

THE CONTRIBUTION OF RABI‘AH AL-‘ADAWIYYAH IN SUFISM

Nusba Parveen

Rabi‘ah Ba‘Äriyyah has played a significant role in the development of Sufism. She was a representative of that particular style of Sufism which grew in her time. Separation from her family in her childhood made her live a life of slavery. This in turn enabled her to accomplish her goal, i.e. complete devotion and full submission in the service of Allah. Her contribution was highlighted by later Sufis without any thought of her being a woman and they considered her a prominent Sufi. Particularly her concept of selfless - love with God is noteworthy. Why was she accorded this high position? What was the essence of her experience/teaching and how did she achieve it? We would try to offer some thoughts on these issues in the following.

According to Jāmâ (d. 1492 A.D. who wrote *Nafa‘ât al-Uns*) the term ‘Sufi’ was for the first time applied to Abë Hāshim of Këfa (ob. before 800 A.D.). He founded a monastery for sufis at Ramlah in Palestine. This marked the development of a new trend in Sufism. Commenting on the distinction between earlier ascetic trend and this new sufistic trend, Nicholson says, “They were the *via purgativa* and the *via illuminativa* of Western medieval mysticism.”¹¹⁹ However, this does not mean that Sufism in Islam became devoid of that inner purification with this new trend. But it remained as it always was, as a means to attain the nearness of Allah. Louis Massignon explains the emergence of Sufism as the result of an inner rebellion of the conscience against social injustices, not only those of others but primarily and particularly against one’s own faults.”¹²⁰ Thus early Sufism was a natural expression of a person’s contemplation regarding his self and reality.

¹¹⁹ Reynold A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*. (Cambridge University Press, 1962). p. 229.

¹²⁰ Louis Massignon, “*Tasawwuf*”, *Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Ed.

The problem in Sufism started, as Trimmingham observes, that early sufis “were concerned with experiential than theosophical theorizing and sought to guide rather than to teach.”¹²¹

Development of Ascetic Trend

Asceticism developed as a trend in reaction to the Umayyad misrule. Theoretically everything was same as before but in practice they were lacking in justice, their love for luxury was growing and their *Kbilāfab* was becoming individualized. Thus Mu‘tazilism emerged as bearing a moderate attitude in reaction to Khārijites (fanatical and rigid) and Murjites (political conformists) but it changed to extremism later. Asceticism was not a new trend developed at this time but it became popular with the passage of time. Traces of the ascetics (*Zubhad*) were found in the life of the Prophet (SAW) in the companions whose sense of fear and responsibility was stronger than others. The names of Uways al-Qaranâ, Abu-ḡarr al-Ghifârâ, Salman Fârsâ are worthy to be mentioned who had been praised by the Prophet himself for their piety. A companion, Tamâm al-Darâ is said to have passed the whole night repeating a single verse, (xiv, 20).¹²²

“Do those who work evil think that we shall make them even as those who believe and do good so that their life or death shall be equal?”

Abu Darda used to say:¹²³ “if you knew what you shall see after death you would not eat food nor drink water from appetite.” A prophetic tradition goes like this: “If you knew what I know you would laugh little and weep more”.

The disgust with the tyrannical and impious rulers strengthened these thoughts and a sense of grave responsibility and fear for what was going on overtook them. Àasan al-BaÄrâ was the first representative of this trend and his fear of God was so strong that Sha‘rânâ says,¹²⁴ “It seemed as though Hell-fire had been created for him alone.”

¹²¹ J. Spencer Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1971). pp. 2-3.

¹²² Quoted in Nicholson, op. cit., p. 225.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

‘Umar II, the Umayyad ruler was regarded like Āsan in this matter. So the purpose of early Muslim sufis according to Massignon¹²⁵ only if they retired or isolated themselves was in order to be better able to meditate on the Qur’ān (*taqarraba* is the old synonym of *tasawwuffā*) by seeking to draw near to God in prayer. Fazlur RaĀmān does not differentiate these ascetics from ‘Ulama as “they were identically the same persons with varying degrees of emphasis on personal piety and abstinence. Thus he says that this trend was purely ethical with a deepening of inwardness of the ethical motivation”.¹²⁶

Development of Rabi‘ah’s Ascetic Ideas

Sibt Ibn al-Jawzā (d. 1257) relates a story¹²⁷ which shows Rabi‘ah’s feeling towards other Muslims at that time. Once when she went out on a feast day and she was asked about her impression of it, she said, “I saw how you went out (nominally) to make the Sunnah a living force and to put a stop to heresy, but you displayed a love of luxury and soft living and thereby you brought humiliation upon the Muslims”.

