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"Mevlana Rumi as the Persian Poet of Divine Love and Mysticism"

SHEERAZA AKHTER

Ph.D. Scholar,

Department of Persian,

University of Kashmir, Srinagar, J&K, India

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Mevlana Khodavandgar Jalaluddin Muhammad Balkhi Rumi, popularly known as Mevlana Rumi, is arguably the finest Persian poet of all times who had a great influence on Muslim writing and culture. His poetry is still well known throughout the modern world, and he is one of the best selling poets even in modern-day America. He was born in 1207 AD to native Persian-speaking parents in Balkh in present-day Afghanistan. Increasing Mongol attacks forced his family to leave Afghanistan, who travelled to Baghdad, Mekkah, Damascus and finally settled in Konya in Turkey. Rumi was the son of a renowned Sufi scholar, Sultan-ul-Ulama Baha-ud-Din Walad, and consequently he was introduced to Sufism from a very young age. Sufism is a branch of Islam primarily concerned with developing the spirituality, or more precisely, the inner character of a Muslim. In fact, much of Rumi's work is dedicated to waking people up from the deep materialistic slumber, and inspiring them to experience life themselves, rather blindly following the scholars of the day. The most important influences upon Rumi, besides his father, were the Persian poets Attar and Sanai. Rumi expresses his appreciation for the poets in these words:

*"Attar was the spirit, Sanai his eyes twain,
And in time thereafter, came we in their train"
"Attar has traversed the seven cities of Love,
We are still at the turn of one street"*

Rumi witnessed the greatest turning point in his life when he met a travelling Sufi, named Shams-ud-Din of Tabriz or Shams-i-Tabrizi which changed the whole course of his life. Shams became fast friends with Rumi, in whom he recognised a kindred spirit. The two developed a very close friendship and it was at this point that Rumi became more and more secluded, shunning the society of those he previously would discuss and debate matters with. His relationship with Shams caused great jealousy in his family and other students, and after a few years, Shams disappeared. Many believe he was murdered, but Rumi himself did not think so. He travelled for years looking for his friend, and it was this loss that led to the outpouring of his soul through his unparalleled poetry. He wrote numerous lines of love poetry, called *ghazals*, but though they outwardly seem to be about Shams, it is not difficult to see that they are, in fact, poems describing his overpowering love of God. The effect of Shams' company on Rumi was quite decisive. Whereas before this, Rumi had preached Islam soberly, he became filled with the love of God through Shams' influence. What was inside his soul finally came out in the form of an outpouring of his lyric poems, the Divan-i Shams-i Tabrizi:

"Why should I seek?"

*I am the same as He;
His essence speaks through me,
I have been looking for myself”*

Rumi rarely wrote down his own poetry. The six books of poetry in the Masnavi were written entirely by Rumi, who would compose and dictate the poetry, and his student Hussam Chalabi, who would write and edit it. It is believed that Rumi would turn round and round while reciting his poetry, and it is this Sufi dance ‘Sama’ which formed the basis for the *Mevlevi Order*, or *Whirling Dervishes*, founded by his student Hussam Chalabi and his son Sultan Walad after his death. *Dervish* means ‘doorway’, and the dance is believed to be a mystical portal between the earthly and cosmic worlds. Rumi died in 1273 AD and was buried at Konya in Turkey where his splendid shrine has become a place of pilgrimage and the epitaph reads:

*“When we are dead, seek not our tomb in the earth,
but find it in the hearts of men!”*

Mevlana Rumi’s eternal message has travelled far and wide and his popularity has gone beyond national and regional borders. He is considered to be one of the classical poets, by the speakers of Persian language in Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. His works have been translated into many languages across the world, including Russian, German, Urdu, Turkish, Arabic, French, Italian and Spanish. In addition to his poetry, Rumi’s commentaries on various aspects of Sufism were also written down. These prose works comprise transcriptions of his discourses “*Fi-hi Ma Fi-hi*”(‘in it what is in it’) and sermons “*Majalis-e Sab’a*”(‘Seven Sessions’), along with some 150 “*Makatib*”(Letters) that he wrote. The immense popularity of Mevlana Rumi’s philosophy transcended all kinds of barriers and was embraced by the great poet-philosophers like Allama Sir Dr Muhammad Iqbal from the Indian Subcontinent, who considers Rumi as his Spiritual Guide and pays him glorious tribute in these memorable words:

