

Deviation (*ash-Shaṭ ḥā* or *al-Ghulū aṣ-Ṣūfī*) in the Contemporary Poetry of Arab and American Mystical Women Poets

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Historically speaking, mysticism, known in Arabic as Sufism, may take the form of a religious ritual, a prayer, a science¹, or a kind of cosmic speculation. Some forms of mysticism have been rejected or severely criticized and mystics were declared heretics, even persecuted to death. Mysticism tends to involve certain practices, expressions, claims, or ecstatic words that are described as extraordinarily divergent or extravagant sacrilegious aberrations. What orientalists or Islamic scholars call “words of ecstasy,”² I will refer to as “Deviation,” or in Arabic, *ash-Shaṭ ḥā* or *al-Ghulū aṣ-Ṣūfī*. Deviation is “a divergent movement of the secret that finds a vent, an outlet, as a result of the fierceness of the mystical ecstasy.”³ Deviation occurs either at the peak of longing, which is characterized as a drunken stupor, or in the process of proclaiming what they call “the secret.” Sufis seek out this secret on the road to union with the Truth, the Absolute, or the One God. This union, also referred to as Incarnationism, is known in Arabic as *al-Ḥulūl*. The Sufi who has experienced Incarnationism is said to have been astray in intoxicating himself, at which point he starts to vent, unconsciously, the unutterable, or to innovate, in what is seen by the orthodox, or religious “authority” as a denigration of religion, or blasphemy (*bidā*), or even heresy (*zandaqa*). Drinking the wine of the Beloved, who is God, usually comes up as a thematic image in Sufi mystical

¹ Swiveling around the epistemology/poetics of mysticism, the first who called it a science was Al-Qushayri in his monograph on Sufism, *Al-Risala Al-Qushariyaa fi 'Elm Attaṣawwuf* (Al-Qushariyya monograph in the Science of Sufism); besides *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldun*, a chapter on “the Science of Sufism”. See Mohammed Al-kahlawi, *Muqarabāt wa Buḥ ūth Fi't-Taṣawwuf al-muqaran* (Beirut: Dar eṭ-ṭaliā, 2008), 5; also considered a science in Judaism, see *Introduction to the Book of Zohar, Vol.1: The Science of Kabbala (Pticha)*, Ed. Talib Din, Trans David Brushin (Canada: Laitman Kabbala Publishers, 2005). I prefer to use “Deviation”, rather than “words of ecstasy” to indicate the extravagance of ardor as the Arabic word, *Shaṭ ḥā*, portends.

² Carl W. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany: State University of New York P, 1985).

³ Quoted in Abdul-Rahman Badawi, *Shaṭ aḥāt aṣ-ṣufiyya* (Sufis' Deviations) (Kuwait: Wakalat al-Maṭbūāt, 1978), 11. For a study on criticism of tendencies in Sufism, see Carl W. Ernst, 117-132.

poetry, often in a form of narration or conversation with the Divine.⁴ The term ecstasy is derived from the Latin *ekstasis*, which means “standing out of one’s self or ego”; hence the mystic experiences a new type of “existence” in which “mystery” unfolds, along with the path to knowledge of oneself and of God.⁵ Mysticism implies, among other things, thinking infused with longing, and passionate communication that comes in the form of either contemplation or meditation.⁶

However, in these turbulent times of human history where spiritual darkness, ugliness, and ethical aridity loom large, women dealing with religious, mystical themes are attempting to re-situate themselves within a long tradition of poetry writing. Because poetry has served as such an effective vehicle for conveying mystical experience, mystical women poets create a spiritual, aesthetic plane where they are eminently insightful revisionists and innovative creators rather than preachers or teachers of certain doctrines. The innovation in the poems selected here bridges the gap between poetic creation and political-mystical thinking. The authors of these poems, American Jew Alicia Ostriker (1937-), American Christian Lucille Clifton (1936-), and Iraqi Muslim Bushra Al-Bustani (1950-), create a dualism of spirituality and aesthetics as old as poetry. Their poetry is indistinguishable from the religion or faith to which they relate their themes with a spiritual vision which lies outside the ambit of doctrine. Yet, it is very much grounded in immediate, earthly concerns, including war, racism, and patriarchy. These women poets tread mystical domains traditionally impervious to feminist, ethnic, and nationalist speculations, yet their poetry brings these disparate elements together, constituting both an intellectual and spiritual revelation which enriches human culture as a whole. Mystical poetry is for God, man, and art, and betokens the prodigious sacredness of these three together.

In the mysticism of the three revealed religions, Deviation presents challenges to the monotheistic nature of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For this reason it can be quite controversial. Some support it vehemently; others condemn it as transgressive or destructive to faith. A third camp sees it as outrageous and offensive at face value, but commendable in essence. The mystical woman poet not only advocates, but inhabits Deviation. She is so mystified by the secrets of the universe and the divine presence that she is not satisfied with the reality the five senses witness. She seeks to go beyond them, striving for some celestial

⁴ In Islamic Sufism, there is a distinction between the distraught “inebriated” and the more restrained “sober” schools of Sufis, the former represented by Al-Ḥallāj, who was declared “heretic” and paid his life for it, and the latter of Al-Junaid al-Baghdadi. See John Baldock, *the Essence of Sufism* (London: Acturus, 2004), 66.

⁵ John Macquarrie, *Two Worlds are Ours: An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 57.

⁶ John Macquarrie interestingly distinguishes between meditation and contemplation in mysticism, 31-34.

glimpse into the eternal using the lens of mystical experience. Though mystics of the three religions have similar goals, their paths can be quite different. From within her own theological and spiritual tradition, each woman-poet selected here shows some Deviation in her poetry, adding to this tradition of world poetic writing.

