



Life through Death in Rumi's Story of the Boatman and the Grammarian: A Thematic and Symbolic Analysis

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Abstract

The following study examines the story/parable of the Grammarian and the Boatman within the *Mathnavi* of Rumi. We have striven to provide an account of the allegorical aspect of the story and the messages that Rumi attempted to convey. We demonstrated that the primary objective of the story is to signify the Sufi concept of *maḥv* (self-effacement/annihilation) and prioritize it in the life of the Sufi disciple. We examined and analyzed how the theme of *maḥv* is presented through an earthly experience, and explored the symbols Rumi, and the Sufis for that matter, utilized in conveying their teachings. We have also drawn parallels with Qur'anic verses, prophetic teachings, and the teachings of earlier Sufi masters. The Sufi epistemological approach, the experiential knowledge, has been the primary examination of our research, and we drew attention to how the Sufi masters imparted knowledge to their audience. Other poetic formulations of Rumi in various parts of *Mathnavi* have been enlisted to elucidate the author's mind-set on the theory of knowledge. Similar attestations of other Sufi mystics have also been utilized in this survey and the mutual objectives of other Sufis have been analyzed. We have striven to maintain an analytical approach and provided an expository formulation of the Sufis on the nature of epistemology.

Keywords: Rumi, *Mathnavi*, the Grammarian and the Boatman, Experiential Knowledge, Self-effacement, *Maḥv*.

Mevlânâ'nın Dilbilimci ve Gemici Kıssasında Hayat Veren Ölüm: Tematik ve Sembolik Bir Analiz

Öz

Bu araştırma yazısı Mevlânâ Celâluddîn Rûmî'nin *Meşnevî*'sinde geçen "Arapça dilbilimci/Nahivci ile gemici" arasındaki hikayeyi analiz etmektedir. Çalışmamızda Mevlânâ'nın vermek istediği mesajlar ve hikayenin alegorik yönünü açıklama gayretinde olduk. Bu bağlamda hikayenin temel hedefinin, *maḥv* (varlık iddiasında veya inancında olmamak) kavramına işaret etmek ve sufi erlerinin de bu kavramı sufi hayatta öncemeleri gerektiğini belirtmek olduğunu gösterdik. Mevlânâ'nın, bu kavramın önemini ve ne olduğunu sunarken kullandığı somut dünyevi tecrübelerle sembolik atıfları analiz etmeye çalıştık. Analizlerimiz Kur'an ayetleri, hadisler, ve erken dönem sufilere sözleriyle

ilişkilendirilmiş ve temellendirilmiştir. Sufiler için birinci dereceden önem arzeden “tecrübi bilgi” üzerinde durulmuş, bu bilgi edinme türünün ne olduğu ve sufiler tarafından nasıl kullanıldığı konusu da incelenmiştir. Bu bilgi türünün ne ve nasıl bir bilgi türü olduğu hem *Meşnevî*’nin diğer bölümlerinden hem de diğer sufilerin söylemlerinden istifade edilerek zenginleştirilmiştir. Burdan hareketle sufilerin epistemolojik yaklaşımlarına da ışık tutmaya gayret sarf edilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mevlânâ, *Meşnevî*, Dilbilimci ve Gemici, Tecrübi Bilgi, Ölmeden Önce Ölmek, Yokluğun Grameri, *Fenâ*, *Mağv*.

Introduction

The story of the (Arabic) grammarian¹ and the boatman is a story which Rumi (d.672/1273) has woven into a larger one in order to make the point of self-effacement, *mağv*. The larger story is the story of the Bedouin and his wife, and how they decided to take a gift to the caliph. Having lived in the desert for years and knowing the importance of water in their life, they decided to take a jug of water and present it to the caliph as their gift. When the Bedouin came to the palace, he found out that the river Tigris runs in front of it. However, when he presented the gift to the court officials, they smiled, yet accepted it as a precious gift. At this juncture Rumi makes the point that since the king was gracious, his attributes of graciousness flowed down to his subjects and his courtiers, and they also became gracious. He draws a parallel between the king and his courtiers, and between the master and his pupils. For him, the king and the master are the source and a reservoir for the courtiers and the pupils respectively, and the courtiers and the pupils are pipes that feed on it. These pipes cannot absorb anything other than what is already in the reservoir. If the content of the source is clean, then the pipes receive clean content. If the reservoir (king/master) contains the knowledge of jurisprudence, the pipes/pupils receive the knowledge of jurisprudence, and if the master is a grammarian, the pupils receive grammar, not theology or any other knowledge. And if the master is someone who is absorbed in the ways of Sufism, namely the true path to God, then the soul of the pupil is absorbed in God as well. Rumi explains that the knowledge of spiritual poverty is the only knowledge that will benefit its bearer. This is the point where Rumi introduces the story of what happened between the grammarian and the boatman.

