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An Urge for Reunion: Spiritual Longing in Rumi's Song of Reed

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Abstract:

The Tale of the Reed, the opening section of the Masnavi, narrates the separation of the lover, symbolized by the reed, from the reed-bed, its original home in the divine presence of God. Scholars often regard this prelude as a summary of the major themes that recur throughout the Masnavi, particularly separation, longing, and reunion with the beloved. Because of its central role in Nay Namih, the reed becomes an important symbol for understanding both the poem and Rumi's mystical thought.

The reed symbolizes the soul's painful separation from its source and its desire to return to divine unity. At the same time, the image of the reed reflects Rumi's personal spiritual experiences, especially his relationship with Shams of Tabriz. Through poetry, Rumi transforms this experience into a universal meditation on love, loss, and transcendence. In Nay Namih, the lament of the reed expresses both ecstatic longing and suffering. The close relationship between the voice of the reed and the poetic narrator further emphasizes the complexity of the reed's identity and its symbolic role within the poem.

Keywords: Reunion, Spirituality, Love loss, Nay Namih, Lament.

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Introduction

Masnavi-e-Ma‘navi opens with the celebrated “Song of the Reed.” These verses, among the most frequently cited, studied, and internalized poetic expressions in the Muslim tradition, are commonly interpreted as the quintessential representation of the soul’s suffering in separation from the beloved and its longing to return to a state of divine union. Indeed, guiding humanity toward the divine constitutes the central purpose of the Masnavi. This objective explains why the text has been studied for centuries as a source of profound moral and religious insight and why it has often been regarded as the central text of tasawwuf, or Islamic mystical thought, within Sufi traditions.

Jalal al-Din Rumi was born in Balkh in 1207 and died in Konya in 1273. A renowned mystic and poet, Rumi requires little introduction. His remarkable contributions to mysticism and poetry, together with his profound relationship with Shams al-Din of Tabriz, have sustained his prominence in literary and mystical scholarship across the world. Rumi’s close association with Shams, a mysterious dervish whom he encountered in Konya in 1244, exerted a transformative influence on both his life and literary production. Rumi regarded Shams as the perfect embodiment of the beloved and as the supreme companion he had long sought in his spiritual journey. Following the disappearance of Shams from his life, Rumi developed similarly intense relationships with two other companions: Salah al-Din Faridun Zarkub and Husam al-Din Chelebi. Rumi entrusted both men with the guidance of his disciples. These relationships are of considerable importance for understanding Rumi’s works, as he perceived in these companions a spiritual reflection of his own intricate mystical experiences.

In his introductory chapter to Maqalat-i Shams, Muhammad Ali Muvahhid identifies a significant division in Rumi’s literary career: the period before Shams’s departure from Konya and

the period following his death. Muvahhid attributes Rumi's lyrical poetry, the Ghazalliyat, to the former period and the Masnavi to the latter, thereby emphasizing the autobiographical dimensions of these works. He argues that these poetic collections reflect Rumi's experience of Shams as "an-other": in the Ghazalliyat phase, the beloved is sought externally, whereas in the Masnavi period, the beloved becomes internalized as a reality within Rumi himself. (Schimmel 89)

According to Annemarie Schimmel, Rumi's Ghazalliyat reveals the poet's association between language and the beloved (53). She contends that the lyrical poems in this collection express the lover's desire to experience the nearness of the beloved through the "magic of words." In the Masnavi phase, however, Shams becomes embodied within the lover, Rumi, following the violent death of the former, an event associated with a plot involving Rumi's son, Ala al-Din (86). Unlike the initial separation, this second experience of loss fills Rumi with a longing for sama. (85)

Sama represents a state in which the lover and the beloved move toward one another with the anticipation of a union that remains shadowed by the inevitability of separation. Similarly, the sound of the reed in Nay Namih foreshadows the separation that succeeds union. Shams describes sama as a process through which the face of God becomes increasingly manifest. He further explains that those who transcend themselves in sama enter into other spiritual realms (73). Likewise, Jan Rypka suggests that the mystic's whirling dance in sama symbolizes the "vain and desperate search for this mysteriously lost friend" (592). Consequently, after Shams vanished from Rumi's life, Rumi turned toward sama and found inspiration for composing the Masnavi.

