

Islamic Mystical Poetry
Sufi Verse from the Mystics to Rumi

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JALALUDDIN RUMI

(AD 1207–73; AH 604–72)

According to tradition, Jalaluddin Rumi, the greatest mystic poet of Islamic literature, was born in Balkh, one of the major cities of Khorasan (modern Afghanistan). His family moved west to the Anatolian city of Konya (now in modern Turkey), the capital of the Seljuq Sultanate of Rum – hence ‘Rumi’ – where he lived most of his life.

When his father died in 1230, Rumi succeeded him as an orthodox professor of theology. The great turning point in his life came when he met the wandering Sufi mystic (or dervish) Shamsuddin Tabrizi, a spiritual guide who aroused Rumi’s passionate devotion. Tabrizi’s mysterious disappearance in 1247 led Rumi to produce some of his most inspired verse.

His six-volume *Masnavi* is seen by many to be an interpretation of the essence of Islamic thought and ideas and a distillation of many of the verses of the Qur’an. Sometimes referred to as the Qur’an in the Persian language, Rumi’s *Masnavi* has been translated into many languages and is studied throughout the Islamic world.

Rumi’s major works are his *Masnavi* and the *Divan-e-Shams-e Tabrizi*, a collection of ghazals and rubais. His most important prose work is *Fihri Ma Fihri* (*In It What’s In It*), a record of his lectures and talks.

Rumi was also the founder of the Mevlevi Order of ‘Dancing Dervishes’. He died on 17 December 1273 in Konya and was laid to rest beside his father. The epitaph on his shrine, the Yeşil Türbe (Green Tomb), reads: ‘When we are dead, seek not our tomb in the earth, but find it in the hearts of men.’

If You Seek Love

If you seek Love
And are a lover of Love,
Take a sharp knife in your hand
And slit the throat of self-restraint.

Nothing is a hindrance more
Than fear of losing your good name;
It’s a saying made without gain;
Accept it with a mind that’s pure.

Why did that madness seize *Majnun*
In many forms?
Why did beauty choose so many
Wiles?
He rent his robe, he climbed mountains;
He sipped poison, he tasted death.

The spider caught a prey so large;¹
How much larger will the Lord’s snare be!
Since *Leila*’s face had value such,
How much more the worth of the nocturnal journey!²

Have you not heard of *Waisa* and *Ramin*
Have you not heard of *Wamiq* and *Azra*?³
You gather your garment away from water;
But if need be you must dive in the river!

1. A reference to the story of the Prophet hiding in a narrow cave, the entrance to which was quickly covered by a spider’s web; this persuaded his pursuers that he was not inside.
2. The *Miraj* or night journey, when the Prophet was taken into the heavens by angels (seeing Jesus, Moses and Abraham on the way) and received a revelation of what Muslims believe.
3. *Waisa* and *Ramin* and *Wamiq* and *Azra* are lovers from legend and romance.

The way of Love is drunkenness and being low
The torrent runs not upward but from high to low.

You will be the jewel in the ring of lovers
If you are in the circle of the jewel master,
As the sky is enthralled by earth,
As the body is enthralled by the soul.

Beat not your drum that none can hear;
Plant bravely your banner in the desert's heart!

Listen to the voices with the ear of your soul,
The many voices rising up under the green dome.

When your garment is removed by Love,
The firmament will stare aghast.

The universe is in turmoil because of Love;
It purifies all above and below.

When the Sun rose, the night vanished;
When bounty came, affliction was banished.
I am silent.
Speak, O soul of soul of soul,
Each atom speaks
Desiring your face.

My Desire

Show us your face;
We desire the garden.
Open your lips;
We desire sweetness.

Show your face, Sun,
From the veil of cloud;
I desire blinding radiance.

O morning breeze, blowing
From the friend's garden,
Bring me the sweet fragrance
I desire!

Destiny is a treacherous flood.
I am a fish; I desire the ocean!

