

“Dance in Your Blood”: From the Anthropocentric to Organic in Rumi’s Poems

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Abstract

Almost about two centuries prior to the European Renaissance and preceding the Euro-centric assertion of an anthropocentric world-order, illustrated in the ideas of Humanism and the ‘homo universalis’, the view of a diversified earth where each sentient creature exists on the same plane and status as that of the human species was adopted by the *falasifas* (philosophers) of the Near East. In order to assess this prior emphasis on each living being and not only on the Anthropocene — the ‘paragon of all animals’ and the supreme being created by the Almighty — it is relevant that we re-read the works of Jelaluddin Rumi, [(1207 – 1273) original name: JalaluddinWalad], Sufi saint, thinker, poet and founder of the *Mevlevi* sect, who was born in Balkh (modern Afghanistan) and who spent most of his life in Anatolia and Konya (modern Turkey). As reading entails a kind of travelling too, through cultures, places, world-views, times, spaces, identities, subjectivities, and trajectories of knowledge-systems which have either formed discourses¹ or have been absented and silenced by such discourses, the need now arises for critical theorists so influenced by the West-

constructed ‘omnipotent definitions’²to travel through Rumi’s texts, namely *Mathnawi* and *Divan-i Shams-i Tabrizi*.

Keywords- Rumi’s Poems, Jelaluddin Rumi, Mathnawi, Divan-i Shams-i Tabrizi

Mathnawi, meant to be a short ‘teaching’ poem, owes its title to the Persian couplet form and runs to 25,000 verses covering six books, each having a prose introduction. In Rumi’s own description “*Mathnawi* is the shop for spiritual poverty. .../ ... *Mathnawi* is the shop for Unity; if you see anything/ other that God in it, it is an idol” (VI: 1525-8). *Shams-i Tabrizi* is an excellent example of Rumi’s lyrical poetry. It contains more than 3,000 *ghazals* (odes) and 2,000 *rubaiyyat* (quatrains). Many critics and scholars claim that this collection “served as a bridge” (Baldock 48) between the material and the spiritual worlds. One might explore in both the texts the possibility of offering an alternate vision to the Euro-centric Medieval and Renaissance Humanist thesis of Pre-destination, Divine Providence, Human Dignity and the genesis of the anthropocene as superior to all other beings. In *Shams-i Tabrizi* Rumi says:

When a man becomes a vehicle of the Spirit
his human attributes disappear. (IV 2112)

Through, not a de-tour, but a re-tour, a kind of “metanarrative of different kinds of travelling through literary texts, theoretical domains ...” (Behdad1) of Rumi’s texts I try to discover how texts — which have remained outside the discourse that lent primacy to the supremacy of human race and its socio-political corollaries making Europe the center of power —are capable of subverting conventional/mainstream world-view, questioning paradigmatic trajectories of knowledge and even dislocating predominant arrangements of power by proposing an alternative ideology/world-view of seeing the earth with all its living organisms as important as or even more important than the homo-centric world. I critique Rumi’s works through Giorgio Agamben’s theory of the “open”, as explained by him in *The*

Open: Man and Animal. Hence, I engage with a “belated reading” (2)³, to use Ali Behdad’s concept, first by attempting to rewrite “through a kind of philosophical decalagé” our approaches to non-Western literatures and, second, by being “oppositional” in the very belatedness of reading in the sense of becoming “inescapably late, lagging behind what it hopes to transform and write beyond” (2). Ali Behdad, in a very different context, however, has argued that every “belated reading is not an orthodox reiteration or a reapplication of a previous theory, rather, it is an interventionary articulation of a new problematic through a detour — or, perhaps more accurately, a retour — of an earlier practice” (3).

My “belated reading” of the two poems by Jalaluddin (often written as Jalal al-Din) Rumi unfolds those ruptures “where myths converge, clash and sometimes self-destroy, thereby laying bare their underlying strategies” (Král, 77). Given this orientation towards our Natural environment in *Mathnawi* and *Divan-i Shams-i Tabrizi*, I would argue that Rumi’s works portray a kind of fluidity that dissolves the precincts of the mainstream — and hence definitive — Euro-centric notions of Nature versus Nurture, Man versus animal, Centre versus margin, Us versus the Other, which are not-so-innocent belief-systems and have consistently justified the ideology of power/knowledge that, over centuries, have facilitated a particular continent to control the rest of the world in the name of colonialism.