Rumi's unsuccessful search for Shams in the external world ultimately ended when he learned to recognize and internalize Shams's soul and wisdom within himself (Schimmel 25). In

other words, the spiritual fire represented by Shams no longer existed outside Rumi; instead, Rumi came to perceive himself simultaneously as both lover and beloved (29). In this regard, Muvahhid argues that the Masnavi should not be interpreted merely as the "teachings" of Shams, but rather as a synthesis of Shams's ideas and Rumi's own mystical experiences. Muvahhid's observations recall the classical arguments advanced in major studies of Rumi. Nevertheless, his contribution is particularly significant because his introduction to the Maqalat anticipates Shams's own reflections on language, poetry, consciousness, and the relationship between the lover and the beloved.

Separation and the suffering of longing, "the pain of love-desire," which constitutes the essence of the reed's narrative - extend beyond the limits of the poem to such an extent that the reed, the poem, and the poet may all be understood as instruments through which a higher meaning is expressed (Rumi 1-30). The reed functions as a hollow vessel, alternately filled and emptied by the breath that passes through it; the poem becomes a sanctuary illuminated by the lamenting voice of the poet, whose inner being has been set aflame; and the body of the poet, like the reed itself, serves as a medium through which a mysterious force of love is communicated. In attempting to convey the power and intensity of "the pain of love-desire," the reed and its lament, the poet and his poem, and the body and the soul all strive to transcend the dualities that obstruct the fulfillment of their longing (Lewis 135).

The passage of time belongs to the fallen world. In Nay Namih, however, the movement of the fire of love enters human temporality as the force that fills the hollow reed with renewed meaning; the reed's ecstatic expression of longing testifies to this force. The convergence of the time of the lover and that of the beloved thus becomes a moment of conscious inebriation. It is the

point at which the spiritual traveler reflects upon the experience, recalls it, and attempts to preserve it through language. Beyond language itself, the experience and its recollection signify the union of indivisibility, beyond subjectivity, thought, and expression, with division and multiplicity. This condition appears to have inspired Rumi to construct Nay Namih in such a complex manner and through the shifting interplay of voices within the poem.

The voice that presents these images belongs to the poetic narrator, who adopts an omniscient perspective. He observes the reed consumed by love, and he witnesses the sudden transformation of the reed's ordinary, brazen existence into something precious, like gold. The reed's transmutation through the fire of love constitutes an alchemical process imbued with a sense of wonder, and this transformative event inspires awe in the narrator. The narrator understands and recognizes the elements involved in this mystical process: he perceives the sound of the reed not as mere wind, but as fire, and he understands its essence to be the fervor of love itself. Thus, the poetic narrator regards himself as an informed witness to an event that continually captivates him with its ever-renewed sense of wonder.

Furthermore, the process of identification in Nay Namih is analogous to the relationship between Rumi and Shams of Tabriz. In experiencing separation from the beloved, Rumi seeks to rediscover and reconstruct his own identity through poetic creation. Within this context, creativity is associated with Rumi's conscious inebriation, whereby eternity is apprehended within the present moment of the poem. Ecstatic infinitude thus manifests itself through the finite form of language, as the deified self comes to inhabit a body conditioned by subjectivity. The poetic narrator in Nay Namih moves between the positions of the ecstatic reed and the detached observer. The tension between these two roles generates the drama of the poem and reinforces its metaphor

of separation and union. The longing produced by separation resembles a fire that burns throughout the poem in the reed's cry for the beloved; this passion fills the emptied self of the lover with a radiant form of consciousness. Rumi, as the intoxicated poet and mystic, recollects and transforms this experience into verse through the figures of the reed and the poetic narrator after he has internalized and claimed his beloved, Shams, as an integral aspect of his own identity.