This does not at all suggest that these Muslims were extremely corrupt, but their lifestyle were changing towards the world compared to the time of the Prophet and the rightly guided caliphs. In another story quoted by ‘AÇÇār, Rabi‘ah asked a man to buy her a blanket and gave him four silver *dirhams*. The man left and came back to ask her what colour he should buy. “How did colour come into the business? Rabi‘ah answered and demanded her money back and threw it into Tigris. It implies that the fear of too much indulgence in the world had stopped her to do what was even necessary.

Another story is quoted by ‘AÇÇār¹²⁸, which he claims was her first experience in asceticism and she gave up all her worldly desires after that.

Once for seven days and seven nights she had been fasting and had eaten nothing and during the night she had not slept at all, but had spent every night in prayer. When she was in extremity from hunger someone came into

¹²⁵ Massignon, “*Tasawwuf*”

¹²⁶ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) p. 129.

¹²⁷ Quoted in Margaret Smith, *Rabi‘ah the Mystic and Her Fellow Saints in Islam*. (Lahore, Hijrah International Publishers, 1983) p. 22.

¹²⁸ Fariduddin ‘AÇÇār, *Tazķirat al-Anlīyah*. Eng. tr. by A.J. Arberry. (From *A Classical Persian Reader* being compiled by A.R. Farhadi).

the house and brought her a cup of food. Rabi'ah took it and went to fetch a lamp. When she returned, a cat had upset the cup. She said, "I will go and fetch a jug and break by fast." When she brought the jug the lamp had gone out. She intended to drink the water in darkness, but the jug fell from her hands and was smashed to pieces. Rabi'ah broke into lamentations and heaved such a sigh that it almost seemed as if the house would catch fire. She then prayed to God that why are you doing it to me? And she heard a voice that if you desire these pleasures I will confer it on you, but I shall take concern for me out of your heart. Since then she says she separated her heart from worldly things.

Biography

Details of Rabi'ah's life have reached us through many different sources, and above all from her biographer Farâd al-Dân 'AÇÇâr (ob. A. D. 1230). He wrote *Tazkirat al-Anliyah* in which he mentions Rabi'ah in detail. Rabi'ah was born about (95 or 99 A.H/717 A.D) in Ba'Ära in a poor but religious and noble family. She was from al-Atik, a tribe of Qays b. 'Adâ, therefore called Qaysiyah or 'Adawiyah. She was the fourth daughter thus called Rabi'ah and some miraculous events occurred after she was born. It is said that there was no oil for lamp and cloth to wrap her. Her mother asked her father to go and get some oil from the neighbour. Her father had vowed that he wouldn't ask any human being for help, so he went out but came back and while sitting in that agony he slept. He dreamt Prophet Muhammad (SAW) who said words of comfort and relief and asked him to write a letter to Isa Zadan, Amir of Basra reminding him that he prays one hundred prayers every night and four hundred on Friday night, but this Friday night he has neglected, and as a penance, he must give you four hundred dinars, lawfully required. (related by 'AÇÇâr).

Rabi'ah's father did as he was asked and the Amir himself came to see this noble man with penance money, while also giving two thousands dinars as thanks giving to poor. But after some time her parents passed away and she became an orphan. Then the sisters were also scattered after a famine in Basra. One day while walking Rabi'ah was seized by an evil minded man who sold her for six *dirhams* and was forced to do hard labour by her master. Again she was attacked by a wicked person on the street and in the struggle to run she broke her hand. Then she broke into tears and said,

“Lord God, I am a stranger, orphaned of mother and father, a helpless prisoner fallen into captivity, my hand broken. Yet for all this I do not grieve, all I need is thy good pleasure, to know whether you are well pleased or no.” She heard a voice saying, “Tomorrow a station (rank) shall be thine such that those who are nearest to God in Heaven shall envy thee”.

Rabi‘ah then came back to her master’s house and continually fasted in the daytime and carried out her appointed tasks and worshipped all night till the day began.

