




## Celebrating Universality: A Comparative Study of British Romantic and Islamic Sufi Poetry

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### Abstract

Sufism is an Islamic mystic tradition that dates back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century Asia while Romanticism is a mid-eighteenth-century phenomenon that flourished in Europe. Nonetheless, there are remarkable similarities that can be traced in the poetic outputs and aesthetic aspirations of both movements. Sufi mystic poetry is more abstract, while Romantics utilized concrete imagery in their poems. Nonetheless, both of these movements celebrated God/universality as the highest ideal. In both schools, the key to reaching the universal lies within the individual. Writers and philosophers of both these schools give importance to the natural world and the essential nature of things. Nature is the primary focus in both schools. The word Sufi has come from Arabic *Suf* which has connotations to pure wool or purity of heart. It reflects the nearness to the world of nature as well as to the innocence of the heart. Romantics, similarly, eulogized nature. They also celebrated the purity and innocence of the heart. "Child is a father of man", writes Wordsworth. A child is also a symbol of innocence and purity and harmony with nature: things that Romantics aspired for. The paper endeavors to comparatively study the select renowned Romantic poets and Sufi poets to come up with new insights and to reach a better understanding of both schools.

**Keywords:** Sufism, Romanticism, Universality, Individualism, Aesthetics



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### Introduction

Romanticism swayed Europe in the eighteenth century as a movement against an increasingly modernized world run by industries and technology. Romantic philosophers, writers, and artists revolted against rationalism to uphold the realm of pure emotions. Romanticism was a call to go back to the world of nature. It was a celebration of innocence of heart and even naivety which was conceived nearer to the ideal world than the hypocrisy of a modern man. Long back in the seventh century, a similar movement had taken shape in the Islamic world

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that spoke against the dogma and hypocrisy in the religious practices and spoke for going to nature and finding the higher truth in the innocence of heart. The movement was called Sufism. Although Sufism had a great impact and popularity, unlike Romanticism, it was not thoroughly studied in academia and was mostly dismissed as a cult or popular version of Islam. However, Romanticism in Europe inspired a renewed interest in Sufism as various similarities were found in both schools.

Significant research has been done on the comparative analysis of Islamic Sufism and British Romanticism, but the researchers have either tried to romanticize the Sufi or vice versa. Naji B. Ouejjan has tried to look at the Sufi philosophy in British romanticism (1923), while scholars like Iftikhar Shafi have tried to question the misreading of Sufi under the Western gaze which subsumes Sufism under the platonic discourse which takes inspiration from Christianity. Franklin D. Lewis, in a similar vein, mentions that "Persian lyric poetry was transported on the wings of German Romanticism directly to the New World, where it materialized its transcendental form in the 1840s" (529). Gerret Stuenbrink (2012) finds "the romantic enthusiasm in Hegel's works towards mysticism, including Islamic Sufism" (240). It is widely believed that the interest in Islamic Sufism in the West arose only with the rise of Romanticism and because of its apparent similarity with the latter. Stuenbrink points out that the reading of Sufism under the Romantic lens resulted in such interpretations where the mystical experience was equated to the idea of "creative imagination," even though both had completely different origins and connotations.

Taking all such existing criticism in the comparative study of Sufism and Romanticism into account, the present paper attempts to analyze the poetry from both these schools using a comparative analysis based on the evidence of poetic lines. There is a remarkable similarity between both the schools and yet. When one reads the poetic output, there are stark differences as well, and it is important to understand them to appreciate both Romanticism and Sufism as separate, and yet similar schools of thought.

### **Sufism**

Talking of the history of Sufism, Carl W. Ernst highlights "the similarity of the word Sufi with Arabic word Suffa or bench (source of the English word sofa) and in this sense it invokes the historical memory of the People of the Bench, a group of poor followers of the Prophet Muhammad who was homeless and slept on a bench in Medina, sharing their meager belongings and supplies" (Ernst, 2017, p.103). Sufism developed as a religious discourse that adopted the mystical elements of Islam while rejected the external rituals and rules. Shahida writes that "although the word Sufi did not exist in the time of the Prophet, the foundations of *Tasawwuf*, Sufism were laid during the early days of Islam. Sufis are of the view that it was the Prophet Muhammed who received twofold knowledge: outer knowledge, and knowledge of the heart as mentioned in the Holy *Quran*. The Prophet entrusted his inner knowledge to a few companions bestowing upon Ali Ibn Talib, the title of 'Imam of Walis', and positioning him as the fountainhead of mystic knowledge. The beginning of Sufism as a mystical aspect of Islam can be traced from here (Shahida, 2016, p.225). The central precept in Sufism is the concept of divine love that reflects the love of humanity. Sufis seek God in the 'here and now' rather than looking for the union after death. They celebrate the physical world with music, dance, and poetry, and all of these are channeled into a medium to realize oneness with God. Sufis rejoice in such a union. As Sufi practitioners celebrate God in the present world, their concern and love for humanity became one of the defining features of their philosophy. Sufism also believes in living a simple life. Simplicity is the reflection of the purity of heart which is a