Even before the grand doctrines of European Renaissance could construct the ‘*homo universalis*’ out of the European aristocratic white male, far away in the Near East and during the so-called ‘dark’ medieval era, one so-called eccentric poet was creating an organic theory of relationships between the anthropoid and the other organisms. In his philosophy no hierarchical chain, where the upper level controlled the lower, existed but there was an equanimous connection between every being on this earth, each remaining in a symbiotic relationship with the other. He spoke about Man’s connection with the organic and inorganic Universe, not through the ‘Great Chain of Being’ in which Man is offered the ‘Freedom of

Choice' and/or Divine Will by being suspended between the lowly beasts and the higher angels, but of an equal plane on which all beings are created by an impartial Divinity. Through a circular consciousness each being, human and non-human, is connected to another and each, in turn, can merge with the Divine. While his European contemporaries and later counterparts saw the earth as the *terra nullius* suitable for the penitence of Man's Primal Sin and utilizing it for His purpose alone, Rumi saw this world as a sanctuary in which all creatures are gifted with a divine spark. Such 'multi-consciousness' defines "not the essence but the actual existence of cultural diversity" (Král, 25). It establishes an empathetic participation in the flow of the life-force, one in which the Natural environment, precisely Nature uncultivated by Man, plays a pivotal role. Thus, in *Mathnawi* Rumi says:

Proximity to God is not to go up or down

Proximity to God comes when you escape from the
prison of existence.

What place is there for "up" and "down" in non-
existence? There is no "soon" or "far" or "late" in non-
existence. (M III: 4512-14)

Physical non-existence for Rumi is not representative corporeal 'death'. It is metaphoric in the sense that it signifies the complete effacement of the self or ego and can be well-defined by Alexander Kojeve's famous comment, quoted by Giorgio Agamben in his chapter entitled "Snob": "No animal can be a snob" (9). Rumi's refusal to climb "up" and "down" the hierarchical and vertical ladder in order to reach the Almighty reveals his denial to empower Man with the special status of being the 'Crown' in God's Paradise. For Rumi Paradise is situated in the dense forest and in the desert, in the oasis and on the mountain top and by the seaside, and in the heart of Nature which is also the human heart. Divinity is perceived in the fall of the leaves, in the movement of a camel, in the ripeness of dates and

palms, in the gust of high altitude, in the music of sea-shells, and all together in the heart of the lover:

The sun is love. The lover

a speck circling the sun.

A Spring wind moves to dance

any branch that isn't dead. (Barks, *Rumi* 280)

This is not to say, however, that Rumi deviated from the true route of Islam. Following his Prophet, he, too, was connecting the inner and the outer worlds, between the *Quran* and the *Hadith*. The Prophet himself had expressed his judgment:

The Law (*shariah*) is my words,

the Path (*tariqah*) is my actions,

and the Truth (*haqiqah*) is my inner states.

These lines are best explained by John Baldock:

The Law (*shariah*) relates to the laws that govern the way we conduct ourselves in the outer world. It provides the outer framework with which both the individual and society may evolve towards inner awakening and higher consciousness. The Truth (*haqiqah*), from the same root as *al-Haqq* (one of the names of God), refers to an immutable inner reality. These two realities – the outer and the inner worlds – affect the way we both perceive and experience life. They are also related to our organs of sense perceptions: the outer world to the gross physical senses, the inner world to the subtle spiritual senses. If we approach the outer world from the view point of the inner, its meaning and spirit are immediately evident. If we approach the outer world from its own viewpoint, we remain in ignorance of its inner meaning. What we have is simply a literal interpretation of the outer reality. Hence the need for the spiritual

Path (*tariqah*), which binds together the otherwise dualistic realities of the outer and inner worlds, and leads us to the Truth. (68)

The duality, about which Baldock writes, between the outer and the inner worlds can be interpreted as the polarity inherent in the concept of Nature versus Nurture, between human society and the Natural world. Rumi's "Path (*tariqah*)" can only be appreciated and is fully realizable amidst the Natural environment, in relation to man's deepest connection with Nature. The spiritual awakening that he spoke about can be attained only through the 'self-annihilation' of that 'homo universalis' who believes that he is gifted by God, with the central position in the universe. This eradication of the 'I' comes through the practice of *fana* (passing away) and *baqa* (subsistence). It can be attained only when in each of God's creations, in every element and organism of the Natural world, the human is capable of seeing "His Face":

Everything perishes, except His face: Unless you are in His Face, do not seek to exist.

Everything perishes no longer applies to the one who has passed away in Our Face,
because he is in *but God*, he has gone beyond *no god*;
whoever is in *but God* has not passed away.

Whoever is saying 'I' and 'we' at the door, has turned his back on the door and remains in *no god*. (M I 3052-5)

Life, for Rumi, is a journey of this realization: the interconnectedness between the divinity in Nature and the Nature as divine. Thus, unlike Euro-centric saints and thinkers before and after him, his world is not anthropocentric. Every being, animate and inanimate, created by God is placed side-by-side and are linked with each other by love and not by any hierarchical 'Chain' of control. Every being becomes the neighbour to the other. Human

civilization, then, exists in a symbiotic connection with the Natural world and not in a parasitic urge to draw out resources to gratify itself. It is neither opposed to nor segregated from it. Thus, Rumi says:

I stand up, and this one of me
turns into a hundred of me.
They say I circle around you.
Nonsense, I circle around me. (280)

A journey into the wilderness and the woodland is a pilgrimage in search for the authentic being, an existence that several centuries later the British Romantics and the American Transcendentalists would also find refuge in.