This throws some light on the condition of that time, which left women insecure, and they held fast their relationship with Allah. There were some other women also who were known for their asceticism at that time. One of them, Rabi‘ah binti Ismail of Syria was given a high position by sufis. Sometimes she has been confused with Rabi‘ah Ba‘Ārâ but the fact that she was married has cleared the confusion. Another woman of this time was Muadha al-Adawiyya, who was known for her humility. She was an associate of Rabi‘ah Ba‘Ārâ and was married. Sha‘wana was another sufi whose assembly was attended by men and women sufis. She used to cry a lot for God and followed the way of love like Rabi‘ah. Nafisa was great granddaughter of Ha‘Ān (son of Ali), born at Mecca in 145 A.H. She was so well versed in the Qur’an and religious knowledge that Imam Shāfi‘ā used to come and listened to her discourse. (Ibn Khallikān) etc. etc.

Now, one night while Rabi‘ah was praying, her master woke up and saw her worshipping, she was shying, “O my Lord, you know that the desire of my heart is to obey you, and that the light of my eye is in the service of your court. If the master rested with me, I should not cease for one hour from your service, but you have made me subject to a creature”.

This reflects the inner state of Rabi‘ah which was not taught to her but was developing due to her sincere devotion to God. Her master saw a light on Rabi‘ah’s head which illumined the whole house. He called her when the day was dawned and set her free. She journeyed into desert first then obtained a cell in which she was engaged in devotional worship. Afterwards she left for pilgrimage which tells a story how her ass died and she was left-alone rejecting offer of men to carry her luggage. She then prayed to God, “O my God, do kings deal thus with a woman, a stranger and weak? Thou art calling me to thine own house (the *Ka‘ba*) but in the midst of the way thou

hast suffered mine ass to die and thou hast left me alone in the desert”. Her ass stirred and got up before she had finished her prayer and she proceeded.

‘Attar quotes another story that once in the desert alone, how she desired to see God, “show thyself in this very place”. Then she prayed until God spoke in her heart directly without any medium. Saying, “O Rabi‘ah ... When Moses desired to see my face I casted a few particles of my glory upon the mountain (Sinai) and it was rent into forty pieces. Be content here with my name’.¹²⁹

This was the beginning of Rabi‘ah’s asceticism which developed in her due to strong faith and trust in God.

One aspect of her life which needs to be commented is her choice of *celibacy*. Margaret Smith quotes the following passage from *Tazkira al-Amliyah*, (p. 66) which was Rabi‘ah’s answer to Hasan Bari’s proposal, she said, “The contract of marriage is for those who have a phenomenal existence (i.e. who are concerned with the affairs of this material world). Here (i.e. in my case) existence has ceased, since I have ceased to exist and have passed out of self. My resistance is in Him, and I am altogether His. I am in the shadow of His command the marriage contract must be asked for from Him, not from me”.

Commenting on the passage Smith says;¹³⁰

So, like her Christian sisters in the life of sanctity, Rabi‘ah espoused a heavenly Bridegroom and turned her back on earthly marriage even with one of her own intimates and companions on the way.

But Rabi‘ah’s case cannot be compared to Christian sisters as in Rabi‘ah’s case it was only her choice not teaching. She did not deny marriage but she was (just) too occupied with her worship and prayers that it had not left any sensual desires in her heart. On another occasion, al-Hurayfish (*al-Rawad al-fariq*; p. 214) writes that when she was asked to choose any man for her, “She said, yes willingly. Who’s the most learned of you, that I may marry him? They said Hasan of Basra so she said to him, “If you can give me the answer to four questions I will be your wife”. He said, “Ask if God permit, I will answer you”.

¹²⁹ M. Smith, p. 13.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

She then asked (i). “What will be the judge of the world when I die? (means Muslim or *Kafir*?). And (ii) When I am put in the grave and *Munkar* and *Nakir* question me shall I be able to answer them or not? (iii) In the Resurrection, shall I be given my (book) in my right hand or in my left? (iv) In which two groups (paradise or hell) shall I be on the day of judgement?

Āasan BaĀrā’s answer to all four questions was that it is hidden and only Allah has the knowledge of it. She then concluded that if this is not known and I have to concern myself with these four questions, how should I need a husband with whom to occupy.

Rabi’ah lived a long life alone and died in 185 A.H. (801 A.D.) and was buried at Basra.

