

## THE IDEA OF LOVE IN AL-GHAZALI'S LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

Al-Ghazali, one of the *Sufi* masters had written in relation to love for God in his *magnum opus*, *Ihya' Ulumuddin*. The ultimate love, also known as *mahabbah*, is the highest and the greatest form of love for God. To attain such love, one must struggle and know Him through *ma'rifah* and *idra'*. Al-Ghazali gives a very serious account on knowing own self in the quest to know God. Without knowing Self, one is impossible to know his God. Al-Ghazali's writing is converged towards *Sufi* training which on this account, al-Ghazali tells on how one may lessen his love to God and on the other hand, he also teaches how to intensify *mahabbah* through step by step approaches. The purpose of this conceptual paper is to present an understanding of the literary writing of al-Ghazali on love for God who created the universe as universal manifestation of emotional and rational beings.

### Keywords

*Al-Ghazali', Ihya', magnum opus, Sufi, Allah, al-Qur'an, al-Hadith, mahabbah, love.*

### INTRODUCTION: THE IDEA OF LOVE IN AL-GHAZALI'S LITERATURE

Al-Ghazali in the beginning of his treatise on the Love for God (*mahabbah*),<sup>1</sup> his approach of writing converges toward advising particularly the *Sufis* who were struggling to renounce worldly pleasures; that they must patiently face the obstacles in order to attain *al-Haqq*,<sup>2</sup> the highest spiritual pleasure of the Love of God. Al-Ghazali in my opinion, began his writing by invoking the *Sufis* to be patient because al-Ghazali himself had gone through *Sufi* life by sacrificing his career as an academician at Nizamiyyah in Baghdad.

He also suggests *Sufism* as the way of life in his opening remark to attract attention of layman that the great pleasure of being in love with Allah is just like the way of the *Sufis*. According to him, there are many obstacles for those who want to pursue the *mahabbah*<sup>1</sup> way of life because it demands great sacrifice of worldly pleasures and affections.

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<sup>1</sup>This article and its narrative analysis are solely based on al-Ghazali's *Ihya' Ulumuddin* except the commentaries written in the footnotes. The writing of al-Ghazali on *Love and Attachment* can be found in The Book of Constructive Virtues in *Ihya'*, vol 4, chap. 6. See Fazlul Karim, *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, vol 4 (Karachi: Darul Ishaat, 1993) pp 245-309. This book is a translation version from Urdu version of *Ihya'* and is considered as simplified version of *Ihya'*. The more detail and complete translation of *Ihya'* is translated by Prof. Ismail Yakub, *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, vol 7, (Kuala Lumpur: Victory Agensi, 1988) pp 409-475.

<sup>2</sup>*Haqq* (حَقّ) is the Arabic word which means truth. In Islamic context, it is also interpreted as righteousness, right and (certain) reality. *Al-Haqq*, the truth, is one of the names of God in the Qur'an. It is often used to refer God as the quality of *Ultimate Reality* in Sufism. Read Robert C. Neville, *Ultimate Realities* (US: State University of New York, 2001) pp 78-79.

<sup>1</sup> According to Ibnu Qayyim, the word *mahabbah* is originated from *hibbah* or *habbah*, which means seeds. Al-Hujwiri also holds similar opinion which means the seeds that dropped on middle of the desert and then grow. Within the context of man, the love also grows and develops in the heart of one if it is being treated and watered well. In many of its forms, the word *mahabbah* is being distributed in various verses in both *makiyyah* and *madaniyyah*. Read M. Asyhari, *Tafsir Cinta* (Jakarta: Penerbit Hikmah, 2006) p111.

Al-Ghazali further explains, the love for God is the essence of Islam. To attain the level (*maqam*) of such love, al-Ghazali delineates few main characteristics that should be fulfilled by one such as repentance, patience and abstinence (*zuhud*) that later form a more profound aspects of decent personality such as yearning, taming, satisfaction (*rida*) and other attributes directed towards it. Many *ulama'* somehow failed to go through such obstacles and because of that, they declare that the love and devotion take place to only among similar beings and species.

