

Analytical Study Of The Feminine Element Of Sufism In Light Of Annemarie Schimmel's "Mystic Dimensions Of Islam"

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Abstract

Annemarie Schimmel talks about the much-needed aspect of Islamic Mysticism. Over the course of the history of Sufism, there has been a general concept that Sufism associates with Men. But if you dig deep into the phenomenal course of Islamic Mysticism, you can easily conclude that the true essence of Sufism evolves around the very nature of a Woman. Starting from the very first true recognizer of Sufism, the beloved Rabi'a Basri, who gave the ideology that the true love of Allah Almighty does not and should not come with the concept of fear of Hell and Love for Paradise. After Rabi'a comes to the Fatima of Nishapur and Sha'wana of Persia who wept so much in the love of Allah that she turned blind but spread the light of Faith all over the world. These great examples of Women in Sufism lead to the evidence that the nature of a woman fits perfect to the requirements of Sufism. Women are born with such enormous amount of Patience and observing powers that fulfil all the principles of true Sufism. Sufism gives the concept that bonds with family nourish one's connection with Almighty Allah. Times are changing and we all need to stand together in order to understand the Divine nature of Mysticism and dig deep into the roots of the true love of Allah Almighty. Whether we are male or female, the duty of keeping our hearts and souls pure remains intact. With each passing moment of self-cleansing, there is going to be a time when there's no Loved or Beloved but only Unity.

Key Words: Mysticism, Sufism, Women, Rabi'a Basri, Fatima, Sha'wana, Faith, Patience, self-cleansing

Introduction

Sufism (The mystical heart of Islam) is generally bound to be associated with Men. In this regard, Annemarie Schimmel, The Orientalist, presented a thorough work as “The Feminine Dimension of Sufism” in her book named “Mystic Dimensions of Islam”. She has discussed how Sufism started mainly from a Woman and how its core principles involve the literal nature of a woman. In the following discussion, a thoughtful analysis of the role of Women in Sufism is presented in light of certain Authors.

Introduction of Author

Annemarie Schimmel (7 April 1922- 26 January 2003) was an Influential Scholar from German who worked abundantly on Islam and Sufism.

Early Life

Schimmel was a born protestant from a middle-class but cultured family in Erfurt, Germany [1]. Her father worked in postal services and her mother Anna came from a family with connections to International Market. Her childhood home was filled with literature and poetry although she didn't come from an academic family [2].

Schimmel finished high school when she turned 15 and then started working in (Reich Labor Services). She then started studying at The University of Berlin in 1939, during the Nazi domination period in Europe. In university, her great inspiration was her teacher named Hans Heinrich Schaefer. It was He who suggested to Schimmel that she should do the majors in Divan of Shams Tabrizi, a very prominent work of Jalal Uddin Rumi.

Scholarly Career of Annemarie Schimmel

Schimmel had a turning phase in her life when she was appointed The Professor of History of Religion at Ankara University. She spent there 5 years teaching Turkish and became the 1st woman

as well as 1st non-Muslim to teach theology at an academic level. In 1967 at a young age, she established the Indo-Muslim studies program at The University of Harvard and stayed as the part of faculty there for around 25 years.

In 1992, upon her retirement from Harvard, Schimmel was named Professor Emerita of Indo-Muslim Culture. During this period, she also became an honorary professor at the University of Bonn [3].

Faith of Schimmel

Schimmel was often questioned by her Muslim as well as non-Muslim more profound and followers about whether she was a Muslim or not. In response to such queries, she preferred to give an equivocation but elaborated answer by saying that “only those who are not sure whether they are good Muslims or not can really be good Muslims” [4].

Selected Work of Schimmel

- And Muhammad Is His Messenger, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985.
- Mystical Dimensions of Islam (512 pages). Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975
- The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaluddin Rumi. London: East-West Publications, 1980.
- I Am Wind, You Are Fire: The Life and Work of Rumi. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997. Reissued as Rumi's World: The Life and Work of Great Sufi Poet. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2001.
- Islam: An Introduction (166 pages). Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992.

Schimmel died on January 26, 2003, in Bonn, Germany.

Introduction to Book

In the past few years, many books have been published solidifying the importance of Mysticism in Islam. Each of them has touched upon a completely different facet, introducing the different phenomenon of Sufism.