Like Jacob I in sorrow weep;
I desire fair Joseph's face!

Without you the city is a prison;
I desire to wander the mountains and deserts!

In one hand the wine cup,
In the other my Beloved's hair
Dancing in the city square
With all passion afire,
That is my desire!

Weary and mean-spirited companions
make me weary.
I desire a Lion of God¹ or a Rostam²
With me!

Every being can great things attain.
That mine of Beauty, I desire
To gain.

Bankrupt I am, but will not accept
A small diamond, I desire the diamond mine!

Full of complaint of mankind,
Weary and weak,
I desire the drunkard's
Lamentation; that is what I seek!

My soul is weary of Pharaoh's tyranny
I desire the light of Moses!

They say that he cannot be found;
They have searched long.
I desire that which cannot be found!

My song is stifled by envy,
Sweeter than the nightingale;
But my lips are sealed.
I desire to complain!

The Master roamed the streets
With lamp in hand, crying:
'I'm tired of devil and beast!
I demand a man!'

1. A reference to Ali ibn Abi Talib (600–61), the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet. He is regarded as the fourth and final Rightly Guided Caliph by Sunni Muslims, whereas for Shia Muslims he is the Prophet's first true successor.
2. An ancient Persian hero.

My work has gone beyond desire and longing
I want to move from place and being.
I desire the essence of existence!

He is hidden
And the creator of all things;
I desire Him
Who is manifest in everything!

I am intoxicated with the wine of faith
I desire the body, the form, the limbs of faith!

I am love's lute and love is mine
I desire the hands and style of Uthman!³

Each moment the rabab exclaims:
I desire the Mercy of the Merciful!

O singer, sing the rest of this ode
In this way,
That is my desire, I pray!

Arise, O Sun, you are the glory of Tabriz!
Dawn of Love!
I desire to be the hoopoe bird⁴
In the court of Solomon!

- 3 Uthman ibn 'Affan (c. 579–656), a companion of the Prophet, was the third Rightly Guided Caliph of Islam.
- 4 The hoopoe, a salmon-pink bird, took a letter from Solomon to the Queen of Sheba (Qur'an 27:20–44).

My Soul

My soul is mingled with Thee, dissolved in Thee,
A soul to cherish as it has Thy perfume!

Each drop of blood of mine
Is saying to Thy dust,
'I am the colour for Your love,
Companion of Your affection.

In this house of clay, my heart is desolate
Without Thee!
O Beloved, come into this house
Or else I'll be gone!'

The Voice of Love

The voice of Love,
Each moment comes,
From everywhere.

We were in heaven once,
We were friends to angels once,
To that place let us return;
That is our country, our home.

Higher than heavens, we are.
Greater than angels, we are.
Why not leave them both behind?
Our goal is Majesty, Divine.

How far apart, this dust,
From what is substance pure;
Though we came down,
Let's return up once more.

Youthful fortune is our friend;
Our work: to give our soul to Him.
The leader of our caravan,
Glory of the world, *Mustafa*!
This sweet fragrance of the breeze
Comes from His flowing tresses.
The radiance of our thought
Illumined 'by the morning bright'.¹

By his look the Moon was cleft;
She could not bear the sight;
Fortunate was the Moon,
That humble beggar of the sky.
Each moment come and see

1. Qur'an 93:1.

The cleaving of the Moon, our hearts.
Why does the vision of that vision
Not grace your eyes?

The wave of 'Am I Not'²
Came and wrecked the body's ship.
Once more that ship shall wreck
When the body attains union again.

Like fowl and fish, from the ocean
Of the soul,
Man has emerged;
Once risen from the sea
Why should this bird
Make his home the earthly tree?

Yet we are pearls of that sea
And that is where we shall abide.
Why else should waves emerge
From the sea of soul, and create this urge?

The time of Union
Is the time of eternal Beauty.
The time of favour and bounty
Is the ocean of perfect purity.

