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Mt. Menoikeion Seminar

1 June 2015

The Mystic Garden:

The Garden as a Physical Manifestation of Mysticism

From that rose garden I have plucked this posy
Which I have named “the mystic rose garden.”
Therein the roses of hearts’ mystery are blooming,
Whereof none has told heretofore.
Therein the tongues of the lilies are all vocal;
The eyes of the narcissus are all far-seeing.¹

The *Gulshan I Raz* (*Mystic Rose Garden*) was written in the 14th century by the poet Mahmud Shabistari. Written as a response to fifteen questions about the Sufi doctrine, the *Mystic Rose Garden* provides a poetic reflection on the fundamentals of the Islamic mystical tradition of Sufism. As a collection of poems, the *Mystic Rose Garden* is a profound composition of the Persian language and Islamic imagery. It is through the imagery and symbolism of the poems that the complexities of Sufi mysticism are introduced to the readers.

One of the most obvious and striking images in the text is that of a garden. The text’s inquiry into the tenets of Sufism is compared to the experience of a human being thrown into a garden of mystery. This garden of mystery represents a physical manifestation of the human heart in which “the roses of hearts’ mystery are blooming.”² To discover the heart’s mystery, the Sufi mystic has to retreat from the temporary world and search for higher truths that exist in his her or her soul. By exploring the symbolic importance of the garden in Shabistari’s *Mystic Rose*

¹ Maḥmūd ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm Shabistārī, *Gulshan I Raz = The Mystic Rose Garden of Sa’d Ud Din Mahmud Shabistari / the Persian Text, with an English Translation and Notes, Chiefly from the Commentary of Muhammad Bin Yahya Lahiji*, by E. H. Whinfield. (London: Trübner, 1880), Epilogue: 1000; 94.

² Ibid.

Garden, we can see how Sufism has incorporated elements of other forms of ascetic traditions, such as Christian monasticism. In addition, the importance Shabistari places on the Sufi message rather than on the rules and practice of the tradition also explains how the Sufi tradition has been accessed beyond the mystics by others who have been attracted to the physical manifestations of the Sufi message, including that of the garden.

The influence of Christian monasticism in *Gulshan I Raz* can be understood in the context of the time that the text was written in. As the translator of the text E.H. Whinfield highlights in his introduction, Shabistari composed the poem at a historical juncture of the Moghul conquests of central Asia, including Persia and India. Shabistari, who lived in the capital of the new Moghul Empire, observed the conversion struggle that ensued as Christian missionaries and local Muslims tried to convert the new Moghul emperors. These conversion missions influenced the Christian references in the *Mystic Rose Garden* as “Mahmud’s acquaintance with Christian doctrines may have been derived or improved from intercourse with Halton or some of the other monks attached to these missions.”³ While we cannot ascertain the particularities of the exchange between Shabistari and Christian monks, we can rely on the *Mystical Rose Garden* as a text to analyze the similarities that exist between the Sufi doctrine and Christian monasticism.

In the text, Shabistari likens the human being to an almond; the Sufi mystic must shed the husk by letting go of his attachment with worldly laws and matters by reaching for the higher truths of his existence that lie in the kernel.⁴ This renouncing of worldly pursuits is as essential to the Sufi mystical path as it is in Christian monasticism, which Shabistari cites as an example for the Sufi mystics to refer to. The Sufi mystic is encouraged to “Enter the cloister of faith as a

³ Ibid. iv.

⁴ Ibid. 355; 36.

Christian monk. While ‘other’ and ‘others’ are set before your eyes, Though you be in a mosque, it is no better than a Christian cloister.”⁵ Here, the Christian monk is separated from his Christianity. While Christianity is discussed in the same context as idol worship, the Christian monk and his cloister is referred to as a source of admiration and learning. Shabistari indeed plays into the concept of differentiation as he frequently differentiates Islam from idol worshipers and Christians but he also warns Muslims who focus too much on “outward Islam” that their confidence in their religious superiority has no virtue.⁶ A Christian monk who understands the importance of higher truths and is willing to make the sacrifices to reach the eternal reality beyond this temporary world is deemed as an example to admire and follow while the Muslim who is too concerned with laws and practices of the temporary world is warned that he will “be excluded from the faith in both worlds.”⁷ The balance between the inner and outer world is stressed heavily throughout the text.

The significance on keeping a balance between the inner and outer world obligations distinguishes Sufism from the early forms of monasticism in which Christian monks retreated completely from the society by giving up their ties to family and property, thereby creating the famous solitary, desert style of monasticism fashioned in Egypt by the likes of St. Anthony. Sufi doctrine, as manifested in texts like the *Mystic Rose Garden*, does not require the same type of extremity in the mystic’s separation from the world as was expected from early Christian monastics. Hence, Sufism does not evolve in tradition and organization as monasticism does over time with the development of different rules and structures for individual monasteries.

⁵ Ibid. 960; 91.

⁶ Ibid. 965; 91.

⁷ Ibid. 955; 90.

Because the importance is placed on the Sufi philosophy rather than the practice and rules, those who cannot fully retreat from the world to pursue the Sufi path like the mystics can still access the Sufi message and its mysticism. This can be done through the pursuit of the physical manifestations of Sufi mysticism, popularly depicted in the dancing of the whirling dervishes or in the Sufi devotional music of Qawali. The garden is also one such physical manifestation of the Sufi message. The construction of elaborate gardens in Muslim countries, such as during the time of the Mughal rule in India from the 16th – 19th century, can also be understood as the Muslim rulers interests and attempts at illustrating the physical manifestations of their understanding of Islamic mysticism.