> In the Name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate.
>
> Listen to the reed how it tells a tale, complaining of separations—
>
> Saying, "Ever since I was parted from the reed-bed, my lament hath caused man and woman to moan.
>
> I want a bosom torn by severance, that I may unfold (to such a one) the pain of love-desire.
>
> Every one who is left far from his source wishes back the time when he was nited with it.
>
> In every company I uttered my wailful notes, I consorted with the unhappy and with them that rejoice.
>
> Every one became my friend from his own opinion; none sought out my secrets from within me.
>
> My secret is not far from my plaint, but ear and eye lack the light (whereby it should be apprehended).
>
> Body is not veiled from soul, nor soul from body, yet none is permitted to see the soul."

This noise of the reed is fire, it is not wind: whoso hath not this fire, may he be naught!

'Tis the fire of Love that is in the reed, 'tis the fervour of Love that is in the wine.

The reed is the comrade of every one who has been parted from a friend: its strains pierced our hearts.

Who ever saw a poison and antidote like the reed? Who ever saw a sympathiser and a longing lover like the reed?

The reed tells of the Way full of blood and recounts stories of the passion of Majnún.

Only to the senseless is this sense confided: the tongue hath no customer save the ear.

In our woe the days (of life) have become untimely: our days travel hand in hand with burning griefs.

If our days are gone, let them go!—'tis no matter. Do Thou remain, for none is holy as Thou art!

Whoever is not a fish becomes sated with His water; whoever is without daily bread finds the day long.

None that is raw understands the state of the ripe: therefore my words must be brief. Farewell!

O son, burst thy chains and be free! How long wilt thou be a bondsman to silver and gold?

If thou pour the sea into a pitcher, how much will it hold? One day's store.

The pitcher, the eye of the covetous, never becomes full: the oyster-shell is not filled with pearls until it is contented.

He (alone) whose garment is rent by a (mighty) love is purged of covetousness and all defect.

Hail, O Love that bringest us good gain—thou that art the physician of all our ills,

The remedy of our pride and vainglory, our Plato and our Galen!

Through Love the earthly body soared to the skies: the mountain began to dance and became nimble.

Love inspired Mount Sinai, O lover, (so that) Sinai (was made) drunken and Moses fell in a swoon.

Were I joined to the lip of one in accord with me, I too, like the reed, would tell all that may be told;

(But) whoever is parted from one who speaks his language becomes dumb, though he have a hundred songs.

When the rose is gone and the garden faded, thou wilt hear no more the nightingale's story.

The Beloved is all and the lover (but) a veil; the Beloved is living and the lover a dead thing.

> When Love hath no care for him, he is left as a bird without wings. Alas for him then!
>
> How should I have consciousness (of aught) before or behind when the light of my Beloved is not before me and behind?
>
> Love wills that this Word should be shown forth: if the mirror does not reflect, how is that?
>
> Dost thou know why the mirror (of thy soul) reflects nothing? Because the rust is not cleared from its face.
>
> O my friends, hearken to this tale: in truth it is the very marrow of our inward state. (Nicholson 5-6)

Sacred Cry, Sacred Grief

In the opening thirty lines of The Masnavi, Rumi emphasizes the enchanting sound and profound effect of the ney, or reed-flute. He reflects upon the source of its music and the cause of its beauty, ultimately suggesting that its origin lies in the reed plant itself. According to Rumi, it is the reed's agony of separation, its sorrow, lamentation, and cry of longing, that gives the reed-flute its emotional force and charm. Yet the suffering of the reed plant remains inaudible to those who are absorbed merely in the pleasure of listening to the instrument.

As Rumi further explains, the power of the ney resides in its own aatish-e-ishq, or "fire of love," concealed within its hollow body (Rumi 1-30). This fire is generated by the reed's intense longing for, and memory of, the reed-bed from which it has been severed. Such rupture is symbolically visible in the perforated and fragmented body of the flute itself (Nicholson 5-6).