Rabi’ah’s Teachings

It is interesting to note, that there is no evidence that Rabi’ah learnt or studied from any teacher. As for her anecdotes related to Hasan Basri and other leading sufis of the time, it implies that they had high regard about Rabi’ah as their teacher. They use to come to her for her advice and counselling. But there is only one story quoted by Abu al-Qasim al-Nishaburi (in *Uqala al-Majānān* p. 128) which tells that she attended Hayyuna’s company, who practised the greatest austerity and used to pray, “O God I would that the day were night that I might enjoy thy proximity”. In the middle of the night sleep overcame Rabi’ah and Hayyuna came to Rabi’ah, kicking her with his foot he said, “Rise up, the Bridegroom of the truly guided ones has come. The adornments of the brides of night are revealed by the light of the night prayers”.¹³¹

Munawi (d. 1622) places Rabi’ah in the second, of the two classes of individuals “one is the class of those who seek a master in the way that leads to the majesty of God, who may act as an intermediary between them and God... (prophet)... the second class are those who, when they seek to follow the right path, do not see before them the footprint of any of God’s creature, for they have removed all thought from their hearts and concern themselves solely with God. And he says, “This state is the state of Abd al-Qadir and Abu Said Shibli and Rabi’ah al-”Adawiyya”¹³²

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

Rabi'ah has not written any book but her sayings have been quoted by almost all (great) sufi writers, Rabi'ah was regarded a guide and teacher both in her time, and the following generation of sufis on that path were highly indebted to her teachings. To give an example, of what was her view of teaching we quote this story from 'AḤḤār:

“Once ‘Rabi’ah sent Hasan three things - a piece of wax, a needle and a hair.

“Be like wax”, she said “Illumine the world, and yourself burn. Be like a needle always be working naked. When you have done these two things, a thousand years will be for you as a hair”. It can be understood from this that to her, the existence should be to enlighten the world on a higher level. On a lower level we can say to help and benefit others. By naked she probably meant not to be outwardly but in necessary natural condition and the thinness or fineness of hair imply the feeling shortness of the time which is troublesome on this path.

But it is also very important to clarify that she was not aware of the problem, on her path. Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1257, wrote *Mir'at al-ḡamān* p. 257a) mentions this conversation of Rabi'ah with Zulfa bint Abd. al-Wahid who says,

“I said to Rabi'ah, O my aunt, why do you not allow people to visit you?” Rabi'ah replied, “I fear lest when I am dead, people will relate of me what I did not say or do, what if I had seen, I should have feared or mistrusted. I am told that they say that I find money under my place of prayer, and that I cook (food) in the pot without a fire”. I said to her, “They relate of you that you find food and drink in your house”, and she said, O daughter of my brother, if I had found such things in my house I would not have touched them, or laid hands upon them, but I tell you that I buy my things and am blessed in them”¹³³

We can derive the following points from this story.

- i. Rabi'ah's teaching was limited to only those who were able to understand it. Those who did not stand on the same level of understanding in this path were immune to be misled. It suggest that

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

sufism which is the attainment of higher knowledge that's known as *Ma'rifa* cannot be taught to everyone. It is the knowledge which is given by God to those servants who come nearer to him through their self worship and struggle.

- ii. It also suggests that it cannot be taught to common men except in the language that they understand. This means that certain things are not apprehended by everyone. For example, miracles are done by the command of Allah for those whom He wills. They should be the means to strengthen the faith for both, who see and for whom it is done. But they tend to mislead instead and become a source of deviation.
- iii. People should not deny the miracles considering the command of Allah, nor should they consider them within the power of sufis.
- iv. That Rabi'ah's miracles associated with food and drink were nothing but her trust in Allah, which Allah promises to everyone and provides through strange means.

The aim of the Sufis like Rabi'ah was not to show miracles and teach their practices but as Abë ñälüb Makkâ (d. 996) writes in *Qët al-Qulëb*, "Thou shalt worship God as if thou sawest Him". This attainment of *Ihsan* was one of the initial goals of the sufis and they experience it through by worship. First, as to be seen by Him. For He sees us if we cannot see Him. This brought them closer to Allah and finally they arrived at the stage where they were able to see, hear and speak by Him. The Holy tradition speaks of it like this.

"My servant ceases not to draw nigh unto me by supererogatory worship until I love him; and when I love him, I am his ear, so that he hears by me, and his tongue, so that he speaks by me, and his hand, so that he takes by me".

