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THE MYSTICAL AND PHYSICAL SPLENDOUR OF TAYEB SALIH'S *THE WEDDING OF ZEIN*¹

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Abstract

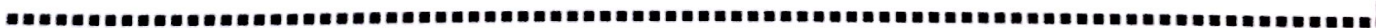
Sufism (Islamic Mysticism) depicts different things to different scholars including Muslim mystics themselves. It is even argued by some western scholars (orientalists) that one can be a mystic without adhering to any religion at all. Hence, it is asserted that no basis of mysticism exists unless some such relations between the human soul and God are pre-supposed. Islamic Mysticism is however considered by some Muslim scholars as a higher level of religious vocation or practice while it is considered as a complete aberration by yet some others. We have, against this background, looked at the mystical and physical beauty of *The Wedding of Zein*. Zein was a rare and very strange personage of mystical and mysterious idiosyncrasies and temperament much as the events and happenings in his life were strange and mystical. However, more important was the mystical feat and flair exhibited by Ni'ma-a beautiful lady, the besought of all the young and old men in the village-which made their marriage a huge success. She got drowned in the ocean of her mystical thought so much so that she no longer belongs to the realm of the mortals but finds a dwelling place for herself in the spiritual realm of celestial habitat, for unless she does this, their marriage could never have come to pass. The marriage was, no doubt, one of the greatest wonders witnessed by the villagers in their respective and collective lives owing to its spiritual splendor and mystical colorations.

Keyword: Sufism, Islamic Mysticism, Zein, Muslim, God

Abstrak

Tasawuf (mistisisme Islam) menggambarkan perkara yang berbeza kepada ilmuwan berbeza termasuk ahli sufi itu sendiri. Sesetengah sarjana Barat (orientalis) juga menghujahkan bahawa seseorang boleh menjadi pengikut mistisisme tanpa berpegang pada mana-mana agama. Oleh itu, ditegaskan bahawa tidak wujud asas mistik kecuali beberapa hubungan sedemikian antara

¹ This paper is a revised version of the one presented at the 2nd International Conference on the Mystical Aspects of Islamic Arts and Literature held at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur Campus between 23rd and 25th June, 2010 under the caption: "*The Mystical and Physical Beauty of Tayeb Salih's 'The Wedding of Zein'*".



roh manusia dan Tuhan diandaikan terlebih dahulu. Tasawuf bagaimanapun dianggap oleh sesetengah ulama sebagai tahap atau amalan agama yang lebih tinggi, manakala ia dianggap sebagai satu penyimpangan sepenuhnya oleh segelintir yang lain. Kami telah, bersandarkan latar belakang ini, melihat keindahan mistik dan fizikal dalam *The Wedding of Zein* (Upacara Perkahwinan Zein). Zein ialah seorang tokoh yang dianggap mempunyai kelainan serta menjalani kehidupan yang penuh mistik dan misteri. Walau bagaimanapun, hal lebih mustahak ialah pencapaian dan bakat mistik yang ditonjolkan oleh Ni'ma-a seorang wanita rupawan, rebutan semua lelaki tua dan muda di desa – yang menjadikan perkahwinan mereka satu kejayaan besar. Beliau begitu tenggelam dalam lautan pemikiran mistiknya sehinggakan beliau tidak lagi tergolong dalam alam manusia tetapi menjumpai tempat tinggal untuk dirinya di alam rohani habitat cakerawala, kerana melainkan beliau melakukan tindakan sebegini, perkahwinan mereka akan gagal. Perkahwinan itu, tidak syak lagi, salah satu keajaiban terbesar disaksikan oleh penduduk desa dalam kehidupan masing-masing dan secara berkelompok kerana kegemilangan rohaninya dan pewarnaan mistiknya.

Kata Kunci: Sufisme, Mistisisme Islam, Zein, Muslim, Tuhan

INTRODUCTION/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

It is pertinent to examine what is meant by *Sufi* and Sufism so as to be able to establish whether there is mystical beauty in *The Wedding of Zein* or not. The term *Sufi* and Sufism (that is, Mystic and Mysticism) have been defined differently by various scholars and mystics. Most Muslim scholars favored the idea that it derived from “*Ashab-us-Shufah*” (the ascetics who lived in the Prophet’s mosque). It is equally believed to have been derived from ‘*saf*’ meaning line or rank just as they believe that *Sufis* occupy the first rank among the comity of the Godly. The word ‘*saf*’ occurred in Chapter 61 verse 4 of The Glorious Qur’an. Yet, Jami (Nadvi: 78) and some other scholars were of the opinion that it was derived from ‘*safa*’ which means purity. To the Orientalists and other western scholars, the word *Sufi* was derived from the Greek term “sophist” (Nadvi: 75). This opinion was aimed at justifying the claim that mysticism was alien to Islam and the Muslims and that it was the contact of Muslims with the Greek philosophy as well as philosophers that brought the idea into Islam. This could not be the case; otherwise it becomes an aberration or innovation (*bidi’a*) which has no place in Islam. However, what has gained currency among scholars these days, is that the term was derived from ‘*Suf*’, that is wool. They argued that a woolen garment was a sign of simplicity of life and renunciation of luxury which is the hallmark of life of self-abnegation a *Sufi* lives. True to this, the Prophet of Islam (S.A.W.) and a great number of his companions preferred a plain (simple) cloth to a gorgeous one even on festive occasions.