The wave of Bounty has appeared;
The thunder of the sea arrived.
The dawn of Blessedness has dawned.
Not the Morn, it is the light of God
That's dawned!

What is this picture, form?
Who the king and who the prince?
What is wisdom?

2. A reference to the wine of *Elast*.

All are veils.
The veils are removed
Through this ecstasy!

The spring of this wine
Is in your very head and eyes.
In your head itself there's nothing,
But you have two heads:
One of clay
The other of heaven's substance
Pure.
So many pure heads
Under the earth do lie
That you can know that this head
Depends on the other head;
The other head is hidden from sight,
This head apparent.
Just as behind the manifest world
Lies the infinite universe!

Tie up the water source, cup-bearer,
Bring wine from the jar;
The vessel of perception
Is narrower than the narrowest pass.

The Sun³ of Truth shone
From Tabriz, and I said to him:
'Thy light is one with all,
Apart from all.'

3. References to the Sun are to Shamsuddin Tabrizi, Rumi's friend and Sufi master.

Who am I?

What can I do my friends, if I do not know?
 I am neither Christian nor Jew, nor Muslim nor Hindu.
 What can I do? What can I do?

Not of the East, nor of the West,
 Not of the land, nor of the sea,
 Not of nature's essence, nor of circling heavens.
 What could I be?

Not of earth, nor of water,
 Nor of fire, nor of air,
 Not of the land, nor of the sky,
 Not of being, nor of existence.
 Neither Indian nor Chinese, nor Bulgar am I;
 Nor do I come from Iraq or Saqsin,
 Nor from Khurasan's earth am I!

I am not of this world or the next,
 Nor of paradise or hell am I.

My place is the placeless.
 My trace is the traceless.
 I have no body or soul,
 'Cause I belong to my Beloved
 Entire whole.

I have cast aside duality and embraced Oneness.
 One I seek, One I know, One I see, One I call;
 He is the first, He is the last, He is the external,
 He is the innermost.
 I know naught but Him within, without.
 Drunk with love, I've lost track of the two worlds.
 Nothing I know but drunkenness and revelry!

Were I to spend a moment without Thee,
 I would repent of that moment and that life.
 Were I to win Thy company for a moment,
 I would exchange the two worlds and trample on them.

O *Shams-e-Tabrizi*, I'm so drunk in this world
 That I can only talk of drunkenness and love!

Through Love

Through Love, bitterness becomes sweet.
 Through Love, bronze turns into gold.
 Through Love, dregs turn to tasteful wine.
 Through Love, pain turns into a balm.
 Through Love, the thorns become the rose.
 Through Love, vinegar turns to wine.
 Through Love, the cross becomes a throne.
 Through Love, the burden becomes a fortune.
 Through Love, the prison becomes a garden.
 Through Love, the garden becomes an oven.
 Through Love, the fire turns to light.
 Through Love, the demon becomes a fairy.
 Through Love, the stone becomes butter.
 Without Love, wax turns into steel.
 Through Love, sorrow becomes happiness.
 Through Love, the follower becomes the leader.
 Through Love, the sting becomes honey.
 Through Love, the lion becomes a mouse.
 Through Love, illness becomes health.
 Through Love, a curse becomes a blessing.
 Through Love, the thorn becomes a needle.
 Through Love, the home is lit up.
 Through Love, the dead man becomes alive.
 Through Love, the king becomes a slave.

*It is the True Beloved Who Causes All Outward
 Earthly Beauty to Exist*

The Lover's love is apparent, his Beloved hidden.
 The Friend is absent, his signs are everywhere.
 Leave this desire for outward forms.
 Love should go beyond form and face.
 The one you love is not mere form,
 Whether it be of heavenly or earthly kind.
 Whatever the form that is the object of your love,
 You do not forsake it because life leaves it!
 The form is still there. Why the disgust at it?
 Lover, realize what your true Beloved is.
 And since love increases fidelity
 How can you fail when form abides beyond the apparent?
 When the Sun shines on a wall
 The wall is lit up, but by the Sun's borrowed light.
 O ignorant one! Love not the brick or stone.
 Seek out the source that lights it up!