*“Pir-e-Rumi murshid-e roshan zameer,
Karvan-e-ishq-o-masti ra ameer,
Noor-e-Qur’an darmiyan seenah ash
Jaam-e-Jam sharminah az aa’eenah ash
Pir-e-Rumi khaak ra ikseer kard
Az gubaram jalwah ha ta’meer kard”*

*“Rumi, the Spiritual Guide, with an enlightened heart,
is the Leader of the Caravan of Love and spiritual intoxication;
His bosom is full of the light of the Qur’an,
Jamshed’s cup feels ashamed in the presence of his mirror;
The Guide from Rum converted my clay into elixir,
and built up new lights from my dust”*

One of the most popular Sufi saints and poets of Kashmir Valley, Alamdar-e-Kashmir Sheikh-ul-Alam Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Noorani, also acknowledges the esteemed stature of Mawlana Rumi and gives him special mention in one of his Kashmiri quatrains or ‘*Sheikh Shruks*’ as:

*“malla hai depzi Moulvi Rumi,
natte malla deeshith parzi istighfar,
sadrass taar dyitue temmi,
paaney paanas sapunn yaar”*

*“In truth, the authentic scholar is only Moulvi Rumi,
Beware of other fake scholars around you;
Only he could sail through the Ocean of Gnosis,
And made the path of Divine Love clear for you!”*

Rumi's major works consist of two epic poems. The first is the Divan-e-Shams-i-Tabrizi or Divan-e-Kabir or Divan, named in honour of his mystic friend Shams Tabrizi. It is one of the masterpieces of Rumi. It consists of about 40,000 verses in a vibrant and energetic style. It has been suggested that the Divan represents Rumi's feelings while in a dance-induced spiritual state. It also contains an assortment of poems arranged according to the rhyming scheme. Divan-e-Kabir has been written in 'Dari' dialect. It is regarded as one of the greatest works of Persian literature. At the end of the Divan, is a collection of almost 1,600 poems of four lines, called quatrains or *Ruba'iyat*. For Rumi, the meaning predominated over the form in such a way that in the Divan, he broke nearly all the rules of classical Persian prosody. Yet, because the meaning came from the world of the Spirit and not from his own whims and fancies, it always created forms of beauty and an ecstatic joy in man for union with the Infinite. As Rumi remarks with extreme humility in his Divan:

*“What is poetry that I should boast of it,
I possess an art other than the art of the poets;
Poetry is like a black cloud; I am like the moon hidden behind its veil.
Do not call the black cloud the luminous moon in the sky.”*

The Masnavi is his other seminal work which is a compilation of 25,000 verses in six volumes of poetry, written in a didactic style. The poems are intended to inform, instruct as well as entertain the reader. The Masnavi attempts to explain the various facets of spiritual life. The Masnavi was written at the same time as the Divan, and was probably intended to place the Divan within the wider context of Islam. It is regarded as an explanation of some aspects of the Holy Qur'an, placed within a more Sufi context. Rumi described his great masterpiece of Islamic mystical teachings, the Masnavi as "the roots of the roots of the roots of the Islamic Religion and the explainer of the Holy Qur'an". As Rumi starts his Masnavi so beautifully with these Persian verses:

*“Beshno az ney chon hekaayat mikonad
Az jodayee ha shekaayat mi-konad

Kaz neyestaan ta maraa bebrideh and
Dar nafiram mardo zan naalideh and

Sineh khaaham sharheh sharheh az faraagh
Ta begooyam sharh-e dard-e eshtiyaagh

Har kasi ku door maand az asl-e khish
Baaz jooyad roozegareh vasl-e khish”*

*“Listen to this reed how it complains,
telling a tale of separations;
Saying, “Ever since I was parted from the reed-bed,
man and woman have moaned in unison with my lament;
I want a bosom torn by severance,
that I may unfold to him the pain of love-desire;
Every one who is left far from his source,
wishes back the time when he was united with it”*