To reject this false notion, al-Ghazali further puts forward the evidence from *al-Qurān* "God loves them and they love God"<sup>2</sup>, and *al-Hadis*, "No one will be truly faithful till God is dearer to him than all else."<sup>3</sup>

Al-Ghazali further explains that to search for *mahabbah*, one must know the true meaning of love,<sup>4</sup> followed by their conditions and causes. The knowledge of love is the one that is able to explicate those inquiries, therefore it (*mahabbah*) can be known through *ma'rifah* (knowing)<sup>5</sup> and also the *idra'* (understanding).<sup>6</sup>

Psychologically, al-Ghazali explains that the true meaning of love can be understood only through the feeling and emotion of man. When one possesses the desire for love, the feeling of love will then exist after knowing. What is mentioned by al-Ghazali is of the logical and rational mind that is common to all man. For al-Ghazali, it is impossible for man to love and devote to something that he does not know and understand. Hence, to know and understand, one must seek for knowledge in order to know in a closer and deeper understanding.

Love habitus of man only exists when one begins to know through *ma'rifah*, understand through *idra'* and subsequently, love it. Al-Ghazali explains this in a logical judgment that when one likes something, he will give attention to his senses in order to feel the pleasure of what he feels affection for and it is indeed a normal habitus of man that is healthy. For instance, one who likes music will use his ear to feel the pleasure of hearing such music. Likewise, one who likes certain foods will use his tongue to feel the pleasure of eating such foods.<sup>7</sup>

Al-Ghazali explains the normal and logical habitus of man through simple and constructive instances, not excessively metaphoric but straight to the point with practical arguments. He further elucidates that the senses used by man to symbolically express his liking on something is similar to that of the senses of an animal. However, what can be understood

<sup>2</sup> Al-Qurān (5:54).

<sup>3</sup> It is mentioned by al-Ghazali that the *hadith* is narrated by Imam Al-Bukhari dan Muslim from Anas.

<sup>4</sup> Also referred to as *Hakikah*. The stage of *Hakikah* is the station of a man whereby all his affairs in life are consistent with all that God commands in the Qur'an. At this time, his person reflects nothing but the truth of Allah.

<sup>5</sup> *Ma'rifah* (المعرفة) in Arabic literally means knowledge, is the term used by *Sufi* to describe mystical intuitive knowledge of spiritual truth reached through ecstatic experiences, rather than revealed or rationally acquired. The distinction between the meaning of *ma'rifah* and *'ilm* has been discussed by many *ulama'* for instance, Ibn 'Arabi suggests, *ma'rifah* is knowledge (*'ilm*) of the divine oneness whereas *'ilm* applies to oneness as well as to other matters. Abā l-Barakāt in contrast with Ibn 'Arabi, suggests *'ilm* is more restricted in meaning than *ma'rifah* and represents a more complex stage of intellectual activity. For Tahir al-Maqdisi, *ma'rifah* is the perception (*idra'*) of the essence and persistence of the thing. No definite definition of *'ilm* and *ma'rifah*. Read Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Netherlands: Brill, 1970) pp116-117. For al-Ghazali from the writer understanding, *ma'rifah* is cognition attainable from intellectual means.

<sup>6</sup> Suhrawardi (d.1191) suggests that *idra'* means "apprehension" or "perception", the general act of knowing an absent thing (*al-shay' al-ghā'ib*), which occurs when the idea (*mithāl*) of the reality (*hakikat*) of the thing is obtained by the person, that is, in the knowing subject. It also indicates the level of knowing, including sense of perception (*idra' hissī*) and intellectual perception (*idra' aqlī*), as well as intuition and vision. See Matthew Kapstein, *The Present of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience* (US:University of Chicago Press, 2004) p33.

<sup>7</sup> The logical idea of love between man, senses and pleasure from the worldly point of view put forward by al-Ghazali is similar with the suggestion made by Plato, Socrates and Aristotle. Read A.W. Price, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle* (US:Oxford University Press, 1989) pp15-16.