The sufis aimed at achieving this position and there were some like Said Abil Khair as Nicholson¹³⁴ points out who stopped their practices, which were the means to that goal. But the sufis like Rabi'ah continued their practices until their very end. Thus to quote Prof. 'Attas, "*tasawwuf* is an integral part of Islam; just as all reality and truth has an outer and inner aspect to it so is *tasawwuf* the inner dimension of Islam; it sincere and correct

¹³⁴ Syed M. Naquib al-'Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1978) p. 115.

practice is none other than the intensification of the *shari'ah* upon one's self; it is the expression of *ihsan* in the '*abd*'.¹³⁵

Different Aspects of Her Teachings

Tawba (Repentance)

Sufis have given great importance to *Tawba* which was derived from various Qur'anic verses Al-Hujwiri says,¹³⁶ "There is no right service without repentance. Repentance is the first of the stations in this path" and it includes 3 things (i) remorse for disobedience (ii) determination not to sin again (iii) immediate abandonment of sin. Al-Ghazālā¹³⁷ said that *Tawba* is the conviction of sin which leads to amend it. Rabi'ah's sense of *Tawba* was very grave which caused her to grieve and weep. 'AÇÇār says, it is related that Rabi'ah was always weeping and when it was said to her, 'Why do you weep like this? She said, 'I fear that I may be cut off from Him to whom I accustomed and that at the hour of death a voice may say that, I am not worthy. When she was asked that, Will God accept the *Tawba* of a person who has committed sin? She answered, How can anyone repent unless his Lord gives him repentance and accepts him". So the sense of seeking *Tawba* itself was a gift from God, to Rabi'ah. But her concept of *Tawba* was full of shame which implied to ask for forgiveness for something shameful.

Taqi al-Dân Hisnâ (ob. A.D. 1426 wrote *Siyar al-Salihat*)¹³⁸ relates that Ibn Man'Äer came to Rabi'ah who was praying and saw her place of worship like a marsh from her tears. And she asked him the reason for coming, he replied, to greet you. She then rose up for *Äalät* and said "I ask forgiveness of God for my lack of sincerity when 'I say (those words) I ask forgiveness of God".

Tawba free from sincerity may arise the sense of pride in a person and thus may not be effective. Jāmā¹³⁹ (d. 1492 A.D. wrote *Nafbat al-Uns*) relates that Sufyān al-Thawrā exclaimed in Rabi'ah's presence, "Alas! for my sorrow". Rabi'ah said to him, "Do not lie, if you were really sorrowful, life would not be so pleasant to you". She used to say, "my sorrow is not for the things

¹³⁵ Smith, p. 53.

¹³⁶ Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *L'Äy« Ulum al-Din*, Vol. 4, p. 29.

¹³⁷ Smith, p. 56.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

which make me grieve, but my sorrow is for the things for which I do not grieve”.. This is very important because Tawba is a positive aspect for wrong actions. But if the sense of awareness of the sin is not there, the person keeps doing it unconsciously. The concept of sin to Rabi‘ah was not sorrowful because of the punishment in hereafter but because it separates the sinner from God. Hurayfish¹⁴⁰ (d. 1398 A.D wrote *Al-Rawdal-Faiq*) says that she used to refer to God as the “One who can cleanse her from her sin”.

Āabr (Patience)

Rabi‘ah’s teaching of *Sabr* was a complete example of her practices. She demonstrated the highest stages of *Sabr* during her early life, when she suffered from all sorts of injuries. Later on her stories related to her sicknesses or her domestic needs all show that her main concern was to seek the pleasure of God and she justified everything as His will. ‘AÇÇār refers to her secret of *Sabr* in her conversation with Sufyan. Sufyan tempted her to seek what she desired from God, and she answered, “If I will a thing, and my Lord does not will it, I shall be guilty of unbelief”. This is important as not surrendering to the will of Allah makes a person react and say *Kıfr*. Therefore to accept everything from Allah makes man submit and patient. Al-Ghazali and al-Qushayri considered patience as an essential part of faith.

Shukr (Gratitude)

Rabi‘ah’s sense of gratitude was not only for the gifts but rather for the Giver. ‘AÇÇār quotes this story that her maid servant asked her to come out to behold the works of God. She replied, “Come you inside that you may behold their Maker. Contemplation of the maker has turned me aside from contemplating what he has made. Smith¹⁴¹ says that here “Rabi‘ah’s attitude was different from pantheistic sufis who felt that God was seen (and could be worshipped) in all His creation”.