The woman mystic's soul is mentally and emotionally preoccupied with God. It is engaged with revealing the secret of Universal Truth and seeks knowledge that is beyond human reach. The woman mystic's soul, after a long laborious contemplation that starts as a state of turmoil and lack of equilibrium, develops an ardor that takes her sky high. Her longing for the love of God reaches a point at which her soul is said to glow. In this state she may articulate an outpouring of poetry enshrined in spontaneous words of ecstasy. This is Deviation, which can be likened to a flooding river whose waters stray from all sides, away from their proper course⁷. The secret lies between the worshipped, who is esoteric and veiled, and the worshipper, who is the announcer-poet. Mystics claim that they unite with, or merge into the "Truth," "the Infinite," or "the Absolute" (God) to the extent that they are indistinguishable from a pantheistic/panentheistic unitive incarnation. Outwardly, mystical experience is a journey upward. But in actuality, it is a journey into the depths of the self to savor the presence of God. Any mystical experience is a highly subjective domain; yet, the poets give it an aura of collectivity in their descriptions of mystical ecstasy.

This ecstasy, when unraveled, also imparts deeply spiritual, ethnic, nationalist, and feminist premises which, in their concern for the suffering of mankind, unite the women poets at another level. Alicia Ostriker, whose poetry accentuates feminist themes, Lucille Clifton, whose work explores blackness as a spiritual trope, and Bushra Al-Bustani, whose war poetry conveys nationalist sentiments, are united not only in their mystical quests but in their search for justice and the well-being of humanity.

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Provocatively, Alicia Suskin Ostriker argues that the language of Judeo-Christian monotheism is no more than "a cover-up" of the "Biblical patriarchy" that erases "female power."⁸ She never falters in her quest for a God-surrogate to whom to prostrate in search of a mystical union. Wrestling with God as a patriarchal, distant figure, she seeks his Shekhina, the Kabbalistic notion the feminine part or attribute of Yahweh.⁹ Only Kabbala mysticism postulates a

⁷ This is al-Ṭūsī's saying in his treatise on Sufism, as quoted in Muhammad bin Al-Tayyib, *Waḥdat el-Wujūd Fi el-Taṣawwuf el-Islāmi* (Beirut: Dar -El-Ṭaliá, 2008), 33.

⁸ See her *Feminist Revision and the Bible* (MA: Blackwell, 1993), 30-31. She calls for "re-writing" or "revising" the Bible as a whole leaning on Freud's call in *Moses and Monotheism* where he maintains, reluctantly, that "The distortion of a text is not unlike a murder", 32.

⁹ Since God has different names in each of the three religions, words like: the Hebrew Yahweh, an extended version of the original tetragrammaton YHWH, Adonai—which means the

vision of Yahweh who can be divided into attributes with which the poet can achieve the ineffable unitive adoration-- a union, indomitable, incalculable.

Though never mentioned in the Bible, Shekhina is described in the Kabala as the sought Object, which descends to the Earth to take care of the Jewish people. She is lovable, attainable, and full of life. Ostriker bestows upon the divinity of Shekhina a flood of femininity, an exhilarating affinity in which the female Kabbalist exults and attains unitive self-fulfillment. Ostriker uses dialogue as a mystical mode of discovery. The unitive experience she achieves feels breathtaking and fabulous. The theophany of Shekhina and the emphasis on her theodicy are at the core of the dialogue between the poet and the benevolent female deity.

Ostriker engages in face-to-face, feminist intimacy, identification, and conversation in her one-on-one encounter with Shekhina. Separate from God's own self, she criticizes the Patriarchal Yahweh as a "tyrannical ego." Her mystical Deviation emerges, a locution not to be found in previous Kabala sources. She tries to evade the deliberate demotion of the female indwelling of Yahweh, a result both of elevating the male Creator-God and of what Ostriker sees as "a female burial" prevalent in the Bible. In her book of meditations on the Hebrew Bible, *Nakedness of the Fathers* (1997), in a section titled "Tree of Life," Ostriker envisions some Biblical women, especially those of the Torah, merging mystically in Shekhina. Shekhina, Ostriker explains, is "God's Dwelling or Presence on Earth, or feminine aspect, or tenth kabbalistic sephirah, who in Abraham's time inhabited Sarah, in Isaac's time Rebecca, in Jacob's time Rachel."¹⁰ Ostriker affirms the fusion of these female selves in Shekhina as the sustainer, a mystical omnipresence. In other words, Shekhina is the macrocosm; each of these female figures, including herself, a poet, is the microcosm of this panentheistic-pantheistic union.

This union stands in opposition to the violence Ostriker associates with Yahweh. In her collection *The Volcano Sequence* (2002), she wrestles with a God whom she sees inspiring war and repressing the feminine. In "Dialogue," Ostriker writes her own dialogue with Yahweh, matching that of *Song of Songs*. She quotes Deuteronomy 30.19, in which Yahweh speaks through the prophet Isaiah to the Jewish people in Jerusalem (italics in the original):

I tried to invent new forms of holiness

To console myself

After the event at the mountain

Behold I put before you

Lord, are used to refer to the God of Israel, Christ or God of Christianity, and Allah to God in Islam with the undeniable belief that the three religions are monotheistic.

¹⁰ Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *the Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions* (NJ: Rutgers UP, 1997), 243. Sephirot (plural of Sephira in Hebrew), are the ten attributes of God in Kabbala that form the Tree of Life. This tree represents the mystical unity of the macrocosm—God and the microcosm--man.