According to Nadvi (75-6), *Sufi* and *Wali* are very often used as synonyms and hence interchangeably. He elucidates further that while *Wali* means near and *Wila'it* signifies nearness or propinquity or as generally meant, as he says, "Nearness or closeness to God", *Sufi* on the other hand refers to a life of self-abnegation borne out of one's propinquity to God or the urge for this. He stresses further that *Wila'it* is of two grades: one is meant for all believers, as the Qur'an says, "God is near (or friend to) those who believe (and) brings them out from darkness to light" (Qur'an 2: 275); and the other he says, is reserved for those who annihilate themselves in God. He concludes that "the real *Wali* is therefore he, 'who lives in Him, and dies in Him.'" He buttress this with a quotation attributed to Ibrahim bin Adham (quoted in Sviri) who once said to a person that was desirous of becoming a *Wali*, "Do not incline towards anything of this world or of the next and keep yourself confined to the Exalted Lord and finally get absorbed in Him."

Abul Qasim al-Qushairiy (d. 465A.H.) in his book entitled *Risala-al-Qushairiyyah* which is one of the oldest extant books on Sufism, written in 437A.H. asserts that the word *Wali* can be taken either (a) in the passive voice, meaning he, "who is loved by God, as the Qur'an says: Verily my friend is God who revealed the Book" (Qur'an 7: 196) or (b) in the active voice, in the exaggerated form, signifying "he who loves the worship of and devotion to God." According to Abu Abdullah Khafif, "a *Sufi* is he whom God has purified for Himself out of love" (Nadvi: 75)." To Nadvi therefore, the term *Mustafa* (from the same root) was applied to Muhammad, the Prophet of God, because he was purified by the Divine Being and was His Chosen Prophet.

Sufism in the opinion of Dhul-Nun Misri (quoted in Baker 17: 3) consists in the renunciation of everything else than God. Junayd al-Baghdadi (quoted in Nadvi: 83) on the other hand considers it as thorough dependence on God for life, death and everything else. Ma'ruf al-Karkhi (Nadvi: 97) asserts that three things distinguish saints from the rest of men (a) their thought is of God; (b) their dwelling is with God; and (c) their business is in God. In the words of Nadvi, "Sufism chiefly consists in the puritanical abstinence from luxury and enjoyment and aims at attaining spiritual perfection with a view to final absorption in God." The fact that there is no priesthood in Islam was seriously emphasized by Junayd of Baghdad as he says: "The external and internal aspects of Islam are essentially the same, and that they, far from being antagonistic, corroborates each other" (Nadvi: 98). Sheikh Sharafuddin Yahya Maniri popularly known as Makhduum-i-Bihari says in one of his letters to his disciples: "Whoever seeks this path (Sufism) must make his provision from the materials of Islam, so that he may proceed from Shari'ah (external path) to *Tariqat* (internal path) and then to *Haqiqat* (the Reality)." Whoever is not well versed in Shari'ah, as he opined, cannot know *Tariqat* and none can know *Haqiqat* without knowing *Tariqat* (Nadvi: 99).

So, mortification as observed by O' Leary (87) is the subjugation of the evil part of the animal soul, the *nafs* which is the seat of the lust and passions, and so it is the weaning of the soul from material interests, "a dying to self and the world" as a beginning of a living in God. It is generally asserted by Muslim scholars, particularly those of them that are inclined towards mysticism that human beings are of three categories:

- Accomplished men who have successfully reached the destination
- Middle quality people who are travelling along the road leading to the destination
- Worthless men who are at a standstill.

The first class of people, excepting the Prophets and Divine Messengers, are subdivided into (a) *Sufis*, who by following faithfully in the footsteps of Prophets have reached the Destination and have also taken up the noble task of leading the masses to the right path, and (b) '*Faqirs*' (the mendicants), who after attaining perfection disappear into oblivion. A *Sufi*, according to those scholars, is superior to a '*Faqir*', inasmuch as the latter aims at attaining his end by means of poverty and renunciation of the world, while the former devises no way and means for his end, yet he is confident of reaching his goal in any case. A *Sufi* is so thoroughly absorbed in his destination that he makes no distinction between his means and end. Moreover, a *Sufi*, in addition to self-perfection, endeavors to perfect others by guiding them to the right course of actions while a mendicant minds his business only.

ORIGIN OF SUFISM

Several scholars have argued for the Qur'anic cum Prophetic Traditional origin of Sufism (Islamic Mysticism). To establish the veracity of their claim, allusion is made to several passages of the Qur'an which lend credence to the assertion. Such passages include but are not limited to the following:

He (Allah) is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden: and He has full knowledge of all things (Qur'an 57: 3)

Verily, those who plight their fealty to thee do no less than plight their fealty to God: the Hand of God is over their hands: then anyone who violates his oath, does so to the peril of his own soul, and anyone who fulfills what he has covenanted with God, -God will soon grant him a great Reward (Qur'an 48: 10).

