

**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

**IJELLH**

**International Journal of English Language,  
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



**Volume 7, Issue 2, February 2019**

[www.ijellh.com](http://www.ijellh.com)

Hariz Aftab

Department of English,

University of Jammu,

Jammu, India

aftabhariz@gmail.com

### Rebirth of Mansur al-Hallaj in Herman Melville's Moby-Dick - A new interpretation

Abstract: A text is agape to extensive interpretations and different people interpret a text distinctively. Suchlike is the predicament of Herman Melville's magnum opus and one of the greatest American novels "Moby-dick." The relationship between Captain Ahab and the whale Moby-Dick all along is sketched in abounding ways like egoistic hunger for revenge, tussle between good and evil, doom of a person who defies God's authority and at the same time scads of references pertaining to Ahab like Oedipus Rex, King Lear or King Ahab mentioned in the Bible revealed. This paper attempts to interpret the aforementioned relation (between Captain Ahab and Moby-Dick) as an odyssey of a Sanit who endeavors to seek the knowledge of unknown but in course of his journey does something which begets his end in the light of biography of Islamic Sufi saint Mansur al-Hallaj.

Key words: Captain Ahab, Divine secrets, Mansur al-Hallaj, Sufi, Sufism

#### Introduction

Mansur al-Hallaj (c. 858 - 26 March 922) is a Persian mystic, poet and preacher of Sufism.

He memorises Holy Qur'an before the age of twelve and starts consorting with

contemporaneous Sufi masters. Not appeased with his learnings, he commits himself to

beatific discipline of Islamic Mysticism or Sufism. Captain Ahab is the central figure in Herman Melville's work, born on seventh of April to an insane, widowed mother who dies when Ahab is twelve months old. At the young age of eighteen, Ahab commences being boy-harpooner for whaling ships. He marries a girl with whom he has a son.

### Methodology

The methodology adopted in this paper is that of analogising, comparing the fictional life hero Captain Ahab with real life Islamic sufi figure Mansur al-Hallaj to convey a distinct allegorical interpretation.

### Identical inception

Mansur al-Hallaj and Captain Ahab, duo, right from juvenility pair with their spheres of activity they are oblivious will wreak upon them death. Mansur al-Hallaj is twelve when he penetrates the gates of mysticism, strives to live by its principles and sinks deeper into it and Captain Ahab is eighteen years old when he assumes the job of a harpooner for whaling industry. He is also a saintly mystic figure whose words tote his quest to know unknown and see unseen being thoroughly absorbed in his affair from the beginning like Mansur al-Hallaj. "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event - in the living act, the undoubted deed - there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the moldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man, will strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me." The state of affairs is comparable adequately as both are in chase of thing heavenly. The tune of agreement for the aforesaid argument (Ahab's journey is mystic) rings in the words of the narrator Ishmael. He says, "There is, one knows not what sweet

mystery about this sea, whose gently awful stirrings seem to speak of some hidden soul beneath..."

#### Annihilation of self

Annihilation of self is a mystic concept of denying oneself earthly pleasures that one may decline selfhood and focus on transcendence. Mansur al-Hallaj annihilates himself for his celestial mission to be one with God. He engages in Sufi congregations to attain his purpose. His splendid example of annihilation of self is his one year in the Holy city of Mecca in outright silence and Islamic fasting. On the other hand Captain Ahab yearns to cognise the secrets behind the worldly mask and he annihilates himself in a way discernible to readers throughout the text. He cares not for food and ale, he barely sleeps and is indifferent towards killing sperm whales and subsequent profit. "Ahab and anguish lay stretched together in one hammock...that his torn body and gashed soul bled into each other; and so interfusing, made him mad."

#### Travelling, communication and opposition

Mansur al-Hallaj invests most part of his life traveling to foreign lands like Turkey, China, and India writing about and preaching his pursuit. His potential to reach out and divulge mystic teachings brings him multitudinous followers. On his second pilgrimage to Mecca, hundreds of his followers breeze in with him in the Holy city. During this course, contemporary Sufis of Mansur al-Hallaj find it 'undisciplined' and 'disobedient' on his part to utter the mystical secrets publically. They label him opportunist. Captain Ahab correspondingly dedicates chief part and nearly all of his life to sea voyages. His dynamic persuasive words also earn him followers ever ready to execute his commamds. Says Ishmael, "I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath has

been welded with theirs; and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. A wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine." This confessional statement by the narrator conveys the power of influence in the communication of Captain Ahab. However, he's not utterly free from criticism. Like Mansur al-Hallaj, Captain Ahab is antagonised also by one of his crew members Starbuck who can be correlated to Sufi adversaries of Mansur al-Hallaj. Starbuck in a certain sense like them proclaims Captain Ahab an opportunist and regards his mission undisciplined "but I came here to hunt whales, not my commander's vengeance" and blasphemous. "Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous."