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*Life and death therefore
Choose life, I said
But look at the stiffness of your neck
Look at the desire of your heart
To wreck everything*

With your harlotry

Their voices-- His, the Biblical, and hers, the Earthly-- are indistinguishable, but in conflict. She goes on wrestling Yahweh, quoting Isaiah:

*I am named k'dsha, harlot, whore, abomination
While you are named kaddosh, holy, separate or apart*

*Terrified of the gulf into which we blindly reach
Do I not seek your face, you mine*

*Attempting to touch we destroy we break we are broken
Yet do we not share a root a thread dear friend*

*I said Let reason together, I said I hate your sacrifices, I said I feed the hungry
I said clothe the naked, I said do justice, love mercy, I said keep my law. (23)*

In the quotation from *Isaiah*, Yahweh's speech to the Israelites is full of blame and reproach; in *Isaiah's* vision, He speaks to them "Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt" (*Isaiah* I: 4) and wonders how could they rebel against Him, the Lord. The Lord in Hebrew is *kaddosh*, as He calls Himself-- which has the same root as *k'dsha*, "harlot," a name He uses for the rebellious cities of Jerusalem and Babel. In the poem, Ostriker protests against both words and believes that the word describes Him and her; in a Pantheistic-Panentheistic vision, she sees both as having the same face and lineaments. She wonders boldly as she addresses Him: "then do we not share a root a thread dear friend". The Lord, harsh, daunting, and busy sending His instructions, pays no heed to what she says.

But Shekhina hears. She is an accessible, female vision of God, while Yahweh is infinite and beyond the reach of human language and thinking. Shekhina is the allegorical manifestation of God's advances towards the Israelites, who are on their own path to self-knowledge.

In another poem, "Yearning," Ostriker starts with a quotation from the *Zohar* (in Hebrew "The Book of Splendor"), a major source of Jewish mysticism. The poem speaks about two worlds, the upper and the lower. The poem predicts that a "yearning" from the lower world is capable of bringing about "the completion above." In attempt to expedite that, the speaker produces her own gender-marked "yearning" at which rabbis frown. She says:
but as for me

their gates stand closed
fastened against me
what must I do outside here
shake the latches and wail, they are deaf
mount a lawsuit against them, they are expert lawyers
scratch my scabs go on a hunger strike
forget it they own the cameras, oh my beloved
how long before you tell them who I am (36).

The yearning necessary for completion is not supposed to come from a woman. The rabbis, the “expert lawyers” of the poem, will interfere. They have cameras watching her. In the first stanza of the poem, she mocks their sanctity, highlighting their suppression of the woman’s voice. She goes on her iconoclastic Deviation and says in a sarcastic tone:

and so I am reading the zohar
and they are so splendid these old rabbis in their splendor
and their words are blazing light sparks gushing springs
and their hopes palaces pomegranate trees perfumes ascending
glorious (36).

In this way, Ostriker replays the tragedy of the oppression of women in the Bible and in Kabbalist views, making the “sacred” grow into a “joke” in the attempt “to free ourselves [women] of mental tyranny,” using “the most revolutionary weapon in literature’s arsenal”-- “a cackle/chuckle of the silenced woman finding her voice.”¹¹

In another mystical poem, Ostriker uses women’s blood as the umbilical cord that connects her with the maternal, life-nourishing Earth. She says:

Of all bodily fluids, blood is the one most often named, the heaviest and most dramatic, the fluid of heroes and atonements. The fluid of crime. Of shame, when its river floods from a woman’s body. It is vivid red, and soon becomes clotted, sticky, and stale. The tangy scent of it is a stimulant. Simple people know this. Children dare each other to taste it.

We are connected to Earth by our menstrual blood
and the blood of warriors flowing from open wounds
like open lips, gratifying the soil
moistening dry bones—
without these things, can the Earth yield? (37)

In “the shekhinah as exile” (25-26), “Earth: the shekhinah as amnesiac” (38), and “the shekhinah as mute” (64), Ostriker elaborates on the female aspects of Shekhina, establishing a link of femininity and pride between her and the female human race. Amnesia and muteness engulf women’s cultures and lives, represented also in Shekhina. Women’s pain is carried in her. Through Shekhina, Ostriker gives all muted women a voice and tells about their unspeakable wounds and buried history. Ostriker starts “the shekhinah as mute” with a quotation from *Proverbs*, 8:23-30. Shekhina grows into the allegorical

¹¹ See her *Feminist Revision and the Bible* (MA: Blackwell, 1993), 29.

impersonation of Wisdom as she addresses the people of the Earth and introduces herself as their mother, calling them “my sons.” Ostriker’s voice is also present: she calls Shekhina “lady” and addresses her with unmistakable panentheistic union:

, but part of you is Earth
part of you is wounds
part of you is words
and part of you is smoke

With these feminist poetics, Ostriker bestows on Shekhina other female qualities. She emphasizes the incarnation of all women in Shekhinah, including her own mother, a panentheistic implication that dominates her poems. But her smoke of war and destruction are in her, too, a source of dismay to Shekhina’s theodicy. Not only that, but she is the goddess/mother of the entire Israelite nation; she is identified with their exile, their displacement, their sorrows, and sufferings. Everything swims in her being like fish in the ocean. Ostriker holds firmly to the Jewish and Kabala vision of the feminine part of Yahweh. In her “the red thread again,” Ostriker envisions a mystical ladder to heaven that draws her forcibly and horribly: “stretched from Earth/to heaven from heaven/to Earth this red thread//my entrails drawn/shamelessly from my body/too much and too far//save me save me” (27). The mystical ladder is a symbol of “acquisition of learning and the ascent to knowledge and transfiguration”¹² in the mystical poems selected here. The ladder of ecstasy is a common ground towards a change on the path to know the One.