It is not you who slew them; it was God: when you threw (a handful of dust), it was not your act, but God's: in order that He might test the Believers by a gracious trial from Himself: for God is He Who hears and knows (all things) (Qur'an 8: 17).

Of Him seeks (its need) every creature in the Heavens and on earth: every day in (new) Splendor does He (shines)! (Qur'an 55: 29).

But God does encompass them from behind! (Qur'an 85: 20).

On the Day when every soul will be confronted with all the good it has done, and all the evil it has done, it will wish there were a great distance between it and its evil. But God cautions you (to remember) Himself. And God is full of kindness to those that serve Him (Qur'an 3: 30).

"Yet there are men who take (for worship) others besides God, as equal (with God): they love them as they should love God. But those who have Faith are overflowing in their love for God. If only the unrighteous could see, behold, they would see the Penalty: that to God belongs all power, and God will strongly enforce the Penalty (Qur'an 2: 165)."

And keep your soul content with those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His Face, and let not your eyes pass beyond them, seeking the pomp and glitter of this life; nor obey any whose heart We have permitted to neglect the remembrance of Us, one who follows his own desires, whose case has passed beyond all bounds (Qur'an 18: 28).

From the foregoing passages, it becomes clear that life becomes worthy of living when men realize the purpose of their existence and strive to actualize it. According to Islam, to live is to serve: to serve Allah and humanity through Him, for whatever purpose a man serves is what make or mar his life. Service to humanity is what endears one man to another and it is *Ibadah* (worship) if they are borne out of good motive. Service to Allah endears a man to Him (Adeyemo: 24-31). There shall continue to be imbalance and misplacement of priority as long as man fails to recognize the fact that just as he needs food and water (and or drinks) for his physical development and growth, he equally stands in need of *al-hidayah* (Divine Guidance of Allah); for injustice, oppression and suppression, adultery and fornication, anarchy and chaos, survival of the fittest, ignorance and superstition, internecine warfare, animism and barbarism shall continue to be the order of the day if he neglects this all-important provision (Adeyemo, 2002: 10).

Regarding the Prophetic Traditional origin of Sufism, many instances from the lives of the Prophet and those of his *Sahabah* were quoted. The Prophet was described as being mystical in tendency and ascetic in actions. His seclusion in the cave of *Hira* and many other instances were cited. It was related that Allah the Glorious says in a hadith *Qudsiy* thus:

"I was a hidden Treasure, and I desired to be known; and therefore I made the creation that I might be known (Nadvi: 81)."



Many traditions of the Prophet from which mysticism is expressly inferable or implied were used to buttress the claim. Among such traditions are the following: "Whoever knows himself knows his Lord." "None has believed who does not love." "Man is with him whom he loves (Nadvi: 83)". No wonder, love is considered one of the major corner stone of Mysticism, especially Sufism. It is equally clear, that the mystical love craved by Ni'ma for Zein was the catalyst for their spiritual and physical marriage. Wonderful as it was, this is perhaps the major mystical beauty of the union. However, many questions are still apposite and germane to our study and are equally begging for answers. Among such questions are: Can strange happenings in the life of Zein including his wedding be used to justify him as being a saint or *Wiley*? What is the spiritual and the physical beauty of his wedding which has made it a major wonder, or to use religious parlance, miracle witnessed in the individual and collective lives of the villagers? How do we reconcile the fact that Zein had never in his life visited mosque with the claim that he was a saint? What are the factors that facilitated his marriage to Ni'ma and how did they represent or incline toward mysticism particularly in Islamic purview? What lesson/s could be drawn from the wedding? All these and similar other questions are what this essay attempts to answer in the segments that follow.

A GLIMPSE AT ZEIN

Zein was a very humorous and mysterious personality who amazed and equally amused people all around the places he visited. His appearance alone attracted people to him and so did his jokes and antics with which he entertained them. He was such a controversial personality: a glutton, an energetic young man whose appearance betrayed his ability, one who was able to prove that disability was not inability, a generous man in spite his penury just to mention a few things about him. Owing to his physical appearance and certain other odds against him, majority of the villagers were of the belief that he would not be married in life yet he started to be slain by love as early as when he attained 13 or 14 years of age. However, to their utter dismay, although not without a lot of hues and cries as well as haggling and quarrelling, Zein eventually got married. He was not just married, but married to one of the most beautiful and cultured girls in the village, one that was born with silver spoon in her mouth. A girl whose hand, many noble and respected personalities had sought in marriage without success. Little wonder therefore, that the marriage was celebrated with pomp and pageantry as it was attended by the *crème de la crème* of the society. The marriage was considered a great miracle, one in which God's hand was visible, for what money, fame and nobility could not do, faith and trust in God was able to achieve it. This indeed, is the mystical beauty of the marriage as would be seen in the succeeding paragraphs.