divine quality. "Adorn yourself/With Divine Qualities," writes Hadith Qudsi (Safi, 2018, 33). He explains the concept of purity of heart and love in his poem "Path of Love" and explains that there is no domination or exploitation in the path of love: "Rather than merely a vertical relationship of submission, the path of love becomes a sensual and spiritual love affair of seeking and yearning, being and becoming, among God and humanity" (Safi, 2018, p. 33).

### **Romanticism**

Romantic movement in poetry is said to have found its inspiration in the French Revolution of 1789 with its emphasis on individual freedom. However, English and German philosophers like Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, Hegel, and Schiller had created a fertile ground for the advent of the Romantic movement. These philosophers gave importance to the empirical basis of knowledge. Burke talked of aesthetic judgment and imagination in *Philosophical Enquiry into the Ideas of Sublime and Beautiful* (Burke, 1863), first published in 1757, and opined that they originate from sense perceptions. Kant in his *Critique of Judgement* (Kant, 2007), first published in 1790, adds that the judgment of beauty as a subjective experience is based upon feelings. He opines that when feelings are free of any personal interest, the judgment of beauty is impersonal and universal. Kant thus writes that "the delight that determines the judgment of taste is independent of all interest" (Kant, 2007, p. 36). Art is the realm that takes one from the individual self to a universal self. For Romantics, nature was the ultimate form of aesthetic delight that inspired all other art forms because the wild, profound, sublime element in nature helps one rise above the limits of individual ego and reach towards the universal which is the realm of art. Schiller also talked of the combination of concrete and universal in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Schiller, 2012), first published in 1795, and reflected upon beauty in terms of freedom. These philosophers inspired the Romantic movement in literature wherein poets strived to seek true, selfless feelings in the purity of hearts to reach the universal. Nature became a medium to inspire such selflessness as it inspires one with its immensity and challenges individual limitations. Such a poet, under the influence of selflessness, speaks of the universal truth, and, thus, the idea of a poet as a seer was established in the romantic movement which was a remarkable shift from the mimetic school of poetry to the conceptualization of poetry as an individual expression.

### **Comparative Analysis**

Just as Sufism stood up against the rigid ritualistic institutionalization and bigotry in Islam that had become a false symbol of status for many, Romanticism started as a voice of revolt against the status quo bolstered by too much rationalism and scientific advancement that was nonetheless destroying the natural world. Romanticism emerged as an urge to go back to the pristine and sublime world of nature to find solace and resulted in the celebration of pure heart and creativity inspired by the natural self. Sufi poetry didn't directly talk of the ills of the world, but, many Sufi saints were socio-political rebels because their belief in non-attachment and a typical lifestyle materializing from non-possession and roaming freely with intoxicated hearts in the celebration of God questioned the socio-political institutions at various levels. While Sufi poetry took the form of abstraction and mysticism because of the dominance of the other-worldly dialogue with the Almighty that Sufi practitioners rejoiced in; Romanticism emerged as a dialogue against modern development and technical advancement, as well as a celebration of the concrete world of nature and sense perceptions. The form and expression of both the schools, thus, differed; however, their aim remained the same which was to reach the universal. As Hamadani writes in "By Any Means Necessary" - "The only obligation in

religion/is to arrive at God/by any means necessary" (Safi, 2018, p.105), in Sufism various schools emerged that suggested different ways to reach God through music, dance, poetry, a celebration of natural self and through simple life, etc., for Romantics the way to reach the God/universal was commonly sought through the medium of nature as perceived through five senses. "Nature never betrays the heart that loves her," writes Wordsworth (Wordsworth, 1798). For Romantics, nature is the expression of divinity. While seeking this divine love in the concrete world of nature, they resembled Sufis who were focused on living a simple life that was nearer to the natural world and took minimum from the material world.

