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THE ALCHEMY OF LOVE: TRANSFORMING HUMAN LONGING INTO DIVINE UNION IN RUMI’S TALE OF ‘THE KING AND THE HANDMAIDEN’

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Abstract

This paper delves into the transformative journey from earthly desire to divine love in Rumi’s Mathnawi, focusing on the allegorical tale of ‘The King and the Handmaiden’. Through this mystical story, Rumi unravels the soul’s evolution, where human love serves as a stepping stone toward spiritual awakening. The ultimate motto of the soul must be relentlessly striving toward the divine. The king’s infatuation with the handmaiden, seemingly rooted in worldly attachment, becomes a mirror reflecting the soul's deeper longing for the Divine. As the king’s pursuit of love leads him through suffering, surrender, and divine intervention, the narrative reveals a profound truth: love, in its truest form, transcends material desire and serves as the soul’s path to union with God. The handmaiden's illness becomes a metaphor for the soul’s separation from its divine source, and her healing enabled by a mystical healer that symbolizes the soul’s reunion with the Divine through the purification of love. This study explores the metaphysical layers of the tale, emphasizing Rumi’s belief that the pain of human love is necessary to awaken the heart to its ultimate purpose: divine love and spiritual fulfillment. By analyzing the interplay of longing, suffering, sacrifice, and surrender, this paper argues that Rumi’s Mathnawi illustrates love not merely as an emotional experience, but as a divine catalyst for transformation, healing, and unity with God. For Rumi, the ultimate aim of life is to attain peace, which is possible only through the true realization of God.

Keywords: Rumi, Mathnawi, Earthly Love, Divine love, Heart, The king and the Handmaiden, Self Purification

Introduction

Maulana Rumi, a master of Sufism, saw love as the most powerful force in existence. Rumi describes a love that goes above earthly desires—a love so deep and all-encompassing that it encompasses the Divine. This love is beyond any human passion. This love, according to Rumi, is the holy bond between the human spirit and God, the very essence of reality. For mystics, this love from on high is the pinnacle of achievement since it unites humanity with God.

Rumi considered himself more than a scholar or poet; he was a lover first and foremost, yearning for communion with the Divine. His encounter with the enigmatic figure Shams Tabrizi sparked a spiritual revolution within him, awakening and transforming his pervasive hunger for God. Shams was the catalyst that transformed Rumi from an educated professor into the preeminent poet of heavenly love in the world. After meeting Shams, Rumi's understanding of love expanded to include a love that permeates everything and is fundamental to being.

Love brings man closer to God and helps him attain heavenly attributes. The Islamic worldview and canon state that man was endowed with the divine spirit as a token of God's appreciation for his creation. Hence, this immense power possesses the spirit of God. This component allows man to reach the pinnacle of achievement by overcoming his lowest state and connecting with the Holy Spirit. Love is the name that Rumi has given to the bond that exists between God and humanity.

Loving God is one of the indications of worship and assurance, because a person cannot love God if they do not know him. The journey from oneness in essence to oneness in worship is completed when a person learns who their true lover is and realizes that He alone is worthy of devotion. *Tawhid*, often known as monotheism or the oneness of God, is Rumi's overarching philosophical notion. In the end, there is no truth other than God. Love, in his view, can have no other object than God; after all, God is the origin of love and all things. God, in his view, is at the very center of everything. (Chittick, 1983)



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So given that God is the ultimate source of everything, it is crucial to discuss briefly about the concept of God, because as we know that Rumi's philosophical foundation was based on the edifice of Qur'an and Sunnah.

God

Rumi believes that there is only one God, and Muhammad is His Prophet. According to him, God is "the ultimate ground of all experience, a rationally directed creative will which we found reasons to describe as an Ego." when we emphasize the individuality of the ultimate Ego, the Holy Qur'an gives the proper name of God. There is a *Surah* in the Holy Qur'an named as *Surah- Al-Ikhlās*, which beautifully defines the God. That is

Say, "He is God, (who is) One,
God, the Eternal Refuge.
He neither begets nor is born,
Nor is there to Him any equivalent". (112: 1-4)

Since religion is based on the concept of God, God is at the center of religious life. Rumi argues that God is a personal and ever-changing substantial reality. According to the concept of "only so far as personal relations are allowed to exist between the worshipper and his God, can that God be properly described as personal," a personal God cannot be an abstract concept or notion. Similarly, a God without attributes cannot be dynamic. Rumi held the belief in an individual God who is responsive to human requests for help. Rumi records multiple instances in which God speaks directly to the elect. His address to Moses can be quoted as of the examples. Again, Rumi asserts that God is 'Loving' and 'Living':

"You will see neither the sky nor the stars nor
(any) existence but God, the One, the Living, the Loving". (Qaiser, 1989, p. 225)

In addition, even though God is beyond human perception, He can be known through religious experience. God is crucial to human flourishing. Man should strive to flourish by absorbing God's qualities and having a correct understanding of God's nature and His connection to humanity and the universe. This is because man is created in God's image and needs God as his ultimate goal. According to Rumi, life is a pilgrimage back to God.