Back in the thirteenth century, then, a Sufi poet-thinker, living his life outside the dictates of any authority, was speaking in the same way about Man after the end of History. He was interrogating grand narratives and dismantling Man's 'I'-ness by locating the latter as the basic constituent of Nature:

O pilgrims on the path, where are you?
Here is the Beloved! Here!
Your beloved is your neighbour,
just the other side of the wall.
Why do you err in the desert?
If you look at the Beloved's Face,
and don't fix your gaze on form,
you become the House, and its lord,
For you are the Kaaba! You! (*D* 648, after Lewis, *Rumi*, pp 384-5)

In order to justify this view-point Rumi spoke of the *fana* (the effacement of the self) and the *baqa* (subsistence in God's Natural world) as practices that would initiate the human

“I” ness (ego) to “die before you die”. Death here does not entail physical extinction but calls for the elimination of the ego or the ‘I’ that makes the human condescending enough to construct an illusory anthropocentric world and, then, preach such world-view as the absolute truth. Hence, it is the Sufi poet’s claim:

I died to the mineral realm and became a plant,

I died to the plant realm and rose to the animal,

I died to the animal realm and became human.

What is there to fear?

When did I ever become less by dying?

.....

For Non-existence resonates within me,

like the deep notes of an organ, saying

Verily in Him we shall return. (*M III: 3901-6*)

He shares empathy with plants more than he does with humans:

He who turns fire into trees and roses is able to make this
world free from harm.

He who brings forth roses from among thorns is able to
make winter turn into spring. (*M VI: 1740-1*)

Even the inanimate objects of the Natural world engage in an empathic participation:

A stone transformed into a flawless ruby

Becomes filled with the qualities of the sun. (*M V: 2015*)

About the Nightingale Rumi says:

When you see a confidant, tell him of spiritual mysteries,

And when you see a rose, sing like a nightingale. (*M VI: 2037*)

While the Natural world has its own spiritual loveliness and purity, the human society, reveling in its self-centredness, becomes a prison, for Rumi, one that entangles the ignorant:

The world is a trap, and desire is its bait: escape
the traps and quickly turn your face toward God. (*M VI: 377*)

Though Rumi's thematic imagery is perplexing for being colossal he is capable of capturing the image of human society in a single line:

This present world is but a dream; the sleeper imagines
it to be real. (*M IV: 3654*)

He encapsulates the fact that by way of being a part-particle of the Universe each being (the human and non-human) has to reciprocate to its rhythm:

Inside water, a waterwheel turns.

A star circulates with the moon.

We live in the night ocean wondering,

What are these lights?
.....

A secret turning in us
makes the universe turn.

Head unaware of feet,
and feet head. Neither cares.

They keep turning. (*278*)

Yet Rumi is also aware of the fact that "things become clear through their opposites".

It is for this reason that he tries to scrutinize the ambiguous duality inherent in human society and the Natural world, a view explained clearly by Baldock:

This duality of opposites remains part of our everyday experience of the world until such time as our sense of 'self' dissolves, like a drop of water, in the Ocean of Unity.

In the meantime, we can utilize our experience of the duality of everyday life to discern what is food for the lower self and what is food for our heart or soul. Rumi helps us in this by constantly drawing our attention to the world of opposites so that we may, like him, relinquish duality and experience the two worlds as one. (170)

Baldock's argument also provides clarification for the following lines in Rumi's *Mathnawi*:

You are not your body: you are the Eye. When you
see the Spirit, you are free of the body.

A human being is an eye: the rest is just flesh and
bones. Whatever your eye sees, you are that. (VI: 811-12)

And

Beware! You are half-musk and half-dung. Beware! Do not
build up the dung, build up the Chinese musk! (V: 2479)

Since, from Kojève's comment, we have discerned that the human alone can be a "snob", therefore, given Rumi's view of life and lived experiences, it is obvious, that in his sphere of existence there can be no 'snob'. This is not to say that there can be no humans, but the fact is that humans who enter Rumi's sphere ought to shun their snobbery. As it is his statement: "Because my genus is not that of my Lord, my ego passed/ away for the sake of His ego./ With the passing of my ego, remained alone. I/ whirl like dust under the feet of His horse./ The individual self turned to dust, in which on His/ footprints remain ..." (*M II*: 1173-5). The "footprints" that turn the "self" into "dust" also transform the anthropocentric earth into a part of the Natural earth, a place in which all matter originate from dust and return to dust.