Ostriker in her kabala emerges as a model, a mystical template, who strives to find connection with the divine through a poetics of mystical femininity. Her corpus on Shekhina is an attempt to create a canticle of her own that matches the Biblical *Song of Songs*, which is considered by the Kabbalists to be a dialogue between God and His chosen people, the people of Israel.¹³ Ostriker’s Shekhina poems are a song to the female race, a musing on the mystical poetics of a female goddess with a manifest midrashic sensibility that shows her to be a mystagogue, a zohardic Kabbalist. Shekhina is the mystical, Jungian “Great Mother” of the Godhead, an image of the ecstatic moment of union which engenders challenges to the monotheism of Judaism. Shekhina’s character defines what Yahweh is not. Ostriker’s Shekhina is a model of a divinity in mutual response between the mystic and God. God approaches the mystic as the mystic approaches God so that they become one and the same in an endless mutual and shared emulation.¹⁴ Shekhina, for Ostriker, is the ultimate interceder

¹² *Dictionary of Symbols*, 923.

¹³ Arthur Green, “Shekhina, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs: Reflections on Kabbalistic Symbol in Its Historical Context, *AJS Review*, 26:1 (2002), 1-52.

¹⁴ See Ori Z. Soltes, *Mysticism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Searching for Oneness* (Maryland: The Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 195.

for all women not only with Adonai, but with the whole patriarchal system of Judaism.

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In the same pantheistic-panentheistic vein, Lucille Clifton (1936-), an African-American Christian poet, creates what might be described as Christian, black, feminist mysticism. In her collection *Some Jesus*, she bunches Biblical figures under a heading "Some Jesus." She also Africanizes the Biblical figures, merges them in issues of racism, and bestows upon the female figures elements of feminist poetics. The poems carry in their names other Christian stories: "adam and eve", "cain", "moses", "Solomon", "job", "daniel", "jonah", "john", "mary", "joseph", "the calling of the disciple", "the raising of lazarus", "palm Sunday", "good Friday", "easter sunday", and "spring song". An interesting example is "john," where she combines Martin Luther King, Jr. with Christ in an unmistakable parallel between Christ's crucifixion and King's assassination. Their premature deaths express an explicitly black, mystical union:

somebody coming in blackness
like a star
and the world be great a bush
on his head
and his eyes be fire
in the city
and his mouth be true as time
he be calling the people brother
even in the prison
even in the jail
I'm just only a Baptist preacher
somebody bigger than me coming
in blackness like a star¹⁵

In Christianity, pantheistic incarnation is indisputable. God has descended in the body of the human Christ to "possess a flesh-and-blood form, [live] a human life, and [die] a human death."¹⁶ But Clifton develops it into a larger variant: everything swims in God-Christ; King is the locus of a divine manifestation. Christ takes abode in the black body. Jesus descends to embody all elements of human life, as she says:

the green of jesus
is breaking the ground
and the sweet
smell of delicious jesus

¹⁵ Lucille Clifton, *good woman: poems and memoir 1969-1980* (the U of Massachusetts P, 1980), 98. Henceforth, the collection will be cited parenthetically with the page number only incorporated within the quoted lines. I am indebted to Hilary Holladay, *Wild Blessings: the Poetry of Lucille Clifton* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2004), 106.

¹⁶ Soltey, 195.

is opening the house and
the dance of Jesus music
has hold of the air and
the world is turning
in the body of Jesus and
the future is possible. (106).

Fertility, renewal, and optimism for the future all exist in Christ/God in a panentheistic, mystical union. Christ's/God's theodicy is unmistakable: green, sweet smelling, musical. The world's body swims in Him and is delivered by Him. It is the doctrine of man imitating God and vice versa, which is at the core of Kabbalistic perspective as well.¹⁷ This anthropomorphic process is inherent in most of the mysticisms of Judaism and Christianity. Clifton emphasizes God not only as human but also as black. Dolan Hubbard writes: "the preacher-as-creator recovers Jesus and places Him within the fresh water of the black experience . . . Stepping out on space and time, he brings color and excitement and intensity to an often colorless Judeo-Christian religion."¹⁸

God's anthropomorphism encapsulates both masculine and feminine aspects. For Orthodox Christians, the Mother of God is "the one who gave birth to the one who is God."¹⁹ She is also the Bride of God and the Virgin of the Trinitarian godhead. She is the unequivocal presence of the Kabbalistic Shekhinah. In Judaism, Yahweh's Shekhina is one of "ten spheres of divine manifestation in which God emerges from His hidden abode. Together, they form the 'unified universe' of God's life, the 'world of union.'"²⁰ In Christianity, God is one, yet three-fold: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Despite their tendencies to anthropomorphize God, however, both Jewish and Christian mystical traditions still regard Him as unreachable and thus resort to the metaphor of light to convey this understanding. The Islamic tradition also partakes of this metaphor. God's image as light is a theophany, in different degrees, of the three religions. Meditation on the mystical notion of "light" as a symbol of God prevails in their scriptures. In the Hebrew Bible, God decrees, "Let there be Light, and there was light." Moses sees God in the bush as light. After he speaks to God at Mount Sinai, he descends with the tablets, his face radiant. The New Testament states, "In him was life, and that life was the light of men. That light shines in darkness . . . The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world" (1 John 1.4-10). Baptism is understood to be "enlightenment." In the Quran, Allah is "Light upon Light" (24:35), the light of

¹⁷ Soltez, 195.

¹⁸ Dolan Hubbard, *the Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination* (Columbia; U of Missouri P, 1994), 12.

¹⁹ Jaroslave Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Feminist Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), 55.

²⁰ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (1945-1995)* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 213.

the skies and the Earth. A whole chapter in the Quran is titled “al-Noor,” light. It teaches that the true Muslim is light and that knowledge is light, and that scholars are enlightened people as well as believers. Darkness means ignorance of Allah, illiteracy, and sin. The light described in these scriptures is a mystical light, to which Ostriker, Clifton, and al-Bustani are privy.

