

Rab'ia Al Basria (717-801 AD): The Mystic Daughter of Islam

Mizazur Rahman Talukdar

Assistant Professor, Department of Arabic, Gauhati University, Assam

Abstract

Rabia Al Basria is the most famous and perhaps the first female Sufi saint of Islam. She was born in Basra, a sea port in southern Iraq in 97 A.H. Her father was Ismail Basri. Literally, the word '*Rabia*' means 'fourth'. Since she was the fourth daughter of her parents she was named so. Her father died when she was not even 10 years old. She lost her mother too in early age.

In this materialistic world where only worldly success matters, where the word 'self-less' does not figure in its lexicon, where religion is largely observance of rituals; this mystic daughter of Islam is an exception. Rabia Al Basria was a sufi mystic in its true sense. She had overcome her Self (nafs) by means of devotion, meditation, contemplation, patience as well as trust in Allah. Throughout her life, her love of God and self-denial remained her constant companions. She used to spend whole night in prayer and contemplation. She was immersed in the thought of Allah and reached the pinnacle of mystic path. Rabia Basria was of the opinion that God should be loved for God's own sake, neither out of fear of the Hell nor in greed of paradise. Rabia did not marry in her life. Then governor of Basra Muhammad bin Sulaiman Al Hashimi sent a proposal to marry her. Rabia politely declined the proposal and did not tie the nuptial knot ever. She lived around 80 years and breathed her last in 180 A.H.

Rabia was not only a Sufi mystic; she did compose beautiful verses on love of God, salvation and so on. In this paper titled '*Rabia Al Basria : The Mystic Daughter of Islam*' efforts have been made to highlight the contribution of Rabia Al Basria to the enrichment of Sufi Arabic literature.

Key words: Sufism, mysticism, salvation, meditation, love of God.

Rab'ia Al Basria (717-801 AD): The Mystic Daughter of Islam

Rabia Al Basria was born in Basra during the regime of Umayyad ruler Waleed Bin Abdul Malik (d. 96 AH). She was born in 95 AH, the very year in which Hajjaj Bin Yusuf, the Governor of Iraq died. Earlier biographers of Rabia like Sheikh Fariduddin Attar (R) did not mention the year of her birth in his monumental work '*Tadhkiraul Aolia*'. But the modern writers have asserted that she was born in 97 AH or 717 AD. The famous French orientalist Massignon has stressed on 95 AH or 99 AH. This has been endorsed by Dr. Margaret Smith in her famous book '*Rabia: The Mystic*'. Smith was the first westerner to chronicle the life of the Sufi mystic Rabia of Basra.

Rabia witnessed the regime of 9 Umayyad and 5 Abbasid rulers. Politically her time was a golden period for Muslims. Islamic conquests were being made and plenty of war booties were coming to the Muslim cities. People were happy and the regime was strong and stable. Basra was a confluence of many cultures and civilizations. Apart from being a sea port, Basra was a centre of trade and commerce. People from every walk of life would come to Basra and it was recognized as a centre of knowledge and literary activities.

Rabia was born and brought up in poverty. She spent first five years of her life with her parents. There was a famine in Basra during the early age of Rabia. This famine had bankrupted many dynasties. It was that famine wherein Rabia was separated from her family. A robber caught her and sold her to a merchant. She spent a significant time of her early life in slavery, although she was left free later on. Rabia Basria memorized the holy Quran and acquired proficiency in the traditions of prophet.

Rab'ia and Her Mystic poems:

The famous book on Sufism 'History of the Philosophy of Sufism' co-authored by famous orientalist Dr. R. A. Nicholson and Prof. R. J. Arberry depicted the poetical calibre of Rabia Basri in the following few lines:

“Whatever Europe has learnt about Sufism, they learnt from the words of Rabia Basri. Her poems are the true expressions of the heart of a lover filled with love.”¹

¹ History of the Philosophy of Sufism by Dr. R.A.Nicholson and Prof. R.J.Arberry

Once Sufian Thawri asked Rabia about the essence of her belief. Rabia replied saying that she never worshiped Allah in fear of the Hell or in the greed of the Paradise. Instead she worships Allah in His love. Then she recited the following few verses:

Theory of two Loves

أحبك حيين حب الـهوى
وحيا لانك اهل لـذاكا
فاما الذى هو حب الهوى
فشغلي بذكرك عمن سواك
واما الذى انت اهل له
فكشـفك لي الحجب حتى اراكا
فلا الحمد في ذا ولا ذاك لى
ولكن لك الحمد فى ذا وذاكا

Translated by Margaret Smith as follows

I love Thee with two loves, a selfish love.

And a love that is worthy of Thee,

As for the love which is selfish, I occupy my self.

There in with remembrance of Thee to the exclusion of all others.

As for that which is worthy of thee, there in thou

Raise the veil that I may see thee.

Yet is there no praise to me in this or that.

But the praise is to thee, whether in that or this.²

(Rabia: the Mystic)

Relationship between Lover and beloved:

Rabia is famous for her poems on the love of Allah. Love of Allah makes its lover secluded from everything save Allah. And a lover wants to get closer to the beloved. Many a times Rabia used to recite the following few verses:

² Rabia : The Mystic by Margaret Smith

ولقد جعلناك في الفؤاد محدثي
وابحث جسمي من اراد جلوسى
فالجسم مني للجليس موانس
وحبيب قلبي في الفؤاد انيس.³

Dr. Margaret Smith translates as follows

I have made thee the companion of my heart
But my body is available for those who desire its company.
And my body is friendly towards its guests.
But the beloved of my heart is the guest of my soul.