Rumi refers to this hidden longing as the sirr or asrar—the "secrets" of the ney—and uses it to explain the concealed existence and lament of the soul within the body (Schimmel 89). He reminds the reader that the jaan and tan, or soul and body, are as inseparably connected as the reed's cry is to the flute, though this connection can only be perceived by those endowed with spiritual insight (86). Indeed, just as the flute is created through the separation of the reed from its reed-bed, the human body comes into being through the soul's separation from the Absolute. The fundamental reality of human existence is therefore symbolized by the story of the reed-flute: both are defined by a longing to return to their origin. The sweetness of the flute's sound derives precisely from the fact that it embodies the quintessential lover. The reed retains the memory of its original roots and expresses its yearning for them, and it is this longing that grants the instrument its emotional and spiritual power. The ney-flute searches for sympathetic listeners, for fellow lovers whose hearts, like its own body, have been torn apart by separation. It seeks companions who can understand its story, share in its grief, and perhaps join it in the search for reunion (Nicholson 6).

Through this majestic and mystical metaphor, Rumi elevates the ney-flute into an instrument of divine truth. Beyond the literary beauty and spiritual symbolism of this image, the socio-political implications of the metaphor are equally significant (Bashir 40-42). The status of music within Islamic religious thought has historically been contested in many parts of the Muslim world. However, Rumi's Masnavi strongly affirms the centrality and sacredness of music within Islamic spiritual practice. Elsewhere in the work, Rumi beautifully suggests that the flute has the lover at one end and the divine at the other, while its sound functions as a revealer of hidden truths. Its ability to move the human heart arises precisely because it is animated by divine love (Schimmel 25). The sacred quality of music is reflected in its capacity to awaken emotion, inspire pain, and bring inner feelings to the surface, all of which are essential to self-knowledge. In other

sections of The Masnavi, Rumi even suggests that the voice of the reed-flute is the voice of the divine itself, speaking to humanity and reminding it of the truth of its cosmic existence. Consequently, within Rumi's Masnavi, the flute is transformed into the archetypal lover, reimagined as the companion of all those separated from their beloved, and established as a lasting symbol of the soul's cry within the human body (Lewis 140).

Sufism

Maulana Rumi is widely regarded as one of the greatest Persian poets and mystical philosophers within the Sufi tradition. To understand why Rumi occupies such a significant position in Sufism, it is first necessary to consider the nature of Sufism itself. Sufism may be understood as the quest for higher realities, the search for divine knowledge, and the effort to establish a personal relationship with God while comprehending the divine message (Arberry 15-18). Since the beginning of human thought, individuals have continuously reflected upon fundamental questions concerning their origin, destiny, purpose of existence, the nature of God, and the ultimate realities of life (12). Rumi devoted a substantial part of his intellectual and spiritual life to these questions. Rumi's major work, the six volumes of the Masnavi, seeks to explore how human beings may attain ultimate truth and experience the divine at the deepest possible level. This study focuses on the concept of truth and its distinctive representation within Rumi's writings (Schimmel 25). It also examines Sufism through the perspective of Rumi's Mathnavi (86).

The notion of "post-truth" and the conflict between competing forms of knowledge may also be understood within the framework of Rumi's thought (Lewis 300). Throughout his works, Rumi consistently emphasizes the existence and omnipresence of God. He portrays himself as

entirely surrendered to the divine will. According to Rumi, God exists everywhere; there is nothing in the world apart from God, and the universe itself is sustained through divine order. The discussion further addresses the question of whether human beings possess the right to hold mistaken beliefs or to act incorrectly in matters that do not impose harm upon others. It also considers whether error should always be regarded as blameworthy or whether it may sometimes be understood as innocent. Finally, the discussion examines the radical proposition advanced by extreme skeptics: that all human beings may be mistaken all the time.

Concept of Sufism:

Sufism may be described as a form of Islamic mysticism or asceticism that, through both belief and practice, enables Muslims to attain nearness to Allah through a direct and personal experience of the divine (Arberry 15-18). The belief that one may follow a spiritual path leading to closeness with God, ultimately culminating in an encounter with the divine in the hereafter, is a fundamental aspect of Islamic faith. In Sufi thought, however, such proximity to God can also be realized during one's earthly life. Within Islamic civilization, Rumi is regarded as one of the foremost representatives of Sufism, or tasawwuf (Lewis 1-5). At the other end of the religious spectrum are theologians, interpreters, and jurists. Like many other Sufis, Rumi placed great emphasis on sincerity. Sufism offers an intuitive approach to Islam in contrast to more doctrinal methods. Whereas the Shariah regulates outward conduct, Sufism focuses on the inner experience of spirituality (Bashir 40-42). In this respect, Sufism functions as a moderating force against excessively rigid or zealous expressions of Islam (78). Sufism maintain that true spirituality extends beyond the mere performance of rituals. Even after attaining a degree of spiritual

enlightenment, the mystic continues to pursue a higher level of awareness. The desire to attain the pleasure of God provides the Sufi with the motivation to continue this spiritual journey.

