

Rumi: The Sufi Mystic Poet of Persian Language

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INTRODUCTION

*“Half of life is lost in charming others,
The other half in going through anxieties caused by others.
Leave this play, you have played enough.”* - RUMI

The ecstatic poems of Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, a Persian poet and Sufi master born 807 years ago in 1207, have been sold in millions of copies in recent years, making him the most popular poet¹ globally.

A poet, an Islamic dervish and a Sufi mystic, Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi, is regarded as one of the greatest spiritual masters and poets. Born in 1207 AD to a family of learned theologians, he made use of everyday life's circumstances to describe the spiritual world. Rumi's poems have acquired immense popularity, especially among the Persian speakers of Afghanistan, Iran and Tajikistan. Numerous poems written by the great poet have been translated to different languages.

Jalaluddin Rumi was born on September 30, 1207, in Balkh (in present-day Afghanistan). His father, Bahaduddin Walad, was a theologian, jurist and a mystic, while his mother was Mumina Khatun. When Mongols invaded Central Asia, between 1215 and 1220, Rumi left Balkh with his family and a group of disciples. The migrating caravan traveled extensively in Muslim lands, including Baghdad, Damascus, Malatya, Erzincan, Sivas, Kayseri and Nigde. After performing pilgrimage in Mecca, they eventually settled in Konya, located in the present-day western Turkey. At that time, Rumi's father was an Islamic theologian, a teacher and a preacher.

Rumi was a disciple of Sayyed Burhan ud-Din Muhaqqiq Termazi, one of his father's students. Under the guidance of Sayyed Termazi, he practiced Sufism and acquired a lot of knowledge about spiritual matters and secrets of the spirit world. After the demise of Bahaduddin, in 1231 AD, Rumi inherited his father's position and became a prominent religious teacher. He preached in the mosques of Konya. By the time Rumi reached the age of 24, he had proven himself as a well-informed scholar in the field of religious science.

Rumi was already a teacher and a theologian, when in 1244 AD he came across a wandering dervish named Shamsuddin of Tabriz. The meeting proved to be a turning point in his life. Shamsuddin and Rumi became very close friends. Shams went to Damascus, where he was allegedly killed by

the students of Rumi who were resentful of their close relationship. Rumi expressed his love for Shamsuddin and grief at his death, through music, dance and poems. He himself went out searching for Shams and journeyed again to Damascus. There, he realised:

*“Why should I seek? I am the same as
He. His essence speaks through me.
I have been looking for myself!”²*

For nearly ten years after meeting Shamsuddin, Rumi devoted himself in writing ghazals. He made a compilation of ghazals and named it Diwan-e-Kabir or Diwan-e Shams-e Tabrizi. Thereafter, Rumi encountered a goldsmith - Salaud-Din-e Zarkub - whom he made his companion. When Salaud-Din-e Zarkub died, Rumi befriended one of his favorite disciples named Hussam-e Chalabi. Rumi spent most of the later years of his life in Anatolia, where he finished six volumes of his masterwork, the Masnavi.

Diwan-e Shams-e Tabrizi (or Diwan-e-Kabir) is one of the masterpieces of Rumi. It is a collection of ghazals named in the honor of dervish Shamsuddin, Rumi's great friend and inspiration. It also contains an assortment of poems arranged according to the rhyming scheme. Diwan-e-Kabir has been written in 'Dari' dialect. It is regarded as one of the greatest works of Persian literature. Rumi's love for, and his bereavement at the death of, Shams found their expression in these outpouring lyric poems.

His masterpiece, Masnawi (or Mathnawi) is a compilation of six volumes of poetry, written in a didactic style. The poems are intended to inform, instruct as well as entertain the reader. It is believed that Rumi started the work of Masnawi at the suggestion of his then companion, Husam al-Din Chalabin. Masnawi attempts to explain the various facets of spiritual life. The Masnawi is the longest single-authored emphatically mystical poem ever written at 26,000 couplets, making it a significant work in its own right. It is also arguably the second most influential text in the Islamic world after the Qu'ran. Mathnawi remains one of the purest literary glories of Persia.³ The original Persian text was so influential that in Ottoman times a network of institutions was devoted to its study. Masnawi contains anecdotes and stories derived largely from the Quran and the hadith, as well as everyday tales.