(*idra*) by man through his five senses and later on rooted to his senses as emotional liking and then the sense of love, according to al-Ghazali, is only at the level of liking and does not actually reach the level of love in its actuality.

The actual love is the one that emerges from the sixth sense of man which is instinct (*mata-hati*) or also known *aql* or *nur*. Its understanding (*idra*) is stronger than what can be defined by the physical senses of man.

The other truth (*hakikat*) of love according to al-Ghazali is that, man cannot escape from loving own self or loving others. Loving other human beings or own self occurs because man possesses inclination to do similar action repeatedly in order to fulfill own wants and desire and consequently feel and enjoy the pleasure and happiness he would obtain. This type of love is exercised by all five senses which is inclined towards fulfilling own lust (*nafs*).<sup>8</sup> The love for Allah using those five senses or through imagination is not called love because such senses possess limited attributes. This kind of love will be extinguished and will not last long especially when one die.

In explicating this matter, al-Ghazali brings an instance like love towards the wealth, his family, children and companions. This kind of love takes place in order to fulfill the desire of one to complete his life. Likewise, if one loves someone who does *ihsan*<sup>9</sup> onto him. The portrayed love is not actually to the person who did such *ihsan* onto him, but rather the love is directed only for such *ihsan*. For al-Ghazali, this kind of love will also be extinguished once the person who does such *ihsan* dies. Al-Ghazali also explains about love for something that cannot be identified through human senses. For instance, the love towards the Prophets and their Companions. Love of this kind according to al-Ghazali, cannot be identified through senses, but through inner spiritual instinct upon the actions that being leaned to them. Despite all the meanings of love, the highest level of love is the love itself and not because of the benefits or reimbursement that can be obtained. That is real love.

## THE IDEA OF LOVE TO ALLAH

In elucidating the concept of love towards Allah, which is the highest level and of the utmost importance, al-Ghazali stresses that a man who knows himself will know his God,<sup>10</sup> therefore, man will certainly know about his inexistence except the one and only existence of God. Man exists because Allah through His will wants him to exist and all things that belong to man are of the bounty of God. If one does not love God, it is indeed not love but stupidity.

The love apart from Allah according to al-Ghazali is because of few things which among others are fear of disappearances or extinction. One who does not know himself and his God (refuse to possess knowledge of God and himself through *ma'rifah*) does not possess the feeling of love and therefore has weak possession of such feeling. This type of man does not understand the meaning of '*Qudrah*', because of being tied with his imagery sense of *aql* and

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<sup>8</sup> In *Ihya'* under the section "*Kitab riadat al-nafs wa tahdhib al-akhlaq wa mu'alajat amrad al-qalb*" (Book of the training of the ego and the disciplining of manners and the healing of the heart's diseases), al-Ghazali also mentioned about *nafs*. It has two meanings; first, it means the power of anger and sexual appetite in a human being... and this is the usage mostly found among the people of *tasawwuf* (sufis), who take "*nafs*" as the comprehensive word for all the evil attributes of a person; second meaning of *nafs* is the soul, the human being in reality, his self and his person. However, it is described differently according to its different states.

<sup>9</sup> *Ihsan* literally means putting the good and the beautiful into practice.

<sup>10</sup> The idea of "a man who knows himself will know his God" is that if one is aware of one's own lack of significance when compared to God, then one is in an excellent position to take control of one's emotion. The individual who is ignorant of himself (his *nafs*) will be ignorant of God. For details about *nafs*, read Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, *Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions*, vol.1 (US:ABC-CLIO Inc, 2008) pp591-592.

habitus which lies upon mere logical rationale. As for examples put forward by al-Ghazali, the man who irradiated by ray of sunlight, will deduce and understand the sun is the one that had caused the light emitted by which, he does not understand the *hakikah* of God's *Qudrah* who make the light to be emitted for the use of other beings as well, and not to only human beings.