ZEIN: BIRTH AND PARENTAGE

Little is mentioned in the book about the birth and parentage of Zein. In fact, nothing at all is mentioned about his father. We are therefore constrained to be content with the vague account of his birth and parentage as could be seen in the story. Zein unlike every new born who screams upon delivery, was reported to have burst into laughter soon after he was born. This was narrated by his mother and further corroborated by the women who attended his birth. This was strange enough to portend more wonders or strange things that were yet to happen. He had grown up with only two teeth in his mouth, one in the upper jaw and the other in the lower. His mother recalled that his mouth was once filled with pearly white teeth; however, as it is stated, "when he was six she took him one day to visit some relatives of hers so at sunset, passing by a deserted ruin rumored to be haunted, Zein suddenly become glued to the ground and had begun shivering like a wet bird. 'So he let out a scream' (Salih: 28). According to the mother, he took to his bed for several days, and upon his recovering from the illness it was found that all his teeth had fallen out except one in his upper jaw and one in the lower.

A PEN PORTRAIT OF PHYSICAL APPEARANCE OF ZEIN

Zein is described as having an elongated face with prominent bones to his cheeks, his jaws, and under the eyes. His forehead was described as rounded and jutted out; his eyes were small and permanently bloodshot, their sockets deeply set in his face like two caverns. His face was completely hairless, with neither eyebrow nor eyelashes, even upon attaining manhood no hair had ever grown on his chin or the upper lip. His head was pivoted by a thin long neck; hence, he was given the epithet by the children, "the giraffe". The neck stood on two powerful shoulders that straddled the rest of the body, forming a triangle. The two long arms were like those of a monkey, the hands coarse with extended fingers ending in long, sharp nails which he had never cut. His chest was concave, his back slightly hunched, while his legs were long and spindly like those of the crane. His feet were splayed bearing traces of ancient scars. He was fond of walking about barefoot and he remembered the story behind each one of the scars in his body.

Zein was known for his insatiable greed for food. He never missed any wedding feast. On such occasions, when trays of food were served and people were forming themselves into circles around them, each group tried as much as possible to ensure that Zein did not sit amidst them, as he would dispose of everything in the dish within a twinkling of an eye, leaving nothing for anyone else. Once Abdul Hafeez asked him: Do you remember what you did at Sa'eed's wedding? He answered: "Certainly I do", with humor. "By God, I would have eaten up the lot right down to the last little bit of it, if Isma'il's son, God damn



him, hadn't caught me" (Salih: 38). It is therefore natural, given the above circumstances of his physical appearance, his disposition to life and all but joke and amusement all the time, that people would "write him off marriage". No single man in his right senses would want to give the hand of his daughter in marriage to such a hopeless and good-for-nothing man; not such exceptionally pretty girl, born of noble lineage and character with a silver spoon in her mouth.

No wonder, it was to the utter chagrin of the villagers to hear the news that Zein was getting married. For instance, when Haleema told Amna about the strange wedding, the jug she was holding almost fell from her hand. So was the case with the Headmaster who had been furious with Tureifi for coming late to school and had resolved to punish him for his failure to be punctual. However, upon being told that they were marrying out Zein, his lower jaw dropped in astonishment and Tureifi therefore escaped the punishment. By the same token, Sheikh Ali who had owed Abdul Samad a certain amount of money for over a month was able to evade the payment of the money, even though the latter was determined to have his money paid to him on the spot whether by hook or crook. He however got carried away by the story of Zein's wedding narrated by the former such that he was not paid as he had vowed.

ZEIN AND THE VILLAGE WOMEN FOLK

Zein was so famous among the women folk in the village much as he was with men. However, he was accorded special regards among women owing to a number of reasons. He used to entertain them with his humor as he used to make a lot of jokes with them. He could enter into any of their houses. They were even the ones who would be inviting him upon setting their eyes on him. Thus, he was able to see the young girls around. He was always attracted to the most beautiful girls. He always raised alarm about his intended love affairs with those girls only to advertise their beauty to those who would eventually marry them. Thus, like a merchant who had merchandise to sell, women were apt to invite him to their houses and offer him food and drinks, for whoever's name entered the lips of Zein would get a good suitor in no distant time. He was always abreast of the wedding ceremonies around. Zein was thus held in high esteem by women who always offered him a seat of honor and provided him with food and drinks for the service he knew how best to render. This is understandable giving the fact that in a conservative society like that of theirs, girls hardly come out. He did not only attend the wedding feasts but equally the ululations and chants by women. *And with a leap Zein would land like Destiny herself in the dance circle. Suddenly the place would quicken into life, for Zein would have imbued it with new vigor. From afar one could hear their shouts as they hailed him: Welcome! Welcome! Join in the company!* (Salih: 39)

He would be seen entering the kitchen with them as if he was partaking of the preparation of the meal, all because of his stomach. In fact, the only thing left for him to become one of them was a kind of biological transfiguration. Although Zein was fond of joking and playing antics with girls and their mothers, nevertheless, there was a damsel who remained distinct and untouched by his jokes and antics. The girl used to observe him from a distance with her beautiful sullen eyes. Yet, upon seeing her coming, Zein would remain silent and keep off his antics, raillery, buffoonery and horse plays. Off he would flee from her, were he to spot her from a distance. This is no other person than Ni'ma, who as providence made it, was to become his spouse later in life.