Al-Qushayrâ (*Risālah*, p. 106) regarded gratitude as an important quality on the mystic way. He mentions three elements leading to Shukr, faith, feeling and action. Faith must accept the fact that all benefits come from God. This faith must produce the feeling of joy and the humility before the

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 62..

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 60.

Giver. And consequence of these two leads to action and make an individual grateful, praising and thanking the Giver and avoid its opposite.

‘*ttar* relates this story on her teaching of *Shukr*. “It is related that one time she saw someone who had a bandage bound about his head. She said, “Why is this bandage bound (round your head)? He said, “My head is paining me”. Rabi’ah asked him, “how old he was”? “Thirty years old he replied. She asked him “Were you in pain and trouble for the greater part of your life”? ‘No’ he answered. Then she said, “for thirty years (God) has kept your body fit and you have never bound upon it the bandage of gratitude, but for one night of pain in your head you bind it with the bandage of complaint”.

Raja’ and Khauf (Hope and Fear)

Hope and fear were regarded as the two main pillars of faith by sufis. Al-Sarraaj (al-luma; p. 66) says, “Those who fear, serve God through dread of separation from Him, and those who hope, serve in the expectation of union with Him. Al-Sarrāj¹⁴² refers to three kinds of fear, the commonest being fear of punishment. Others fear being cut off from God, or anything that might hinder attainment of gnosis. But there is a higher type of fear even than this, and the holy fear of elect is the fear of God alone.

Al-Qushayrâ says that the terror of the common sort (*rahba*) makes a man run away, but holy dread (*Khashya*) brings him near to God. And so he compares it with the lamp, which makes heart see what is good and what is evil. “He who truly fears a thing flees from it, but he who truly fears God, flees unto Him.”

The Sufi doctrine of fear and hope is summarized by al-Sarraaj¹⁴³ as follows:

“The fear is like a state of darkness, in which the soul wanders, bewildered, seeking always to escape from it, and when hope comes to lighten it, the soul goes out to place of refreshment and grace prevails.

Rabi’ah’s fear was caused from the effect of hell fire and it used to express in her weeping (as we have already seen). Her biographer Munawi says that she remained for forty years without raising her head to heaven, out of her

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

reverence towards God. And she used to say, whenever I have heard the call to prayer, I have remembered the trumpet call of the Day of Resurrection, and whenever I have seen the snow I have seen also the pages of the records fluttering. Commenting on Rabi'ah's teaching on hope and fear, Smith¹⁴⁴ says, "Seen in an eschatological setting, it is closely linked with her teaching on the doctrine of disinterested love to God, and since she appears to have been among the first to bring this doctrine into prominence among the sufis and to lay particular stress upon it as the essential element in the saint's relation to God. It is possible that she was also one of the first to teach this exalted ideal of hope and fear and to conceive of paradise as a spiritual state". Al-Ghazālâ also regarded Rabi'ah responsible for this important development in Sufi doctrine.

Al-Munawi relates that Rabi'ah heard a reader reading that "the inhabitants of paradise are occupied in enjoying themselves," and she said, "the inhabitants of paradise are unfortunate in their occupation and their companions". But Rabi'ah was blamed for making this statement by Ibn 'Arabâ, who said that it was she who was unfortunate and that they were occupied only with God and this was His will for them. Smith¹⁴⁵ elaborates Rabi'ah's point by saying, "She probably wished to make it clear that in her view paradise was not a place for sensual delights but rather a state of contemplation of the face of God". There are several occasions when Rabi'ah was asked to say something about paradise, she said, "first the neighbour, then the house". Al-Ghazālâ's opinion on this statement was that, "in her heart was no leaning towards paradise, but to the Lord of paradise.

Tawakkul (dependence), Zuhd and Poverty

Tawakkul is related to poverty, and asceticism. Rabi'ah's life was a perfect example of abandoning everything for the sake of God and relying in Him. "AÇÇâr relates one story of Rabi'ah when she reached 'Arafât while making pilgrimage. She heard the voice of God saying, "O you who invoke me, what request have you to make of me? If it is myself that you desire, then I will show you one flash of My Glory (but in that) you will be absorbed and melt

¹⁴⁴ *Kitab al-Luma'*, p. 63.

