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**RESEARCH IN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES: FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES**

*Special Issue Editors*

S. M. ROJAPOO  
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## RESPONSE TO CRISIS OF ISLAM: SPIRITUALITY IN TARIQ ALI'S WORKS

**Dr. NEETA CHAKRAVARTY**

Associate Professor & HOD (English),  
R. J. College (Autonomous),  
Ghatkopar (W), Mumbai-400086

### Abstract:

World history and Politics have always been Tariq Ali's chief interests. A diasporic Pakistani writer, Tariq Ali shows great insight into the history of Islam. Through his novels, he shows us the parallel roles played by spiritual practices like Sufism and Islam although they have often been perceived as contradictory to each other. Applying Durkheim's Sociology of Religion theory to his works, we find that both Sufism and Islam are Sacred rather than Profane. Tariq Ali explains that history has time and again created a crisis that attacked the very roots of Islam and this necessitated the fearless traits of Sufism and the upholding of tenets of humanity as the greatest act of spiritualism.

**Key words:** Sufism, Islam, Sociology of Religion, Sacred, Profane

Tariq Ali, a diasporic Pakistani writer has written extensively on world history and politics. In his Islam Quintet, he makes an attempt to recreate the history of Islam. In two of these books, Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree and The Stone Woman, he has attributed an important role to Sufism in the early stages of the history of Islam. He indicates that Sufism refers to both spiritual principles as well as a way of living. He provides clues as to how many of the crisis faced in course of the history of Islam finds solace in Sufism. Sufism is not a separate religion. Instead, Sufism

may be said to draw substantially from Islam and Quran plays an important place in their lives. This is in line with Durkheim's Sociology of Religion theory. Durkheim refers to the role of Religion in bifurcating the world in to the Sacred and the Profane. While the Sacred refers to the transcendental and the extra-ordinary, the profane refers to everyday utilitarian activities. Thus, both Islam and Sufism are the Sacred.

In his Islam Quintet I, Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree, Tariq Ali throws light on the definition of religion put forth by the great Sufi saint, Al-Ma'ari when he puts his finger on the problem ailing religion. Tariq Ali contends that the true colours of religion are seldom understood by the practitioners. Religion is closely guarded by zealous people so that it ceases to be a living entity. It is considered sacrosanct and any attempts at questioning it would be called blasphemy. However, Sufi saints dared to say what they believed in. This fearlessness often alienated them from mainstream society which prefers to follow the dictum of conventional religion. Al-Ma'ari, who was himself accused by the society on these grounds, however, minces no words when he opines his views on religion. He says:

*'What is Religion? A maid keeps so close that no eye may view her;*

*The price of her wedding-gifts and dowry baffles the wooer.*

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*Of all the goodly doctrine that from the pulpit  
I have heard*

*My heart has never accepted so much as a  
single word!*' (Ali SPT 29)

Ali uses the voice of his character al-Zindiq in this novel to reiterate the superiority of Sufi poetry. Al-Zindiq, claims to have learnt more from one of Al-Ma'ari's poems than from all the books of religion. This bold expression is made as an acknowledgement of the truth rather than as mere skepticism of religion. Ali understands that religion often vexes the world and problematizes relationships. He quotes Al-Ma'ari:

*'Falsehood hath so corrupted all the world  
That wrangling sects each other's gospel chide;  
But were not hate Man's natural element,  
Churches and mosques had risen side by side.'*  
(Ali SPT 28)

While this novel narrates the story of the fall of Granada through the saga of a family struggling to survive in the midst of the collapse of their world, Ali through his excellent story telling ability articulates the trials and tribulations of those times. Ali juxtaposes the Islamic ways of those times with the Christian attempts at claiming superiority of their own religion over all others. This enables the readers to put this feud in perspective to understand the turmoils of the present. In course of the narrative, Ali explains that even before the fall of Granada, the ensuing struggle had already made major changes to the general nature of Islam. While the North Africans carried out a sustained struggle to save Islam from the Christians time and again, Ali posits that these little victories were at the cost of destruction of the foundations of Islam rendering it on par with Christianity, so that it could neither claim superiority nor inferiority with respect to the other

religion. Al-Ma'ari makes a poignant portrayal of the plight of all religions of his times. He says:

*'Our preachers are stumbling, Christians  
have gone astray,  
Jews are bewildered. Magians far on error's  
way.  
Humanity is composed of but two schools.  
Enlightened knaves or religious fools.'*

(Ali SPT 155)

Great Sufi saints like Al-Ma'ari have played pivotal roles in those difficult times. For instance, Al-Ma'ari opines that the world had reached a precarious point and that the present was not in a position to correct the past. Even in death, he left instructions for the following words to be inscribed on his grave:

*This wrong was by my father done  
To me, but ne'er by me to one.* (Ali SPT 155)

Tariq Ali traces the roots of Sufism in his Islam Quintet III, The Stone Woman. Tariq Ali presents a character Hasan Baba who practiced Sufism. Hasan reveals with pride his Karmatian roots which he claimed was the origin of the different Sufi orders of his times: "The Karmatians were the fathers and the mothers of all the different Sufi orders that exist today. They were the first ghazis in this part of the world. They were prepared to fight and die for Allah and the glory of his Prophet." (Ali SW 93)