Ahmad Ghazali, a Sufi poet, in his poem "Not This, Not That/Both This and That" explains the concept of love in Sufism which is also called *Ishq* or radical love: "I will write you a book on Radical Love/Provided you do not bifurcate it/Into Divine Love/And Human Love" (Safi, 2018, p.5). Such commingling of divine love and human love is also echoed in the famous poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge: "He prayeth best, who loveth best/All things both great and small;/For the dear God who loveth us, /He made and loveth all" (Coleridge, 1905, p. 55).

Sufi looks for divine love in human love itself. In Sufi philosophy, love has its base in those human hearts that are engrossed in purity and the love of God. This is clearly expressed in the poem "A Heart to Contain God": "My Heaven cannot contain Me/neither can My Earth//But the heart/of My faithful devotee/suffices me" (Safi, 2018, p. 25). Qur'asin, another celebrated Sufi poet, similarly talks of serving the celestial love by loving the servants of God and writes in "Enter Inside My Servants": "O soul at peace/return to your Lord/You pleased with God/God pleased with you/Enter inside My servants, /you have entered My Garden" (Safi, 2018, p. 12). Sufi practitioners look for the guidance and company of these devotees who nourish God's love in their hearts. They celebrate them as 'guru' (teacher).

Romantics seek similar guidance and teaching in the world of nature and those whose lives are entrenched in nature are gurus in the sense of source of inspiration. In "Resolution and Independence", Wordsworth, finds inspiration in the nature-rooted 'leech-gatherer' to carry on with the trials and tribulations of everyday life with patience, courage, and peace. Coleridge also wants his child to have a peaceful childhood amidst nature so that the latter might teach that which is worth knowing: the love of God. He, thus, writes in "Frost at Midnight": "And Mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear/The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible/Of that eternal language, which thy God/Utters, who from eternity doth teach/Himself in all, and all things in himself" (Coleridge, 1905. p. 55).

For both Romantic and Sufi practitioners, the idea of beauty is related to this sublime aspect of universality that frees individuals from limitations. In "God, Love and Beauty" Hadith writes "God is beautiful and loves beauty" (Safi, 2018, p. 22). In "Face of God" Qur'an says: Everything on the Earth is perpetually vanishing/But the face of your cherishing Lord remains/Full of splendor and grace (Safi, 2018, p. 15). The idea that beauty is something that never perishes and is universal, is the dominant one in Romantic poetry as well. John Keats in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" famously gives expression to it when he says "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, -that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." (Keats, 1994, 218). While kings and queens die, the artifacts of beauty remain there for eternity and give mortals a glimpse of this eternal divinity. A Sufi poet prays for the manifestation of same beauty and divine light in the hearts of humans in the poem "Love, Harmony, and Beauty": "Illuminate our souls with Divine Light/OThou, the Perfection of Love, Harmony and Beauty, /All-powerful Creator, Sustained, /Judge and Forgiver of our shortcomings, /Lord God of the East and of the West (Safi 2018, p, 51).

P.B. Shelley in "To a Skylark" urges the bird to teach this beauty and art to him: "Teach us, Sprite or Bird, what sweet thoughts are thine: I have never heard/Praise of love or wine/That panted forth a flood of rapture so divine" (Lines 63-65). This divinity of nature helps romantic poets to forget their sorrows. "Ode to Nightingale" is an example where the song of the nightingale transports Keats from the dreary existence of everyday suffering. Universality or eternity helps in forgetting the individual self. While going beyond and surpassing the physical turmoil and suffering of everyday life is one passionate pursuit for Romantics, Sufis devoted most of their energies to celebrating God and refused to acknowledge anything other than Him: "Where Do You See God?" Kharaqani writes "Wherever I don't see myself" (Safi, 2018, p. 64). While Romantics are inspired by nature to forget their selves, Sufi practitioners take a step ahead in forgetting themselves when they strive to see God everywhere. It is the divine love that is celebrated in both schools. Both schools believed that one needs a natural self and the purity and simplicity of heart to realize this love. Rumi, thus, writes in his poem "Not Every Eye" that not all can perceive this love. Closeness with natural self is mandatory and in few Sufi sects, this closeness is brought forth by being under the influence of direct nature itself, the way it does in Romantic philosophy: "Wail, my nightingale! /The lover's cry/changes the heart/of rocks and thorns" (Safi, 2018, p.115). Hafez, similarly, like Romantics, celebrates the melodious song of a bird in his poem "Words of Love": "I have heard/nothing lovelier/than the melody of love// a keepsake/lingering/in this whirling azure dome" (Safi, 2018, p. 124). And like the Romantic conception, this love is eternal. Aby Sa'id hints in his poem "Same Love" upon this eternity: "It's your love that I'll take to the grave/ the same love/me/will raise" (Safi, 2018, p. 171).