¹ The fact that the grammarian is an expert in the Arabic grammar, and not in the Persian, can clearly be inferred from the technical term, *nağv*, used specifically for the Arabic grammar.

Transcription/Transliteration

*Ān yakī naḥvī ba-kashtī dar nashast
rū ba-kashtībān nihād ān khudparast*
*Guft hīch az naḥv khāndī guft lā
guft nīm-i ‘umr-i tū shud dar fanā*
*Dil shikasta gasht kashtībān z’tāb
lik ān dam kard khāmush az javāb*
*Bād kashtī rā ba-girdābī fakand
guft kashtībān bad ān naḥvī buland*
*Hīch dānī āshnā kardan bagū
guft nay ay khush javāb-i khūbrū*
*Guft kull-i ‘umrat ay naḥvī fanāst
z’ānki kashtī gharq-i īn girdābhāst*
*Maḥv mī bāyad na naḥv īnjā bad ān
gar tu maḥvī bī khaṭar dar āb rān*
*Āb-i daryā murda rā bar sar nahad
var bavād zinda z’daryā kay rahad*
*Chun bamurdī tu z’avṣāf-i bashar
baḥr-i asrārat nahad bar farq-i sar*
*Ay ki khalqān rā tu khar mī khanda’ī
īn zamān chun khar bar īn yakh mānda’ī*
*Gar tu ‘allāma-i zamānī dar jihān
nak fanā-i īn jihān bīn v’īn zamān*
*Mard-i naḥvī rā az ān dar dūkhtīm
tā shumā rā naḥv-i maḥv āmūkhtīm*
*Fiqh-i Fiqh u naḥv-i Naḥv u ṣarf-i Ṣarf
dar kam āmad yābī ay yār-i shigarf*
*Ān sabūy-i āb dānishhāy-i māst
v’ān khalīfa dijla-i ‘ilm-i khudāst*
*Mā sabūhā pur ba-Dijla mī burīm
gar na khar dānīm mā khud rā kharīm*

*Bāri a‘rābī bad ān ma‘dhūr bud
 kū z’Dijla ghāfil u bas dūr bud
 Gar z’Dijla bā khabar būdī chu mā
 ū naburdī ān sabū rā jā bajā
 Balki az Dijla agar vāqif budī
 ān sabū rā bar sar-i sangī zadī.²*

Translation³

A grammarian boarded a boat. That self-conceited person [the grammarian] turned to the boatman

And said, “Have you ever studied grammar?” “No” (*lā*) he replied. The other said: “Half of your life is gone in vain.”

The boatman became heart-broken with sorrow, but at the time he remained silent and refrained from answering.

The wind [of pride] cast the boat into a whirlpool: The boatman spoke loudly (shouted) to the grammarian,

“Tell me, do you know how to swim?” “No” (*nay*) he said, “O well-spoken good-looking man!”

“O grammarian,” he said, “your whole life is gone to naught, because the boat is sinking in these whirlpools.”

Know that *maḥv* (self-effacement) is needed here, not *naḥv* (grammar): If you are *maḥvī* (dead to self), plunge into the sea without danger.

The water of the sea places the dead one on its head (causes him to float on the surface); but if he be living, how shall he escape from the sea?

Inasmuch as you have died to the attributes of the flesh, the sea of (Divine) consciousness will place you on the crown of its head (will raise you to honor).

(But) O you who has called the people asses, at this time you are left (floundering), like an ass upon this ice.

² Reynold A. Nicholson (ed.), *The Mathnawī of Jalālu‘ddīn Rūmī, Edited from the Oldest Manuscripts Available: With Critical Notes, Translation, & Commentary*, volume 1: *Containing the Text of the First and Second Books* (London: E. J. W. Memorial Trust, 1925), pp.175-76; or lines 2835-2852 of any other edition.

³ This translation is largely drawn from Nicholson’s with minor differences reflecting the current author’s preferences of other words.

If you are the most learned scholar of the time in the world, behold the passing-away of this world and this time!

We have stitched in (inserted) the (story of the) grammarian, that we might teach you the grammar (*naḥv*) of self-effacement (*maḥv*).

In self-loss (*dar kam āmad*), O dear friend, you will find the jurisprudence of Jurisprudence, the grammar of Grammar, and the morphology of Morphology.