Sheikh Sihabuddin Suhrawardy has quoted the following verses of Rabia:

تعصي الإله وانت تظهر حبه
هذا لعمرى في الفعال بديع
لو كان حبك صادقا لأطعته
ان المحب لمن يحب مطيع.⁴

Translation

(O my soul!) You claim and express the love of Allah, where as you disobey Him.

This indeed a strange thing

Had your love to Allah been true, you would have obeyed Him.

Because a lover must obey his beloved.

Mufti Masood has written a book on Rabia in 2007 AD. In this book he has quoted a poem claiming to be that of Rabia. The verses of the poem are as follows.

كأسي وخمرى والنديم ثلاثة
وانا المشوقة في الحبة رابعة
كأس المسرة والنعم يديرها
ساقى المدام على المدى متتابعة
فاذا نظرت فلا أرى الا له

³ حضرت رابعة بصري رحمة الله عليها، حافظ ناصر محمود، ص 363

⁴ حضرت رابعة بصري رحمة الله عليها، حافظ ناصر محمود، ص 364

وإذا حضرت فلا أرى إلا معه
يا عاذلي اني أحب جماله
يا الله ما أذاني لعذلك سامعه
كم بت من حرتي ونرط تعلقني
اجرى غيرنا من عيونى الدمعة
لا عبرتي ترق ولا للى له
يبقى ولا عيني القريحة هاجعه.⁵

Translation:

Among wine, cup of wine and my friend, I am the fourth one. I have the drink of joy and happiness one after another. Whenever I gaze to Him, I see Him and wherever I would be I would be with Him. O the advisor! I fell in love of his beauty. By God, my ear is full of your advices. I have spent many nights in His remembrance, while my eyes were shedding tears. Neither my tears remain nor did our union last long and my eyes do not lower for a moment.

Mustafa Abdul Razzak pasha one of the experts on Rabia said that she is the pioneer in sufi literature who propagated the doctrine of love in sufi poetry instead of fear psychosis. She could be dubbed as the founder of this segment of sufi poetry. Her poems are not only full of sufistic flavours and ardent love to Allah, they are the best examples of beautiful expression of what is there in heart. Most of her poems are her prayers to Allah which have taken the shape of poetry. We see nothing but ardent love of Allah in her poems. Spontaneous expressions of her inner self and perfect depictions of her realisations have beautifully been portrayed in her verses. Her verses prove that there was nothing in her inner self except the existence of the Almighty.

She has many verses on exclusive love of Allah and dedicated prayers to him. She says:

أ للزاد أبكي؟ أم لطول مسافتي؟ وزادي قليل ما أراه مبلغني
فأين رجائي فيك؟ أين مخافتي؟ اتحرقني بالنار يا غاية المنى.⁶

⁵ حضرت رابعة بصري رحمة الله عليها، حافظ ناصر محمود، ص 366

⁶ www.naseemalsham.com

(موقع نسيم الشام)

Rabia Basri used to pray at night saying:

إلهي هدأت الأصوات وسكنت الحركات
وخلأ كل حبيب بحبيبه
وقد خلوت بك أيه المحبوب
فاجعل خلوتي منك في هذه الليلة عتقي من النار⁷.

Last prayer:

Margaret smith, the famous orientalist has mentioned Rabia's last prayer in her book 'Rabia: The Mystic'. Although this prayer is not in the shape of poetry, it has the beauty and style of poetry as well. This has been endorsed by R A Nicholson, the other orientalist. Imam Abul Qasim Arif has also mentioned this last prayer in his book 'قصد الى الله'. This last prayer is nothing but her longing to meet the beloved as early as possible. She says in her prayers that best of gifts that she has is her desire to meet the beloved. The sweetest words that she has are praising of Allah. The moment of meeting with the beloved is the best moment in her life. O Allah, I cannot live in this world without your remembrance and in hereafter without your sight.

Research on Rabia:

Dr. Margaret Smith, the famous orientalist did her Ph.D. from university of London on Rabia Basria. Title of her thesis was "Rab'ia Basri the Mystic & Her Fellow Saints in Islam". Dr. Smith is considered to be an authority on Rabia Basria. Dr. Smith is of the opinion that many of the sources and materials available on Rabia are not authentic, because of the fact that many of the writers and biographers of Rabia were born after the demise of Rabia. Many of them relied on stories or folktales. In generally Muslim scholars have given less importance towards female scholars or sufis. But Rabia is an exception. She has been warmly received by all quarters due to her sincerity and later sufis were also fond of Rabia Basria. Hazrat Rabia was in her eighties when she passed away. She died in Jerusalem in 185 A.H

(Zirkali, al-A`lam, vol. 3, p 10, col 1, who quotes Ibn Khalikan as his source.)

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⁷ www.naseemalsham.com

Conclusion:

Rabia Basri is a pioneer sufi mystic of early period who introduced the doctrine of Divine Love. Her reputation as a female Sufi mystic surpassed many of the contemporary sufis of her time and even after her time. Many of the poems attributed to her could not be authenticated since she did not leave behind her any compilations of poems or Dewan. Still researchers dug upon her scholarship and discovered many of her works from diverse sources. Apart from being a Sufi mystic par excellence, she put forward a significant contribution to the promotion of Arabic Sufi literature through her poems and prayers. May Allah give her best of rewards.

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