



# KASRAVI, AḤMAD VI. ON MYSTICISM AND PERSIAN SUFI POETRY

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### vi. On Mysticism and Persian Sufi Poetry

By the turn of the 20th century the Sufi tradition in Iran no longer enjoyed the popularity and following that it attracted in previous centuries. This was due to a number of factors, including modernizing and centralizing tendencies that increased in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and several other competing worldviews. As a result, some of the leading intellectuals began the task of analyzing the role of religion in Iran, one of whom was Aḥmad Kasravi. This iconoclastic thinker published many works in which he identified the “evil teachings” of various denominations that had been, or were in his own time, prevalent in Iran, including Shi‘ism, Bahatism, and Sufism (Kasravi, 1943).

Basing himself firmly in a tradition that emphasized the role of reason (*kerad*), Kasravi was one of the severest critics of Sufism. By the early 1940s Kasravi had written several short treatises in which he explained his opposition to Sufism and Persian Sufi poetry, the most important of which were *Şufigari* (1943, tr. 2006), *Dar pirāmun-e adabiyāt* (1943, repr. 1999), and *Hāfeẓ čeh miguyad* (1942, tr. 2006). These works were brief and of a populist nature, and



lacked a sophisticated and analytical method. His method must be questioned, for in *Dar pīrāmūn adabiyāt*, Kasravi admitted that he had not read Rumi's *Maṭnawī*, but had merely “seen bits and pieces here and there” (p. 85).

Kasravi was not the only critic of Sufism and Persian Sufi poetry in his time. In the modern period the opposition of some clerics continued the trend that has been present for centuries among “exoteric” scholars, and perhaps the most representative of anti-Sufi works were those published by ‘Allāma Abu’l-Faḏl Borqē’ī (just after Kasravi’s death). Aside from clerical opposition, Sufism was opposed by intellectuals, including Ṣādeq Hedāyat, ‘Ali Dašti, and Taqī Arāni (q.q.v.), who criticized the anti-social nature of Sufism and the tendency for Sufis to be charlatans who tricked their way to wealth and position. The general opposition to Sufism may also be witnessed on a wider geographical perspective, typified in the writings of the Indian reformer [Muhammad Iqbal](#). During the first half of the 20th century institutionalized Sufism did little to assuage its opponents. Members of the Ne‘mat-Allāhi order could not agree on a single authority or leader, and schisms broke out about the position of the *qoṭb* (“pole” or leader). Some attempts had been made to reform and modernize the order, particularly by Ṣāḥir-al-Dawla (Ridgeon, 2010) and the Anjoman-e oḳovvat (q.v.; however, the latter was tainted with associations of [Freemasonry](#)). Despite these problems, there was still some support for Sufism and Gnosticism (*‘erfān*), particularly among the staff of the newly established Faculty of Theology at the University of Tehran during the 1930s, such as [Badi‘-al-Zamān Foruzānfar](#), whose editions of and writings on Rumi’s works became well known. Other sympathetic supporters included Sa‘id Nafisi and scholars and politicians such as ‘Ali-Aṣḡar Ḥekmat and [Moḥammad-‘Ali Foruḡi](#).

It was in this context that Kasravi commenced his opposition to Sufism, although Nafisi has remarked that he did not originate the controversy. Nafisi claimed that in the decade after the Constitutional period (see [constitutional revolution](#)) Sufi poetry had been condemned in a newspaper called *Zabān-e āzād*, which caused a rejoinder in defense of the tradition by none other than Moḥammad Taqī Bahār (q.v.). Nevertheless, Kasravi’s public declaration of his opposition to Sufism and Persian Sufi poetry came in 1935, when he gave a public address at the Anjoman- e Adabi (q.v.). In his speech Kasravi criticized the tendency for Persian poetry to sacrifice the meaning for style. He praised some modern poetry that was socially engaged, but condemned verses that utilized allegory (especially some of the metaphors that were frequently employed by the Sufis). Although he refrained from attacking the major poets,



such as Rumi, Hafez, and Sa'di, it was clear that they were his real target, as he criticized similar mystically inspired poets who are generally considered of a lesser rank. Indeed, his views on Hafez, for example, were already well known, as he had discussed this subject in a series of articles in his newspaper, *Peymān*. Kasravi's aim was to promote good habits, Iranism (*Irāngarī*), and Islam. In effect, his project was to advocate a rational form of belief which was centered on the nation and a reformed and sanitized version of modernist Islam, which bordered on Deism. Kasravi claimed that, as a result of his speech and refusal to make a public withdrawal of these views, he was denied by 'Ali Aṣḡar Ḥekmat (the minister of education) a teaching post in the newly established University of Tehran (Dokā', 1973, p. *hašt*; however, his name appears among the Faculty of History during the late Reza Shah period; see *Sāl-nāma-ye Šarq 1921*, p. 131).

Kasravi's criticisms of Sufism are detailed in his treatise *Šufigari*, in which he elaborated on six major deficiencies of the Sufis: the doctrine of the unity of existence, Sufi idleness, celibacy and sodomy, rejection of this world and despising life, Sufi understandings of love (*'ešq*), and Sufi irrationality. His criticism of the unity of existence fails to appreciate the general Sufi perspective of balancing God's incomparability (*tanzih*) with his similarity (*tašbih*), and instead Kasravi understood Sufism as emphasizing the unity between God and man and all of creation (*vaḥdat-e vojūd*). Moreover, according to Kasravi, this unity between God and all of creation belittled the position of human existence in the order of things (his views contrasted with the Sufi argument that man is the greatest of all of God's creations). The third criticism that Kasravi made of the school of the unity of existence is that Sufis of this school abstain from this-worldly pleasure. His argument on this point is a simplification of how such Sufis lived their lives, as it is known that Sufis, including Rumi and Ebn 'Arabi, were engaged in society, married, and had children. Rather than viewing this world with contempt, such Sufis viewed the world and everything in it as a place where God's attributes were manifested, and it was a sacred place, which needed to be respected.

