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Book Review

Unveiling the Mystic: A Literary and Spiritual Portrait of Prophet Muhammad as Sufi Archetype

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Reviewed Work:

Prophet Muhammad: The First Sufi of Islam by Farzana Moon, Garnet Publishing, 2013
ISBN: 9781859642948, 309 pages

Introduction

Farzana Moon's *Prophet Muhammad: The First Sufi of Islam* attempts an ambitious reframing of the life of Islam's founding prophet—not merely as a statesman or religious reformer, but as a mystical lover of God. The subtitle alone—"The First Sufi of Islam"—signals the book's central thesis: that Prophet Muhammad's life and teachings align deeply with the spiritual ethos later associated with Sufism. Moon's work combines poetic biography with devotional narrative, seeking to recast the Prophet in the mold of a timeless spiritual archetype, steeped in longing, love, and transcendence.

Structure and Style

The book is presented in chronological chapters, blending narration, inner monologue, dream sequences, and embellished historical detail. The first chapter, "The Holy Bridegroom," sets the tone with vivid prose and lush imagery as it details Muhammad's marriage to Khadija. Farzana Moon's language is lyrical, almost mystical, echoing the literary traditions of Sufi poetry and Persian epic, with descriptions such as "a scent of rose and jasmine hung in the air, emanating from Muhammad's very soul".

Moon's background as a playwright and poet is unmistakable. The narrative is dramatic, infused with sensuous detail and emotive flourishes. While this approach provides aesthetic richness, it occasionally blurs the line between historical fidelity and romanticized fiction. This raises critical questions for academic readers: Where does reverent embellishment end, and where does historical distortion begin?

Theological Framing: Muhammad as Sufi Mystic

At the heart of Moon's interpretation is the claim that Muhammad was the "first Sufi of Islam." While this framing is poetically persuasive, it is theologically contentious. The author identifies mystical elements in Muhammad's early meditations at Mount Hira, his inner spiritual struggles, and his intense longing for divine nearness, describing these as signs of proto-Sufism. Indeed, the themes of *tawhid* (oneness of God), *fana* (self-annihilation), and *mahabba* (divine love) emerge throughout the narrative, anticipating later Sufi lexicon.

However, one might argue that Moon retroactively projects later Sufi categories onto a foundational Islamic narrative. The Prophet's asceticism and spiritual yearning are well-documented, but whether this makes him a "Sufi" in the sense the term acquired in later centuries is debatable. The book's title is thus more interpretive than descriptive, inviting discourse rather than consensus.

Interfaith and Contemporary Relevance

One of the book's explicit aims is fostering understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims. In her preface, Moon writes with the hope that even "suicide bombers might heed the message of Islam in the true sense of the word—meaning peace and reconciliation." This moral and didactic dimension permeates the work, often through idealized portrayals of Muhammad as a peacemaker and lover of humanity.

Moon does not shy away from addressing modern concerns—women's rights, extremism, and interreligious conflict—but she does so obliquely through allegorical parallels rather than direct commentary. Her Muhammad is a spiritual humanist, emphasizing compassion over conquest, mercy over militancy. Such a portrayal may serve as a counter-narrative to popular misrepresentations of Islam, though it also invites critique for selective historicism.

Literary Merits and Limitations

The greatest strength of Moon's work lies in its literary ambition. Her portrayal of Muhammad's interior life—his dreams, doubts, and devotions—is vividly imagined and emotionally resonant. The book reads as a hagiographic novel more than a standard biography, offering new readers a spiritually immersive experience.

However, this very strength can also be a liability for critical scholarship. Moon provides minimal citations, and her blending of historical sources with fictionalized monologues may confuse readers unfamiliar with Islamic historiography. Academics expecting rigorous historical method or references to primary Islamic sources may find the work lacking in that regard.

Conclusion

Prophet Muhammad: The First Sufi of Islam is a luminous, provocative reimagining of Islam's central figure. Though it may not satisfy purist historians or traditional theologians, it contributes meaningfully to the discourse on Muhammad's spiritual legacy. For readers interested in the confluence of literature, mysticism, and religion, Farzana Moon's book is both a poetic offering and a theological provocation. It asks us not merely to analyze the Prophet's deeds, but to feel the pulse of his soul.

Recommendation:

This work is recommended for scholars of Islamic mysticism, comparative religion, and religious literature, particularly those interested in devotional and literary reinterpretations of prophetic figures. It may also serve as a supplementary text in courses on Islam and Sufism, with appropriate contextual framing.