Problem of Suffering in Sufi Perspective: An Overview

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Abstract

The problem of suffering has been one of the existentially relevant issues which have most intimately invited human thinking. Phenomenologically, suffering is too complex to be easily stated. Essentially it belongs to the ‘ontic’ category and not to the epistemic, though passes on to the latter. To know what suffering is, is to undergo it. In Marcel’s terminology it is ‘second reflection’ through which one can realize the ‘mystery’ of suffering.

The problem of suffering has been significant area of interest for religious reflection. The Stoics in the West and the Buddha in the East are two familiar names dealt with in details. In modern time Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus and other who have dealt with the fact of suffering as an important ingredient of human consciousness. For Nietzsche, suffering born of an urge to perfection is a sign of spiritual vitality and growth. Heidegger’s Angst which is the consequence of the ‘apprehension of nothingness’ finds its clear manifestation in man’s confrontation with the possibility of death. Sartre’s anguish is connected with human reality within which human existence (being-for-itself=consciousness) implies absolute freedom and its recognition implies anguish. However, in Islāmic spiritual tradition suffering has a positive role in human life and it is a sort of examination or test bestowed by the Supreme Reality to human being. In the present paper an attempt has been made to briefly present the problem of suffering in Sufi perspective.

Keywords: Suffering; Existential; Sufi; Mystery, Ontic; Sartre, ma’rifa; Rumi; Buddha.
INTRODUCTION:

Suffering is not negative in itself; it happens to everyone in this imperfect world – we suffer because this world is far from perfect. Suffering is a great equalizer; suffering is therefore a “given” and a “constant” in this ephemeral world; it is a neutral occurrence. It is how we make of it that makes suffering negative and positive. The enlightened person approaches pain as a stepping stone towards his perfection and spiritual growth; the pessimist sees it as a stumbling block. It is your decision that matters as to how you see it and respond to its challenges. (Qadri, 1984, 41)

If Divine Nature is just, why there is so many suffering in this world? Philosophers, theologians and even common man ask this perennial question. Ancient and contemporary sages pondered on this question and they too had some answers to this paradox of life.

Sartre admitted that it is in anguish that one becomes aware of one’s own freedom. In other words, it is through suffering that one becomes aware of one’s being (i.e. being-for-itself).

Most authentically Dostoyevsky accepted suffering as the way to human redemption and human freedom. For him suffering becomes the essence of being. Suffering becomes the Archimedean point from which the dark part of human possibilities arises and is brought to light.

For Kierkegaard it is not the abstract, universal concept of suffering which concerns him but it is the very act of suffering which directly involves him into it. To be a Christian for Kierkegaard is not to be one of the ‘crowd’ of church-goers or to accept the ecclesiastic injunctions which would bind all the Christians into a group of believers but it is to realize that what binds together one Christian with other is their fellowship in suffering.

For Marcel, suffering becomes a mystery which is not a matter of reasoning to understand. It is to be intuitively understood through introspective and personal realization with an attitude of faith and hope. It is the mystic experience within which it has been more adequately and profoundly understood.

Now let us turn to the views of the ascetics and the Sufis in Islām. It is here that suffering is accepted as the way to salvation, a form of consciousness which takes on to the spiritual height where gnosis (ma’rifah) is attained and which transforms the mundane consciousness into a blissful state of God realization.

SUFI’S APPROACH TO SUFFERING:

Sufism or Islāmic spirituality is as old as Islām itself. It is generally known to be the spiritual or inner (batin) dimension of Islām. The outer (dhair) or esoteric dimension may be regarded as religious world-view. However, both the esoteric and exoteric aspects of religion are important aspects of Islām to understand it in totality. They are, in reality, the two sides of the same coin. As a matter of historical fact, the spiritual dimension of Islām has been overemphasized for it is
deemed to be representing the true spirit of religion in loving, serving and integrating humanity. (Kazmi, 2013, 59-60)

The Sufis were great lovers of God and the true humanists. They understood vast and deep human suffering with great sympathy and empathy. Their religious invocations and poetic out-pourings served as soothing balms to hundreds of millions of people across centuries. The Sufi values and norms were horizontal and liberal. Their anti-establishmentarianism and non-fundamentalism fostered values and attitudes of mutuality, interdependence and tolerance. Sufis generated a liberal and humanistic out-book in times when ideological regimentation was the order of the day. In view of the same, the need for re-appropriation of Sufi discourse can hardly be over-emphasized in any debate on any human situation. (Ibid, 59-61)