Like Durkheim's theory which refers to positive, negative and piacular practices, Ali draws our attention to the quaint beliefs of the Karmatians. He uses Hasan Baba's voice to explain that the Karmatians 'swore an oath to serve the seven virtues, abhor the seven vices, open seven doors and close seven doors. Hasan elaborates that while butchers, surgeons, atheists, tax-

gatherers and astrologers were considered as vices, drinking of wine, the inhaling of herbs, the state of ecstasy, daily prayers and the cleansing of infidels were all considered as virtues. So, comparing the Karmatian beliefs with Durkheim's theory, it can be said that the virtues are the positive practices while the vices are negative practices. Since, an oath is taken, like Durkheim's piacular practices, those deviating from the norms were liable to be punished.

Ali weaves in the narrative strands of the now extinct cultural sites of meeting houses. He explains that these cultural places were frequented by Karmatians. People of different professions gathered in different meeting houses to feast, pray and to discuss the problems ailing their land and solutions to them. He explains that these sites were not religious ghettos but places that bred nationalism. So, the Karmatians gathered in meeting houses would think of ways to help the sick and needy as well as conceive of ways in which bandits could be punished. These meeting houses also served as inns for travellers.

The narrative also records the downfall of the Karmatians when we hear Hasan mouthing his anguish: "The Ottomans could not have succeeded without them. Later, much later, when the capital was in Bursa, the meeting houses were disbanded and attached to mosques. That was the beginning of our end." (Ali SW 93)

The consequences are also reported in terms of the impact that it had on Hasan's family. While Hasan's forefathers were soldiers and produced swords and had been a 'part of the Sultan's retinue' and had entered Constantinople with them, as the Karmatians began losing their importance, Hasan's father decided to convert themselves into barbers and began producing razors and scissors instead of swords.

However, Sufi saints are still remembered with love. This is because Sufism rather than being restrictive, experimented with a number of themes like love, religion, adultery etc. Another character in Ali's novel, Iskander Pasha was a Sufi in his youth. He often frequented meeting houses, in one of which he came across Zakiye who believed in the joys of ecstatic union as a way of communicating with Allah. But since that was considered disreputable by Ishkander's parents, he became a dervish forcing them to finally relented to Ishkander and Zakiye's marriage. Later, as he lost his wife, Iskander is droued in grief. And whenever her memory haunted him, he would aspire for the peace that Sufi music could give him. Since Hasan Baba's eldest son and grandson Selim had joined the Sufi order, he calls upon Hasan's grandson, Selim to sing out Sufi verses hoping that it will salvage his peace of mind and help him overcome some of the void that his heart could no longer bear. Selim, a good singer sang a Sufi verse of love:

*Let us drink our fill from the wine of thy lips  
Let us drink to the satisfaction of lovers  
Let the hearts that have suffered too much  
separation become  
Intoxicated and bewildered;  
Let their love overflow like the seven seas  
Let us drink till their hearts are covered in  
moonlight  
Let us drink till in their bliss, in their bliss, in  
their bliss, the lovers  
Experience  
Allah, wa Allah, wa Allah! (Ali SW 85)*

It is also through Hasan Baba and his grandson Selim that many aspects of the sufi order are revealed. For instance, Sufism 'encourages its devotees to grow their hair long' (90, Stone) which

Hasan claimed was the true reason for his son having embraced Sufism. A week before his death, Hasan Baba had given detailed instructions about when and where he wanted to be buried including the depth to which his body was to be lowered indicating a sort of premonition that he had about his impending death. It is through Hasan Baba that we learn about a Sufi belief that the reward for leading a perfect life in this world was that one is gifted with the ability to choose the form in which he or she can return to life after death. He had sought to know the preferred choice of animal from Selim, whom he had brought up in spite of being his grandfather. When Selim had indicated his preference for the eagle, he had announced that he would take the form of one after his death. So, after Hasan Baba died, while all other members of the family followed all the necessary rituals, Selim chose not to offer prayers. Selim recognized Hasan's close bond with Sufism. He wanted to connect to that aspect of Hassan's personality in parting. So, he used his sweet voice and ability to sing to offer his respects to Hassan in death. The Sufi verse that he selected was akin to an ode to Hassan. He sang:

*O Sufi, to you the mosque and the tavern were one,  
The voice of the devout and the cry of the drunk were one,  
The remembrance of God and the goblet of wine were one.  
You gave up hypocrisy,  
Because for you the throne and the beggar's stool were one.  
You burned with love,  
Because for you the candle and the moth were one.*

*Become light and see, become light and fly,  
Because you and the eagle are one.*

(Ali SW 207)

Tariq Ali, thus spells out the contribution of Sufi mysticism in the history of Islam. What is most appealing is the perfect harmony that existed between Islam and the tenets of Sufism. Sufism, thus, goes beyond religion and mysticism, to be a way of living, with humanity as the essence of life.

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