

**THE INFLUENCE OF SUFISM ON ERIC-EMMANUEL SCHMITT'S WORK**S. Amirian<sup>\*1</sup>, G. Sarwar Yousof<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>Doctor of Philosophy in Drama, Department of Cultural Centre, University of Malaya, Malaysia<sup>2</sup>Professor in Drama, Department of Cultural Centre, University of Malaya, Malaysia

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper attempts to investigate Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt(1960- ), as a Western dramatist and mystical writer of Eastern traditions through a detailed, qualitative and critical analysis of one of his most important work, Monsieur Ibrahim and the Flowers of Quran . In the play , Sufi framework and Archetypal Theory is used to present plainly and briefly the main concepts of mysticism and, at the same time, to situate mysticism within the play. Here, the author finds that the title character takes on the role of a Sufi master, initiating the protagonist, Moses, into the way of the Sufi and to eventually become his successor. The author concludes that Schmitt is indeed influenced by the master and disciple relationship in the initiation and journey of Sufism.

**Key words:** Modern drama, Emmanuel Schmitt, Sufism, Theater, play, Monsieur Ibrahim and the Flowers of the Qur'an.

**INTRODUCTION**

Just like how humanity has set themselves countless boundaries, people have, and often will, cross many of them; boundaries of words, objects, and communities, even of politics and science. Just like when crossing the border to a country.

Skilled authors also tend to cross borders. Poets may sometimes go past the boundaries of science, prose and rhyme.

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A novelist sometimes escapes the literary context into something deeper, larger than life.

The passing and crossing of borders can often mean to take a look back, or retrospectively looking at a situation, to reach a new situation. Looking into the past again may lead to the discovery of the hidden things that weren't fully realized at their discovery. In short, there is a modern world in the past that is, at times, as sophisticated as ours. Just as we cross a border from one country to another, while we discover new things and encounter new situations, we further recognize and appreciate the characteristics of the country from which we have passed.

If we look at the ancient works, we discover that not all of them are ineffective, useless, and wasteful. Every ancient work has its own unique and valuable characteristic that has helped to preserve its wisdom for several centuries, but it's often been forgotten for several reasons. One is that the work may not be understandable for many of the today's readers. But to me, the ancient works may be rediscovered and reintroduced into the academic societies of today. In fact, rediscovery is a modern aspect of a classic work, and is the exit from today's world of essential boundaries.

Especially in the current state of the modern world, meaningful and spiritual activities are moving farther away from the human experience. There are less and less activities that people do nowadays that are done for a higher purpose. Because the modern human is deeply involved in technology to create new plans, make discoveries, and solve worldwide issues, they forgot the boundless potential and endless spiritual oblivion.

However, It is the poets, artists and thinkers that feel the importance of rereading and the reanalysis of the spiritual meanings to revive the essence of humanity's meaningful activities in today's world. This is something that many contemporary dramaturgy writers are striving to do, among whom I believe Emmanuel Schmitt has been successful. This contemporary dramatist has focused his attention to spirituality in recent decades, quickly gaining people's attention. His work invites the audience to think and to make sense of the meanings and by once again raising the issues of human existence and life's meaningful activities.

Schmitt, for reintroducing and rearing the spiritual concepts, turned his attention to philosophy and mysticism and has tried to deliver the complex mystic concepts in terms of dramaturgy that's easier and more convenient way to the modern audience. Although you will not encounter a direct connection to any particular scholar or special personality in his works, he has been overwhelmingly influenced by Rumi, the legendary seventh century Persian Sufi and poet.

By examining the play *Monsieur Ibrahim and the Flowers of the Qur'an*, we find how the author reexamines mystic concepts in simple words through Moses, a young boy. He once again explores the rich concepts of love, compassion, sacrifice, enjoyment of life, and even the definition of evil in the world, further exploring the mystical visions of different religions of the world.