This mystical light is different from light that comes from photons. Ostriker has her own vision of the mystical light. It caresses the receiver, offers love, and encourages communication, in the same way that God beams His light to all His creation.

Ostriker says:

Normal light never killed anything.
When I beam my affection at you.
Do not duck. It is not bullets.
Do not try to impersonate Superman.
It is not Kryptonite.
What normal light wishes and dreams about
During its flight is how it will encounter
An object: every photon imagines this
The way we imagine gateways that slowly open
As we fly toward them, into gardens,
The poppies and peonies making their mouths wide.
What actually happens to the light:
Striking a surface, some, particles rebound
And keep going, some are absorbed
And become heat, that's it.
That's usually it. But some
Flash on and inward to the curious cave
That is light's garden, light's antithesis,
And form an image.
Sometimes an object struck
Where it has eyes, will see.

Light dreams of this.²¹

Ostriker's poem begins with mystical light which emanates from her towards all of humanity, in the same way that the sun's rays reach the flowers with love. God created light for man to see His Grace. So too Ostriker emboldens humanity to see the light of affection in her advances. In Ostriker's code, light is peace, darkness is conflict.

Clifton also tackles themes of light and darkness in her poetry, drawing heavily on the mysticism expounded by Saint John of the Cross in his magnum opus, *Dark Night of the Soul*, where darkness, tranquility, and silence are important enhancers of the Christian mystical experience. Hence the choice of the “night” as the setting. The absence of light indicates solitude, suffering, and the withdrawal from life's pleasures, a process which occurs when the mystic

²¹ Ostriker, *No Heaven* (PA: the U of Pittsburgh P, 2005), 41.

chooses to annihilate the self and be overpowered by the imminence of the divine. Clifton revels in the etymology of her name, Lucille (light), when she retreats deeply into her soul to find God/Christ incarnated in herself. “the light that came to Lucille Clifton,” her title poem, reads:

the light that came to Lucille Clifton
came in a shift of knowing
when even her fondest sureties
faded away. it was the summer
she understood that she had not understood
and was not mistress even
of her own off eye. then
the man escaped throwing away his tie and
the children grew legs and started walking and
she could see the peril of an
unexamined life.
she closed her eyes, afraid to look for her authenticity
but the light insists on itself in the world;
a voice from the nondead past started talking,
she closed her ears and it spelled out in her hand
“you might as well answer the door, my child,
the truth is furiously knocking.”(211-221)

Light, a symbol of God, cannot co-exist with worldly things in or around the Lucille of the poem. Once her mystical part is nurtured, it overrules the base part, which includes the intellect and bodily sensation. This latter part shuts down, as it is a hindrance on the ladder to heaven. In this case, “Revelation is completely divorced from intellect,”²² an activity of the soul on its path to union with Christ, who has descended and is now knocking at the doors of her heart. The poem ends with a Biblical allusion to John’s vision in the New Testament, where Christ’s voice echoes, saying, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation, 3:4; 20). The Father has descended to visit His child, Biblically speaking.

In another interesting poem about God’s advances towards a mystic, “testament”, she writes:

in the beginning
was the word
the year of our lord
amin. I,
lucille Clifton
hereby testify
that in that room
there was light
and in that light
there was a voice
there was a sigh

²² John Maccurrie, 176.

and in that sigh
there was a world.
a world a sigh a voice a light and
i
alone
in a room

The speaker, Lucille herself, is “flooded,” to use her own word, by the divine light bestowed on her by the testament, the Word, the divine decree of the creation of the world. She voices her own “testament,” the eye-witness covenant of her own mystical experience. Here she claims that she can “eye” this light of the reality and the truth of God that dwells in her; it is a state of mystical euphoria. She capitalizes one word, “Light,” to resonate with the godhead:

incandescence
formless form
and the soft
shuffle of sound
who are these strangers
peopling this light?
lucille
we are
the Light
And she also says:
someone calling itself Light
has opened my inside.
I am flooded with brilliance
mother,
someone of it is answering to
your name (213-214).

Through this introspection, like any Christian mystic Clifton discovers God to be inside her. It is a theophany enfolded in the knowledge of God, which is knowledge of self. The Quranic idea of the closeness of God to one’s own jugular vein²³ is a metaphor of His ubiquity. In the Quran, the emphasis falls on Allah’s ubiquitous presence as well as the contemplation on His Most Beautiful Names: the All-Encompassing, the All-Knowing. Jubilation in the mystical experience of receiving God’s light is expressed in the ecstasy of illumination. Knowledge of God and His immanence (hence the pantheistic presence) is divinely accorded to her.

Nevertheless, Lucille Clifton’s Marian poems show the humanization of the Virgin. Clifton characterizes her as down to Earth, as in “holy night,” where she merges in the female speaker. Yet, darkness enfolds the mystical experience that occurs as Mary conceives, literally, God’s Word:

joseph, I afraid of stars,
their brilliant seeing.

²³ John Macquarrie, *Two Worlds are Ours: An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 18-19.

so many. such light.
joseph, I cannot still these limbs,
I hands keep moving toward I breasts,
so many stars. so bright.
joseph is wind burning from east
joseph, I shine, oh joseph, oh
illuminated night. (200).