Rumi's popularity has gone beyond national and ethnic borders. He is considered to be one of the classical poets, by the speakers of Persian language in Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. For many years, he had a great influence on Turkish literature. The popularity of his works inspired many artists, including Mohammad Reza Shajarian (Iran), Shahram Nazeri (Iran), Davood Azad (Iran) and Ustad Mohammad Hashem Cheshti (Afghanistan), to give classical interpretation for his poems. Rumi's works have been translated to many languages across the world, including Russian, German, Urdu, Turkish, Arabic, French, Italian and Spanish. Globally, his fans are legion.

In December 1273, Rumi fell ill; he predicted his own death and composed the well-known ghazal, which begins with the verse:

*How doest thou know what sort of king I have within me as companion?
Do not cast thy glance upon my golden face, for I have iron legs.⁴*

Rumi departed from the world on 17th December 1273 AD, in Konya, within the Seljuk Empire's territory (currently it's within Turkey). His death was mourned by the diverse community of Konya, with local Christians and Jews joining the crowd that converged to bid farewell as his body was carried through the city. Rumi's body was interred beside that of his father, and a splendid shrine, the *Yesil Türbe* (Green Tomb, الخضرَاء قبه; today the Mevlâna Museum), was erected over his place of burial, commemorating the great Sufi poet. It consists of a mosque, dervish living quarters

and a dance hall. The sacred site is visited by his admirers coming from different parts of the world. His epitaph reads:

*When we are dead, seek not our tomb in the earth,
but find it in the hearts of men.*⁵

He is a compelling figure in all cultures. The map of Rumi's life covers 2,500 miles, from Rumi's birthplace in Vakhsh, a small village in what is now Tajikistan, to Samarkand in Uzbekistan, to Iran and to Syria, where Rumi studied at Damascus and Aleppo in his twenties. His final stop was Konya, in Turkey, where Rumi spent the last 50 years of his life. Today Rumi's tomb draws reverent followers and heads of state each year for a whirling dervish ceremony on 17 December, the anniversary of his death.

The transformative moment in Rumi's life came in 1244, when he met a wandering mystic known as Shams of Tabriz. Rumi was 37, a traditional Muslim preacher and scholar, as his father and grandfather had been. The two of them have this electric friendship for three years – lover and beloved or disciple and sheikh, never clear. Rumi became a mystic. After three years Shams disappeared – possibly murdered by a jealous son of Rumi, possibly teaching Rumi an important lesson in separation. Rumi coped by writing poetry. Most of the poetry that we have today, comes from age 37 to 67. He wrote 3,000 love songs to Shams, the prophet Muhammad and God. He wrote 2,000 rubayat, four-line quatrains. He wrote in couplets a six-volume spiritual epic, the *Masnavi*.

During these years, Rumi incorporated poetry, music and dance into religious practice. Rumi would whirl while he was meditating and while composing poetry, which he dictated. That was codified after his death into elegant meditative dance. Or, as Rumi wrote, in Ghazal 2,351: "*I used to recite prayers. Now I recite rhymes and poems and songs.*" Centuries after his death, Rumi's work is recited, chanted, set to music and used as inspiration for novels, poems, music, films, YouTube videos and tweets.

He was a poet of joy and of love. His work comes out of dealing with the separation from Shams and from love and the source of creation, and out of facing death. Rumi's message cuts through and communicates. "*Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.*"⁶

Rumi was a very mysterious and provocative poet and figure for our time. As we grapple with understanding the Sufi tradition, understanding the nature of ecstasy and devotion and the power of poetry, he stands tall in a long tradition of ecstatic seers from Sappho to Walt Whitman.

Across time, place and culture, Rumi's poems articulate what it feels like to be alive. They help us understand our own search for love and the ecstatic in the coil of daily life. Rumi's work can be compared to Shakespeare's for its resonance and beauty.