منزل ما كبريا است

Our destination is God. (Qaiser, 1989, p. 223)

So Rumi gets inspiration from the Quran: "We are from God and unto Him do we return". And "God is the beginning and God is the end". (Hakim, 1959, p. 29)

Main Theme

A legendary Sufi poet, Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi has the ability to speak to people's souls regardless of their nationality or religious affiliation. Rumi's work appeals to a wide variety of people because of his inclusive perspective on love and the divine comfort it offers. Rumi is more than just a love poet, although many researchers continue to misunderstand him when discussing his perspectives on love. The divine, or God, is Rumi's ultimate destination as he interprets love. He writes of the incredible ability of pure, compassionate love to change any heart from its previous condition into one that is completely dedicated to serving God, and how this power knows no bounds. Unlike human love, which is limited and imperfect, divine love has the power to break through the hardest and most resistant hearts. It dissolves pride, ego, and selfish desires, making the soul more sensitive to divine guidance and presence (Anuradha, 2023).

The mystic's spiritual journey is profoundly impacted by love, according to Rumi's Sufi theory of love. Rumi saw love as more than just a feeling; it was the source of all creation, the key that opened the door to the Divine, and the very substance of being itself. According to this interpretation, love is fundamental to all parts of life, especially the spiritual, psychological, and experiential parts of Sufism.

The mystic's inward state, under the influence of divine love, becomes a constant process of annihilation of the ego (*nafs*) and self-surrenders. A pure soul yearning for communion with God remains when love consumes all other



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attachments and selfish ambitions, according to Rumi's poetry. For the mystic, love is a divine gift—a power for transformation that breaks down barriers between lover and beloved. Rather than being a cerebral process, this inward change is felt at a profound level by the heart and spirit. (Chittick, 1983)

In order to explain the concept of love in Sufi literature, it is necessary to discuss two terms: '*ishq-e-majazi*' and '*ishq-e-haqiqi*'. According to the Rekhta lexicon (2013), '*ishq-e-majazi*' means "mundane love" or "carnal love," whereas "*ishq-e-haqiqi*" means "divine love" or "spiritual love of God." Both kinds of love have their place in the spiritual journey, but they represent distinct phases. Ravi, (2011) in his article '*Ishq-e-Haqiqi (The True Love)*' states:

“Whether it's a love between lovers, friends, or even the appreciation of the beauty of nature, *Ishq-e-Majazi* describes the love that exists in worldly relationships. Many consider this kind of physical love as a springboard to more abstract concepts like connection and emotion. Even if it is fleeting and flawed, it is valuable because it can serve as a mirror or a way to *Ishq-e-Haqiqi*. The supreme, transcendental love that one feels for the Divine is called *Ishq-e-Haqiqi*. It is considered the true and pure form of love that connects the soul directly with God”. (Ravi, 2011)

After realizing oneself and God, the ultimate goal of life should not be temporary pleasure but rather the attainment of lasting pleasure. Love like this knows no bounds; it exists beyond the boundaries of time and space. Seekers in Sufism go on a path that begins with letting up of material possessions (*Ishq-e-Majazi*) and ends with achieving unity with the Divine (*Ishq-e-Haqiqi*). So in this connection we can say that,

حقیقی عشق کی عشق مجازی پہلی منزل ہے
چلو سوئے خدا اے زاہدوں کوئے بتان ہوکر

“Human love is the stepping stone to Divine love

Come, O ascetics, let's walk through streets of idols on the way to God”. (Rekhta, 2013)

Love being the central theme in all works of Rumi, he has always wanted his audience to feel it for themselves rather than just read about it in theory. Rumi has sought to supply "the Water of Life" to satisfy what he calls "a perfect thirst"—love. Rumi frequently employs allegories to transport readers to a world of "Love". Rumi States:

"Someone asked "What is love?" I replied, "Ask not about these meanings. When you become like me, then you will know. When he calls you, you will recite its tale." (Chittick p. 195)

Now that we've covered earthly and eternal love, let's take a look at a famous and deep story, "The King and the Handmaiden," which explores the philosophical aspects of love in Jalaluddin Rumi's Mathnawi. By comparing the king's passion for the handmaiden to the soul's longing for God, Rumi examines the role of human love as a portal to higher spiritual realities in this story. Rumi sheds light on the "metaphysical elements" of love, which are the deeper realities of love. These include the ways in which pure love goes beyond earthly concerns and finds satisfaction in the divine.