Mystical Dimensions of Islam is one of the greatest works of Annemarie Schimmel towards the contribution of Islam and Sufism. She dedicated an important part of her life in order to present a thorough knowledge of Islamic Mysticism.

Important Topics of Book

Schimmel literally focused on the following topics in her book:

1. What is Sufism?
2. History of Classical Sufism.
 - The formative period
 - Some mystical leaders of the late 19th Century.
 - Al-Hallaj- the martyr of Mystical Love.
 - The Period of Consolidation. (From Shiblee to Ghazali)
3. The Path to Sufism.
4. Man, and His Perfection.
5. Sufi Orders and Fraternities.
6. The Osophical Sufism.
7. Sufism in Indo-Pak.
8. The Letter symbolism in Sufi Literature.
9. The Feminine Element of Sufism [5].

Importance of Book

Even today, after so much work being done in this regard, Mystical Dimensions of Islam is still one of the most important yet comprehensive Introductions to Islamic Mysticism. Coming from an Orientalist, that too from Germany (which is considered to be one of the oldest places to portray the corrupt image of Islam), this book

gives the view, for the very 1st time a complete treatment of the cross-boundary process of Mysticism. Through her deep and vast understanding as well as far too-fetched interest in Sufism, Schimmel draws the reader into deep attention in such a quite impressive manner that touches on an essential element of her study of Mysticism.

The Feminine Element of Sufism

Introduction

The term “Sufi” basically involves the recognition of Allah Almighty by a true Being. Here a “Being” can be either Man or a Woman. Since the start of the very beginning, human beings both have tried their best to walk the path of unification with their actual source of creation. In the circles of Sufi traditions, this truth has been recognized and encouraged in such a manner that it led to the spiritual nourishment of women. Schimmel has highlighted the diversity of Sufism beyond the worldly limitations and Patriarchal norms that are envisaged in the roots of our society.

The difference between ‘feminine’ and ‘women’ denotes a significant shift in focus on the phenomenon in question. Here, she does underline the role of women in Sufism, historically, but the piece points to the feminine aspect of mystical Islam by documenting key elements of its history that concentrate on the phenomenon of the female, and not just traditionally known woman. The appendix piece did lay the textual and historical groundwork for what has now become a wide topic of interest. In 1982, Schimmel (Schimmel 1982) published a distilled version of “The Feminine Element in Sufism”, focusing on promoting the positive role of women in Sufi history.

Feminine Element of Sufism in Early Islam

According to Annemarie Schimmel, Sufism turned out to be more favorable towards the development of feminine activities as compared to so many other literal roots of Islam. She started this debate with a very famous saying of Sina'i that A pious woman is better than a thousand bad men. These lines are coming from a Persian mystical poet who isn't very much disposable towards the weaker sex.

It is clear from the historical study of Sufism that women have played such an outstanding role in the growth and nourishment of Sufism which is classically known to have begun with the advent of the Last Prophet of Allah Almighty, Muhammad (PBUH). Muhammad (PBUH) rejected the previous devastating norms of society and brought a message of the essence to everyday life, by recognition of the feminine as well as the masculine as an important and supreme part of the culture and traditional values. Although societies all over the world did not agree to follow the guidance of the Quran, it still gave a message of the equality of women and men in almost every aspect of life telling us that there is nothing like patriarchy in the true essence of Islam. At that time in history when the highly illiterate Arabian tribes were very brutish and used burying infant girls alive giving clear evidence of male dominant society, this new voice of the Islamic Values attempted to reestablish the recognition of the Unity of Being. It started to make difference while addressing the disproportion that had been arising for centuries, advising respect and honor for the feminine.

Allah says in Quran, "O you who believe! You are forbidden. to inherit women against their will. Nor should you treat them with harshness, that you may take away part of the dowry. you have given them - except when they have become guilty of open lewdness. On the contrary, live with them on a footing of kindness and equity. If you take a dislike to them, it may be that you

dislike something, and Allah will bring about through it a great deal of good." [6]

From the family of The Prophet (PBUH)

During the starting years of this new revelation of Prophethood, Muhammad's beloved wife, Khadija, fulfilled a role of great compliance. She was the one who sustained, strengthened, and supported The Holy Prophet (PBUH) against the doubts of his own and the bewilderment of Arabic Societies. She stood still along HIM just in the middle of chaotic circumstances and anger of Arabs and helped the Holy Prophet (PBUH) carry the light of the new faith.