From an analysis of this first criticism of Kasravi, it becomes clear that his understanding of Sufism was superficial and that he had not investigated the doctrines of Sufis in sufficient depth. His subsequent five criticisms reveal similar simplistic argumentation. In fact, his opposition to Sufism, in essence, boils down to the fact that he viewed Sufism as completely irrational and other-worldly. For Kasravi, life in the modern 20th century world necessitated



the application of reason and a commitment to the improvement of society and the individual, in other words, his was an ideology that conformed to the demands of modernity and the promotion of the nascent nation-state in Iran.

Related to his criticism of Sufism was Kasravi's opposition to Western orientalists. Of note was his hostility to E. G. Browne, whom he accused of living for a year in Iran in Persian clothes in order to further his work—which does not appear to have been the case (Ridgeon, 2006, p. 218, n. 32). He argued that danger of the research and publications of the orientalists was that it promoted classical Persian poetry, which was full of the “evil-teachings” of Sufism. This poetry spread religious innovation (that is to say, it perverted “true” Islam, and promoted immorality, i.e., homosexuality and sodomy; it weakened Iran, because the European powers were able to brainwash Iranians into thinking that such poetry and its message were ideals to which the young should aspire. Kasravi had originally approved of Browne, as he seemed to be a champion of Iranian independence in the context of the threat posed to it by Imperial Russia. However, Kasravi remarked that it was Browne's *History of Persian Literature* that changed his mind. Kasravi's criticism of Western orientalists is contained in most detail in chapter six of *Dar pirāmun-e adabiyāt*. He briefly mentions Sir John Malcolm and Sir Henry Rawlinson and endorsed their work, as there was nothing within these writings that was detrimental to Iran or morally repugnant. However, Kasravi's ire was kindled by the like of “Mister Arberry” and “Dr. [Margaret] Smith” because of their promotion of Sufism. But Kasravi was particularly critical of Browne because of his links with influential Iranians, including [Moḥammad- 'Ali Foruḡi](#) and Mirzā Moḥammad Khan Qazvini (q.v.). Kasravi claimed that such individuals wished to spread Sufism in Iran through editing and publishing mystical works.

Furthermore, he argued that the influence of Sufism was very strong even in the modern age, because “among the state employees and bureaucrats you can find many people who are dervishes, and each one considers himself a follower of this ‘Mast ‘Ali-Šāh’ and that ‘Bahman ‘Ašeq-Šāh.’ Behind office desks are those in charge of people” (Ridgeon 2006, p. 65). Kasravi's criticisms of the orientalists seem a little lame. When he criticized orientalists whose works are published in Persian and disseminated throughout Iran, he asked “Why don't you write these things in European languages and spread them among Europeans?” (Ridgeon, 2006, p. 69). Of course, Browne, Arberry, and Smith did indeed publish their works in Europe, and it is difficult to witness



any explicit hostility in their writings to Iran.

Another important treatise penned by Kasravi on the topic of Sufism and mysticism was his tract entitled *Hāfez čeh miguyad* (“What does Hafez say?”) (Ridgeon, 2006, pp. 160-94). Kasravi’s writing on the topic must be viewed in the context of renewed interest in Hafez during the 1930s, when his tomb in Shiraz was renovated (see [HAFEZ xiii](#)), and a number of prominent scholars published works in which he was lauded. Most of the leading researchers of the day, including Foruzānfar, Foruḡi, Hekmat, and Qazvini and Ġani (Ridgeon, 2006, pp. 28, 145) regarded Hafez as a Sufi, or at least a free-thinking mystic. The positive views that they held on such men of literature only assisted the burgeoning discourse for the promotion of the modern nation-state. Kasravi, however, ever the iconoclast, considered Hafez a *karābāti*, that is to say, someone who frequented taverns, enjoyed a hedonist lifestyle, considered the world meaningless and futile, and belittled reason and the intellect. Kasravi was not a naive commentator of Hafez, because he recognized that some interpreters understood his terms in a mystical sense and that many of his *ḡazals* included pejorative remarks about Sufis. This only led to Kasravi’s conclusion that Hafez was best understood as a confused individual who composed poetry that reflected a range of influences, including the Qur’ān, Iranian history, astrology, fatalism, and *karābātism*. This was problematic for a thinker such as Kasravi because of his single-minded pursuit of modernism that held a social agenda for the improvement of Iran. Moreover Kasravi’s criticism of Hafez also was related to his generally negative view of poets who were not socially engaged, but simply spun poetry as a profession. Such poets were more concerned with perfecting the rhyme of the *ḡazals* than with providing a coherent and consistent worldview.

In conclusion, Kasravi’s view of Sufism and the Islamic mystical tradition seem to have been predetermined by his view that man must lead his life through the exercise of *kerad*. He felt that the Sufi emphasis on love (*‘ešq*) belittled *kerad*, and this explained why Iran had suffered so many disasters since the Mongol period, when Sufism had captured people’s hearts. Kasravi was not interested to contemplate the possibility that Sufism provided a degree of social cohesion through its rituals, enriched the spiritual lives of Iranians, and sometimes provided a means of security from tyrannical rulers. This is not to say that Kasravi’s views were completely without merit. However, his treatises were written in a populist style that targeted a general audience, which may explain for the crude, sweeping statements about the nature of Sufism.



Although it is easy to criticize the content and style of Kasravi's works on Sufism, his bravery in tackling such topics should be applauded, even if the conclusions that he drew seem somewhat pre-determined.

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