He Who Needs Mercy Finds It

Doing kindness is the game and quarry of good men,
 A good man seeks in the world only pains to cure.
 Wherever there is a pain there goes the remedy,
 Wherever there is poverty there goes relief.
 Seek not water, only show you are thirsty,
 That water may spring up all around you.
 That you may hear the words, 'The Lord gives them to
 drink,'¹
 Be athirst! Allah knows what is best for you.
 Seek you the water of mercy? Be downcast,
 And straightway drink the wine of mercy to intoxication.
 Mercy is called down by mercy to the last.
 Withhold not, then, mercy from any one, O son!
 . . . If of yourself you cannot journey to the Kaaba,
 Represent your helplessness to the Reliever.
 Cries and groans are a powerful means,
 And the All-merciful is a mighty nurse.
 The nurse and the mother keep excusing themselves,
 Till their child begins to cry.
 In you too has God created infant needs;
 When they cry out, their milk is brought to them;
 God said, 'Call on God';² continue crying,
 So that the milk of His love may boil up.

E. H. Whinfield

1. Qur'an 76:21. 2. Qur'an 17:110.

All False Doctrines Contain an Element of Truth

. . . Say not, then, that all these creeds are false,
 The false ones ensnare hearts by the scent of truth.
 Say not that they are all erroneous fancies,
 There is no fancy in the universe without some truth.
 Truth is the 'night of power' hidden amongst other nights,
 In order to try the spirit of every night.
 Not every night is that of power, O youth,
 Nor yet is every night quite void of power.
 In the crowd of rag-wearers there is but one Faqir;¹
 Search well and find out that true one.
 Tell the wary and discerning believer
 To distinguish the king from the beggar.
 If there were no bad goods in the world,
 Every fool might be a skilful merchant;
 For then the hard art of judging goods would be easy.
 If there were no faults, one man could judge as well as
 another.
 Again, if all were faulty, skill would be profitless.
 If all wood were common, there would be no aloes.
 He who accepts everything as true is a fool,
 But he who says all is false is a knave.

E. H. Whinfield

1. Literally, a beggar, but here used to mean someone with real spiritual knowledge and humility.

All Religions are in Substance One and the Same

In the prayers and adorations of righteous men
 Praises of all prophets are together bound.
 All their praises mingle into a single stream,
 As the water from several cups poured in a jug.
 Because the praised is none but the One,
 All religions by this token are the same.
 Remember, all praise is directed to God's light
 And the various worshipped forms are from this light.
 Men do not praise that which is not worthy,
 They only err in mistaking another for Him.
 Just as when moonlight falls on a wall,
 The wall is merely a link to reflect its beams;
 Yet when it reflects back to its source, it seems
 They forget the Moon and worship the wall.
 Or when a Moon is reflected in a well,
 They look into the well and praise the image;
 In truth they are praising the Moon,
 But mistakenly only praising its reflection.
 The object of their praise is the Moon, not its guises,
 But when this does happen, infidelity arises.
 The well-meaning person, in this way, goes astray,
 The Moon is in the heavens, but he only sees it in the well.
 Because of such idols, mankind is confused,
 And driven by vain desires, they reap sorrow!

The Prophet's Prayer for the Envious People

O Giver of stability and sustenance,
 Set free mankind from uncertainty and doubt.
 In work which is worthy of performance,
 Let them be steadfast and certain.
 Give them patience and weigh down their scales
 And set them free from vile deceivers all.
 O Merciful One, save them from envy
 So they do not become like envious *Iblis*.
 How foolish man is envious over all these passing
 Things: wealth, comforts, bodies that will die!
 See how kings full of envy battle,
 And kill their kith and kin!
 How lovers full of desire for false forms
 Spill each other's blood in vain!