The term "Sufi" is derived from the Arabic word safa, meaning "purity" (Arberry 12). Sufis are particularly known for meditating upon the attributes (sifat) of God, especially the attributes of Majesty (sifat al-jalal) and Beauty (sifat al-jamal). Central to Sufi thought is the question of how human beings may come close to God (Schimmel 23-25). This objective is generally pursued through practices such as meditation and the remembrance (dhikr) of God (Arberry 20-22).

Theory of Impermanence (FANA')

In addition to being a Sufi poet associated with the doctrine of wahdat al-wujud, or the unity of existence, Rumi is also regarded as a proponent of the concept of impermanence (Schimmel 305-308). His understanding of impermanence is reflected in the statement: "What is the meaning of faith? You shall burn yourself before Almighty. If you want to shine like the day, burn your existence as the night burns away; and dissolve your form into the form of existing reality, just as particles of copper disappear into the dough" (Rumi 1760–1765; Nicholson 220–222). Through this idea, Rumi suggests that one can overcome attachment to the notions of "I" and "we," since such distinctions arise from dualism and separation (Schimmel 306).

Role of Flute (Musical instrument)

Music occupies a central position within Sufism, and Maulana Rumi frequently employs the image of the flute as a significant symbol in many verses of the Masnavi. Rumi regards the flute as essential to understanding the process of Sufism (Schimmel 25). Significantly, the Masnavi begins with the image of the flute, which Rumi presents as embodying the essence of Sufi thought.

He compares its importance to that of Surah al-Fatiha, which he describes as the central and foundational chapter of the entire Quran (Arberry 10-12).

Conclusion

In the experience of separation from the beloved, Rumi seeks to rediscover and reconstruct his own identity through poetic creation. Within this framework, creativity is associated with Rumi's state of conscious inebriation, through which eternity is apprehended within the present moment of the poem (Schimmel 86). Ecstatic infinitude is thus expressed through the finite medium of language, as the deified self finds its place within a body conditioned by subjectivity. The poetic narrator in Nay Namih shifts between the roles of the ecstatic reed and the detached observer. The tension between these two positions creates the dramatic structure of the poem and reinforces its central metaphor of separation and union (Papan-Matin 7). The longing produced by separation resembles a fire that burns throughout the poem in the reed's lament for the beloved; this passion fills the emptied self of the lover with an illuminating form of consciousness. Rumi, as the intoxicated poet and mystic, recollects and transforms this experience into verse through the figures of the reed and the poetic narrator after he has internalized and embraced his beloved, Shams of Tabriz, as an integral part of his own identity Papan-Matin 10). The Persian poet Maulana Jalal-ud-din Rumi may be regarded as one of the greatest spiritual figures of the thirteenth century. His exceptional creativity and poetic achievements continue to be recognized and appreciated throughout the world (Lewis 12). Love, in Rumi's philosophy, remains fundamentally inexpressible and resistant to rational analysis; nevertheless, it is through love that the soul may be purified. Love therefore constitutes one of the central virtues of both his philosophy and Sufism (Schimmel 89). According to Rumi, Sufism represents the highest source of knowledge available

to humankind. He further maintains that human beings alone possess free will, and that divine blessings are bestowed upon those who obey God and follow the divine order (Arberry 24). Rumi's emphasis on love as a means of understanding God became a major theme for later Sufi thinkers. His spiritual and intellectual concerns were deeply connected with the doctrine of the oneness of God (Bashir 40). Rumi's international reputation, particularly in the West, expanded significantly during the twentieth century, and numerous societies and foundations across the world continue to study and promote his works (Lewis 523).

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