

Eliot's Rose Garden: A Sufi Interpretation

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Abstract: Eliot's theosophical poetry supports the idea that God's willingness to relate to the world gives his creatures the possibility of personal knowledge of him, although this can be acquired only through difficult and strenuous spiritual exercises.

The variety of poetic works, which Eliot produced such as *Four Quartets* and *Hollow man*, are a blend of philosophical and mystical ideas which attempt to explore the inner meaning of faith and represent a creative and influential stream that both draws upon and contributes to Sufism.

Key Terms: Sufism, Eliot, Rose – Garden, Schimmel

Introduction

One of the recurring symbols in the later poetry of T. S. Eliot is that of the rose. Appearing in the *Hollow Man* (1925) for the first time, it acquires newer and deeper connotation in the succeeding poems till it assumes its full significance in *Four Quartets* (1943). Most discussions of the rose in Eliot's poetry relate the symbol either to Dante or to the medieval Christian tradition. Leonard Unger (1966:69-70) notes that for Eliot the rose garden symbolizes an early sexual awakening comparable to that described by Eliot in his discussion of Dante's *Vita Nuova*. Eric Thompson (1963:99) too traces the rose garden to Dante's earthly paradise. Barbara Seward (1960:156) in her detailed account of the symbolic rose considers Eliot's rose not "wholly modern" and traces its origin to the Middle Ages and the Catholic symbol of spiritual love incarnated in Christ. "Combining the romanticism of a yearning, nostalgic, insatiable age with the absolute authoritarian standards of medieval times," Seward (Ibid: 156) notes that "Eliot has created a symbol suited to religious present needs."

A large body of scholarly and critical writing on Eliot is available today, yet it is to be noted that no critic has alluded to the Sufi tradition in the discussion of the rose and the rose garden in Eliot's poetry. Even those critics who have dealt with the oriental influence on Eliot limit themselves either to the Hindu or to the Buddhist traditions. In both the cases there is enough evidence to show that Eliot was influenced by these traditions. No such evidence, as yet, is available to show that Eliot ever came under the influence of the Sufis or their poetry. Nonetheless, it is possible to draw certain parallels between Eliot's imagery and the Sufi imagery for the simple reason that certain archetypal images and symbols with mystical connotations transcend the barriers of language and tradition and find expression in poetry written at different periods and places. The mystics, in whichever language they express themselves, have always been fascinated by "the symbol" since it enables them to express certain complex and inexpressible ideas which the ordinary words fail to do. Though essentially a poet, Eliot at times uses the language of the mystics in order to express moments of mystical experience.

Sufism and Eliot

The rose and the rose-garden which dominate Eliot's later poetry can be abundantly found in Persian and Turkish mystic poetry. Sānāī, the first major mystic poet of Persia, preaches the Sufi doctrine through the symbol of the rose and the bird (Arberry 1966:8):

The nightingale hath no repose
For joy that ruby blooms the rose;

Long time it is that philomel
Hath loved like me the rosy dell.
Tis sure no wonder if I sing
Both night and day my fair sweeting:
Let me be slave to that bird's tongue
Who late the rose's praise hath sung!
O Saki, when the days commence
Of ruby roses, abstinence
By none is charged; then pour me wine
Like yonder rose incarnadine.

A host of notable mystic poets following Sānāi have employed the rose symbol in their poems to relate the mystic experience. Sādi, a thirteenth century classical poet from Persia, entitled one of his principal works as *Gulistan* or *The Rose Garden* which is "recognized by the most eminent Sufis as concealing the whole range of the deepest sufi knowledge" (Shah 1968:90). In her book *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam* Annemarie Schimmel recounts an interesting story to explain the Sufi's love for the rose. According to a tradition when the Prophet saw a rose, he kissed it and pressed it to his eyes and said, "the red rose is part of God's glory" (Schimmel 1975: 222). Schimmel thinks that the "Prophet's love of roses may have induced the poets to call him the 'nightingale of the Eternal Garden' for he discloses to the faithful some of the mysteries of God, the Everlasting Rose" (Ibid: 22). Abu 'Ali Qalandar, the 14th century mystic poet, says (Ibid: 217): "Welcome, O Nightingale of the Ancient Garden! / Speak to us about the Lovely Rose." For Eliot too the rose symbolizes the mystery of God manifest in created forms. Similar to Sufi poetry, his poetry also relates the rose, the bird and the garden with one another.