The King's Love Affair with a Handmaiden

In *Mathnawi's* first book, "The King and the Handmaiden," the novel explores love in all its facets. A triangle of love emerges in the novel involving Samarcand's King, his handmaiden, and the goldsmith. An important figure in the novel is the spiritual doctor who discovers the handmaiden's illness's source.

Notably, Rumi has written the stories in Mathnawi with the intention of imparting Sufi ideas. These stories are more complex than those that only entertain through their literal interpretation. As allegories, these tales convey basic narratives at one level while subtly incorporating insights from Sufi teachings at a deeper one. The tale of "The King and the Handmaiden" is no different.

The story begins with a king who falls deeply in love with a beautiful handmaiden whom he found on his highway. This event planted the seeds of love within him. But he fell into a deep depression when the handmaiden contracted a sickness that no doctor could treat. The mystery ailment persisted despite his best efforts, and he was unable to determine its source or a cure. His eyes welled up with tears as he bowed low before God. A saintly doctor who claimed to have found the cure for his enigmatic illness came to him after he prayed, answering his petition. He broke the news to the King that the handmaiden had contracted a love disease. The sick person in question was a goldsmith from the town of Samarcand. Thus the king came to know that it was not a physical disease but an ailment of 'Love'.



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The king dispatched their emissaries to Samarcand in a mad dash to locate the goldsmith and summon him to their court. The holy physician gave the king the order to marry the handmaiden when he was hauled before the king's court. The king's strong desire to marry her made the task extremely challenging for him to do. But he had put his faith in the holy healer, so he did as he said and wed the handmaiden to the jeweler. Because of this decision, the handmaiden learned to appreciate the King, who granted her the freedom to marry anyone she liked.

The happy newlyweds enjoyed life to the fullest throughout the first half of their marriage. A heavenly word then came to the doctor, telling him to administer a certain kind of elixir to the young goldsmith so that he would seem smaller. The potion's effects became apparent as time went on. The once-beautiful goldsmith became ugly. He had lost some of his former allure. Because of this, the handmaiden also stopped caring about him. On the other hand, she had previously shown her gratitude to the king for giving up his wish to marry her so that she might get the medicine she needed and live out her wish. By the end of it all, she wed the king after accepting his love.

This happy ending story is fundamentally about physical love or *ishq-e-majazi* in Sufi terminology, at the core level of meaning. The king's instantaneous feelings for the handmaiden serve as a defining feature. The handmaiden's love, on the other hand, was born of her desire, which faded as the goldsmith's attractiveness waned. But she embraced the king's love after she understood her desire was for her physical looks alone.

The story is marked by a divine touch that goes beyond the main level of meaning. When the king pleaded for heavenly mercy after all the doctors failed to heal his sweetheart, the story's element of divine love became apparent. Along with other heavenly figures, the holy physician showed up as a messenger from on high to figure out the answer.

In an allegorical sense, this tale depicts the path of obtaining love from on above. Just like the handmaiden, '*salik*' might fall for the traps of worldly cravings every once in a while. The outcome is a spiritual illness. One side holds that all of '*salik*' aspirations are fulfilled by the heavenly love of God. The king's decision to marry the handmaiden off to the goldsmith is an allegory for this. '*Salik*' can't set the desire of the heavenly trip in motion unless he understands the significance of divine love. '*Salik*' realizes the pointlessness of his preferences for the material attractions when the realization occurs. But it's not easy to come to this realization. Unfortunately, not a single doctor was able to diagnose or treat the handmaiden's illness. The holy physician was sent by divine grace to diagnose and cure the ailment. This holy doctor represents the spiritual leader or '*a pir*' in Sufi terms. Through his spiritual guide, '*salik*', the protagonist comes to the realization that his true destiny is in loving God and that his attachment to material possessions is a distraction from his true calling. When one is united with the love of God, this realization comes to a close. Because there is a direct line from this world to God. Changing the attachment's direction is all that's needed. The poet continues by stating, "Love, whether it comes from this side or that, will ultimately lead us to that side (i.e., we shall be perfect in Divine love)" (Mathnawi, Vol. I, 1998, (Trans) by Nicholson).