Al-Ghazali also explains that the person who does not understand the meaning of *ihsan* will love someone because of the *ihsan* rendered to him. This person does not know the meaning of *hakikat ihsan* due to the confusion on the concept of *Majaz* (no true *hakikah*).<sup>11</sup> No one except Allah does the *ihsan*, and certainly not human being because human being is not the *hakikah* of the reality of existence. Allah is the one who inspires one's heart to do *ihsan* because according to al-Ghazali, man is not at all devoted to do *ihsan* due to his desire and lust to worldly pleasures. With the *ihsan* of God, man is inspired to perform *ihsan*. To those who understand the *hakikat ihsan*, the beloved one is not the one who performs those *ihsan*, but only Allah. Man is only an intermediary of God's *Ihsan*.

Love can also be developed from similarity and appropriateness. According to al-Ghazali, it is the nature (*fitriah*) of man to like something similar to him. For instance, a learned man likes to be with other learned man, children like to play with other children, or metaphorically, birds will also flock with their similar species. Nevertheless, for al-Ghazali, such liking is mere exoteric. Liking exoterically (*zahiriyah*) to the extent that the feeling of love emerges, is formed as a result of acquaintance which later on generates pleasures.

Love towards God on the other hand, is considered as esoteric (*batiniyyah*) appropriateness. However, it does not possess corporeal similarity and likeness. Al-Ghazali urges that whoever wants to draw himself near to God, he must follow the '*akhlaq rubbubiyah*', which means following the way of God such as in knowledge, wisdom, *ihsan*, decorum, generosity and courtesy.

*Sentiasalah aku menempati  
Suatu tempat dari kecintaan engkau  
Heranlah segala hati  
Ketika menempatinnya.*<sup>12</sup>

In the ode depicted from Abul-Hasan an-Nuri, al-Ghazali interprets that the love for God is shown in actuality (*haqiqi*) which is neither in the highest, nor in the lowest level and formed into man. It is also not shown in the *majazi*, but through instinct (*nur* or *aql*). Man who loves other beings is the manifestation of the weaknesses and limitations and imperfection of man.

## THE PLEASURE ON THE VISION OF GOD

Rabi'atul Adawiyah reciting on the meaning of love;

*Aku mencintai engkau dua cinta  
Cinta keinginan dan cinta kerana engkau berhak yang demikian  
Adapun yang itu cinta keinginan*

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<sup>11</sup> *Majaz* means metaphorical words and sometimes used in sentences. The confusion on the metaphorical used of the words and sentences according to al-Ghazali, may possibly lead to wrong interpretation and understanding of meaning of *hakikah* in the creation of beings and their reality of existence.

<sup>12</sup> This ode is depicted from *Ihya'* translated by Prof. Ismail Yakub under the same section.

*Maka kesibukanku menyebutkan engkau, dari orang yang selain engkau*

*Adapun cinta yang engkau berhak baginya,  
Iaitu: engkau bukakan dinding bagiku, sehingga aku melihat engkau  
Maka adalah pujian bagiku pada ini dan itu,  
Akan tetapi, bagi engkaulah pujian pada ini dan itu.*<sup>13</sup>

Rabiah's ode is portrayed in al-Ghazali's writing to show the level and intensity of Rabiah's love towards God. The worshipping performed by her is not to obtain the heavenly reward or fear of the hell, but because of her genuine love and yearning of Allah.

