Chapter 5

Syncretic Mystical Literature

of

Sharafuddin Maneri:

An Evaluation
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Religious syncretism often takes place when foreign elements are broached into an indigenous belief system which exhibits blending of two or more religious belief systems into a new one, or the incorporation into a religious tradition of beliefs from unrelated traditions, thus emerging into a blended theosophy. The new, heterogeneous religion then takes a shape of its own, which resultantly gets reflected in its literature known as eclecticism. Syncretism occurs for myriad reasons, and it is a commonplace in situations where multiple religious traditions exist in proximity and function actively in the culture; or, when a culture is conquered, and the conquerors bring their religious beliefs with them, but do not succeed in entirely eradicating the old beliefs or, especially, practices. Religions, especially mystical systems, have syncretic elements embodied over history, which gradually get rooted, thus becoming the very fiber of the religio-mystical life reflecting in its literature.

The religious literature, especially mystical literature, is geared towards having the experience of the divine. Literature, like language, is just a sign, a pointer towards that benevolent religious cum mystical experience, which results into literary expression. The religio-mystical experience per se is trans-religious, trans-linguistic and thus beyond expression. Hence, the mystic takes the aid of literature, wherein language turns to be symbolic to communicate the deep mystical experiences with apt figurative expressions. Furthermore, mystical experience in itself is a-religious. Religion is sociological and
comprises of creed, code, cult and community. Whereas, mystical experience is spiritual, i.e. at the realm of the Spirit - a trans-religious state. And so, as the mystic seeks the aid of literature, so also he syncretically adapts and/or assimilates other religious and literary elements, to serve the purpose of mystical communication. For religious mysticism, that too at the initial stages - Sharafuddin founded the Fidausi mystical order - is limited in terms of verbal expression. Hence, mystical schools syncretically assimilate language from other religious cum mystical systems. Sharafuddin’s mystical literature too falls under such syncretic sphere.

We have seen syncretism looming large in Sharafuddin’s mystical literature. He has gleaned his literary material from many a diverse source, such as Greek, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, etc. to name a few. In my brief search, I have made an attempt to bring to light the clandestine syncretic mystical portrait of Sharafuddin from the material gleaned from his literary sources. His literature has to be classified as work of spirituality, not about spirituality; for, only a work of the former category is capable of reaching beyond minds and touching hearts. Interestingly enough the human heart, considered as the seat of experience and divine wisdom, is the most frequently occurring term after the divine name in Sharafuddin’s *The Hundred Letters*. Time and again Sharafuddin harks back to the human heart as the place par excellence of the divine-human exchange. Moreover, this is also an unconscious testimony we can decipher from his mystical texts that he had experienced this human-divine exchange within the depths of his own heart, and he speaks from his own heart to other hearts. Like all giants of the human spirit Sharafuddin transcends the limits of his own religious boundaries without in any way
repudiating it, and syncretically assimilates other mystical cum literary traditions into his own new found one.

To evaluate the value of a mystical work and to trace the syncretism prevailing therein, we have to rely on the critical study of the text itself in the light of other texts. For example, The Cloud of Unknowing is a distinguished fourteenth-century mystical work produced in England. Although its author is unknown, we can make certain deductions from the work itself. Similarly, Sharafuddin’s mystical works contain a great deal of Persian material cum elements from other religio-mystical traditions, which are sprinkled - though not very generously - with biographical and even autobiographical references. A careful study reveals the disparate religio-mystical elements that have syncretically made inroads into Sharafuddin’s mystical literature. Therefore, it is imperative to cast a critical eye on this literary material in order to ascertain the syncretism prevalent therein.

From the view point of literature, Sharafuddin’s works fall under two broad categories - letters and discourses. The letters are written to various persons guiding them in the mystical path, and discourses contain reminiscences from the lips of Sharafuddin himself. It is a comprehensive mystical compendium of Sharafuddin, a teaching that flowed from the wellsprings of his profound inner experience of the divine. For a mystic, and particularly a literary artist, these are pearls of wisdom and priceless jewels, which will acquaint great many literature lovers with mystical insights of a Sufi who not only founded the Firdausi order but also initiated devotees into the mystical Way, penned missives to numerous disciples, and delivered stirring discourses to the audiences at his benevolent monastery. In brief, he exercised his pen as well as his tongue to
communicate the spiritual insights, which were syncretic in tune with his diverse audience.