ZEIN AND HIS COMPANIONS AND CONFIDANTS

Zein was well known for his jokes, laughter and antics. He was always slain by love for this or that girl. Though he played and shared pleasantries with Abdul Hafeez, Mahjoub, Ahmed Isma'il, Hamad Wad Rayyis and others, yet his only confidant was Haneen. *Haneen was a pious man wholly dedicated to his religious devotion who, having stayed six months in the village praying and fasting, would then take up his pitcher and prayer-rug and wander about up in the desert, disappearing for six months and then returning. No one knew where he went, though people related strange stories concerning him, one swearing that he had seen him in Merowi at a particular time, while another swore he had caught sight of him in Karma at that very same time, though a distance of six day journey separates the two places* (Salih: 41). Haneen was generally accepted as a saint or a man of God, that is, a *Waliy*. Whenever he and Zein met on the road Haneen would embrace him, kiss him on the head and call him "The blessed one of God". Zein, too, on seeing Haneen coming would eschew his horse-play and raillery and hurry up to hug him.

Haneen would not partake of meal in any house but Zein's: off Zein would go to his mother and ask her to prepare them lunch, tea or coffee, and there Zein and Haneen would stay together for hours laughing and talking. The people of the village tried to learn from Zein the secret of their friendship, but would never say more than the words "Haneen is a man blessed of God". As a result of his association with Haneen, people particularly Haneen and Zein's mother, were of the opinion that Zein was a saint – a claim that could find substance or credence in the strange things happening in his life. Zein used to spend the greater part of his time with Mahjoub's group or "gang", in fact he was said to be actually one of the major character in it. The Imam was observed to be the only person hated by Zein; his mere presence at a gathering was enough to spoil Zein's peace of mind and start him cursing and shouting. The Imam paid no attention to



the claim that Haneen, who represented the mystical side of the spiritual world-a side – he did not recognize or reckoned with, was the direct cause of Seif ad-Din's repentance and devotion.

ZEIN AS A PHILANTHROPIST

Zein's major friends were the less privileged ones. He took special interest in caring for and sharing with people who were physically challenged such as Mousa, Ashmana and Bekheit. He used to visit Mousa in the morning in order to see how he was and so in the evening he would come to him carrying dates and other types of food presenting them to him. At this extraordinary act of charity, the villagers would be flabbergasted more than hitherto, considering him thereby to be a legendary leader, a Prophet of God or even according to their estimation, an angel sent down by God in lowly human form. His friendship with all sorts of person whom the villagers considered as abnormal: Deaf Ashmana, Mousa the Lame, and Bekheit who was born deformed with no upper lip and a paralyses left side had earned him special fame in the village. He was fond of such people. Thus, if he were to set his eyes on Ashmana returning from farm bearing a heavy load of firewood on her head, he would carry it for her with a playful smile. Although she was so afraid of people that if she were to come face to face with anyone whether man or woman, she became utterly panic stricken, as if though, they were wild beasts, yet as the story goes, she enjoyed Zein's company and would give her sad, almost soundless laughter that resembled the clucking of hens. There was equally Mousa, a ransomed slave of a wealthy man who had elected to stay with his master even after he had secured his freedom. People did not generally call him by his name but "the Lame One". He was a very old man, the mere sight of whom was enough to rend one's heart because of the great efforts he had to make to walk, a man for whom life was an exasperating and arduous road. He had been the slave of a wealthy man in the village and when the government gave the slaves their freedom, Mousa had elected to stay on with his master, who had shown him great kindness, treating him like a son.

Upon the death of his master, his wealth devolved upon a good-for-nothing son (Seif ad-Din), who had dissipated it and driven Mousa out. Overtaken by old age, Mousa had found himself destitute, without a family or anyone to look after him. He therefore lived on the fringe of life in the village, just like the old stray dogs that howled in the waste plots of land at night and, harried and harassed by boys, spent their days scavenging hither and thither for food. Zein, taking pity on the man, had built him a house of palm branches and provided him with nanny goat milk. In the morning he would go to enquire how he was and after sunset would come with his garment bulging with dates and other sorts of food.

which he would lay before him. Sometimes he would bring along an ounce of tea, a pound of sugar, or a little coffee. Thus, if Mousa was asked about the friendship that existed between him and Zein, with eyes brimming over with tears, "Zein – Zein's a good fellow", would be his response.

THE FACEOFF BETWEEN SEIF AD-DIN AND ZEIN

The villagers came round to see what had happened and give helping hands. People were dumb-founded; it was Abdul Hafeez who later broke the silence shouting at Zein with reddened eyes borne out of anger: 'Tell us who did this to you-who's the criminal dog who struck you?' While some women screamed at the top of their voices, some others could not hold back their tears; Ni'ma stood at a distance, silently looking with her eyes set on Zein's face, but this time the sullenness of her eyes was seen to have been replaced with great tenderness. They dispersed into two groups: one mostly men taking care of Zein and the other his mother. Zein was eventually rushed to the hospital where he was hospitalized for two weeks.

