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The Theology of Love and Its Requisites in the Epistles (Maktubat) of Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindi

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Introduction

For centuries, love has been far from a marginal concept in Islamic mysticism; rather, it forms the very core of many Sufi teachings. Although the Qur'an does not contain the word ʿishq, over time it became so deeply embedded in Persian literature -and particularly in Sufi texts- that without it our picture of Islamic mysticism would be incomplete. Figures such as Rābiʿa al-Adawiyya, Aḥmad Ghazali, Ayn al-Quḍat, and Ruzbihan Baqli each approached love from a different angle and ascribed various attributes to it. Yet some jurist-theologians, including Ibn al-Jawzi and al-Qushayri, disapproved of using the term "love" for the relationship between God and His servant.

In this context, Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindi- known as the Imam Rabbani and Mujaddid Alf Thani- who lived in the politically and intellectually turbulent atmosphere of Mughal India during the ۱۰th–۱۱th/۱۶th–۱۷th centuries, adopted a moderate yet innovative approach in his celebrated collection of letters, the Maktubat. Though he preferred the word maḥabbah (affection) over ʿishq, he examined the dimensions and implications of love from a distinctly Sharia-oriented perspective, sometimes arriving at conclusions that set him apart from many earlier Sufis. What has largely been overlooked in previous Sirhindi scholarship is a precise account of these very attributes of love. The present article, employing a textual analysis method, seeks to fill this gap and to answer the fundamental question: what place does love hold in Sirhindi's mystical system, and what features does he enumerate for it?

Research Findings

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A thorough examination of the three-volume Maktubat reveals that Sirhindi, unlike many love-absorbed Sufis, does not treat love as a mere emotion or transient state, but rather as a precise mechanism within religious and ethical wayfaring. The attributes he enumerates for love can be categorised under seven main themes: First, love is the driving force of creation. Citing the well-known sacred ḥadith "I was a hidden treasure…", Sirhindi argues that it is khullat (intimate friendship) that sets the chain of creation in motion and brings the world into existence. In his view, without khullat, nothing could exist, and no part could be joined with another. He goes even further, claiming that even non-existence itself, in its own solitude, owes its stability to the blessing of khullat and serves as a medium for contingent beings. Interestingly, Sirhindi regards the first determination (taʿayyun) as existential and related to Abraham (upon him be peace), rather than as a concise noetic determination related to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). He attempts to reconcile this with the ultimate superiority of the Prophet by distinguishing between "noetic attainment" (wuṣul-i naẓari) and "practical attainment" (wuṣul-i qadami). Second, love is a sharp blade for severing attachments. Sirhindi views love as a tool for cutting all ties with anything other than God. He insists that if love is given to the seeker at the beginning of the path, it is precisely to liberate him from the bondage of creation so that he may ultimately reach the pure station of servitude. In other words, love here plays a preparatory role; it is not the final destination. Third, worship devoid of love is self-worship. Referring to the sayings of Rābiʿa and the intimate prayer of Imam Ali (peace be upon him), Sirhindi considers worship motivated by hope for Paradise or fear of Hell as nothing but the worship of one's own self. For him, a loving servant, once in the station of essential love, sees divine favour and affliction as equal; indeed, the pain inflicted by the Beloved may even be sweeter than His bounty.

Fourth, pain and grief are inseparable from true love. Quoting verses from Jāmī and Ḥazīn, and recalling the Prophet's constant grief (mutawaṣil al-aḥzan), Sirhindi establishes the conviction that genuine love cannot be free of sorrow. In his view, it is precisely this pain that distinguishes love from khullat, for khullat is all intimacy and tranquillity, whereas love brings restlessness and wanderlust. Fifth, ecstasy (wajd), audition (samāʿ), and dancing are for beginners. Living at a time when the Chishtī order placed great emphasis on samāʿ and ecstasy, Sirhindi unequivocally declares that these states belong to those who are still caught in the shadows of divine attributes. Those who have attained perfection and reached the station of prophethood (or its following) have no need for such shadows; their love manifests solely as pure obedience and compliance with the Beloved.

Sixth, love sometimes flees from union. This feature, also found in the writings of ʿAyn al-Quḍāt and Jāmī, is described by Sirhindi as one of the very "arts" of love. At times, the lover becomes so absorbed in love itself that he turns away even from the Beloved- which signifies complete annihilation and the unity of lover and Beloved. Seventh, in essential love, the Beloved's affliction is sweeter than His favour. Sirhindi regards this station as exclusive to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and elevates it above the station of riḍā (contentment), because in riḍā only aversion is removed, whereas here the lover actually delights in the very pain and severity inflicted by the Beloved. In addition, Sirhindi distinguishes between khullat and

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maḥabbah as the general and the specific: khullat is the broader principle, while love is its perfect manifestation, accompanied by pain and grief.

Conclusion

Looking at these seven attributes as a whole, we find that Sirhindi, in his Maktubat, elevates love from a purely mystical station to a theological–ethical phenomenon. He presents love not as the ultimate goal, but as a passageway toward pure servitude, and in doing so, relying on concepts such as khullat, detachment from all else, self-renunciation, embracing suffering, and shunning superficial ecstasies, he paints a fresh portrait of a theology of love in which Sharia and spiritual wayfaring are interwoven, and love is understood not as mere frenzy but as loving obedience. This Sharia-centred approach is the single most important factor that distinguishes Sirhindi's theology of love from other mystical systems of his time.

Keywords: Sirhindi, Maktubat, Love, Lover, Beloved.