Like other mystic and Sufi poets of Persian literature, Rumi's poetry speaks of love which infuses the world. Rumi's teachings also express the tenets summarized in the Quranic verse which Shams-e Tabrizi cited as the essence of prophetic guidance: "Know that 'There is no god but He,' and ask forgiveness for your sin". In the interpretation attributed to Shams, the first part of the verse commands the humanity to seek knowledge of *tawhid* (oneness of God), while the second instructs them to negate their own existence. In Rumi's terms, *tawhid* is lived most fully through love, with the connection being made explicit in his verse that describes love as "that flame which, when it blazes up, burns away everything except the Everlasting Beloved."⁷ Rumi's longing and desire to attain this ideal is evident in the following poem from his book the *Masnavi* :

I died to the mineral state and became a plant,

*I died to the vegetal state and reached animality,
I died to the animal state and became a man,
Then what should I fear? I have never become less from dying.⁸*

The reasons that Rumi endures include his startling imaginative freshness, the deep longing that we feel coming through and his sense of humour. There is always a playfulness in his poetry mixed with the wisdom.

Just now there is a strong global movement, an impulse that wants to dissolve the boundaries that religions have put up and end the sectarian violence. It is said that people of all religions came to Rumi's funeral in 1273. Because, they said, he deepens our faith wherever we are. This is a powerful element in his appeal now.

Rumi belongs to the class of Islamic philosophers which include Ibn Arabi and Mulla Sadra. These transcendental philosophers are often studied together in traditional schools of irfan, philosophy and theosophy throughout the Muslim world. Rumi embeds his theosophy (transcendental philosophy) like a string through the beads of his poems and stories. His main point and emphasis is the unity of being. It is undeniable that Rumi was a Muslim scholar and took Islam seriously. Nonetheless, the depth of his spiritual vision extended beyond narrow understanding sectarian concerns. One rubaiyat reads:

*On the seeker's path, wise men and fools are one.
In His love, brothers and strangers are one.
Go on! Drink the wine of the Beloved!
In that faith, Muslims and pagans are one.⁹*

Rumi was an experimental innovator among the Persian poets and he was a Sufi master. This combination of mystical richness and bold adaptations of poetic forms is the key to his popularity today. The first of Rumi's four main innovations is his direct address to readers in the rare second person to which contemporary readers respond well. Second is his urge to teach due to which readers of 'inspirational' literature are drawn to Rumi's poetry. Third, his use of everyday imagery and fourth, his optimism of the attainment of union within his lyrical love ghazals. The convention in that form is to stress its un-attainability and the cruel rebuffs of the beloved. Rumi celebrates union.

Masnavi weaves fables, scenes from everyday life, Qur'anic revelations and exegesis, and metaphysics into a vast and intricate tapestry.

Rumi believed passionately in the use of music, poetry and dance as a path for reaching God.¹⁰ For Rumi, music helped devotees to focus their whole being on the divine and to do this so intensely that the soul was both destroyed and resurrected. It was from these ideas that the practice of whirling Dervishes developed into a ritual form. His teachings became the base for the order of the Mevlevi, which his son Sultan Walad organised. Rumi encouraged Sama, listening to music and turning or doing the sacred dance. In the Mevlevi tradition, *samâ'* represents a mystical journey of spiritual ascent through mind and love to the Perfect One. In this journey, the seeker symbolically turns towards the truth, grows through love, abandons the ego, finds the truth and arrives at the Perfect. The seeker then returns from this spiritual journey, with greater maturity, to love and to be of service to the whole of creation without discrimination with regard to beliefs, races, classes and nations.

In other verses in the *Masnavi*, Rumi describes in detail the universal message of love:
*The lover's cause is separate from all other causes
Love is the astrolabe of God's mysteries.¹¹*

As new translations come into print, and his work continues to resonate, Rumi's influence will

continue. His inspiring words remind us how poetry can be a sustaining part of everyday life.

Rumi does not belong to a religion, nation or a language, he is universal. Rumi is able to verbalise the highly personal and often confusing world of personal growth and development in a very clear and direct fashion. He does not offend anyone, and he includes everyone. Today Rumi's poems can be heard in churches, synagogues, Zen monasteries, as well as in the downtown New York art/performance/music scene.¹²

To many modern Westerners, his teachings are one of the best introductions to the philosophy and practice of Sufism. Rumi's life and transformation provide true testimony and proof that people of all religions and backgrounds can live together in peace and harmony. Rumi's visions, words, and life teach us how to reach inner peace and happiness so we can finally stop the continual stream of hostility and hatred and achieve true global peace and harmony.

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