¹⁴⁵ Smith, p. 72.

away.” She then said, O Lord of Glory, Rabi‘ah has no means of attaining to that degree, but I desire one particle of (spiritual) poverty.¹⁴⁶

And then the voice explained poverty, that it is as a wrath in the way of men.

Smith says that poverty, here” signifies the state of complete self-loss, exceedingly hard to attain and not leading to union unless it is perfect and even then the mystic may, in the good pleasure of God, be subject to a dark night of the soul before attaining to union. Such a poverty could be attained only by the adept, divested of every attribute of “self”. ‘*Zuhd*’ (asceticism) she says is considered side by side with poverty. And the first state of ‘*Zuhd*’ is initiatory and represents the purgative life, through which the *Nafs*, the carnal soul must be purified from its sins which come from the desires of self.¹⁴⁷

Abë nãalib Makkâ¹⁴⁸ (pp. 248, 250) says, that piety in the servants leads on to ‘*zuhd*’ and ‘*zuhd*’ to love of God, and these two states are the aim of those who seek to love God and to be intimate with Him and he is not truly a *Zahid* who does not attain to the station of love or the mystic state of intimacy (*Uns*)’.

Al-Hujwiri refers to three kinds of ‘*zuhd*’ by Ahmad b. Àanbal. One, the renunciation of what is unlawful, which is common enough. The renunciation of what is lawful, which is a more special type, and finally, the renunciation of all, whatever it may be, that distracts the servant from God most High and this is the *zuhd* of gnostic.¹⁴⁹

Rabi‘ah’s teachings have played a major role in the development of this early school of *Zuhd*. ‘Attar says that when she was asked “whence have you come?” She said, from that world” they asked her, “Whithers are you going? She replied, “To that world? and she was asked, “what are you doing in this world?” and she answered, “I am sorrowing”. “In what way”, they asked and she said, “I am eating the bread of this world and doing the work of that world.” Then someone said, “One so persuasive in speech is worthy to keep a rest-house and she responded, “I myself am keeping a rest house, whatever

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Kitab al-Luma'*, p. 46.

is within, I do not allow to go out and whatever is not does out come in. If anyone comes in or goes out, he does not concern me, for I am contemplating my own heart, not mere clay”¹⁵⁰.

On Love and Union

Rabī‘ah’s teaching on love can be summarized as follows: First, she says this love of the servant to his Lord must shut out all others than the beloved. One must raise above the claims of the sense and allow neither pleasure nor pain to disturb his contemplation of the divine. To her God seemed to be a jealous God, who will suffer none to share with Him that love which is due to Him alone. Secondly, she teaches that this love, which directed to God to the exclusion of all else, must be disinterested, that it must look neither to hope of reward nor to relief from punishment but seek only to the will of God and to accomplish that which is pleasing to Him, that He may be glorified”. Schimmel says,¹⁵¹ “Rabī‘ah’s love of God was absolute”. She was the pioneer of disinterested love and love of jealous God. Smith says that though she was not the first to seek God through love, she was the first to lay stress upon the doctrine and to combine with it the doctrine of *Kashf*, the unveiling at the end of the way, of the Beloved to His lovers.”¹⁵²

‘AḤḤār speaks of her as “that woman on fire with love and ardent desire... consumed with her passion”.¹⁵³ Abē nālib refers to Rabī‘ah’s comment on Sufyān at-Thawrā, when he said, “O God mayst thou be satisfied with Him”. And Sufyan said, I ask forgiveness of God”. Ja‘far then said, to her, when is the servant satisfied with God most high”? and she said, when his pleasure in misfortune is equal to his pleasure in prosperity”.¹⁵⁴ Al-Ghazālā says that sincere love causes you to obey and “everyone who obeys seeks intimacy”, and he refers to following verses recited by her.¹⁵⁵

“I have made thee the companion of my heart, But my body is available for those who desire its company,

¹⁵⁰ *Kashaf*, pp. 117-118, Quoted in Smith, p. 77.

¹⁵¹ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. (Chappel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975) p. 39.

¹⁵² Smith, p. 97.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*., p. 93.

¹⁵⁵ Al-Ghazali, p. 358.

And my body is friendly towards its guest, But the beloved of my heart is the guest of my soul”.

There is a famous story attributed by Aflākā¹⁵⁶ to Rabi‘ah, where her disinterested love for God is demonstrated.