"Burnt Norton," the first poem of *Four Quartets* is central to the understanding of Eliot's rose garden. According to Unger (1966: 79), "Burnt Norton" displays on its surface "the spiritual quest, the constant endeavor to interpret the experience and relive it." The poem, he observes, "is a discourse on the ultimate significance" of the experience in the rose-garden (Ibid). In the poem, there are at least three rose gardens — the rose garden of the past which the poet regrets of having not entered but might have entered; the actual rose-garden of "Burnt Norton;" and most important of all, the mystical rose garden of the Timeless moment which contains the past, the present and the future symbolizing "those moments that show more than any others, the meeting of the Eternal and the temporal" (Weitz 1969: 146). It stands "as a symbol of those temporal experiences which reveal most poignantly the immanent character of the ultimately real" (Ibid).

The ecstasy experienced in the timeless moments in the rose garden is similar to the Wajd experienced by the Sufis. Wajd literally means "finding" i.e., finding God and attaining quitted and peace. The Sufi, overwhelmed by the happiness of having found Him, becomes enraptured in ecstatic bliss. This ecstatic experience is often a consequence of having attained Fanā. Nicholson (1976: 14) explains Fanā as "the passing away of consciousness in mystical union." During this momentary period of intoxication "all the attributes of the self are negated" (Ibid: 20). In Fanā, there is a complete annihilation of the self and the obliteration of the self in God. However, Sufis like Ibn-al-Farid, a 13th Century Sufi from Arabia have suggested that the highest mystical experience is not negative but positive. Nicholson, quoting profusely from Taiyyatu-i-Kubra, elaborates Ibn-al-Farid's concept of fanā. Ibnl-Farid distinguishes between three modes of experiences/ normal abnormal, and super normal corresponding to "sobriety" (Sahw), "intoxication" (Sukr) and the "sobriety of union" (Sahau-i-Jam). In the first stage of his journey the Sufi is aware of the distinction between his individual self and God; in the second stage these distinctions vanish; and in the third stage he is aware of himself as being one with the Creator from whom he as a created one is distinct. Hence during the momentary intoxication of Fanā all the attributes of self are negated and in the sobriety of union they are resolved (ibidem:19). In Sufi thought fanā is a correlative of Baqa which means "persistence" or "subsistence in God" (Schimmel 1975: 143). While the Persian Sufi Bayazid of Bistam taught the negative doctrine of Fanā, Abu Syed Ali Kharraz propagated the view that "the ultimate goal is not death to self (Fanā) but life in God (Baqa)" (Nicholson 1976: 14).

Some parallels to this thought could be traced in "Burnt Norton." "Burnt Norton" opens with a striking comment on the co-existence of time past, present and future (Eliot 1936: 213): "Time present and time past / Are both present in time future, / And time future contained in time past." In these lines Eliot "collapses the division of time giving us the eternal presence of all time" (Williamson 1966:211). Past, present and future possibility all point to an end which is always with us, the Eternal or timeless moment. Muslim thinkers and mystics have always been pre-occupied with the problem of Time. Hujwri (1988: 367) in *The Kashf al Mahajub* or "The Revelation of the Hidden," the oldest Persian treatise on Sufism, says "Waqt (Time) is that where a man

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becomes independent of the past and the future, as for example, when an influence from God descends into his soul and makes his heart collected, he has no memory of the past and no thought of that whatever is not yet come." Hujwri (ibidem:369) further states "time cuts the root of the future and the past and obliterates cares of yesteryears and tomorrows from the heart." Iqbal (1984:75) explains the Sufi poet Iraqi's concept of divine time as that "which is absolutely free from the qualities of passage, and consequently does not admit of divisibility, sequence and change. It is above eternity; it has neither beginning nor end." For the Sufis, the experience of Waqt or time is "the moment at which they break through created time and reach the Eternal Now in God" (Schimmel 1975: 220). Iqbal, in his interpretation of the mystical symbols, understands time as a reference to the moment at which the "infidel's girdle" namely "serial time is torn, and the mystic establishes a direct contact with God" (Ibid). The "still point of the turning world" which Eliot mentions in the second movement of the "Burnt Norton" is comparable to the moment when the Sufi establishes a direct contact with God.