In the case of the Mughal emperors, their relationships with Sufism were quite complex religiously and politically but I would argue that their taste in aesthetics was largely influenced by Sufi symbolism and imagery. To be sure, Sufi symbolism and imagery, as seen in Shabistari's text, is really a compilation of symbols and images from the Quran, which could also be categorized as simply Islamic. For example, the Mughal gardens are often referred to as Indo-Islamic gardens for they combined the aesthetics of the gardens in the Islamic world in the Middle East with the gardens of Buddhist monasteries in the East. The symbolic importance of the garden is also explained solely within the context of the descriptions of the paradise in the Quran as consisting of eternal, lush gardens.⁸ While the descriptions of the architecture of the Mughal gardens are explained accurately in terms of the Quranic images of paradise that the gardens represent with their greenery, running water, and tombs, these descriptions undermine the mystical significance that these gardens might have held for the Mughal emperors.⁹ For

⁸ M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an / a New Translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem*. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 3:15, 35.

⁹ Ibid.

example, the entrance to Emperor Akbar's garden in Sikandra, India has an inscription – "These are the gardens of Eden: enter them to dwell therein eternally."¹⁰ A possible Sufi influenced interpretation of Akbar's designation of his garden as the "gardens of Eden" can allow us to appreciate the garden as Akbar's attempt to construct a physical link between the physical and spiritual world that is described in Shabistari's text. Like the Sufi mystic who tries to reach union with the higher being by balancing his commitments to the temporary and everlasting worlds, Akbar also tried to create a union between the temporary and everlasting spheres by constructing a temporary manifestation of the eternal garden in his empire. Interpreting the Mughal gardens in terms of Sufi imagery and symbolism is appropriate also because of the reverence that some Mughal emperors gave to Sufism. In one Mughal miniature painting, the emperor Jahangir is depicted as handing over a prestigious book to a Sufi Shaykh, showing his preference for the Sufi mystic over the other notable guests that are also present in his court, including King James I of England.¹¹ In addition, Jahangir was also credited for investing money into repairing numerous monasteries in India.¹²

Further justification for a mystically influenced interpretation of the Mughal gardens can be traced back to the Islamic gardens in the Middle East that served as inspiration for the Mughal gardens. The apparent fascination that Muslim leaders have had with gardens is clear in their dealings with Christian monasteries. The Armenian historian, Abu Salih, describes the state of Egyptian monasteries under Muslim rule in the eight century in his account, *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and Some Neighboring Countries*. Salih's account of the monasteries is

¹⁰ James Dickie (Yaqub Zaki), "The Mughal Garden: Gateway to Paradise," *Muqarnas* 3 (January 1, 1985): 128–37, doi:10.2307/1523089, 133.

¹¹ "Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaykh to Kings," accessed June 1, 2015, <http://www.asia.si.edu/explore/worlds-within-worlds/zoom/jahangir-preferring-sufi-shaykh-to-kings.asp>.

¹² Ali Riaz, *Faithful Education: Madrassahs in South Asia* (Rutgers University Press, 2008), 62.

constructed based on the work of other historians of his time, including the most in-depth historical source we have on Muslim interactions with the monasteries - the *Kitab al-Diyarat* (the *Book of Monasteries*). Salih's book enhances our understanding of how Muslims connected with monasteries beyond the popular historical understanding of monasteries as places of consumption and pleasure for Muslims. Salih's account reveals that in addition to the wine and entertainment offered in the monasteries, Muslims were also attracted to the gardens of the monasteries where the monks grew their living sustenance and crops that were exchanged for revenue.¹³ In the incidences in which the churches of the monasteries were taken over, Salih highlights how the Muslim officials specifically seized the gardens.¹⁴ Considering the importance of fertile land by the Nile River in Egypt, economic interests in revenue from the crops can explain the Muslim officials' focus on the gardens. Though the Muslims' interest in the gardens of the monasteries was not limited to economic motivations. Outside of Egypt, the garden of the monastery also served an aesthetic purpose in the building of government palaces. Under the Abbasid Caliphate, aristocratic palaces were built within the gardens of existing monasteries that had been seized by the Muslims.¹⁵

Tracing the development of Islamic gardens to the historical time when Muslims were figuring out their relations with the monasteries after the Muslim conquests would allow for a better understanding of how the garden came to occupy such an aesthetic influence for Muslim rulers. This would also allow us to see to what extent Muslim rulers, like the Mughal emperors

¹³ al-Armanī Abū Ṣāliḥ, *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and Some Neighbouring Countries : Attributed to Abū Ṣāliḥ, the Armenian / Ed. and Tr. by B.T.A. Evetts, with Added Notes by Alfred J. Butler.*, Gorgias Reprint Series ; No. 17 (Piscataway NJ: Gorgias Press, 2001) 53.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Glaire D. Anderson, *The Islamic Villa in Early Medieval Iberia: Architecture and Court Culture in Umayyad Córdoba* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2013) 126.

who dedicated large amounts of money and energy into building gardens, were actively incorporating Sufi messages and symbolism into their projects. Was the Muslim admiration and fascination with gardens influenced strictly by Islamic imagery of paradise or was it also influenced by a strong mystical motivation?

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