According to al-Ghazali, the interpretation of pleasure among human beings is different from one another in which, they follow instinct (*gharizah*) and the strength of their own feeling. The attained pleasure depends upon the habit of man himself. For instance, *gharizah* on the desire for food is created so that it can produce pleasure according to his habit. Likewise the *gharizah* on *qalb*, or also called by al-Ghazali as Godly Light (*an-nur-ilahiy*). Sometimes, this light is also called as esoteric instinct or *aql* or *nur iman* or *yaqin*. This *gharizah* is created by God in order for man to know the truth about all questions and business. To knowing this truth, al-Ghazali again stresses on the concept of *ma'rifah* and knowledge in supporting such habit so that its *gharizah* will be able to produce pleasure needed by such habit. The pleasure within this context is the *ma'rifah* and *'ilm*. According to al-Ghazali, a man who is connected with this *ma'rifah* and *'ilm* can make himself blissful although at the lower level of knowledge. Knowing something leads to satisfaction and pleasure to one's curiosity because knowledge is one of the attributes of God. However, according to al-Ghazali, the pleasure of knowledge has few levels depending on the dignity of the knowledge itself. If it is known that such and such knowledge is more great, more perfect, more vast and significant, then such knowledge will become the most pleasurable knowledge. Hence, the most pleasurable knowledge is the knowledge of God and His attributes and secrets that cover the whole existence (*maujud*), and it is indeed the highest form of knowledge, the highest and the most pleasurable compared to the whole worldly pleasure.

*Adalah bagi hatiku hawa-nafsu yang bermacam-macam,  
Lalu berkumpul sejak dilihat Engkau oleh mata hawa-nafsuku.  
Jadilah aku didengki oleh orang yang aku mendengkinya.  
Jadilah Engkau Tuhan manusia, sejak Engkau menjadi Tuhanku.*

*Aku tinggalkan bagi manusia,  
Dunia mereka dan agama mereka.  
Kerana sibuk mengingati Engkau.  
Hai agamaku dan duniaku!*

*Kerana dengan demikian juga, berkata sebahagian mereka:  
MeninggalkanNya lebih besar dari NERAKA  
MenyambungkanNya lebih baik dari syurga.*<sup>14</sup>

The pleasure of knowing (*ma'rifah*) Allah is the best and more meaningful from other worldly pleasure. It is of the highest kind of *'ilm* and no other knowledge is higher than this

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

knowledge. Those who have already attained the pleasure of *ma'rifah* will most probably renounce all other worldly pleasures because to them, the pleasure of seeing Allah is of everything and is the greatest form of pleasure granted by God.

### THE CAUSES TO STRENGTHEN THE LOVE FOR GOD

Al-Ghazali gives two (2) strategies for strengthening the love for God. The first cause that can strengthen one's love for God is to give up his relationship with worldly affairs. However, it is not necessary that one who is very busy performing his duty of worldly affairs does not love God at all. This only means that his level of love for God becomes lesser. Those who sincerely love God see this world as a prison to them. On the contrary, those who do not sincerely love God see this world as heaven. The weaker love of man towards God is due to his stronger love towards the world. According to al-Ghazali again, the love towards this world includes the love towards his wife, property, children, family and so on to the extent that those who love the melodious bird's song even, can reduce the level of love towards God. The second cause is because of the stronger *ma'rifah* for God. The stronger *ma'rifah* for God can be shown by always using good words and practice good deeds according to the *syari'ah*.

Al-Ghazali metaphorically explains that knowledge is expressed through its application (*amal*). Meaning, one should apply his knowledge by following the rules and conditions of the *syariah* through the knowledge of *muammalah*. The knowledge of *muammalah* when combined with the knowledge of *ma'rifah*, will produce great feeling of love towards Allah easily. This combined knowledge is called by al-Ghazali as the knowledge of *mukasyafah*; the knowledge that unlocks one's heart towards *Ma'rifatullah Taala* which is knowing God and nothing but Him. It is light (*nur*) that is rayed by Allah into the heart of a man as a result of sacred and virtuous practices and *mujahadah* (the battle to fight *nafs* and devil sedition).

### THE REASONS FOR DWINDLING OVER THE LOVE FOR GOD

According to al-Ghazali, those who are not serious about their love for God are inclined to only memorizing the names and attributes of God and envisage about the prominence of Him. However, they do not envisage and discover the meaning of *hakikah* itself. Nevertheless, they still uphold the belief of all that they knew about Allah.