1st True Saint of Islam

Annemarie Schimmel focused on the very fact that the 1st true saint in the history of Islam who recognized Sufism was a Woman, the great lover Rabi'a 1 — Rabi'a unquestionably helped shape the image of the ideal pious woman who can be praised in the most glowing terms (just because of her difference from the ordinary representatives of her sex!)

"When a woman walks in the way of God like a man, she cannot be called a woman" [7]

Rabi'a was the 1st to use the terms that made her definitions of Sufism very easy even for a common man. Even though she suffered many hardships and faced crucial circumstances in her early years of life, Rabi'a's ideology of Sufism didn't include the concept of Fear from Hell or Desire for a place in Paradise, but Her Ideology revolved around the very concept of TRUE LOVE OF ALLAH ALMIGHTY beyond looking for anything in exchange of that Love.

"God is God," she said, "for this I love God... not because of any gifts, but for Itself." Her aim was to melt her being in God. According to her, one could find God by turning within oneself. As Rabi'a says:

In love, nothing exists between breast and Breast.

Speech is born out of longing,

True description from the real taste.

The one who tastes knows;

The one who explains lies.

How can you describe the true form of Something?

In whose presence you are blotted out?

And in whose being do you still exist?

And who lives as a sign for your journey? [8]

Women after Rabi'a

We can clearly see from History that, however, Rabi'a was no exception, even though she was credited for introducing the concept of pure love without looking for something in exchange in the early outlook of early Sufism. Margaret Smith, another great author to work on Sufism and Islamic Mysticism has collected very informative knowledge regarding the lives and events of some of Rabi's peers, saintly women who lived their lives in the late eighth century in Basra and in Syria. Among them are Maryam of Basra and Rihanna, "the enthusiastic", and this research includes so many others who used to be called and known as "ever weeping, fearful, and who make others weep". Their eyes become blind while crying so that they can see better with the eyes of their pure hearts.

Some of the female descendants of the Prophet, like Sayyida Nafisa, excelled in their virtue and piety. The same holds true for Sayyida Zaynab, whose sanctuary in Cairo is visited so often that it even provides the setting for two modern Egyptian novels, as Muhammad Mustafa Badawi has shown in a fine study [9].

In addition to these ascetics and mystics, who actually accomplished so much as traditionalists, calligraphers, or poets, mention must be made of those who were married to the leading Sufis of their time. The pious Rabi'a the Syrian, wife of Ahmad ibn Abi'l-Hawarf was noted for her

constantly changing mystical states, which she expressed in lovely verses.

Sha'wana, a Persian Mystic

In this Journey of Sufism, there were women who followed the True Path of Almighty ALLAH and followed it with great pleasure and joy. Among them, there were also those women who continually wept and didn't smile once they discovered the True Path. Sha'wana, a Persian Mystic, was one of those who did not choose the path of joy, but she wept throughout her life. Men and women from all over the tribes used to gather in circles around her and listen to her songs and discourses.

Women in Sufism and Celibacy

Annemarie Schimmel highlights another important factor regarding women in Sufism that whether a Sufi should have led a celibate life or not. Some Male Sufi's are absolutely Antagonistic and show no interest towards Women rather they would treat her like a divergence and do not even accept food cooked by their hand. Therefore, interest in married life could be considered as a substitute for Hellfire for a saint who suffers the affliction of his nasty, ill-mannered, and misbehaving spouse. Even today, some spiritual representative figures allow their disciples to get married because the affliction that waits for them will clear the path toward Allah Almighty.

Thoughts of some Famous Mystics about Women Sufism

Annemarie Schimmel describes the views of some very famous mystics of Islam and how they equate "World" with "Women". These mystics represented the world as an old hag who paints her toothless face and Illuminated Quran upon it to hide the wrinkles. Therefore, she tries to seduce men and kills every day thousands of husbands. She is lecherous, a prostitute, mean, and has no meaning in life. That idea was expressed in the

sermons of Hassan Al Basri and then often used by Ghazali, Attar, and even Rumi.

Yahya Ibn e Muadh Al Razi also portrays this World as a “Woman” and warns his followers to stay away from Her (World) because as long as they are under her (world) influence, they won’t be able to connect themselves with Allah Almighty. And the true mystic who connects himself to God comes under the protection of the Almighty and does not care for Her (world).