### **Sufism in *Monsieur Ibrahim and the Flowers of the Quran***

In the play *Monsieur Ibrahim and the Flowers of the Qur'an*, Schmitt displays a young boy who needs not only love, but also guidance to find his true way of life. He is a youth who still does not know how to live. The people who could help him the most, his parents, had abandoned him when Father committed suicide and Woman abandoned him as a child. Therefore, an adolescent Moses has been left out wondering and confused. Without the guidance of his family, his heart is broken and is gradually filled with hatred. In this section of the script, the concern for Moses' future is brought up. How can this boy be useful to the community and his future children? Could this young boy, with such confusion and distress over his family and even his religion, be a useful person to his society? It is at this point that Schmitt introduces Monsieur Ibrahim, a symbol of mysticism. With his guidance and knowledge, Moses returns to his true self. He teaches Moses how to love people, how to see that all people are derived from one existence, how to enjoy all the blessings around him which many people overlook. He teaches him how to smile, and replace sadness and depression with enthusiasm and happiness. However, to learn these lessons, simply reading books is not enough.

One may compare this to learning how to drive. We do not learn how to drive until we sit behind the wheel, when we steer and change gears ourselves, and when we learn where to break and slow down. Can one become a proficient driver simply by reading the driving manual? In the play, when Monsieur Ibrahim decides to seriously teach Moses the lesson of life, they go on a trip from France to Turkey, the home of the legendary mystic Rumi. Monsieur Ibrahim gets a car and has Moses drive it. The youth drives for the entire trip, and, as noted in the script, Moses not only learns the true way of life, but also becomes an experience driver. Schmitt has intentionally created parallels between the driving experience and learning the true way of life. Moses must learn to live a life by actually living it, and not by reading books and memorizing rules.

In this section, I will address the influence of Sufism in *Monsieur Ibrahim and the Flowers of the Quran*. Monsieur Ibrahim is a deeply religious Muslim, yet he does not bombard Moses with the

history and meaning of Islam or the Quran. Rather, he teaches religion as if it is something inside oneself, like beauty, charity, and righteousness. As he continues, Moses comes to know what is in his Quran (his heart).

Ibrahim: You can find beauty where ever you look. That is what my Quran says.

Momo: Should I read your Quran?

Ibrahim: If God wants to reveal life to you, he won't need a book. (Schmitt, 2006:12).

Sufism in order to reach highest levels of true Mysticism (Erfan), believe on practical steps and levels, which unless otherwise the possibility of reaching true Mysticism (Erfan) would be impossible. Sufism has considerable similarities and differences with general Islamic Knowledge. Their similarity is that the goal for both is to understand reality. But difference is that in Islamic Knowledge the goal is not limited to understanding God, but include the realization of existing order in universe (of course the main part of this understanding includes God). However in Sufism the target is only limited to understand God. As Sufism believe, knowing God is knowing everything; everything would be understandable through the lens of knowing God from monotheistic view.

While Hakim (scientist) possess mental and thoughtful understanding, like the type of understanding a mathematician acquires, the Sophist method of understanding is intuitive like a kind of wisdom an experimentalist bear in the lab.

Hakim's tools are reasons and logics, but sophist tools are refinement and treatment of soul. Hakim wishes to apply his mental perspectives and study the universe with his mental and logical capabilities, but sophist tries to move with his soul to reach deepest truth of universe and like a drop of water which joins the sea, include himself in the truth of universe.

The ultimate perfection of human being is understanding as Hakim (scientist) believes, however the ultimate perfection of sophist is reaching truth. Hakim think of illiterate person as an incomplete person, but for Sufism, incomplete persons are those who are far from self's soul. Mysticism which consider perfection as reaching the final truth but not understanding, argues a need for introductions which then is called "journey". Journey to the God is a vertical journey but not horizontal one. Its vertical as it is perpendicular to divine geometry not natural geometry. It means entering to dominant level, not dominant place. So Sufism, in essence, is a path, or a way, and this is true no matter which teacher a seeker one turns to—be it Omar Khayyam, Rumi, Ibn Al-Arabi, Mansur Al-Hallaj, or Suhrawardi—this 'movement' is shaped from whichever

perspective or from whatever stage one is at during the search. Sufism only gives the way (Rah) towards the ultimate goal of the Truth.