The incarnation—in Arabic *al-Hulūl*—is the Christian mystic's struggle to get rid of the feeling of imprisonment in the physical body. Its burden and its sin saddle the soul with alienation from the self. Incarnating Christ's body, which is God's body, is a first-hand mystical experience, despite the eroticism that pervades Mary's speech to Joseph. The cessation of suffering, resonating with ecstasy, ends in illumination or theophany, as here Mary implies. The night is illuminated by the light of God's word annunciated in her womb. A state of inebriation, self-surrender, and change inflicted on the alchemy of the whole universe ushers in a new era. One can hardly feel the presence of the poet; she is completely annihilated and achieves subsistence in Mary. In this unity, Mary is transformed into a divine mode. Here, Clifton expresses the idea of union in love, representing the noumenal crux of the message of Christianity. More than that, Clifton performs a double incarnation: one in Mary and another in the self-immolation of Christ. A crucifixion and a resurrection take place within her as she re-lives a re-birth in the incarnation. She reports it to the world, conveying it in the poem in a spurt of emotions.

But Clifton's mysticism not only expresses union with God, Christ, and the Virgin Mary. It is also a communion with the world of the spirits, the dead, and of ancestors. Clifton voices her mystical experience when communicating with her deceased mother, the Virgin Mary, and the Catholic saint Joan of Arc. Clifton discerns her body as black, "born with twelve fingers," and as "two-headed woman." Like a clairvoyant, she can use her "terrible shadowy hands," which celebrate ethnic self-revelation, to communicate with the world of spirits beyond the grave. In the same vein, she interlocks ethnic and race issues with the black mysticism she experiences in "to a dark mooses," saying:

you are the one
I am lit for.
come with your rod
that twists
and is a serpent.
I am the bush.
I am burning.
I am not consumed. (127).

In "perhaps," Clifton performs another mystical experience reminiscent of the Mevlevi "whirling Dervishes" dance, also called the skirt dance, or the *sama*'. It is based on a spiraling movement and the contemplative listening to divine music, which is a spiritual exercise, a prayer. She explains the steps of the

annihilation of the bodily senses as she places herself in the vortex of the cosmic space she circumambulates. She says:

I am going blind
my eyes exploding,
seeing more than is there
until they burst into nothing
or going deaf, these sounds
the feathered hum of silence
or going away from my self, the cool
fingers of lace on my skin
the fingers of madness
or perhaps
into the palace of time
our lives are a circular stair
and I am turning (*good woman*, 216).

Likewise, in “explanations,” she tries to answer her “perhaps” questions with a sort of certitude derived from her performance of the *Sama*’ dance. This dance is based on the divine music she finds in nature:

anonymous water can slide under the ground.
the wind can shiver with desire.
this room can settle.
but can such a sound
cool as a circle
surround and
pray
or promise
or prophecy? (217).

In “grief” from *Blessing the Boats: New and selected poems, 1988-2000*, Clifton contemplates the human condition and America’s horrendous present. She also grieves the whole history of humanity as one of disasters, pains, and woes. The poem is full of allusions to Whitman’s nature mysticism, which has no place in the current age. She writes:

grief
begin with the pain
of the grass
that bore the weight
of adam,
his broken rib mending
into eve,
imagine
the original bleeding,
adam moaning
and the lamentation of grass.
from that garden,
through fields of lost
and found, to now, to here,
to grief for the upright
animal, to grief for the

horizontal world.
pause then for the human
animal in its coat
of many colors. pause
for the myth of America.
pause for the myth
of america.
and pause for the girl
with twelve fingers
who never learned to cry enough
for anything that mattered
not enough to fear,
not enough for the loss,
not enough for the history,
not enough
for the disregarded planet.
not enough for the grass.
then end in the garden of regret
with time's bell tolling grief
and pain,
grief for the grass
that is older than adam,
grief for what is born human,
grief for what is not.²⁴

In her poems, Clifton refers to herself as a woman with twelve fingers. Now this woman, in her old age, is mourning the condition of humanity. That includes the collapse of the myth called “America” and the distorted legacy of the “grass”—that inherited symbol of its democratic creed and dream.

As in Whitman's nature mysticism, Bushra al-Bustani sees herself in passionate communion with the depths of life, with all that serves her being: a flower, its scent; a tree, its shadow and leaves; a river, its charming flow; twittering birds, cadence of winds; clouds, their decoration of the sky; the human, their loyalties, pitfalls, and departures; her house, its warmth and furniture; the landscape and the Earth; her students, their struggles, their laziness, their failures and successes. She binds herself emotionally and spiritually with everything surrounding her—human, non-human, animate and inanimate. It is a bond with the divine lover, which can draw her up to heaven. The secret of her mysticism lies in her contemplations through the eye of a romantic, a mystic, and an aesthete. She trudges on rich lands, hilltops, mountains, and landscapes. In her poetry she celebrates the new levels which her mystical experience can reach. The mental anguish and physical pain belong both to hers and to all the things with which she identifies. She is the artist, the poet, the mystic, the creator merged with her transcendental self that melts in the theophanic presence she experiences. In her poetry, the world is a tapestry, a

²⁴ *Blessing the Boats: New and selected poems, 1988-2000*(New York: BOD Edition, 2000), 30-31.

shrine where she resides as a mystic, a hermit, and an aesthetician (though never aloof or alone). With her mystical world, she experiences a mutual purgation of the intellect, a discharge of life burdens and anguishes, a relief from pain, and a return of a lost sense of equilibrium, an ecstasy of pantheistic adoration. Al-Bustani's "pantheism" (*al-Ḥulūl*) is a symbiosis of two selves: her individual one, which is a partial being, and the collective self, which is all that surrounds her. To experience this collective self, al-Bustani must annihilate her individual self through dissolution.