That jug of water is (an emblem of) our different source of knowledge, and the Caliph is the Tigris of God's knowledge.

We are carrying jugs full (of water) to the Tigris: If we do not know ourselves to be asses, asses we are.

After all the Bedouin was excusable, for he was ignorant of the Tigris and of the (great) river.

If he had known about the Tigris, as we have, he would not have carried that jug from place to place;

Nay, had he known about the Tigris, he would have smashed that jug against a stone.

The reason that the protagonist is a grammarian is explained by Furūzānfar that the science of grammar had become too great a subject of obsession for people and the grammarians had grown boastful and self-conceited in the knowledge of trivial aspects of grammar.⁴ He also recounted two anecdotes from *Manāqib al-ʿĀrifīn* of Aflākī⁵ (d.761/1360) in one of which Rumi personally was subjected to an unsuccessful test by the grammarians and in the second, Rumi recounted how self-conceit and pride had condemned a grammarian into a well.⁶

At least for the sake of continuity the reader expects to encounter a Sufi master and a pupil in the beginning of the story of the grammarian and the boatman. However, this picture is not easily detectable. Rumi's skillful utilization of the rhetorical device *barāʿat-i istihlāl*, the excellent beginning,⁷

⁴ Badī' al-Zamān Furūzānfar, *Sharḥ-i Mathnavī-yi Sharīf* (Tehran: Dānīshgāh-i Tahrān, 1348), v.3, p.1177.

⁵ Shams al-Dīn Aḥmad Aflākī, *The Feats of the Knowers of God: Manāqeb al-ʿĀrifīn*, trans. by John O'Kane (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p.75, 96.

⁶ Furūzānfar, *Sharḥ-i Mathnavī-yi Sharīf*, v.3, pp.1177-1178.

⁷ *Barāʿat-i istihlāl* is a rhetorical device by means of which the writers and composers of literary works would, at the beginning of their prose or verse discourse, hint with a word or a passage at the thrust of the coming discourse.

through the depiction of the grammarian as the self-conceited man implies that it is a story about the biggest trick of the ego—the pride of existence and/or self-conceitedness—, and the allegory of the boatman implies that the path of salvation from the tricks of ego is achieved through Sufism. A closer examination of the allegorical aspect of the story reveals more than what catches the eye. That the boatman is a Sufi master is not difficult to infer for the students of the Sufi path of knowledge. The fact that one of the protagonists is a boatman is not without significance; he could have been anyone else. But Rumi drives home a significant allegorical point. The sea or the ocean is the symbol of the Divine, for both allude to infinity and boundlessness. Ability to successfully sail and steer in a boundless ocean, the sea of the Divine, without being subjected to the danger of drowning is the feat of a boatman, who in this story represents the Sufi master. Also noticeable is the fact that the boatman demonstrates a quintessential Sufi attribute at the most difficult moment, when his ego (*nafs*) is attacked. When the grammarian denigrates the boatman as someone who has lived for naught, the boatman refrains from answering and remains silent. The attribute of silence figures in significantly throughout Rumi's works more than anybody else in the Sufi literature to the degree that some scholars tended to regard silence as his *nom de plume*.⁸ Schimmel noted that silence in Rumi's works came mostly in the context of Divine love because the secret of love could not be conveyed through words and/or Rumi wanted to leave the floor to the Beloved.⁹ The significance of silence for the Sufis cannot be overemphasized. The very beginning of the opening lines of *Mathnavī, bashnū*, invites to silence. Al-Qushayrī (d.465/1072) in his treatise of *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, devoted a considerably large space to the attribute of silence in the Sufi path and recounted many traditions, wisdom sayings, and anecdotes about the dangers of speech and the benefits of silence. A prophetic hadith urges the believers to either speak of good or keep silent.¹⁰ Another tradition regarded it as protection—*iḥfaz 'alayk lisānak*.¹¹ Silence is considered one of the rules and etiquette of being in the divine presence—*ḥazra*.¹² In poetry, silence was the bewildering effect of union with the beloved:

⁸ Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001), p.97.

⁹ Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, p.97.

¹⁰ Abū al-Qāsim 'Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, ed. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd b. al-Sharīf (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha, 1966), v.1, p.299.

¹¹ Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, v.1, p.299.

¹² Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, v.1, p.300.

I have many words for you,
 Yet when I become united with you I forget them.¹³

By remaining silent, Rumi implies, the boatman was in union with the Beloved despite the fact that his ego was under attack by the grammarian.