Since Zein was getting popular by the day and since he always eyed the most beautiful girls in the village, it was just natural that not many people would like him. Hence, the proposal made by Zein to marry Seif ad-Din's sister did not go down well with Seif ad-Din. Seif ad-Din was the one who smashed his head with an axe and he almost breathed his last but for the quick response or intervention of the people around. However, the tragedy which eventually landed Zein in the hospital where he had to remain for two weeks was indeed a blessing in disguise. He recounted his experience in the hospital thus: "Directly I arrived they took off my clothes and dressed me up in clean ones. The bed was a splendid affair, the sheets are as white as milk, and the stone floors so highly polished you slid around on the rug". All his broken teeth were replaced with dentures and this gave him a fine look anew from his former appearance. After returning from hospital it was as though, Zein had been transformed into a new person and it struck Ni'ma as she stood amidst the ranks of people who had come to receive and welcome Zein, that Zein was not after all, devoid of certain handsomeness (Salih: 52).

The second episode of Zein/Seif ad-Din faceoff was the attempts made by Zein to revenge and punish Seif ad-Din for his misdeeds. Zein became drastically and mysteriously energetic such that all men present were unable to restrain him. This was not the first time this would happen, he had once seized a difficult calf by the horns, lifted it from the ground like a bundle of hay, and then swing it round and throw it to the ground. He equally, in one of his hysterics of thrill, torn an acacia bush by roots as though it were a stock of maize. His thin emaciated body concealed extraordinary super-human power and that Seif ad-Din-



the prey upon whom Zein had descended-as concluded by the men who were present, was doomed. It was Haneen who saved the situation. He said: "Zein the blessed one, may God be pleased with you". Nobody knew neither how he suddenly appeared in their midst nor where he was coming from. "Zein, blessed one of God, why did you do it?" So, as if an angel sent on errand by God to save a situation, a very short instant passed something of the order of twinkling of an eye during which a complete silence reigned, a silence that was inevitably a mixture of terror, consternation, and hope (Salih: 54).

After that, life comes back to normal within them and they remembered Seif ad-Din. "If you hadn't come, reverend Sheikh, he would have killed him", one of the men said. "If you hadn't come, reverend Sheikh, I would have killed him. The he-donkey-when he struck me on the head with an axe-did he think I would let him get away with it". "But you were in the wrong", Haneen reprimanded Zein. "When did Seif ad-Din strike you on the head with an axe?" Haneen continued. "At the time of his sister's wedding", replied Zein laughing, his face full of mirth. "What did you do to his sister on her wedding day?" "His sister had her eye on me", come Zein's reply. "Why did they want to marry her off to that good-for-nothing fellow?" "All the girls are after you, blessed one of God", Haneen said in a gentle and tender voice. "*Tomorrow you will be marrying the best girl in the village*" (Salih: 54). Mahjoub took this prophecy seriously even though he was not known to respect such declarations. "Who would marry this imbecile? On top of everything he was going to commit a crime". With a stern look at Mahjoub, Haneen retorted: "Zein's no imbecile. Zein's a blessed person. "Tomorrow he'll be marrying the best girl in the village." "Now we want you to make it up," said Haneen firmly. "Let it end there-it is over and done with". He hits you and you've hit him". He called Seif ad-Din and ordered Zein to get up and kiss him on the head. Zein did as instructed. With tears rolling down his cheeks, Seif ad-Din turned to Zein and said: "I have wronged you, forgive me". He then rose up and kissed Zein's head then seized Haneen's hand and kissed it. Then came along all men present: Mahjoub, Abdul Hafeez, Hamad Wad Rayyis, Taher Rawwasi, Ahmed Ismai'l and Sa'eed the merchant; each silently took hold of Haneen's hand and kissed it in turn. "God bless you. God bring down His blessing upon you", said Haneen in his soft, unassuming voice, and he rose and picked up his pitcher. "You must dine with us tonight", Mahjoub quickly invited him. Haneen, though, gently refused. Claspings Zein's shoulder with the other hand, he said, "Dinner's to be in the house of the blessed one" (Salih: 54), and off the two of them went into the darkness.

All the eight men involved in this scenario lived to recount the blessing of the day as prayed and prophesized about them by Haneen. It left an indelible impression on their individual persons and the society at large. The miraculous change in Seif ad-Din saw the beginning of a number of strange things that came to pass in the village that year. There was not the slightest doubt in anyone's mind, even Mahjoub's as they saw miracle after

miracle occurring, that was attributable to Haneen's having said to those eight men in front of Sa'eed's shop that night, "God bless you all. May God bring you His blessings" (Salih: 54). A prayer to which they believed, supernatural powers in the Heavens had answered in one voice, 'Amen'. For this reason, the year was later known and generally referred to as Haneen's year among the villagers.

ZEIN AS A SAINT

Although Zein had never entered mosque since he was born to observe prayer, his association with Haneen and strange things between him and his friend as well as those of the mysterious happening in his life had made the villagers conclude that Zein was a saint. Nobody knew what Haneen ate or drank, as he never carried any provision with him on his sojourn and adventures. Zein was his only friend and confidant in the village. He would not partake of any meal except with Zein. Even, on the day he made peace between Seif ad-Din and Zein and prevented pandemonium from broking loose, he declined in a subtle way, the dinner that was to be organized in his honor for the remarkable feat he was able to achieve. Whenever people asked about Haneen and the friendship that existed between them, Zein would reply saying: "Haneen is a man blessed of God", and would not say anything further than that. Starting from his birth to his grave, it was all extra-ordinary. His excessive power belied his physique and so did his charity which belied his penury. His associates portend a kind of spiritual splendor, yet he made jokes and engaged in vain talks. This was indeed a contradiction. Yet for a man of his physique-a down trodden whom his gang always referred to as good-for-nothing to have married not just the most beautiful girl, but of the best manner and noble background was an indication of a divine decree. "The people of the village, seeing these acts of Zein's, would be even more amazed; perhaps he was legendary leader, the Prophet of God, perhaps an angel sent down by God in lowly human form in order to remind His worshippers that a great heart may yet beat even in one of concave breasts and ridiculous manner such as Zein". Zein to an ordinary mind might not be considered as a saint as one would need a *spirit-mystical* squint to view and understand his temperament and idiosyncrasies that bore mystical and spiritual stamp.