So, now let's discuss the different themes of love based on the essence of the above story. Those themes are such as, worldly love and divine love, sacrifice, pain and suffering, separation and union with divine truth are central. Let's deal with these themes one by one.

• **Worldly Love and Divine Love:**

As the Handmaiden watched her lover's beauty deteriorate, she came to the realization that her attraction to the jeweler was based on her physical attractiveness. Had she not wed the goldsmith, she would not have experienced the selfless character of the king. Her passion for the goldsmith laid the groundwork for her eventual union with the king. Many Sufis believe that all of our loves, whether for other people or for material things, are expressions of divine love. This longing is born when '*salik*' begins to love. As Rumi (2009) discusses, these people and things that man loves in this world are nothing but veils. Behind these veils, there is ultimate Truth, the divine love.

One should not, however, confine themselves to the love of this world. This person's earthly affections and the things they hold dear are merely mirror images of the love that exists in heaven. These objects and people seem more



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lovely and endearing to 'salik' when his spirit and heart are devoid of spirituality. As he grows spiritual, he realizes that everything he cherished while he was here is actually a facade. The goldsmith was the handmaiden's soul mate; she contracted an incurable illness just so she could be with him. She recognized her love for him was based on nothing more than physical attraction when she witnessed his deteriorating physical attractiveness.

"In the eyes of the elect, love is a tremendous eternal light, even though the vulgar see it as but form and sensuality." (Chittick, 1983, p. 201)

• **Love's Anguish and Hardships:**

Anguish and hardship are inevitable companions of love. No matter how many material possessions a person has, he will never be able to conquer the anguish of love unless he has what he loves. The handmaiden was showered with every amenity befitting a royal. Even after consulting with a plethora of specialists, her condition remained incurable. The illness vanished after she wed the goldsmith, her sweetheart. On his way to the affection of the gods, the "salik" also endures a great deal of hardship. His union with the divine truth puts an end to all of these hardships.

• **Sacrifice is necessary for Love:**

Sacrifice one's will for the beloved is the only way to prove one's love worthiness. In an effort to win over the handmaiden's heart, the king also did the same. In order to be worthy of heavenly love, "Salik" must let go of his connection to material riches and carnal cravings. His "self" must be destroyed in order for him to make the ultimate sacrifice. The eradication of "self" or the giving up of aspirations came first, according to Chittick, before theory and practice were put into action. Followers of spiritual discipline follow the lead of a spiritual guide, or "pir," as they seek the Holy Truth. In order to prioritize the well-being of his beloved—and himself—the guide teaches him to put everything else on hold. The king followed the spiritual discipline of love as instructed by the holy physician. He set aside his personal wish to marry the handmaiden because she was his beloved (Chittick, 1983). In this connection, the revered Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya also expresses a profound truth: the ultimate purpose of human existence is the pursuit of divine love. If someone professes to love God but secretly has a passion for this world, he is deceiving himself, he says, because true love requires giving up all that one loves to get to the one they love (Nabi, 1962, p. 63)

Furthermore, to grasp the concept of sacrificing cherished things in the pursuit of the beloved, one can look to the Prophets as the finest examples. The Holy Qur'an and Hadith recount numerous stories of different revered figures, but I will focus on a particularly profound narrative: that of Prophet Ibrahim (AS) and his son Ismail (AS), as described in *Surah As-Saffat* (100-109).

In this story, God commands Prophet Ibrahim (AS) to offer his eldest son, Ismail (AS), as a sacrifice, testing his unwavering faith, love, and devotion. Without taking a second, Ibrahim (AS) prepares to fulfill God's command. However, just as he is about to carry out the act, the Archangel Jibreel intervenes, halting him. This moment signifies that Ibrahim's obedience, and willingness to sacrifice have been acknowledged and accepted by God.

A true follower of God dives headfirst into war without thinking about the repercussions, and it never asks "why" before sacrificing all for the Beloved. By doing so, it changes good things into bad things and vice versa. Through the eyes of true love, what is ordinarily considered "good" or "evil" loses its usual meaning. Love can find beauty and meaning in suffering and joy, hardship and ease. It sees beyond dualities, perceiving everything as good or bad and believes that it is a part of the journey to the Beloved. It represents a complete and unconditional transformation in the way of thinking.