In Islām, the concept of ‘Suffering’ has two dimensions: one is meant for testing humankind; and the other is occurred on account of man’s own wrong or ignorant ‘self’. Further, Salvation (falah) is essentially salvation from a future wrath (adḥāb) of God to be pronounced on sinners at the Last Day of Judgment (qayāmat), as well here in this world also. (Kazmi,2014-15, 67). In fact, the base of Islām is al-Tawhid (Unity of God). Man’s status is supreme among the creation of Allah and he is the vicegerent (khalifah) of Allah on the earth. However, Allah used to test every person, especially His pious men with various types of losses. All sorts of ‘tests’ or ‘sufferings’ have certain objectives and if a man overcomes them he may be given good news of salvation. The Qur’ān says: ( Al-Qur’ān, 2: 155-57)

وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ بِشَيْءٍ مِّنَ الْخَوْفِ وَالْجُوعِ وَنَقْصٍ مِّنَ الْمَوَابِلِ وَالْثَّمَرَاتِ وَبَشِّرِ الْصَّابِرِينَ

We will surely test you with measure of fear and hunger and a loss with wealth, lives and fruits; And give good news to the patient—

أُولَئِكَ عَلَيْهِمْ صَلَوَاتٌ مِّنْ رَبِّهِمْ وَرَحْمَةٌ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُهْتَدُونَ

Those who, when an affliction visits them, say, ‘Indeed we belong to Allah, and to Him do we indeed return.’

أُولَئِكَ عَلَيْهِم مُّلْوَاتٌ مِّنْ رَبِّهِمْ وَزَخْمَةٌ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُهْتَدُونَ

It is they who receive the blessings of their Lord and (His) mercy, and it is they who are the (rightly) guided.

According to the Qur’ān man was originally created pure and simple. The need of the prophet arises when there is some corruption and iniquity, which he is sent to combat. His coming means much trail and suffering, especially to those who join him in his protest against wrong. Even so peaceful a prophet as Jesus said: “ I came not to send peace but a sword” (Matt. x, 34) (Yusuf Ali (19831065- 66, p.369). However, it is all God’s Plan, for we must learn humility if we would be worthy of Him. (Cf. Kazmi,2014-15, 85).
Moreover, God has categorically said in the Qur’ān that whatever pain or suffering man gets in the world, it is because of his own self, his undue wishes, greediness, ignorance, mistrust, selfish attitude etc. The Qur’ān says:

فَمَا كَانَ اللَّهُ يُظْلِمُهُمْ وَلَكِنَّ كَانُوا أَنفُسَهُمْ يُظْلِمُونَ (الْقُلُوْدٌ:۷۰)

“So Allah surely wronged them not, but they did wrong themselves.” (Al-Qur’ān, 9: 70).

Or again, the Holy Book vehemently declares:

فَمَنْ اهْتَدَىْ فَإِنَّمَا يُهْتَدِىْ لِنفْسِهِ وَمَنْ صَلَّ فَإِنَّمَا يَضَلُّ عَلَيْهَا وَمَا أَنَا عَلَيْكُمْ بَوْكِيلٌ (يُوسُفٌ:۱۰۸)

“So whoever is guided, is guided only for (the good of) his soul, and whosoever erreth, erreth only against it. And I am not warder over you. (Al-Qur’ān,10: 108)

The great salvation or say escape from divine judgment is to be achieved by teaching and practicing of Islāmic beliefs and values with submission to Allah. This is the quintessence of Islām. Submission must be spelled out in the life of a Muslim, firstly, by accepting the ‘aqā‘id’, that is, believing in One God (Tawhid), having Imān in Nabbuah (His Messengers in general, and the last of the prophets—Muhammad (s) in particular; and in the Last Day of Judgment (qayāmah) etc. followed by the continuous performance of the routine prayers in various forms as described in the Qur’ān and the Sirah of the Prophet Muhammad (s). These ones mainly include: 1) Five-time daily prayers; 2) the welfare tax called the ‘zakat’ (“purification” of the rest of one’s wealth); 3) Fasting in Ramadān; 4) Pilgrimage to Makkah, (once in life, but if he/she can afford; 5) Jihad (“holy war” ‘against those who suppress/ oppress or wage war against Islām or Muslims’, or the most appropriate ‘holy struggle against one’s own undue desires or lower self’) etc. However, in all the religious matters a fine inner intention (niyat) with devotion is quintessential for God and His commandments in Islām. (Kazmi, 2014-15, 86)

In fact, the Sufis hold rich treasures of insights on suffering as well as keys that unlock this existential mystery that allow us to transcend all sorts of physical or mental pain and suffering. They bring out that it is suffering which bring the real meaning and purpose of life and also teach men to remain active and vibrant in facing problems and overcoming them.