Through her mystical being, the veil is stripped off and al-Bustani can see through to find answers in a process of ecstatic perception. She exchanges vitality and splendor with all members of the collective self as they become one. Knowing her place in the world, the presence of the divine spirit is latent in her heart and in the universe, from within and from without, as she feels God rejoice in her relationship with Him and in His work. Profoundly, this process of ecstatic perception is a celebration of the divine love that can be mistaken for idolization of nature and other things rather than worship of God, the true designer, and the true artist. Therein lies her Deviation.

In her revolutionary, recondite poem, "*Ma'idatu-l-Khamri Tadūr*" ("The Wine Table Spins"), Bushra al-Bustani merges a worldly experience (the intoxication of wine) with the intertextuality of certain Quranic expressions and parables to convey a nationalistic theme and to resist those occupying her country. What is interesting about her poetry in general and this poem in particular is that she presents literary Deviations (*shaṭaḥ āt adabiyya*) in order to preempt controversy. The poet experiences annihilation as she conjoins with the things in the poem and subsists in the dynamism she, as a poet, allots them to work out. The agency that she bestows upon inhuman elements produces weird images: things do what humans fail to do. Human characters fade out as they are substituted by other creatures or inanimate objects that move and are moved by a poetic vigor, however bizarre. They are divorced from their traditional meanings to incarnate new ones.

For instance, the wine, which is not a traditional mystical term here, is clad with war-like, belligerent connotations. Invoked in four out of 16 stanzas, the wine table alternates with other tables: "the longing table," "war table," "love table," "musk table," "death table," and "patience table," which provide the Dervish-like, circular, whirling movement in the poem. The whirling produces a state of dizziness which is mystical and ecstatic, but not joyful. The lack of joy is a Deviation from the traditional Dervish ceremony, which through joy helps the dancing mystic rein in his ardor and escape from the worldliness of being. Al-Bustani's joyless dance is an escape – a protest against a war which thwarts the mystical experience.

The poem is based on a biographical account of the relationship between the pre-Islamic poet, Umru'-l-Qays, and his father, who was murdered. When a messenger told Umru'-l-Qays about his father's assassination, the poet was at a wine party. His reaction was slow. He decided that "Today is for wine and

tomorrow for a decision.”²⁵ To avenge his father’s killers, as was his tribal duty, he did not turn to friends or relatives, but went to the Emperor of Rome asking for help. The Emperor procrastinated and would not assist; that made Umru’-el-Qays waste away in agonized waiting which lead to his death. Al-Bustani weaves an implicit comparison between this biographical element from the pre-Islamic period with the present situation of some brethren Arab rulers who, engaged in their luxuries, ignore the invasion of Iraq and wait for foreign rulers to solve their national problems. Not only that, but the table is an allusion to a chapter of al-Quran, which is also titled *al-Ma’ida* (“The Table”). But Al-Bustani departs from the Quranic reference to compare the table in the poem with contemporary wine tables.

“The Wine Table Spins” delves into the poet’s message as a human, alone, trying to fang the killing instinct in man by revolutionizing the traditional way of enduring the dire reality of war. War numbs minds and hearts and certainly causes the mystical journey to fail. In her poem, al-Bustani revises the mystical tradition by projecting the state of utter sensational chaos occasioned by the whirling dance onto the state of war, an experience reminiscent of Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: an Essay of Abjection* (1982).²⁶ In both Kristeva’s account and al-Bustani’s poem, the viewer is to “jettison” the “object” in reaction to what is experienced in a war zone. The poem starts with a state of complete disorder and conflict, drifting into a vortex. Each object acts to impede the movement of the other:

--The wine table spins.

Pearls erase lines written on the branches by rubies.

I do not exclude the anguish of the fish that linger in the cave of green gleam.

The green fish was murdered in the eye of the needle.

Lilacs opined:

The eye of the needle is larger than a sea, whose anchor is swallowed by fever;

the fever takes the sea towards an arm of scum that is keen on tearful parting.

Necklace snaps and I fall.²⁷

Kristeva explains the ugliness of life and the discharge of its concomitant “object.” Al-Bustani’s mystical poem strives for the mystical ecstasy to cleanse the ugliness brought about by war and to jettison the psychological fissures, to opt for a more optimistic vision, the success of the mystical journey. The poem is rich in Sufi symbolism, though the ecstasy is precluded by the pervading mayhem. “Pearl” is the enlightened human being in the aftermath of the mystical experience.²⁸ The mystical experience is doomed to fail in times of war, and the mystic, instead of soaring sky high, falls into abysmal depths as her world is shattered: “Necklace snaps.” “Fish” is a symbol here of the negativity that engulfs life at the time of the invasion, while the “green fish” is a symbol of

²⁵ Ibn Qutaiba, *Ash-Shi’r Washshu’arā’* (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1902), 39.

²⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*, Trans by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982).

²⁷ *Al-Adīb*, 155 (Nove.11, 2007), 8.

²⁸ John Baldock, p. 76.

the resisters who are caught up in “the eye of the needle,” blindsided by the invasion’s massive shock, which causes the celestial journey to fail. Lilacs are the only faint symbol of hope and resurrection left in the war scene. Their charming colors express confidence in the uprising of the youth-resisters. War is daunting to everything and is associated with death; wine brings uplifting, love, longing, and musk that interlock with the mystical dance, releasing ardor and casting off pain:

The longing table spins.
The palm trees arise;
tear clusters writhe in pain on the palm fronds.
I twirl around with the squirming trees.
I kneel down at the roots of the first Books and
parade the joy of the heart, smitten by flowers of love.
I do what Eve did not do.
I tighten the pomegranate branch around my neck.
I hang myself.