Wordsworth talks about the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings that come deep from the heart and become a poetic inspiration. Such flow directly leads to the universal. This spontaneity of the way to reach the universal is again similar to Sufism. Shebli, a Sufi saint writes in "A Blazing Lightning" about this path: "The path is: a blazing lightning bolt/that burns up/everything" (Safi, 2018, p. 92).

Such poetic expression has nothing to do with classical decorum as its defining feature is spontaneity and the natural expression of pure feelings. This discard of classical decorum is similar in Sufism too where practitioners abolished all external rules and rituals of institutionalized Islam. In the poem, "Lord of the Ka'ba", a Sufi poet, Farid Al-Din Attar writes: "I need the Lord of the House/What am I to do with the Ka'ba (Safi,2018, p.30). Similarly, Abu Sa'id criticizes the formal rituals and writes "You know/so much about the spiritual path/yet are so ignorant/about the Lord of the Path" (Safi, 2018, p. 55).

Blake is one of the forerunners of the English Romantic movement in poetry. His book *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, first published in 1790, is the typical expression of the Romantic philosophy that believes in the union of the individual with universal, of objective with subjective, of this world and the other world, of Heaven and Hell. Blake writes, thus, "For everything that lives is holy" (Blake, 1994, p. 45). In "The Voice of Devil", Blake explains that "Man has no body distinct from his Soul; for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age" (Blake, 1994, p. 4). The way Blake celebrated Hell and Devil, is reminiscent of Sufi philosophy where this world is read as an expression of divinity. Qa'ani writes in "My Only Shame": "My only shame is this/On the Day of Judgment/I won't have sinned/ enough/to match/the enormity/of Your forgiveness" (Safi, 2018, p. 61). Blake writes in the "Proverbs of Hell" that "the cut worm forgives the plough" (Blake 1994). As long as mistakes help learning and growing, they are worth doing. Hafez, a Sufi poet, similarly writes in the poem "Forgiveness": A secret whisper came to me from the Tavern's corner/

"Drink! /He forgives"/ God's grace is bigger/than my sin" (Safi, 2018, p. 39). In "A Memorable Fancy – 2" Blake shares his opinion and writes that "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite" (Blake, 1994, p. 16) and for doors of perception to cleanse themselves, one needs to do experiments and to make mistakes to learn from them. Thus, there are remarkable similarities between the Romantic school of philosophy and Sufism. Though both schools have very different historical roots, sometimes reading lines from one school gives the impression of reading the philosophical concepts emerging from the other.

### Conclusion

Both Romantic poets and Sufi poets were the poets of heart. While the natural world of wild and lively nature turned into a medium of inspiration for Romantics to touch the supernatural; Sufis sought the same in the pure and simple heart, the art forms like song, dance, and poetry, as well as in the world of nature. Sufi poetry is mystical at the same time when it seeks to celebrate this worldliness and views humanity as an expression of divinity. Romantics celebrated the physical world of senses and gave expression to it through concrete nature imagery. Both of the poetic movements touched the hearts of many and gave birth to world-renowned poets and expressions that still reverberate in human hearts. Both of these schools contributed to suggesting practical ways to taste human freedom and reach the universal while living on this Earth.

This paper tried to use a comparative lens to highlight the independent as well as similar features in both schools. While Romantic poetry has been vastly studied, there are not many studies on Sufi poetry. While this paper focused on understanding the differences in the theoretical and philosophical aspects of both the schools, further research can be carried out to understand differences in various sub-schools in Sufism like Sufi Persian Poetry and Sufi Arabic Poetry and these can further be compared to Romantic Poets to understand the relative features in both.

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