

Niyaz's *Fourth Light Project* and Music in Sufism

*Oh daylight, rise! atoms are dancing
The souls, lost in ecstasy, are dancing
To your ear, I will tell you where the dance will take you.
All the atoms in the air and in the desert,
Let it be known, are like madmen.
Each atom, happy or miserable,
Is in love with the Sun of which we can say nothing.*

- Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (1207–1273 C.E.)

In his widely circulated teachings and writings of 13th century, the Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (or Rumi) emphasized the importance of reaching complete interconnectedness with the divine. “There are many roads which lead to God,” wrote Rumi. “I have chosen the one of dance and music.”

Indeed, for Rumi, the personal affectations caused by music’s aural stimulation reflects an elevated state of being that transcends both time and place. It is said that while walking through a local market, Rumi became overwhelmed with the repetitive, rhythmic beating of metal workers and, inspired by God himself, began to whirl. Significantly, within this spontaneous and highly euphoric act, Rumi heard the *dhikr* (“remembrance”), the vocalization of God’s name in affirmation of his power. For him, the divine power of rhythmic sound excited the human body at the atomic level and only through becoming “lost in [it’s] ecstasy” can one have a complete relationship with God.

During his lifetime, Rumi’s followers recreated this moment, ritualized its practice, and thus solidified the place of divine whirling within Sufi worship practices. More than merely a dance, however, whirling is a prayer and an act of meditation. Though most commonly associated with those who subscribe to the Sufi order founded on Rumi’s teachings, *Mawlaw’īyya* (or the Mevlevi Order), whirling is a broader symbol of the mental and physical connection to God possible through music.

Throughout its existence, music and dance have been essential to the inward-reaching goals of Sufism. The doctrine of Sufism, a form of Islamic practice codified in the 8th and 9th centuries that developed outside of the standard requirements of the *Qur'an*, teaches followers to seek a tangible relationship with God. Commonly viewed as a decidedly mystical practice of Islam, Sufis value personal, inward connection to God and see his presence in every aspect of life. Though performance of and use for music is highly debated, and often banned, throughout the Muslim world, Sufis highlight its divine power. Central to their goal for connection to the divine is the *samā* (or listening) ritual, a communal form of mediation involving music, poetry, prayer, and, at times, whirling. In *samā*, the act of meditative listening is paramount as it brings the possibility of affectation to the human rather than remaining a purely sonic phenomenon. More than listening to the worldly sounds that surround them, however, *samā* participants listen for the words of God. Much like Rumi's experience in the market, spontaneous movement is not uncommon in *samā*, a clear sign of not only divine presence, but divine union.

Though accessible to cross-cultural and even secular audiences, Niyaz's *The Fourth Light Project* is grounded in the practices of Sufi mysticism. It is a tribute to 8th-century Sufi mystic Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya (or Rabi'a al-Basri) who, due to a history of patriarchal governance, is largely forgotten. By utilizing her poetry and the elements of her biography that appear in the works of later Sufi writers such as Rumi and Farīd ud-Dīn, however, Niyaz attempts to subvert gender imbalances by presenting her influential piety to a broader, contemporary audience.

Known as the "Mother of Sufism," Rabi'a al-Basri developed the concept of *Ishq-e Haqīqi* ("Divine Love"), a nearly ubiquitous term within the Muslim world. Divine Love is the passion for God alone and the desire to reach the state of transcendent perfection that comes with

its implementation. Though not explicitly addressed in the *Qur'an*, it developed from Rabi'a al-Basri's holistic and self-sacrificing commitment to God alone.

“If I adore You out of desire for Paradise,” she wrote to God, “lock me out of paradise; but if I adore You for Yourself alone, do not deny me Your eternal beauty.” It is said that, during her years of captive servitude, she would spend many of her nights in prayer and frequently fasted to demonstrate her commitment to God, a practice that led to her release. Considered a *Walī* (an Islamic saint), Rabi'a al-Basri spent her years of freedom in ascetic devotion and, through her teachings, Sufi ideals spread rapidly.

More than just the decidedly Sufi subject matter, Niyaz includes other notable elements of Sufism. Featuring artists and musicians from a diversity of locales such as Iran, Turkey, India, and Canada, Niyaz transcends both genre and borders. Indeed, like Sufism itself, the internationality of performance speaks to the inclusive, far-reaching goal of its performers. The group's combination of music, dance, and poetry, reminiscent of *Samā* rituals, draws distinctively on the collectiveness of their belief system. Like the practice commonly associated with Rumi's Mevlevi Order, the performance features the appearance of a whirling *Darvīsh* (or dervish), a figure of piety and divine union. Color is of particular significance involving the *Darvīsh* who, throughout the performance, dons clothing black, red, and white, respectively. Not only representative of Pan-Arabic colors associated with the flags of Muhammed, the order the garment colors reflects the personal, spiritual trajectory of Rabi'a al-Basri's life from struggle to the serenity of liberation and the purity of resurrection. That this particular *Darvīsh*, traditionally a role for men, represents the femininity of its subject is important to this narrative; it calls directly attention to the issues of gender inequality inherent to the project's inclusive goals.

“Differences exist,” wrote Rabi‘a al-Basri, “but not in the city of love; thus my vows and yours are the same.” For audiences, Niyaz’s *Fourth Light Project* brings the communal nature of Sufi devotional practices to the forefront of a contemporary, electronic-music setting that fulfill the both the nationally and sonically transcendent contexts of the global Sufi presence. What is more, the project’s focus on the works of Rabi‘a al-Basri reconstructs otherwise patriarchal narratives to begin a balancing of genders and broadening of human acceptance.

Key Terms:

Darvīsh (“dervish”) – One who has shed worldly pleasures and devoted their life to the practice and guidance of Islamic (primarily Sufi) devotion. They are particularly known for their rituals and commonly connected to Rumi’s whirling.

Dhikr (“remembrance”) – An Islamic devotional ritual consisting of the vocal recitations of phrases affirming the divinity of God. In Sufism, this typically involves repetitive statements of God’s name.

Farsi – A contemporary form of Persian, an Indo-Iranian language dating back to antiquity. It is the official state language of Iran and is also spoken Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

Ishq-e Haqīqi (“Divine Love”) – The concept of Divine Love central to Sufi practices.

Islam – Practiced throughout the world, Islam is a monotheistic faith derived from the work of the prophet Muhammad as dictated by God himself.

Mawlawīyya (“The Mevlevi Order”) – A Turkish order of Sufism based on the teachings of 13th-century mystic Rumi and most commonly associated with whirling rituals.

Muslim – One devoted to the teachings and practice of Islam.

Mysticism – The spiritual belief in communication with and/or personal connection to a deity or divine being, often involving inward reflection and self-surrender.

Qur’an – The holy text of Islam and the Muslim people as recited to Muhammed by God.

Samā (“listening”) – A Sufi ritual combining music, dance, poetry, and prayer to reach connection with God. Its key element is the communal listening to music and sacred texts. This may elicit spontaneous physical reactions to the music, said to be caused by an elevated connection to the divine.

Sufism – An inward-reaching form of Islamic practice rooted in spiritual mysticism and oneness with God, the divine power.

Transcendence – Existing beyond the normal scope and limits to which something is typically prescribed.

Urdu – A standardized form of Hindustani language owing much to Persian language of *Farsi*. It is the official state language of Pakistan and is also spoken widely in India.

Walī (“protector”) – An Arabic term for an Islamic saint.

Whirling – The Sufi meditational practice of euphoric spinning to rhythmic accompaniment. This is commonly associated with the *sama* rituals of Rumi’s followers.

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