### Blasphemy

The pair faces severe hostility and resistance. Mansur al-Hallaj affronts the wrath of contemporary Sufis and court-men of Abbasid caliphate and Captain Ahab encounters the repulsion of Starbuck. Goodness knows what takes place and both our heroes make blasphemous comments. Mansur al-Hallaj implores God at Mecca to be despised by his people and returns to Baghdad. There he utters his controversial shath (ecstatic utterance) "Ana 'l-Ḥaqq" which means "I'm the Truth" or "I'm God" blasphemous from Islamic standards. Captain Ahab in desperation to kill Moby-Dick and score his goal (finding unknown) baptises harpoon with the blood of his pagan crew members saying "Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli" which means "I baptize thee not in the name of the Father, but in the name of the Devil."

### Uncertainty and the period before death

The blasphemy of Mansur al-Hallaj can be contemplated as the statement heavens make him utter for his seizure and divulgence of the divine secrets that heavens do not desire to be

unveiled. This is confirmed through his reply while in prison to one of his followers Ibn Ata's message who says, "Master, ask pardon for the words you have spoken, that you may be set free" to which Mansur al-Hallaj replies: "Tell him who said this to ask pardon." Starbuck smells similar uncertainty in the words of Captain Ahab in chapter 132 'The Symphony' when Ahab says, "Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?" The uncertainty or denial in narrow sense of their blasphemous remarks authenticate intervention of something unknown in their utterances because have these been deliberate acts, Mansur al-Hallaj would have be asking for pardon and Captain Ahab saying 'it is I, who, lifts this arm.' An instance deserving consideration is, despite blasphemy, neither Mansur al-Hallaj nor Captain Ahab question the existence of God instead display their belief in Him. Mansur in captivity calls himself "God's captive" and foretells duple reward for people who'll stone him because they're moved by their belief in Oneness of God. On the other hand Captain Ahab yet in uncertainty doubts if God is making him search and kill Moby-Dick. Although he baptises his harpoon in the name of the Devil yet he doubts if he's doing it by himself or is he being controlled by God, displaying his belief in Him. A point can come up here questioning parallel story line of Mansur al-Hallaj and Captain Ahab that Mansur al-Hallaj by the time mentioned is an acclaimed Sufi but Captain Ahab is just now struggling to lay his hands on the unknown and unseen? The answer to this question is that Mansur al-Hallaj is not intimate with the genuine secrets of unknown yet because so far his comments are no something that divine can't bear to be known. There is likeliness of him revealing truths beyond Ana l'Haqq. It is verifiable from his words that he's yet a least fraction of a 'Fana' Sufi who dies before his death and has a long way to walk. Before his execution, a person asks him, "What is Sufism?" He replies, "the least part of it is this that you see." Much the same Captain Ahab endeavors to reveal such truths.

The time before death is the most brutal period in the life of Mansur al-Hallaj. He is tortured in the prison. He is not allowed to meet anyone except his two disciples Ibn Ata and Ibn Khafif while Captain Ahab feels wretched in his own way. His anguish pinnacles and he frantically keeps asking different ships about Moby-Dick. He suffers at the hands of nature when his ship is caught in a typhoon. He hears the prophesy of his death also.

### Death

The moments before death precede in tyranny imposed upon Mansur al-Hallaj and Captain Ahab. Mansur's feet are chopped, hands cut, eyes plucked out, and tongue mangled. Ahab correlatively goes through the bad by cause of his expanding anguish. He is so occupied in his pursuit that he instantaneously denies help to Captain of a ship called Rachel who is searching for his lost son in the sea. He cannot see beyond Moby-Dick and power structure of his ship Pequod is also subverted. Moreover he can't find Moby-Dick for three days and like a mad man, he continually finds for it walking over the deck of the ship in madness. But both the legends contend the situations valorously. Despite parts of Mansur's body cut, he has a smile on his face while Ahab doesn't back off from his mission. In conclusion, both the legendary figures end in water ahead of unmasking the disguised. Mansur al-Hallaj is killed, his body is incinerated and the ashes are scattered in the river and Captain Ahab is entangled in harpoon line and is drowned in the sea by Moby-Dick.

### Conclusion

There is a striking parallel between the life story of the two heros and Captain Ahab can allegorically be regarded as Mansur al-Hallaj when we weight their lives and circumstances against each other. Captain Ahab arrives finally to be like Islamic Sufi saint Mansur al-Hallaj in his mission, that is to fathom divine secrets by annihilation of self and gets killed by divine

intervention for fiercely and flagrantly chasing the otherworldly secrets. The contrast between duo presents ample confirmation of saintly character of Captain Ahab. He can undoubtedly be viewed as an incarnation of Mansur al-Hallaj.

## Works Cited

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mansur\\_Al-Hallaj](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mansur_Al-Hallaj)

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Captain\\_Ahab](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Captain_Ahab)

Encyclopedia of Islam (1986), Louis Massignon, Louis Gardet, 2nd ed., Vol. 3.

Moby-Dick, Herman Melville, Vintage Classic, 2007.

Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat AL-Auliya, Farid Al-Din Attar,

Translated by Arthur John Arberry, Routledge, 2007.