Rumi's alternate vision, potent enough to replace the Euro-centric world-view of the primacy of the human, can best be explained through Giorgio Agamben's concept of the "anthropogenic and anthropological machine" that has, since times immemorial, constructed

the dissection between the human and the non-human. The two variations of the machine are “the moderns” who “functions ‘by isolating the nonhuman with the human’ and ... the ancients, where ‘the non-human is produced by the humanization of the animal’” (Edkins 82). Arguing about the “intimate strife” between the human and the non-human, between civilization and Natural environment, between what he terms and the “world and earth” Agamben states:

For similarly at issue in the work of art – in conflict between the world and earth – is a dialectic between concealedness and unconcealedness, between openness and closedness, ... The earth appears only where it is guarded and preserved as the essentially Undisclosable, which withdraws from every opening and constantly keeps itself closed. In the work of art, this Undisclosable comes to light as such. “The work moves the earth itself into the open of a world and keeps it there.” ... World and earth, openness and closedness – though opposed in an essential conflict – are, however, never separable:...” (71-72).

Building upon Heidegger’s theory of this “inseparable opposition”, Agamben affirms that this conflict between “concealedness and unconcealedness”, between Nurture and Nature, between human society and the Natural environment, is essentially a “political paradigm” (73). He also argues that keeping oneself closed to “*animalitas*” is another way of closing oneself to “*humanitas*” and, hence, he opens up an unsettling question: “If humanity has been obtained only through a suspension of the animality, and must thus keep itself open to the closedness of animality, in what sense does Heidegger’s attempt to grasp the “existing essence of man” escape the metaphysical primacy of the *animalitas*?” (73) The answer, to this incalculably disturbing interrogation was, perhaps, provided, centuries earlier, by the medieval migrant poet of Konya. In a simple verse Rumi has said all:

Dance, when you’re broken open.

Dance, if you've torn the bandage off.

Dance in the middle of the fighting.

Dance in your blood. (281)

Given his consciousness about Nature and the Natural environment at a time when the West was self-reflexively anthropocentric, Rumi's poems offer a singularity that cannot be compared to any monolithic culture. His was a vision multidimensional and pluralistic. And this phenomenon is aptly explained in Francoise Kral's words: "It is precisely when a culture cannot be compared to others, when its singularity and difference asserts themselves more powerfully than the similarities with our own culture ...that we start to grasp cultural differences, not the essence but the actual existence of cultural diversity" (25).

Notes:

¹Here I use the word "discourse" the way Michel Foucault in which explained the concept in 'Discourse Analysis', where one particular process of thought and/or cultural notion becomes dominant in order to silence, absence, and even obliterate several others that mainly belong to the subalterns and/or the marginalized. Cultural marginalization, that works hand in hand with imperialism (and colonization), adopts various strategies to establish the grand narrative of discourse thereby burying underneath the voices of the oppressed and the peripheral.

² In the essay "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition" Shu-mei Shih speaks about the need to resisted West-centric dominant discourses that tend to categorize Third World literatures and discourses mainly as exercises in Postcolonialism. In "Exiles at Home — Questions of Turkish and Global Literary Studies", Hüla Adak asserts that Global Literary Studies view Third World literatures as "frozen" in "celebrating nationalism and independence", which is the second phase of Gugelberger's "triadic developmental paradigm" (21). In her concluding paragraph, she states:

... if we want literary studies to be global, we must listen to Third World Criticism not just to grasp the historical and cultural context of the national literature in question (inviting Third World literary critics as native informants) but also to understand this criticism's comparative modus operandi, its dialogue with the theories of the Euro-American academy ... Giving voice to Third World literary criticism has a double emancipatory potential: it may break the debilitating monopoly in global literary studies of theories that do not consider the historical

and cultural contexts of Third World Literatures, while breaching the silence Third World literary critics who can neither write back (consenting or resisting) nor wake up from the nightmare of such ‘omnipotent definitions’. (25)

³In *Belated Travelers* (Durham & London: Duke Univ. P, 1994), Ali Behdad critiques nineteenth century travel writing and its active function in European colonialism. He critiques those travelers who, he argues, have arrived late because by the time they traveled through the ‘Orient’, tourism and colonialism had already converted the exotic into the familiar. Thus, these travelers, having missed the authentic experience of the ‘Orient’, could view the East (Near East) no longer through the lens of Orientalism. In fact, Orientalism itself became a complex phenomenon without a single developmental tradition. Behdad sees it as shifting field of practices that was ambivalent and discontinuous. He also views his own discursive practice as “belated” (2), in order to highlight the heterogeneity and plurality of Orientalism.

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