In the play *Monsieur Ibrahim and the Flowers of the Quran*, Moses' humorous search for the definition of Sufism is quoted below:

Moses says; I realized I was being nosy. If Monsieur Ibrahim did not want to tell me anything else about his disease, that was his privilege, and I kept silent until we got back home. When he gets home he takes a dictionary from his father's bookcase and looks for the Sufi. And he reads to himself; Su...Su... Sufism: school of Islam, It opposes Legalism and stresses inner contemplation. Well the one important thing is that Sufism isn't a disease, that's quite reassuring, it's a way of thinking although there also are ways of thinking which is a disease, Monsieur Ibrahim says.(Schmitt,2006:18).

In this scene, we witness Moses' difficulty to grasp the meaning of a Sufi. He tries a dictionary, but it is to no avail until he is forced to settle for a way of thinking. Despite referring to the dictionary, Moses is no wiser as to what a Sufi is. This teaches him to start thinking.

Through the play, author shows that there is something beyond religion. He allegorizes that there is a difference between people who only respect religious laws and those who follow their hearts. We can see clearly in *Daftar 1, Mathnawi*, that Rumi believes it;

From God came, verily, opinion do not enable to dispense. With the truth, when the steed of opinion run to the Heavens. Recognize that your imagination and reflection and sense-perception and apprehension are like the reed-cane on which children ride. The sciences of the mystics bear them .The sciences of sensual men are burdens to them. God said, laden with his books. Burdensome is the knowledge that is not from Him. The knowledge that is not immediately from Him does not endure.( Rumi,2013: 34)

Sufism believes that there are limitations of rational knowledge of understanding the Path of Truth and Schmitt reveals this through dialogues between Monsieur Ibrahim and Moses. As Mohammad Ebn e Malekdad e Tabrizi in *Divan e Shams* has a famous saying "You will learn by reading .But you will understand with love"(Tabrizi, 2011:35).

We can find the same words in the play when Moses says he does not understand the Quran. Monsieur Ibrahim replies that simply reading will not be enough to understand it: it should be understood from the way of your heart. As we can see in the following quote from the play:

Monsieur Ibrahim: Are you reading the Quran

Moses: I don't really get what it says.

Monsieur Ibrahim : To learn something, you don't pick up a book. You find people you can speak with you can understand with love. I don't believe in books. (Schmitt,2006:20).

Moses thinks about it and he finds out that Monsieur Ibrahim's knowledge is very deep. Monsieur Ibrahim tells him that to understand "the way", one has to release his rational and argumentative thoughts that disrupt ones' heart.

### **Dance in Sufism and in Monsieur Ibrahim and the Flowers of the Quran**

Molana founded mediation that continued for over seven hundred years among his followers. A mediation which is type of dance.

Kids likes turning around themselves; no one is asking why all around the world, regardless of ethnicity, race and religion, kids like to turn around themselves. When watched this childish play, Molana thought with himself that there should be a feeling that these kids sense, but probably cannot express or even not aware of it

So he tried, turning around himself. He surprised to understand that when you continue turning, after a while a moment arrives when the center inside body feels resident, but your body, brain and everything inside you is turning around that center inside. You become a resident in the middle of thunderstorm. The turning (Sama) is like that thunderstorm, but in the middle of thunderstorm you will find a place which is not moving. Molana once realized that he can find resident place inside and then he turns around himself for 36 hours nonstop; his moves gathered huge crowds. People were going and coming until finally he drops down on the ground after 36 hours.

He waked up, laughed and said" I didn't move a second during this 36 hours; now to see God I shouldn't go to Mecca, I found him, it's here inside my resident part".

During their journey, Moses learns to deeply appreciate his surroundings, the beauty it gives out, and to open his senses and heart to such wonders from Monsieur Ibrahim, as he mentions to him they are going to find the source of sea. He is happy that Momo is with him. Monsieur Ibrahim wants him to drive slowly; because he believes doing things slowly is the key to happiness. When Momo wants Monsieur shows to show him the sea he on the map, Monsieur Ibrahim replies he should not bothers him with the map as they are not in the school but instead he should pay attention to the beautiful nature which surrounds them.