Representation of “Nafs” as a Women

In the Mystic Dimensions of Islam, Schimmel talks about another unfortunate comparison between “Nafs and Women”. The Nafs which is the lower soul and are used to represent worldly needs and temptations compared to women. Rumi strengthens up his ideology by giving an instance of a Love-filled “She Mouse” who tried to seduce a frog. Also, the fact that “Nafs” in Arabic leans toward Feminine nature makes Rumi’s arguments even more appeasable. These famous names truly believe that their fall is in the hands of a woman and this thinking prevails not in Classical Sufism but also in Medieval Christianity where Christian monks are of the same views about Women’s Spirituality.

Positive Aspects of Womanhood

Even though some never appreciated or even accepted women in the department of Sufism, some of Male mystics fully realize the positive aspects of Womanhood regarding Sufism. Some of the Quranic Verses and Stories serve the beautiful and pure representation of Love and Religion by women. One of the most famous examples is the wife of Potiphar who lost herself completely in the Love of Joseph and this true essence of Love made her close to Allah Almighty.

Mystics particularly love Maryam, the mother of Jesus, and is often taken as the symbol of spirit in Classical Sufism. The strong and unmatched

faith of Women in Sufism plays an important role in the nourishment of Islamic Spirituality and the formation of the Muslim Ummah. Quran repeatedly speaks of “Muslimun wa muslimat, mifminun wa mu’minat” which means (Muslim Men and Women) and even though the same religious responsibilities are valid for both sexes, still women are seen as more concerned about religious duties.

It would be fruitful and worthy to study and understand the impact of noble women in the lives of famous Sufis. Many famous names of this path admitted that they took their preliminary guidelines from their mothers about the mystic path of Sufism. Whether it be Farid Ganj-i Shakar’s mother in India or c Abdul-Qadir Gillani’s mother and aunt, Women are seen everywhere in bring of such highly valued names.

Women Sponsoring Sufi Activities

From the earliest periods in Classical Islamic history, Women are highlighted as financial backers of groups of dervishes. They would fill the Khankahs with food and water just like Fatima Bibi, who supported Ibn e Saad and his fellow Sufis in her age and like one of the beautiful daughters of Aurangzeb who devoted a completed Complex in the name of Islamic Sufism and spirituality. This special role of women facilitating Sufi activities requires special attention and appreciation. It was in the field of Sufism that women explored themselves and served themselves for noble social work. In the reward for their true contributions, all they wanted was a rightful place in Mystic gatherings and to uplift their souls. These kinds of feminine activities can still be seen in some parts of the Islamic World.

Women; The Suiters of Sufism

Within Sufism, women can truly be explored, and we can assume that women are the most beautiful representation of Allah’s power on earth. It is

probably this capacity for storage of power and love both at the same time in a woman that suits Women so amazingly in the spiritual path of Sufism and pure relation with the Divine. For example, every Surah of the Holy Quran begins with the beneficence and mercifulness of Allah Almighty (Bismillah Ar-Rahman Ar-Rahim). Both the words Rahman and Rahim came into being from the very same root, the word “Womb”. Being a woman, we can easily associate ourselves with it as we are born from the womb and since the very beginning of our lives, we carry the womb with us, and then ultimately with the courtesy of “Rahman”, we give birth to other women from the womb and the cycle continues. Being women, we have all those requirements needed for the spiritual path already present in ourselves. We possess a great capacity for patience, we possess the power of love and nurturing in our nature. So, you see, a Sufi is like a mother, who devotes everything she has got without any questions asked. The one who is always there, willing to set limits, but also willing to stay up all night to nurse a child. Usually, these qualities are seen very less often in the opposite gender.