Taking a cursory look at the world, we find many unpleasant things and occurrences: death, injustice, hunger, bitter experiences, sadness, natural and man-made calamities etc. This phenomenal world is in pain and in constant suffering. Pain is not only limited to the outside world; in our internal world, we are also suffering because we can hurt our own selves as well. People broken relationship, misunderstandings with friends, persecutions from enemies, guilt feelings, and our own cravings – all these hurt us deeply. Why then do we have to suffer?
One of the early Sufi al-Muhasibi (d.875 A.D) accepted self-mortification of the body and the soul as a mystic virtue. The renunciation of the world led him to the attainment of the knowledge of the God. (al-Muhasibi : Kitab al Wasaya)

Ahmad al-Baghawi (d.607 A.D.) also practiced mortification to an extreme degree and had accepted the doctrine of ‘preference’ or sacrifice i.e., choice of another’s interest than his own and the principle of vicarious suffering (Al-Hujwiri in Kashf al-Mahjub). Suffering is eulogized as it increases the value of service, patience, charity and generosity.

The Persian Sufi poet Abul Majd Sanai (d.1150 A.D.) exalts death as deliverance from life full of spiritual suffering. The worthlessness of mundane existence is often emphasized by undergoing suffering so that the desire to renounce it may increase and the love of God may take complete possession of one’s consciousness. It is an ordinary religious experience that suffering brings man closer to God. However, the Sufis recognize it as a medium to seek unity with God by suffering in service to man which is service to God.

Sufi-Islāmic mystics offer a profound existentialist perspective regarding the purpose of suffering vis-à-vis the ‘human condition’. Bayazid Bistami, a Persian Sufi mystic, states: “True self-knowledge is the antidote to suffering, for somebody who knows that the oil in his lamp is limited, will not moan after its extinction. One who knows that the lamp which he has lit is not safe from wind will not scream when it is blown out” (Sirr-e-Dil, 1977, 141).

Sufism likewise accepts the inevitability of suffering as part of the overall makeup of Reality. Therefore, we are obliged to accept the existence of suffering for our own mental and spiritual sanity.

Existentially speaking, suffering is beneficial if we know its redemptive purport and its transcendental objective. According to Badiuzzaman Said Nursi, the Turkish Mujaddid saint of great vision, pain and suffering instruct us so that we will be able to see a “higher view of life”. Suffering enables us to contemplate that God alone suffices and that we need to submit ourselves to the Providence of God, in perfect trust, contentment, gratitude and obedience. (Risala-i-Nur, 2004, p.27-28)

Furthermore, it is through the pain of confronting and resolving problems that we grow strong, sturdy and mature – thus we learn to face life in its multi-dimensional challenges. As per Said Nursi, truly wise people do not dread pain and suffering; they welcome them, learn from them, pour courage on them, find wisdom in them and allow them to place their reliance on the Benevolent God; it is suffering that makes persons resolute, spiritually mature and holy. It enables him to face challenges of life and hold confidence.

It is only through sufferings and difficulties that one can attain mastery in life and livings. Life is characterized by the alternating movements of conflict and peace, peace and conflict, so on and so
forth; God designs this dynamic movement for the moral, mental and psycho-spiritual development of humans. As the Quran says: “… Lo with hardship comes ease, hardship is followed with ease; and ease with hardship, so when you are relieved, still toil and strive to please your lord”. (Al-Qur’ān, 94: 5-8)

The view of the German idealist philosopher Hegel absolutely agrees with the above mentioned Qur’ānic pronouncement when he says: “Conflicts, disputes, confrontations and struggles are the laws of progress. Human development evolves in the battlefield of the mind and in the riot of the world. One can therefore reach stability and tranquility only through conflicts, disputes and struggles. Here, I am not speaking only of struggles in society but also from the point of view of the struggle in man’s inward psyche. Life’s development and transformation are always borne out of conflict… conflict purifies experience. Struggle or striving is the vehicle of the evolution of man’s spirit”. (Kuhn,1985, p.127)