In my opinion, the climax of their time is when Monsieur Ibrahim first shows the whirling dervishes to Moses as a form of worship in Istanbul, deeply affecting Moses in the process as he mentions "...when you dance, your heart sings. They spin around their hearts, and God is in their hearts"( Schmitt,2006:20).

Monsieur Ibrahim during his trip to Turkey asks Moses to stop the car in a place, to show him that specific place; the place where Dervishes are turning around (Sama).M. Ibrahim thinks human heart is like a bird in cage, but when turning around, this inner bird starts singing.

Then M. Ibrahim starts to tell Moses about Sama and how it could make changes inside human heart and even transform it. Moses at the beginning was totally unaware of such things but gradually likes it and with Ibrahim's applause starts to learn it. Like Dervishes he starts turning and turning and after a while he feels happy, losing his hatred against his parents and even feels all bad things surrounding him are getting away.

Monsieur Ibrahim: Stop here, I want to take you dancing.

Moses: Dancing?!

Monsieur Ibrahim: Absolutely, yes. Man's heart is locked up in a cage. If you dance, your heart sings like a bird, and its song may reach God.( Schmitt,2006:20).

Monsieur Ibrahim explains to him about Sama, and Moses says: "The first time I saw the men whirling. The dervishes were wearing great robes of pale, flowing material. They were whirling and whirling"( Schmitt,2006:21).

If the reader has not read the play, I would like to quote one of the best conversations in the play to delight the reader. On the Sama, Monsieur Ibrahim explains:

Monsieur Ibrahim: You see, Momo, they're praying.

Moses: You call that praying?

Monsieur Ibrahim: Try it Momo. Try it.

Moses: (whirling) I'm happy being with Monsieur Ibrahim. (whirling) I'm no longer angry with my father for leaving.

Monsieur Ibrahim: So, Momo, did you think beautiful things?

Moses: Yes it was incredible! I wasn't so angry at my father any more. And I think if I hadn't stopped I might have dealt with my mother.

Monsieur Ibrahim: You see going to the Tekke is a necessary thing; you get rid of bad thoughts. Better. You cleanse yourself.( Schmitt,2006:23).

Monsieur Ibrahim teaches Moses to clean his heart from hatred, and this can be done through dance/Sama. In order to remove all the hatred from Moses' heart, he took him to Sufi centers, and taught him swirling and the Dervish dance. With this, he taught him how to replace the hatred in his heart with kindness.

The ending of the play shows Moses embracing Sufism and practicing the dance of the whirling dervishes, or Samae. This Sufi tradition was founded by Rumi as a way of reaching God by imitating the circle of life as seen in all living entities, from the electron circling its center to the planets circling the sun. Here, though, the heart is the symbolic center of Man and the Samae enables one to reconnect with the divine, even for a brief moment. Music and song is also incorporated to heighten this experience.

### **Religions in Sufism and in Monsieur Ibrahim and the Flowers of the Quran**

Monsieur Ibrahim's view on religion is very similar to the thought of Sufism. In the following discussion, evidence of the presence of Sufism in Schmitt's play will be presented. In some parts of the play, Schmitt brings in religion. The first time is when Moses brings his father's dinner and starts talking to him, he asks his father about their religion, and what religion does to people.

When Moses starts hesitating about his beliefs and religion, he wanted to know what were his parents' beliefs? Moses asked him about his religion to know what he believes. But father glowering which shows a big pain; it seems he can tell nothing about his religion to his son since it reminds him of painful memories, when Jewish's were killed and burned because of their faith.

Moses knows that he is a Jew but does not know or care much about it, and nor does Father. After speaking with Monsieur Ibrahim, he really wants to know what religion is since he has not found his answer yet. When he sees Monsieur is circumcised, he asks again about Monsieur's religion. Through the latter's answers, Moses understands something more about Monsieur Ibrahim's religion.

Monsieur Ibrahim: Muslims are circumcised just like Jews, Momo. It's Abraham's sacrifice: he reaches out to God by offering him his child. That little bit of skin missing is the mark of Abraham. During circumcision, the father has to hold his son- the father offers his own pain up as a memory to Abraham's sacrifice.