The unparalleled stature of Mevlana Rumi and his masterpiece Masnavi can be gauged from the golden words of another Persian mystic poet Maulana Abdur Rehman Jami:

*“Mann chih goyam wasf-e aan aali jinaab,
neest paygambar wali darad kitaab”
“Masnavi-e-manavi-e Moulavi,
hast Qur’an dar zaban-e-Pahlavi”*

*“What can I say in praise of that great soul (Rumi)?,
He is not a Prophet but has come with a Book (Masnavi) !”
“The spiritual poetry (Masnavi) of the Moulavi (Rumi),
is, in fact, the Qur’an in the Pehlavi (Persian) language!”*

Mevlana Rumi was one of the greatest Muslim saints and mystics. He has also been hailed by Western scholars as the greatest mystical poet of all time. The popularized versions of his poetry have made him the best-selling poet in America in recent years, even after a period of over 700 years, during which his fame has endured in the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. The popularity of his poetry has spread in the West because of its heart-felt themes of lover-beloved mysticism, and its spiritual joy which seems to emanate even from the most distorted versions in English. Indeed, the problem with many translations of Rumi's work is the separation of his poems on love from his belief in God and Islam. Many translations of his work have become mere love poems, and Rumi himself has become known as a love poet. Love is an overwhelming part of Rumi's work, but for him, this love was the divine sacred love for God and His Prophet, rather than the earthly mundane love. As is depicted so manifestly in this *Rubai* from Rumi's *Divan*:

*“Ishq-ast tareeq-e rah-e Payghambar-e maa
ma zaada-ye ishq-o ishq bod maadar-e maa
ay maadar-e ma nehofa dar chaadar-e maa
penhaan shoda az tabi'at-e kaafar-e maa”*

*“Love is the path and road of our Prophet,
We were born from love and love was our mother,
O you! Our mother!, you are hidden within our veils,
Concealed from our rejecting natures!”*

In this perspective, the best way to understand the great Muslim poet of the 13th century, Mevlana Rumi, is to know that the inward meaning of all of his verses and poems is faithful to the revelation of The Holy Qur'an and to the Traditions of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Rumi's approach to Islam is further clarified in this quatrain from his *Divan-e-Kabir*, wherein Rumi emphasizes that no one should interpret his speech and poetry as having meanings that do not conform to the revelation and practice of Islam:

*“Man banda-ye Qur'anam, agar jaan daaram,
man khaak-e rah-e Muhammad-e Mukhtaram,
gar naql konad joz in kas az goftaram,
bezaaram azo waz-in sokhan bezaaram”*

*“I am the servant of the Qur'an as long as I have life,
I am the dust on the path of Muhammad, the Chosen One,
If anyone quotes anything except this from my sayings,
I am quit of him and outraged by these words”*

Today when the modern world is impoverished of spirituality and suffocating in an ambience where ugliness has become the norm and beauty has become luxury, Rumi is discovered by many as the antidote to the ills from which the modern world suffers. And indeed he can be the most powerful antidote provided his teachings are followed in letter and spirit. In order to draw aid from Rumi in the spiritual battle at hand, one must

read him not as a mere poet but as the spokesperson of the Divine mysteries. The works of Rumi and his ever living spiritual presence stand as a strong beacon to guide men by means of beauty to that Truth which alone can liberate them from the illusory prison of deprivation and ugliness that they have created around themselves. Verily it must be said of the works of Rumi that:

*“These words are the ladder to the firmament-
Whoever ascends them reaches the roof-
Not the roof of the sphere that is blue-
But the roof which transcends all the visible heavens.”*

According to Prof Majid M. Naini, “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 vision, 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.” Let us pledge to take forward the eternal message of self-realisation, brotherhood, pluralism, humanism, peaceful coexistence, harmony and tolerance of this great mystic poet!

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