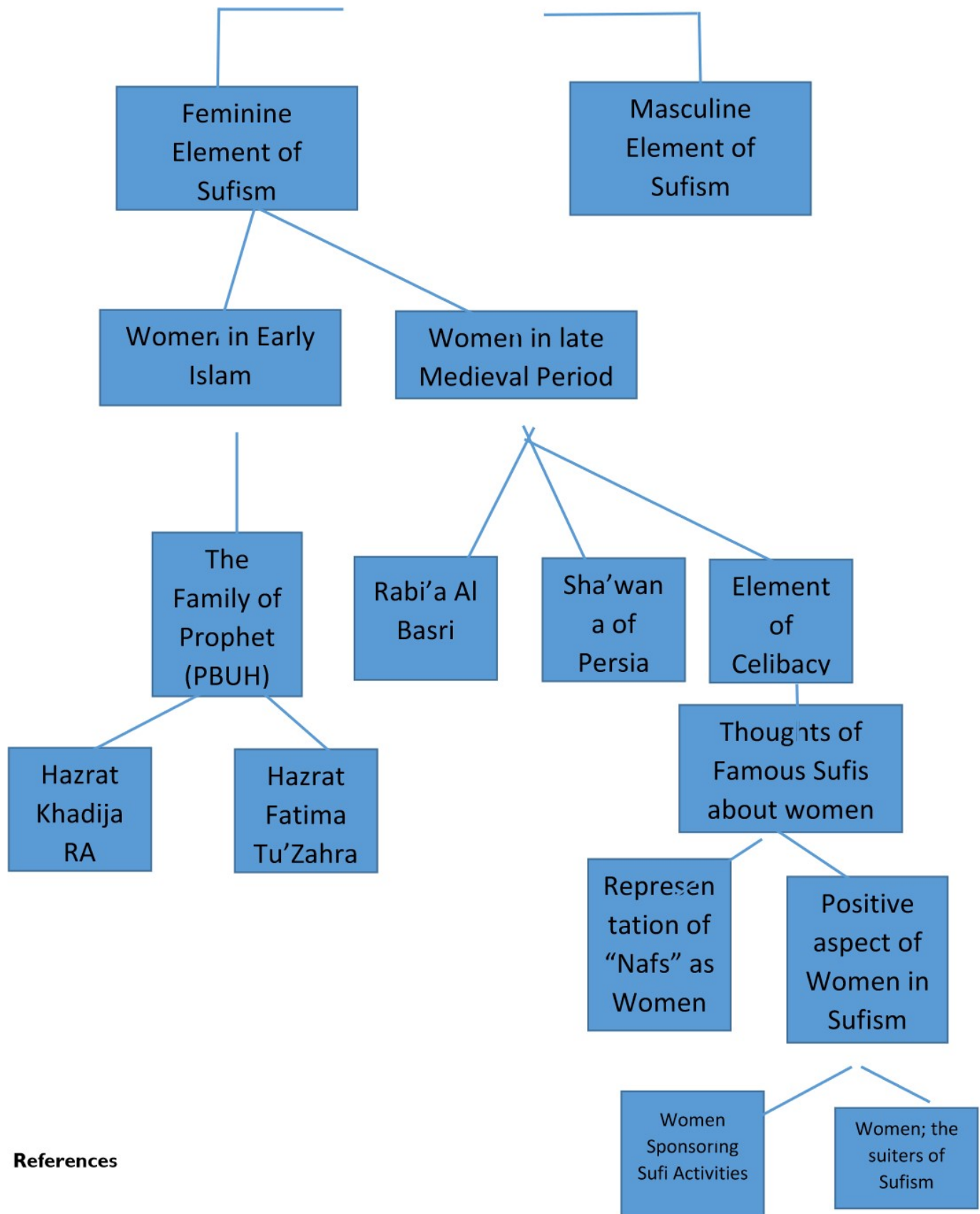
Conclusion

Sufism acknowledges that family and relationships are vessels of the spiritual path. The beauty of having a family is the great blessings of Allah Almighty. And as we deepen our capacity

for relationships, we also explore the source of our unity (Allah Almighty). The circle of this world goes on because of both men and women. So, we all need to stand together in the way toward a greater understanding of the equal partnership between men and women. Both genders have to learn from each other in order to maintain balance in the world and hereafter. As we move forward and support each other, the path to understanding and discovering the being of Unity becomes even easier for all of us because this world was never created without the presence of women in it and will never ever nurture without her. Eve was created with Adam, and Jesus was born from Maryam the Pure, the family lineage of our beloved Holy Prophet (PBUH) moved forward from her daughter Hazrat Fatima Tu’Zahra. So, there is no point in excluding women from anything, be it Sufism or worldly life.

Whether we choose celibacy or committed partnership, whether we are female or male, the same work remains of polishing the mirror of the heart, of being in remembrance moment by moment, breath by breath. Each moment we reaffirm the inner marriage until there is no longer lover or Beloved but only Unity of Being. Little by little, we die to what we thought we were. We are dissolved into Love, and we become love, God willing.

Annemarie
Schimmel



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