Al-Qushayrī also explained that the people of *mujāhada*—the Sufis—preferred silence because they believed that speech causes many disasters, appeases the ego, and leads to the distinguishing of the speaker over others.¹⁴ Furthermore, Rumi drives home another significant point by remaining silent in the face of the grammarian's attack. The Sufi path of knowledge involves experience, and the knowledge that the Sufis hope to acquire is the experiential knowledge. This sort of knowledge cannot be obtained through instruction, it needs to be lived through and it needs to be internalized through experience. The boatman remains silent until the boat was cast into a whirlpool whereby the grammarian would experientially witness that his knowledge of grammar availed him of nothing.

It appears in our story that it is the grammarian who initiates the conversation in order to distinguish himself over the boatman and appeal to his own ego. Having realized this fact, the boatman did not fall into this trap, albeit he knew that he was in the position of a master who ought to teach his pupil (the grammarian) about the trappings of the ego. It is also possible that the boatman did not reply and absorbed the assault because he believed that having done so would have appeased his ego, which, for the Sufis, is the primary enemy that should constantly be subdued and kept under control. It may very well be inferred that the boatman is no less knowledgeable in grammar than the grammarian himself from the fact that he answers him with the Arabic "*lā*". That all the other "no" words are in the form of Persian "*na*" throughout the whole story suffices to demonstrate that the boatman is at least skilled enough to challenge the grammarian if need be. However, the Sufi boatman is interested neither in grammar as understood by the grammarian, nor in boasting himself over the grammarian. His primary interest is to teach the grammarian a valuable lesson through experience. He believes that speech will avail nothing for a boastful egotist who already sees himself at the position of a master. Rumi is not interested in knowledge delivered or acquired through speech. His primary interest, as had been with the earlier Sufis, is knowledge received experientially or

¹³ Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, v.1, p.300.

¹⁴ Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, v.1, p.301.

knowledge which acquired through and translates into practice. For Rumi, knowledge is a means with which one is expected to reach the goal of attaining the ultimate truth of existence, which is the existence of God and the non-existence of everything else. The only true knowledge is that which leads to God, and at the moment of death, all the outward knowledge will be of no avail. Elsewhere, Rumi noted that the required knowledge is the knowledge of spiritual poverty, *faqr* and/or *fanā*.¹⁵ Rumi's reluctance to write a systematic treatment of Sufism has been interpreted as the result of his interest for knowledge gained experientially. He would urge his audience to travel the path to God and enter the way by themselves.¹⁶ In our story, the experiential knowledge is the knowledge of true existence which is gained through death—*maḥv*.

Elsewhere, Rumi differentiates between different categories of knowledge and posits that knowledge, if acquired wrongly, can be the cause of demise for its possessor. Rumi, as well as other mystics, are interested in the knowledge that is received, verified, and absorbed by the heart, not the knowledge that is received by our sensory tools.¹⁷ He thus remarks:

‘Ilm chūn bar dil zanad yārī shavad

‘Ilm chūn bar tan zanad bārī shavad

Guft Īzad “yaḥmilu asfārahu”

Bār bāshad ‘ilm kān nab’vad ze hū

‘Ilm kān nab’vad ze hū bī vāsīṭa

*Ān napāyad hamchu rang-i māshṭa*¹⁸

When knowledge hits the heart, it becomes a helper (but) when it hits the (material) body, it becomes a burden.

God said “like an ass laden with books” if not received immediately from Him, knowledge becomes burdensome.

¹⁵ Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p.297.

¹⁶ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), p.133.

¹⁷ Hassan Ghavami, “Rumi and Alienated Man, Reflecting on the Concept of Alienation in Masnavi: A Review of Self-Alienation Concept in Masnavi,” *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, special issue (May 2016), pp.1226-1241, p.1231.

¹⁸ Mavlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *Mathnavī-yi Ma’navī*, ākhirīn taṣḥīḥ-i R. E. Nicholson va muqābala-i mujaddad bā nuskha-i Qūnya, taṣḥīḥ-i mujaddad va tarjuma Ḥasan Lāhūtī (Tehran: Markaz-i Puzhūshī-yi Mīrāth-i Maktūb, 1393/1973). v.1, p.237, lines 3447-3449.

The knowledge that is not (received) immediately from Him,
does not last, like makeup.