Moses (talk to audience): Monsieur Ibrahim made me realize how Jews, Muslims and even Christians had plenty of great men in common before they started hitting each other on the head. (Schmitt,2006:22).

In this part, we witness how Schmitt raises his ideas about religion through Moses' dialogue, and alludes to the circumstances in which we are living today: it is totally relevant to emphasize that we can live with each other, and we can love each other.

Monsieur Ibrahim wants to teach Moses that all faiths are to be respected, and, instead of emphasizing differences, one should consider common grounds among them in order to live in peace and harmony. He also teaches Moses that all faiths emanate from one source, just like beams of light. This is where the play enlightens the reader with religious polarism. This religious polarism is what Ibn Arabi had clearly illustrated in his books, and even the legendary Rumi had confirmed it.

In his verses, Rumi considers himself neither Muslim nor Jewish, nor that any one religion or belief is better than the other. His constant search is for a single view of philosophy that will lead to Truth.

What is to be done, Moslems? For I do not recognize myself, I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Gabr (Zoroastrian), nor Moslem. I am not of the East, nor of the West, nor of the land, nor of the sea; am I not of nature's mint, nor of the circling heavens. I am not of earth, nor of water, nor of air, nor of fire; I not of the empyrean, nor of the dust, nor of existence, nor of entity. I am not of India, nor of China, nor of Bulgaria, nor of Saqsin; am I neither of the kingdom of Ordain, nor of the country of Khordsdn. I am not of this world, nor of the next, nor of Paradise, nor of Hell; I am not of Adam, nor of Eve, nor of Eden and Rizwan. My place is the Place less, my trace is the Trace less is neither body nor soul, for I belong to the soul of the Beloved. I have put duality away, I have seen that the two worlds are one; one I seek. One I know. One I see. One I call....I am intoxicated with Love's cup, the two worlds have passed out of my ken...I'm so drunk in this world, that except of drunkenness and revelry I have no tale to tell. (Rumi, 2013:1/ 125-127).

### **Journey in Sufism and in Monsieur Ibrahim and the Flowers of the Quran**

Schmitt has designed two journeys in the script. The first journey starts from the narrow and crowded street alleys in France to the majestically beautiful and luxurious places in Turkey. It is as if he wishes to refer to 'Seyr o Solouk' in Sufism. At first, Monsieur Ibrahim tries to make sure that Moses knows himself, his city, and his surroundings. In the Risalat Alahadiyyah, Ibn

'Arabi says, "He sent Himself with Himself to Himself". According to Chittick; "Through the spiritual path man awakens from his slumber and finds that he is not what he had thought himself to be; he is not that particular mode of consciousness with which he had identified himself"(Chittick,2005:66).

The illumination of Man's spirit only occurs when he is relinquished all essence of the self.

Undertaken by Monsieur Ibrahim and Moses, it is a symbol of the spiritual journey in Sufism. From this perspective, Monsieur Ibrahim defines the world to Moses and guides him to the right path. Initially, the rejection of worldly materials is seen as the most assured means to salvation. When Monsieur is near the sea he is absolutely delighted: the sea is a symbol of a mystic's journey to God.

Finally, after Monsieur Ibrahim completes his duty towards Moses, he decides to go to his house by himself. He later dies in a car accident. Prior to leaving Moses to visit his village one last time, he tells Moses to meet him later by an olive tree.

Moses : Monsieur Ibrahim told me that it was just a matter of hours before we'd get to his birthplace. He wanted to get there alone first, on reconnaissance. He asked me to wait for him under an olive tree. (Schmitt,2006:42).

The car smashed into a farm wall. Moses finds him lying on the ground badly injured and bruised. Moses calls him several times. Monsieur Ibrahim answers him that this is where the journey ends, Momo. Moses is crying but Monsieur Ibrahim consoles him as he mentions he is not afraid because he knows what is in his Quran which he means he is not afraid of death because he believes to the life after that God describes on holy Quran.