The stanza is full of bewildered imagery. It ends with the suicide of the mystic by hanging from pomegranate branches. The pomegranate, which is traditionally a symbol of fertility and re-birth, here becomes a tool of death and suicide. In stanza number six, “The Wine table Spins”, wine and love resonate with the amatory lines:

-The wine table spins.
In your eyes, coral bulbs shine.
My heart cheek glows.
Fountains of wine yawns on the branches.
With a breeze, I’ve warmed your heart.
My palm pants between your hands.
Was it your palm glistening?
Or is it a pomegranate seed that steals
the moon’s warmth which falters,
and in your eyes slumbers?

Love glows with the glowing of the heart. Ardor finds a resort in the lover’s heart while the wine spurts like a fountain to intoxicate the tree branches, and all ascend in droves. The reed echoes the whirling dance, the dove’s song, yearning, and salvation as al-Bustani recounts in the “The Musk Table Spins:”

-The musk table spins.
The forest moons have fallen asleep on my arms.
The cooing dream grants your cup the reed’s wine
that hankers, playing on my heart’s chambers.
Take me before the white thread merges with musk,
so the night witnesses my salvation..!

An interesting breakthrough in this poem is the metaphor of “light,” a metaphor which also pervades “The Patience Table Spins:”

My problem is,
the pomegranate will ever resist on the branches;
the red won’t glisten at night;
the dream is a pumpkin;
darkness is a whale.
A couple is in the coffin.

The sea is wounded by the brutal fish.

The sea packs its bags and dies.

The lines are laden with resistance and defiance. They suggest the Biblical-Quranic parables of both Moses and Jonas. But light has lost its seven natural color constituents, except for the red. Owing to the absence of light, red is missing and darkness pervades, crystallizing in the image of Jonas's whale and the coffin of baby Moses. The mystical journey is doomed. The sea leaves the Earth—the sea being the counterpart of the sky, where man swims or soars. Since the sea covers about 70 percent of the Earth, what will remain of life on Earth?

Nevertheless, the mystic won't surrender, and chooses to continue the mystical experience, rebelling against the notorious maps drawn by the invaders and their malicious plans to partition the country. She demolishes all these plans and emerges again:

-The war table spins.

I break the death stick.

I open the window for the gazelles;

the green fish scampers in the deserts; swallows up the idols,

changes the map's colors;

draws another that escapes the fingertip of a feather,

that falls to the bottom of the picture,

confusing it and demolishing the murky frames.

* * *

Any mystical experience is based on interior dialogue with the self that develops into a dialogue with God. This ascent from "interior monologue" into a "dialogue" is the common ground of all mystical experiences beyond any religious doctrine. Ostriker, Clifton, and al-Bustani are far from secular. They are believers; they savor their mystical experiences like manna from heaven:

The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the Earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom . . . but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:31)

Ostriker and al-Bustani's stairways are uplifting and divine. But when they go downward, there is disarray. The three poets give anthropomorphic features to the worshipped they encounter. The personification makes it down to Earth and the divine identifies with the worshipper and the worshipper with the divine. That is one manifestation of the *Shaṭ ḥā* or Deviation, or words of ecstasy represented in the incarnate pantheist or panentheist mysticisms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (though al-Bustani's mysticism avoids broaching the idea of God). These mystical poets strive to find admittance into areas of the spirit or the celestial radiant core, to escape the harsh realities of their lives or their abject historical contexts. That allows them to tap into more exhilarating vibrant venues of consciousness. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, God is ineffable and does not appear on Earth; therefore, He sent His consort, Shekhina

and His Word, His son Christ. This is quite clear in the poetry of Ostriker and Clifton. The Arab, Muslim al-Bustani does not touch the idea of God, but deals with the theme of war in a mystical way, using mystical, Sufi tools. The explicit ecstasy-producing discourse brings to the poets providential visions and innovative locutions. Deviation is used as a cloak to convey a theme or express a protest, or revise a long tradition they are not pleased with. Whether the Deviation they express takes the form of incarnationism or innovation, the poetry of these women speaks of their mystical experience in a way that adds an unmistakable, rich contribution to the long tradition of mystical poetry. Ebullition of love, protest, or a response to the presence of horror is expressed with a Deviation that is as strong as the experience itself.

The poets' femininity is proclaimed overtly. Ostriker's Kabala defines a feminine divine figure of tremendous mythic power and symbolic richness. Clifton repeatedly takes as an abode in female bodies in which she incarnates. Al-Bustani's surrealist Sufism is infused with feminine features: she writes in stanza 3, "A mountain weighs down the desert's breasts/ a rock burdens the young woman's bosom."

The poets' mysticism is redemptive. Ostriker resists the crass suppression of the woman in Judaism by uniting with Shekhina. In Ostriker's words, "in a pathological culture," the woman-poet diagnoses "what is toxic" and strives "for healing" by giving "voice to female silence."²⁹ Clifton relives the mystical experience of Saint John of the Cross and the dark night of the soul as way to redeem the pain of racism. Al-Bustani dictates her painful feelings of the war as abject to them which they jettison with her and on her behalf. Although none of the poets suggests that religion is a balm of any kind, their visions have healing powers. Al-Bustani, in tackling the theme of war, does not believe that God should descend and present a panacea for the fragmentation of humanity. The three poets see poetry as having this redemptive power through its ethical and creative roles.

The Deviation in their mysticism allows accessing the redemptive power of poetry. Deviation is an aesthetic play on language. The aim is a celestial language with spiritual content. It is a new way of conveying new ideas. It is shocking, yet illuminating and glittering. These three women poets use mystical Deviation to achieve disparate worldly aims: feminism, anti-racism, and nationalism. In this way, they reverse the traditional saying, "The roads are different; the goal is one," to say "The roads are one; the goal is different." Mysticism is a common ground between religions. Deviation is a sign of the extravagance of the soul of man in the search of God. It is also a means of recovery.

²⁹ *Feminist Revision and the Bible*, 28-30.