*Engkau telah nyata,  
Maka tidak tersembunyi kepada seorang jua  
Selain kepada orang yang buta  
Yang tidak mengenal bulan purnama raya.*

*Akan tetapi Engkau bersembunyi  
Mendindingkan diri dengan yang Engkau nyatakan  
Maka bagaimana dikenali,  
Orang yang biasa menutupkan.<sup>15</sup>*

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 483.

The above ode by al-Ghazali portrays that man is created with limited contemplation. The weakness of man to interpret and understand through his thinking ability leads to the shallow feeling of love for God. A person who sees God with his *gharizah* and believes that every creation is the manifestation of His prominence and greatness will have an escalating feeling for his God.

Man is created in a state of inadequacy which means man can only differentiate things in its observable exoteric form like the day and night, but man will feel difficult to make a distinction if such things are attributably shared. For instance, al-Ghazali puts forward the rising sun but no 'sun down', then it will be very difficult for man to determine the day or night. Hence, in order to know God, man must be able to differentiate the *maujud* and the hidden one through the difference of the truth (*hakikat*). To see such truth, one must observe through his *gharizah* that Allah is the greatest, the brightest, the highest being from everything that exist. Man, who possesses the strength of *gharizah*, will see himself in the state of *fana* (nothingness), and he loves nothing except God because of his *fana*.

## CONCLUSION

*Hatiku telah mampu menerima aneka bentuk dan rupa;  
Ia merupakan padang rumput bagi menjangan,  
Biara bagi para rahib, kuil anjungan berhala,  
Ka`bah tempat orang bertawaf,  
Batu tulis untuk Taurat,  
Dan mushaf bagi al-Qur'an.  
Agamaku adalah agama cinta,  
Yang senantiasa kuikuti ke mana pun langkahnya;  
Itulah agama dan keimananku.*

(Ibnu Arabi 1165-1240 M)<sup>16</sup>

The idea of love written by al-Ghazali in his *magnum opus*, *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, is of the universal idea. Allah sent Prophet Muhammad S.A.W into this world to carry the message of love to and for the universe (*rahmah lil 'alamin*).

“We sent thee not, but as a Mercy for all creatures.  
(*Al-Quran*, 21:107)

In more detail, the teaching of Islam has laid the love (*mahabbah*) at the highest place. For al-Ghazali, the peak of *Sufi's* attainment is merely the love for God.

The real attainment achieved by most of today's modern man has been very far differing from what had been written and advised by the previous scholars and sufis. Modern man searching for the true love through the love that has been delineated by lust and greediness

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<sup>16</sup> Muhyiddin ibn al-Arabi, *The Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*, (London: Theosophical Publishing House Ltd, 1978), p19.

and further been decorated with the material objectivity are consequently giving up the inner spiritual requirement.

Love had been engraved by many sufis in most of their writings. Since the time Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah divulged love through the writing of sufi literature, the teaching of the love for God became the main title and theme in the *tasawwuf* discourses. Besides al-Ghazali, the writing of love of the *sufi* can be seen in the development of *tasawwuf* like what can be seen in the treatises written by al-Hujwairi (*Kasyf al-Mahjub*), ath-Thusi (*al-Luma'*), al-Qusyairi (*ar-Risalah al-Qusyairiyyah*), and Ibn Arabi (*al-Futuh al-Makkiyah*). Even in the Malay archipelago, we can see the writing of Hamzah Fansuri (*Asra al-Arifin Fi Bayan al-Suluk wal-Tauhid*) and so on.

The teaching of love written by the *Sufis* can essentially educate and refine the soul of man. The magnificence of *mahabbah* love can reveal the *tawhidic* understanding that sometimes can be very difficult to be explained by the mainstream Islamic discourse and knowledge like *fiqh* and *usuluddin* through the legal-formalistic approach. Hence, Islam can be described as more universal, tolerant, humanistic and more broad-based within the multiplicity of cultural ethnic and society. The love of *mahabbah* can indeed can form the harmonious and symmetry within self and society, and between emotional and rational.

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