However, in order to gain Tajalli or the moment of illumination, it is necessary to open the door to the rose-garden. Eliot (1936: 213) regrets that he did not open the door in the past:

Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden.

Hujwri relates the story of a man in Basra who once went to his garden and found the beautiful wife of the gardener there. After dismissing the gardener on some pretext he ordered the woman to shut the gates. She replied "I have shut them all except one which I cannot shut." On being asked which gate it was she answered "the gate that is between us and God." On receiving this answer the man repented and begged to be forgiven (Hujwri 1982: 13). Sa'di of Shiraz in one of his poems, perhaps refers to the same door when he says "the unfortunate one is he who averts his head from this door. For he will not find another door" (Shah 1968: 91).

As mentioned earlier, Seward (1960) considers Eliot's rose-garden as a symbol of natural ecstasy of divine grace, of Christ and the eternal God in the four poems of the Quartet. We have already observed how in the Sufi tradition, the mystical experience or the moment of illumination or Fanā is ecstatic. For the Sufis, the rose also stands for divine grace and the manifestation of God.

Many writers have seen the rose-garden symbol as Christ incarnate. The Christian doctrine of Incarnation finds echos in Mansur-al-Hallaj, the Persian mystic who declared "An-al-Haqq" or "I am Truth" or I am God." Considering this to be blasphemy, Hallaj was executed in Baghdad in 922. Hallaje's was an attempt in Islam to explain the meaning of mystical union in terms of the Christian doctrine of the two natures of God "Ahuf" and "Asut," the divine and the human. While describing the union of the two Hallaj, according to Nicholson, employs the term "Hulul" which in the Muslim mind was associated with the Christian doctrine of Incarnation.

In one of his poems Hallaj declares (Nicholson 1976: 30):

I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I
We are two spirits dwelling in one body
If thou seest me, thou seest Him,
If thou seest Him, thou seest us both.

The rose-garden of Eliot has very often been considered to represent Paradise. For the Sufi, everywhere and everything in Paradise is nothing but Allah since "everything is lost in Him." The Paradise of the Sufi is "the vision of the divine beloved" and "those who are deprived of this vision experience Hell in every place" (Schimmel 1975: 332).

Throughout *Four Quartets* roses are associated with love. A large number of Sufi Poets have also sung of the experience of love in the imagery of roses and nightingales. For instance in Ghazzali's *Aphorisms on Love* or *Sawamh the Rose* very often symbolizes the beloved. About Ghazzali and Sawarii/i, Schimmel (Ibid: 295) writes: "In those short paragraphs, interspersed with verses, we recognize him as the master of chaste love, who puts between himself and the beautiful beloved a rose, contemplating now the rose, now the beloved." A study of the Sufi poets reveals that love is a major theme of their poetry. Divine love is celebrated so often in their poetry that they have come to be considered as masters of mystical love. Love is described by Ruzbihan Baqli, one of the foremost Sufi poets of Shiraz, in these words: "Look well, for the heart is the market place of His Love, and

there the rose of Adam on the branch of Love is from the color of manifestation (Tajjali) of His Rose" (Ibid:298).

Critics like Unger are of the opinion that the ecstatic experience in the rose-garden in Eliot is implicitly sexual. Ibn Arabf, the 12th century Sufi, wrote love poetry to express the embodiment of divine love in a human ideal. His poetry, though essentially religious and mystical in nature, has sexual and erotic overtones. Under the influence of Arab, many later Sufi poets have used erotic symbolism in allegorical terms in their poems.

Conclusion

Eliot's mystical poetry concentrates on gaining knowledge of God through study of His manifestation, and a theosophical tradition that approaches God through his impact on creation.

Eliot claims that, although veridical, his Sufi experiences cannot be adequately described in language, because ordinary communication is based on sense experience and conceptual differentiation: mystical poetry is thus characterized by metaphor and simile. For him it is not controversial here whether all Sufi experiences are basically the same, and whether the apparent diversity among them is the result of interpretations influenced by different cultural traditions.

Finally, it can be stated that despite the lack of any evidence of Sufi influence on Eliot, it is possible to draw parallels between his poetry and Sufi poetry. The parallels between the two show that Eliot's poetry can lend itself to different interpretations, thereby indicating its universal dimensions.

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