ZEIN AS A POSSIBLE SUITOR OF NI'MA

The rumor of the proposed marriage between Zein and Ni'ma was making rounds in the village spreading like a bush fire in the period of harmattan. "Zein of all people", was the comment coming from all the villagers. It was a union sanctioned by God Himself. Ni'ma had been a committed Muslim who had been influenced seriously by certain passages of



the Qur'an. Such passages as '*Chapter of the Merciful (55)*', the *Chapter of Mary (19)* and *Chapter of Retribution* had impacted so greatly on her personality. She would feel her heart being wrung with sadness upon reading about Job. It was a special divine inspiration that sparked the fire of love in the heart of Ni'ma for Zein. Whenever she reached the verse "*And We restored unto him his family, and as many more with them, through our mercy*", she would picture "Mercy" to herself as a woman, a woman of rare beauty, dedicated to the service of her husband, and she wished that her parents had named her Rahma, that is, "Mercy". "He could again be Zein", that was Ni'ma thinking aloud! When Zein came to Ni'ma's mind, she experienced a sensation of warmth in her heart, of the kind a mother feels for her children. Intermingled with it was another feeling: of pity. She would see Zein being an orphan in need of care. In any case he was her cousin, and there was nothing unusual in the fact that she should feel concern for him. Haneen had also assured Zein of marrying the best and most beautiful girl in the village – a prophecy that was destined to come to pass, however, not to be witnessed by Haneen himself. This is the essence of the marriage and indeed an integral part of the spiritual splendor of the matrimony.

NI'MA'S RESOLUTION TO MARRY ZEIN

Despite a good number of suitors asking for Ni'ma's hand in Marriage, she remained adamant even when her parents wanted her to do otherwise. The surprising aspect of it was that Ni'ma was a pretty young girl, indeed a damsel whose hand was sought after by the noble men of her village. Rather than accept their offer, she voluntarily gave her hand to a man much despised by people around. This is one of the spiritual "beauties" of the marriage which, of course, gave it its mystical ornament. While ordinary people were looking at physical exoteric beauty, Ni'ma was concerned with esoteric beauty which she perceived with her spiritual squint. Ni'ma had earlier forced her father to put her in elementary school where she learnt the Qur'an and there she was the only girl among the boys. She learnt how to write within a month. She applied herself to the Qur'an committing it to memory with zest, zeal and vigor much as she enthusiastically recited it. She derived joy from certain portions of the Qur'an and these portions heralded to her mind some sorts of glad tidings whenever she read and reflected over them. Of those chapters she had memorized and held dear to her heart are the *Chapter of the Merciful (55)*, *Mary (19)*, and *Chapter of Retribution*. She grew up as a refined cultured girl with high sense of responsibility and commitment; giving helping hands to her mother in the household chores and discussing all matters with her intelligently.

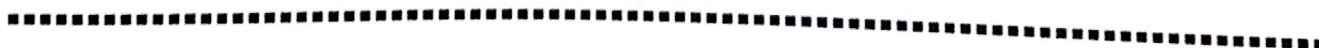
She would bring her intelligence to bear whenever she engaged her father in frantic but polite grown-up discussions which, in some instances amazed or even amused the

father. Her brother who was two years older than her used to persuade her to further her studies in school and would further encourage her by saying: "You could become a doctor or a lawyer". Her response to such advice would be "Education at school was a lot of nonsense. It's quite enough to read and write and to know the Qur'an and the rituals of prayer". Her brother would burst into laughter and teased her thus: "Tomorrow some nice lad will come along and marry you and spare us all this bother!"

When she was sixteen, her mother started talking about the young men who could make suitable husband: the rich, the educated, the handsome, and those whose mothers and fathers would be suitable as "in-laws" but she would however pay no heed to such talks. Amna came to ask for her hand in marriage for her son-Ahmad. Even, though the mother told Amna that the decision is that of her father, she knew right in the *heart of her hearts* that the decision lay with no other person than Ni'ma herself. "I'm not ready to marry yet", came her response. Idris – the Headmaster – also came for the same purpose, though highly educated such that many a girl in the village would have been eager to have him as their husband. He was a teacher at the Intermediate school; he was very much respected among the local people for his gentle disposition. Although, Ni'ma's parents Hajj Ibrahim and Saadiyya and all her three brothers had agreed to the proposal, she told them bluntly, "He's not for me". Her father almost slapped her but was restrained as he observed that neither was she disobedient nor refractory, but that she was being guided by an inspiration from within her to embark upon something from which no one could deflect her. This inspiration is exactly the mystical urge that facilitated the marriage and hence the spiritual splendor of *the wedding of Zein*. Thus, the family desisted from discussing matrimonial issues with her from thenceforth. When Ni'ma was alone later, the thought about marriage flashed into her head and she eventually decided to marry no other person but Zein. "On Thursday they'll marry me to you. You and I will be man and wife. We'll live together and be together." This was Ni'ma telling Zein in the presence of his mother. This decision was influenced by passages of the Qur'an over which she had continued to be reflecting and as a result of her mercy/pity for Zein and due mainly to her sense of responsibility.