This is the prized literary legacy of Sharafuddin, the eminent Sufi mystic, which also hints at one of the many paradoxes that characterize mysticism with its subsequent literature. Mysticism belongs to the spiritual dimension, i.e. at the realm of the Spirit, which cannot be fully captured by the most subtle verbal or literary exchange. For, it is a felt experience at the spiritual, the mystical and the affective level, and transmitted from generation after generation from spiritual master to disciple. Those who stand outside, can perceive the thought world, the ideational structure, the normative categories of mysticism, but its real intent, its unique inner life and fullest mystical legacy, still must be transmitted from spiritual master to disciple, and in that sense Sharafuddin’s original intent will always be inert. All the same, in Sharafuddin’s mystical literature, there is a fine balance between reflection and conduct, explanation and advocacy, attachment to the law and pursuit of the Way, sobriety and ecstasy, bondage and freedom, death and life.

Sharafuddin’s mystical literature is rooted and grounded in the mystical life-situations, which is diverse and also syncretic. At times, the syncretic elements are so strong that they come across as a luxuriant creeper almost strangling the parent tree. For instance, nazar ela ‘l-murd or gazing at beardless boys, shituta / malama or deliberately incurring blame, advaitic ecstasies like “I am the Truth”, karma or transmigration of souls, Platonism, Gnosticism, Pantheism, Shunyata or Nothingness, so on and so forth. Here, the ultimate value lies in the fact that this literature is a fruit of the intimate mystical experience, ably expressed in terms of the Sufi spiritual tradition to which Sharafuddin was heir. As a little child he lived and breathed an atmosphere which was
permeated by particles from diverse religions and spiritualities - oriental and occidental. His particular way of experiencing reality was that of living amongst an overwhelming number of people who were non-Muslims, who followed various local religions and sects, somewhat akin to the term ‘Hindavi’, the word covering many of them, ‘Hindu’, basically meant that they were followers of the local religion. Although the variety of religions still remains - such as Vaisnavism, Saivism, etc. - nevertheless the term ‘Hindu’ has taken firm root as an umbrella term. All the more, it is evident from his writings that he had an accommodative rather than confrontational attitude towards Hindus as well as other religionists. The presumption is that, in addition to the irreplaceable stimulus to growth afforded by his deep and loving association with other religions and mystical spiritualities, he engaged in Sufi exercises, and also soaked himself in Persian mystical verse and in Sufi writings. He was a disguised scholar with syncretic virtuoso, which is spelt out in his mystical literature.

Sharafuddin’s mystical literature is a mine, a spiritual treasure with inspiring teaching stories with the light emanating from the mystical sphere. Drawing from a vast array of sources, such as the Qur’an, the hadith, Judeo-Christian sources, the wisdom from the East, et al it syncretically constitutes a compendium of essential teachings of the mystical Way. Sharafuddin has left a rich spiritual heritage, a syncretic mystical legacy for generations of mystics and littérateurs to come.

Further, whatever may be the glory and grandeur of mysticism, its manifold expression in literature obtains meaning only through its ultimate concern, which is, mystical experience of the divine. For a mystic, the divine is both manifest (zahir) and hidden (batin), or immanent and transcendent, and so every act has both an inner and an

490
outer aspect. This is the Sufi vision of life, which is both syncretic and mystical. For, in Islam, like Judaism, God is only transcendent. But for a mystic, to experience the divine, God has to be both immanent and transcendent. Hence, Sufism syncretically assimilated this dualistic divine aspect from Christian mysticism, which, otherwise is absent in Islam. Sufism as the inner voice of Islam is not overpowered by orthodoxy, but allows great variations in its attitude and expression. For example, while sama’ is shunned by orthodoxy, it is fervently cultivated by Sufism. Nevertheless, the Islamic accent is seldom lost in all authentic varieties of Sufic expression. When Sufis attempted a theoretical formulation of their experience and resorted to conceptual analysis, serious conflicts came to the surface. Some subscribed to the unity of Being (wahdat al-wujud) as the only valid inference to be derived from their experience, while others disputed this claim vehemently and presented testimonial monism (wahdat ash-shuhud) as an alternative. In fact, mystical experience as such is incommunicable and, the moment it is vocalized, it gives rise to differences in interpretation. What is of value in Sufism, including Sharafuddin’s mystical literature, is its presentation of Islam as a living experience, i.e. faith in praxis, and its constant reminder to man not to forget whence he came and whither he returns (Qur’an surah Al-Baqarah 2:156).

What is unbelief or faith before His self-sufficiency?
What is doubt or certainty compared to His integrity?
At His door, how does a Magian differ from a Muslim?
At His door, what is a fire-temple or a hermitage?
You gain no profit from Jesus or Moses,
Nor does Pharaoh or Nimrod cause You loss.¹