One day a number of saints saw that Rabi‘ah had taken fire in one hand and water in the other and was running with speed. They said to her, “O lady of the next world, where are you going and what is the meaning of this”? She said:

“I am going to light fire in paradise and to pour water on to hell so that both veils (i.e. hindrances to the true vision of God) may completely disappear from the pilgrims ... and the servants of God may see Him without any object of hope or motive of fear”.

‘Attar mentions one story that Rabi‘ah was asked, “Do you love the Lord of glory”? She said, ‘I do”. Then he asked “do you hold Satan as an enemy”. She said, “no”. And when astonishingly asked, ‘why is that”? She said “my love for God leaves no room for hating Satan”. She further said, “I saw the Prophet in a dream” and he asked ‘O Rabi‘ah, do you love me”? I said, “O Prophet of God! who is there who does not love you, but my love of God has so possessed me that no place remains for loving and hating save Him.” Rabi‘ah has been blamed to have heresy in her teaching for this saying. But it is clear that she had a completely different picture of God and was indifferent to any other love.

Someone asked her, “what is love”? She replied, “love has come from eternity and passes to eternity and none has been found in seventy thousand worlds who drinks one drop of it until at last he is absorbed in God, and from that comes the saying “He loves them (saints) and they love Him”. (al-Qur‘ān 5:59).

There have been some confusion about the famous verses on love attributed to Rabi‘ah and according to Smith, Abu Talib who is attributed to them, have himself referred them to Rabi‘ah’s own. (They are reported by all her biographers, except ‘AḤḤār):

¹⁵⁶ Smith, pp. 98-99.

“I have love you with two loves, a selfish love and a love that is worthy (of you),

As for the love which is selfish, I occupy myself therein with remembrance of you to the exclusion of all others. And for that which is worthy of you, therein you raise the veil that I may see you.

Yet is there no praise to me in this or that, but the praise is to you, whether in that or this”.

After elaborating these verses, Abë ñālib commented that she had reached the highest truth in regard to love.¹⁵⁷ Al-Ghazali said, “she meant by the selfish love, the love of God for His favour and grace bestowed and for temporary happiness. And by the love worthy of Him. The love of His beauty which was revealed to her and this is the higher of the two loves and finer of them”¹⁵⁸ He further says that she wanted to achieve the union with God and His Beatific vision.

Munājat or Prayers

Rabī‘ah’s prayers were an important part of her daily practice and an insight into her feelings. Introducing her prayers to God, Schimmel says, “The nightly prayers, one of the early pivots of early ascetic life, become, with her, a sweet and loving conversation between lover and beloved; as she says in one of the prayers;

“O God, the night has passed and the day has dawned. How I long to know if you have accepted my prayers or if you have rejected them”¹⁵⁹

Conclusion

Rabī‘ah was one of those few figures in Islamic history, like al-Ghazālā who have been highly respected by all Muslims. And this is a fact to which Smith points out that any pious woman in Muslim society is given the nickname of Rabī‘ah. She has influenced a great deal on general Muslim women but with regard to sufism, her teachings were highly appreciated by all great sufi writers like Abë ñālib Makkāi, al-Qushayrā, al-Ghazālā and Sohrawardā. They all consider her teachings an integral part of sufism. Her

¹⁵⁷ Smith, p. 104.

¹⁵⁸ Al-Ghazali, p. 267.

¹⁵⁹ Schimmel, p. 40.

main biographer ‘Aḥḥār calls her “the second spotless Mary,” who was chosen over all the women of the worlds (al-Qur’ān). And it is possible that Rabi‘ah was inspired by Maryam’s personality. The Qur’an mentions Maryam as the most purified and devout figure. Allah mentions her name with praise, for devoting her life for the service of Allah. This justifies the isolation of sufis like Rabi‘ah for which they have been generally criticized.

While commenting on the personality of Rabi‘ah Schimmel¹⁶⁰ holds the view that “the attitude of sufism towards fair sex was ambivalent, and it can be said that sufism was more favourable to the development of feminine activities than were other branches of Islam”. This is very interesting to note that we certainly do not find any prominent female figure in other disciplines in Islam. And the only reason as the scholars point out could be the technical difficulties faced by women in contributing their intellectual qualities.

Rabi‘ah’s life was a good mixture of Qur’anic teachings. She demonstrated both hope and fear in her actions an ideal for true belief. This in turn developed to the extent that she desired to see God and this typical love for God found its way for her.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 426.