THE SPIRITUAL AND PHYSICAL SPLENDOR OF THE WEDDING OF ZEIN

Zein's marriage with Ni'ma was indeed a miracle. There were more reasons than one to appreciate the Divine ordinance in the wedlock. Zein had been slain with love for so many damsels prior to his love with Ni'ma. However, none of these came to pass. Besides, none of those other girls were as noble in character and birth as Ni'ma and again she was more beautiful than all of them. The fact that she chose to marry Zein out of her own



volition based on passages she had read from the Glorious Qur'an is equally a significant pointer to the Divine ordinance in the marriage and part of its spiritual splendor. This was indeed, the mystical beauty of the marriage. Unfortunately however, as Allah would want it, Haneen who had foretold Zein's marriage to the most beautiful girl in the village had passed away before his prophecy materialized. No wonder, Zein had to disappear into the thin air; that is, to the cemetery where lay the resting place of his friend where he was later found wailing and shedding tears of ecstasy on the grave of a man who he held so dear to his heart. He could not hold back his tears as he was hearing the mystical symphony of the mystical voice of the mystic who had gone to the mystical world; the one who prophesized his marriage to Ni'ma. This was among others, the mystical beauty of the mystical marriage. It seemed incredible for people to believe in the purported wedding. Hence, Amna asked Haleema up to ten times: "Who did you say the lad was getting married to?" "Ni'ma! Impossible!" She retorted. This is understandable in view of the fact that Amna had two months before this time asked for the hand of Ni'ma in marriage to Ahmad her son.

Overwhelmed with the strangeness of Zein's wedding, the Headmaster called out from a distance: "Sheikh Ali, Hajj Abdul Samad – this year's a year of miracles. What a thing to happen! But the biggest of the miracle is the business of Zein's betrothal". "Haneen's words were not idle ones", said Abdul Samad. Abdul Samad asked the Headmaster: "What do you think about the story of Zein's marriage?" "Zein's a dervish who shouldn't be marrying at all", the Headmaster said sarcastically. Abdul Samad warned the Headmaster: "You should, sir, be careful when talking about Zein". "He's a man blessed of God and was a friend of that devout man Haneen, God rest his soul; may God rest his soul", said Sheikh Ali. "He brought prosperity to our village". "And it was all because of Zein" – added Abdul Samad. Even the Imam confirmed the extraordinary fortune coming to the village one after the other.

"How had the miracle happened?" From Haleema to Tureifi and Abdul Samad the story was not the same; one thing however is that the stories from each one of them could be harmonized as they were trying to describe the different sides of a single coin. According to Haleema who was trying to tease Amna, Ni'ma saw Haneen in her dream and he instructed her thus: "Marry Zein. The girl who marries Zein won't regret it". Tureifi's version has it that Ni'ma once found Zein amidst women with whom he was playing his antics and raillery, glared at him severally and said to the women: "Tomorrow, all of you will eat and drink at his wedding". She was said to have gone to her parents and told them about it. Abdul Samad however, reported that it was Zein, meeting Ni'ma on the road who said to her: "Cousin! Will you marry me?" To which Ni'ma replied in the affirmative. All of the stories are pointing towards one single direction, the fact that there was mystical influence on the wedding. No wonder therefore, that Sheikh Ali said to Hajj Abdul Samad that, "In all my born days I've never seen such a wedding as this".

CONCLUSION

Destiny is one of the fountain heads of Islamic belief system. The story of Zein is that of pre-ordination, for whatever is destined by God shall definitely come to pass no matter what the odds may be. Ni'ma had proved by this act of her bravery and conviction that it is not only material things that guarantee peace, solace, succor and tranquility rather it is also the remembrance of God. God says:

And those who believe and seek contentment of their souls via remembrance of Allah; behold, it is only through remembrance of Allah that hearts attain satisfaction (Q13: 28).

Therefore, what money and social status could not achieve, faith was able to attain it. Although, nothing extra-ordinary was mystical about Zein in the literal sense of the word, however, the mystical aspect of the marriage lies in the action taken by Ni'ma and her resolution on the same. The role of Haneen's prophecy about Zein's marrying the best girl in the village on the day of the second episode of Seif ad-Din faceoff with Zein, was equally important in the scheme of the marriage. Whether there is a mystical beauty in the wedding of Zein is a matter that is difficult to determine. Zein, as the story reveals never attend mosque and of all persons, Imam was the only man he hated to see among the villagers. However, his character and certain events in his life particularly his wedding tends to be mystical. Can we therefore say, as argued by the orientalist that one can be a mystic without necessarily partaking in the rituals of a given religion?

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