Afterwards, Monsieur Ibrahim explains to Moses about a ladder that is placed on a man's way for climbing. However, the man usually remains on the first rung. He continues that man was first a mineral, then became a plant, and then died as a plant, and rose to become an animal. People often like to stay on this level (animal) and some of them cannot leave this, but if the man leaves this step, he would gain knowledge, find wisdom, and acquire faith. It is for this reason that Monsieur Ibrahim does not fear death.

Precisely in my opinion, these words remind us of one of Rumi's most famous poems:

Why should I fear? When was I less by dying? Yet once more I shall die as man, to soar. With angels blest; but even from angelhood, I must pass on: all except God doth perish. When I have

sacrificed my angel soul, I shall become what no mind ever conceived, Oh, let me not exist! For Non-existence, proclaims in organ tones, To Him we shall return. (Rumi,2013: 141).

Moses cries because Monsieur Ibrahim is dying. However, he tells Moses that a man who has gone the right way will never die.

Before his fall, Man reflected integrally and consciously that God created Adam in His Own image. Man thus contained within himself the principle of all Existence, with which he was in perfect equilibrium. Through his Fall, however, Man he lost his inward contact with God, and for him the equilibrium of the universe became blurred. In trying to regain his original state, Man created his own equilibrium and saw things not through God, but through the veil of his individual self. The process of death, whether in the sense of the Prophet's words, Die before you die, or in the usual physical sense, implies precisely a return to, or at least a renewed awareness of, Man's original equilibrium with the universe.

At the end of play, we witness that Moses matures as an adult to return to Paris, reconnects with his mother, accepts his Jewish and Islamic inheritance, and takes over Monsieur Ibrahim's grocery store.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the current state of the modern world, meaningful and spiritual activities are especially moving farther away from the human experience. There are fewer activities that people do nowadays for a higher purpose. As the modern Man is deeply involved in technology to create new plans, make new discoveries, and solve global issues, he forgets about the boundless potential and endless spiritual oblivion. However, it is the poets, artists and thinkers who feel the importance of reviewing and reanalyzing spiritual meanings to revive the essence of Man's meaningful activities in today's world.

This is something that many contemporary dramaturgy writers are striving to do, among whom, I believe, Emmanuel-Eric Schmitt is successful. This contemporary dramatist has focused his attention on spirituality in recent decades, quickly gaining people's attention. His work invites the audience to think and contemplate on meanings and, once again, raise issues of human existence and life's meaningful activities.

By reintroducing and rearing the spiritual concepts, Schmitt has turned his attention to philosophy and Sufism, and has tried to deliver complex mystic concepts in terms of dramaturgy that is easier and more convenient to the modern audience. Although one will not encounter a

direct connection to any particular scholar or personality in his works, he has been overwhelmingly influenced by Rumi, the legendary 7th century Persian Sufi and poet.

Monsieur Ibrahim's approach, as well as that of Sufism, is to turn towards the goal and move forward. To sum up Monsieur Ibrahim's play script, one may summarize it as such:

-Bringing into action instead of only studying books: this method is based on the theory that people learn much more effectively than merely reading.

-To learn the spiritual virtue of love by enjoying life, and seeing the beauty of nature: Monsieur teaches Moses that life is beautiful, and that God has created everything around him to be beautiful and delightful;

-To teach that there is no evil in the world: Monsieur teaches Moses that the world does not have any bad or evil, because God made the world to be all good. It is human beings who created the idea of an opposite of good, evil, something which does not exist in reality.

-To clean the heart from hatred (through dance/Samae), and forgiving others' errors: In order to remove all hatred from Moses' heart, Monsieur Ibrahim takes him to places associated with Dervishes and teaches him swirling and the Dervish dance. With this, Moses is taught how to replace the hatred in his heart with kindness.

-To show respect for all religions: Monsieur Ibrahim takes Moses to various sacred places and asks him to express his feelings with his eyes closed. Monsieur Ibrahim wants to teach Moses that all faiths are to be respected. Instead of emphasizing differences, one should consider the common grounds among them in order to live in peace and coexistence.

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