“Through love bitter things seem sweet,
Through love bits of copper are made gold.
Through love dregs taste like pure wine,
Through love pains are as healing balms.
Through love thorns become roses,
And through love vinegar becomes sweet wine.
Through love the stake becomes a throne,



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Through love reverse of fortune seems good fortune.

. Through love a prison seems a rose bower,

Without love a grate full of ashes seems a garden.

Through love burning fire is pleasing light,

Through love the Devil becomes a Houri.

Through love hard stones become soft as butter,

Without love soft wax becomes hard iron.

Through love grief is as joy,

Through love Ghouls turn into angels.

Through love stings are as honey,

Through love lions are harmless as mice.

Through love sickness is health,

Through love wrath is as mercy.

Through love the dead rise to life,

Through love the king becomes a slave". (*Mathnawi*, (Trans.) by Whinfield, 1975, p.80)

• Separation and Union:

The divine path or path of love has two fundamental stations: separation which Sufis call 'firaq' and union known as '*visal*' in Sufi terminology. Separation from divine love results into self existence and any annihilation of self leads to union with God.

The love triangle between Samarcand's king, handmaiden, and jeweler explores themes of separation and unification. The king had an overwhelming want to wed the handmaiden after falling madly in love with her. The realization that she loved the jeweler intensified her sense of alienation. He felt an even greater sense of estrangement when he had to give up his wish to marry her so that his lover may have what she wanted. His union with the handmaiden is the ultimate consequence of following the holy physician's advice. So, this story is about coming together again after being apart, which is a metaphor for leaving behind the love of the divine and finding oneness with the Truth of the divine. According to Rumi, on the path to enlightenment, man goes through a series of alternating states of being—death and life—in succession. To be sure, he gets nearer to the pinnacle of existence and "I am God" with each passing lifetime. He comments:

“The lovers die at every moment, for their dying is not of one kind. The lover has received two hundred spirits from the Spirit of Guidance, and he sacrifices them all at every instant”(Chittick, 1983, p. 233).

Furthermore, God embraces every form of union, as each union signifies the dissolution of individuality and all forms of separateness, revealing the essence of the Divine. Stories such as those of *Layla* and *Majnun*, *Yusuf* and *Zulaykha*, and *Salaman* and *Absal* illustrate the soul's longing for reunion with God. Taking *Layla* and *Majnun* as an example, Rumi describes how *Majnun*'s passion for *Layla* consumed him completely; he began to see her presence in everything around him and felt no need to encounter her physically or hear her voice, as such distractions would disrupt his deep contemplation of her true essence. He stated that *Layla* was a cup from which he drank wine, having no interest in the vessel itself. He perceived the divine beauty within her and found no need for her physical form as a mere reflection of that beauty.

Regarding their 'oneness,' Rumi recounts that when *Majnun*'s intense longing for *Layla* caused his blood to boil and he began to show symptoms of quinsy, the physician suggested bloodletting as the only remedy. However, *Majnun* declined the treatment, expressing that his entire being was consumed by thoughts of *Layla*, and he feared that if he allowed his blood to be drawn, the copper (a person who perform bloodletting) might accidentally injure *Layla* with his lancet while attempting to help him.

It is also said that *Majnun* once freed a gazelle from a hunter because it reminded him of his gazelle-eyed *Layla*, and on another occasion, he purchased a cypress tree, seeing *Layla* in its graceful form. To *Majnun*, the gazelle was *Layla*, the cypress was *Layla*; all was *Layla*; there was nothing but *Layla*. (Khosla, 1989, p.226)



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Conclusion

The foregoing debate leads us to the conclusion that Rumi's poetry portrays love in its purest form since it so eloquently expresses the nature of love, life, and the relationship between the individual and God. When we look at the two phases of man's love, the Ishq-e-Majazi and the Ishq-e-Haqiqi, we can see that everything is a mirror of God and that all love is really love for God. So, some individuals believe in the unique existence of God and focus their love solely on Him, while others hold that different objects of desire exist independently and focus their love on them.

For Rumi, love is believed to be the pinnacle of spiritual energy, capable of rousing the dormant soul and rescuing it from the clutches of material concerns and diversions. A life devoted to God requires virtues like humility, compassion, and selflessness, which it can transform from the rough and unruly parts of the human soul. Real love is love for the Divine, and this divine longing becomes the soul's journey back to its source, where union with the Beloved is the ultimate goal. For him, love was the ultimate path, not just a feeling, but the means by which the soul finds its way home to the Divine.

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