Guru Nanak Dev, a medieval saint revered by Muslims and Hindus alike, did note, “When God instructs His slaves, He drowns them in the sea of suffering. Like a swimming tutor who throws his new student into the water and makes him struggle to learn swimming, God does the same to perfect His slaves”.(Guru Nanak, 1994, 75)

Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi, the famous Persian Sufi poet of Turkish origin, presented his own analogy of the educative aspect of suffering: “They throw barley on the earth; then came out branches. Next, they crushed it in the mill; then it becomes delicious bread after being baked and placed in the burning furnace. Next, the bread is chewed and digested and it became mind, spirit, body and emotion. When the mind is bewildered with love for the Supreme, what a wonderful transformation for this simple barley! This barley-grain has indeed taken a marvelous journey”! (Mathnawi,1985,81)

The foremost need of the hour for Muslims across the globe, in particular and others in general, is to reinterpret Islām in twenty-first century within the conceptual and methodological framework advanced by Sufis or at least presaged by them. The appropriation of the Sufi framework will entail appropriating Sufi beliefs and values which enable men of faith to realize the true spirit and meaning of Suffering in a positive sense. Such a hermeneutical paradigm – shift will further entail respect for and celebration of a world, which is multireligious, multicultural, multinational, multi-ethnic, multi-ideological and very critical place of living where men learn the art of graceful living in crises. Such a tolerant, critical and pluralist world will be peaceful, just, free, gentle, noble and beautiful not only for the Muslims but for the entire humankind. Therefore, let us revisit Islāmic Spiritual Tradition to bring out the lost pristine values such as peace, justice and prosperity for the world human society. Thus, suffering brings changes in life and encounters man with difficult situations and problematic vexed and puzzled issues of life.
Further, if we compare the Buddhist and Islāmic theories of Suffering and Salvation we may arrive at a striking difference also. The Islāmic philosophical tradition explores that Suffering is the cause of not believing in the existence of God and leaving or ignoring His Commandments within the realm of space-time continuum. The Islāmic casualty is theological, ontological and epistemological. On the other hand, the Buddha’s doctrine of casualty is addressed to the exploration of ‘axiological’ or ‘moral’ implications. Buddha accepts the basic Indian ont-axiological doctrine known as “Law of Karma”. The Law is metaphorically summarized in the dictum, “As you sow so shall you reap.” (Kazmi,2014-15, 91-92)

If we long to attain true happiness of living, we have to undergo all difficult and painful experiences in life. Great men, saints, savants, martyrs and heroes suffered from oppressions, tortures, poverty, persecutions and misunderstandings; they courageously persevered in going on with life by God’s grace, beneficence and mercy; that is why, they become heroes and saints. Facing our suffering with courage, fortitude and faith is both a source of grace and a sure road to our sanctification and spiritual transformation.

**CONCLUSION:**

Thus, for the Sufis, suffering is welcome as ennobling and en-widening human personality with its ultimate eye on the ideal of *fana*, the annihilation of human personality through absorption in the Divine Being. When the final union with Ultimate Reality is attained suffering loses its ordinary connotation and becomes the supreme blissfulness of the soul’s identification with God. This is how the Sufi mystics of Islām understood and realized the transcendental, sanctifying and liberating value of suffering in our lives as human persons.

We must understand that Islāmic approach to various dimensions of life is somewhat different from other religions and other systems of faiths and thoughts. However, there are some significant common elements between Islām and other religions. In order to understand the problem of suffering and salvation in Islāmic framework we shall have to have a look on the basic teachings of Islām. Generally, there are three versions in the Qur’ān related to Man-God relationship: (1) Absoluteness of God in the form of *al-Tawhid*; (2) power of freedom and creativity to man (on the basis of which he is responsible for his deeds leading to suffering or pain); and (3) Testing of man by putting him in suffering of various kinds—physical, mental or psychological and economic. (Kazmi,2014-15, 77)

We may therefore possess a mature realization that living entails both enjoyment and suffering; hence, we should not escape suffering for sheer enjoyment, instead we should use our pain and suffering as vehicle for our emotional, intellectual and spiritual growth; for in learning and redemptive values of suffering contains the secret of life’s significance, meaning and joy. Our life itself is an amalgam of joy and suffering.
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