Rumi also postulated the objectives acquiring knowledge and warned against those who, willingly or unwillingly, knowingly or unknowingly, tend to exploit their power of knowledge and fall prey to the tricks of their carnal soul (*nafs*). He elaborated that the true objective of obtaining knowledge should be to recognize oneself.¹⁹ His words run:

Şad hazārān faşl dānad az ‘ulūm
Jān-i khūd rā mīnadānad ān zālūm
Dānad ū khāşşiyat-i har jawharī
Dar bayān-i jawhar-i khūd chūn kharī
Ki hamī dānam yajūz va lā yajūz
Khūd nadānī tu yajūzī yā ‘ajūz
Īn ravā v’ān nāravā dānī va lik
Tū ravā yā nāravāyī bīn tu nīk
Qiyat-i har kāla mīdānī ki chīst
Qiyat-i khūd rā nadānī aḥmaqīst²⁰

He knows a hundred thousand inconsequential/insignificant matters in sciences (but) that unjust man knows not about his own soul

He knows the properties of every matter (but) he is an ass in elaborating on his own substance

Saying, I know everything permissible and impermissible (but) you do not know if you yourself are permissible or an old woman

You know that this is licit and that is not licit but are you or are you not licit? Think about it!

You know what the value of a given article is (but) that you do not know what your value is is stupidity.

The juxtaposition of water, where death is to be experienced, with knowledge reminds us of Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d.618/1221), who, in his

¹⁹ Ghavami, "Rumi and Alienated Man," p.1231.

²⁰ Rumi, *Mathnavī-yi Ma‘navī*, ed. Ḥasan Lāhūtī, v.2, p.614, lines, 2648-2652.

Ilāhīnāma, matched knowledge with the water of life.²¹ Rumi's allegory indicates that the taste of experiential knowledge is to be realized after self-effacement and through water, and only then does one taste the meaning of true existence. 'Aṭṭār's idea and Rumi's image have an atmosphere of the Qur'anic "... We made every living thing of water..."²² Knowledge attained through extinction had been also expressed by 'Aṭṭār.²³ He stated that "if you seek knowledge of yourself, then die unto yourself and do not direct yourself at yourself."²⁴ Self-effacement for 'Aṭṭār, as well as for Rumi, is both a pre-condition and a consequence of the act of knowing, and runs parallel with the allegory of moth and candle in *Mantiq al-Ṭayr*.²⁵

The boat symbolizes the worldly life and the whirlpool symbolizes death. The wind casting the boat into a whirlpool draws the image of the inevitability of death. It conveys the image that just as the whirlpool hauls and sucks any matter that nears its range into its waves, death similarly and inadvertently arrests the souls and bodies. On the other hand, *bād* (wind) has another meaning that beautifully fits the context. It also means pride and haughtiness, and the boat also designates the bodily form of the man. Rumi is telling us through equivoque (*tajānus*) in *bād*, that the wind (of *ajal*) or the grammarian's pride and haughtiness drove him to his demise. Pride and haughtiness are the tricks of carnal soul, which the Prophet had called the most dangerous enemy of man.²⁶ According to Rumi, Schimmel commented, "the greater holy war" should continuously be waged against this enemy of man, and the principle of the prophetic tradition "die before you die" ought to be applied in the struggle against the carnal soul so that the higher faculties may live.²⁷ The notion of struggle denotes resistance and even attack by both sides. Rumi, in his *Dīvān-i Kabīr*, states that *nafs* will never be a friend and there will be no peace between her and man.²⁸ For Rumi it is a one-way street: kill or be killed. A strategy of disarmament seems to be at work in Rumi's mind that since *nafs* feeds on the attribute of

²¹ Hellmut Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul: Man, the World and God in the Stories of Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār*, trans. by John O'Kane (Leiden: Brill, 2003), p.7.

²² Qur'an, 21:30.

²³ Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul*, p.79.

²⁴ Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul*, p.604.

²⁵ Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul*, p.606. The allegory of moth and candle is famously known within sufi circles and it may be recapitulated as follows: The moth draws closer and closer to its beloved candle light but cannot get united with it until it fully hurls itself into the flame of the candle whereby the moth becomes united with its beloved through death.

²⁶ Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun*, p.269.

²⁷ Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun*, p.269.

²⁸ Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun*, p.269.

existence, then non-existence (*maḥv*) is the way to triumph in this struggle. The non-existence or self-effacement translates into giving life to higher faculties with which every man is innately endowed, albeit kept veiled by *nafs*.²⁹

The Sufi master, namely the boatman, shows and symbolizes the path to triumph in this struggle. We have just indicated that the boat symbolizes the bodily form of man, and therefore, the boatman, who here designates the Sufi master, is alluded to as someone who steers the seekers of truth to safety.

Nicholson translated *buland* as loud; however, as was noted by the medieval Ottoman commentator Şarī ‘Abdullāh Efendī (d.1071/1660), with the evidence of the term “self-conceited” (*khudparast*), it is also possible, through *izāfa* construction in which case two short syllables would scan one long syllable, to attribute *buland* to the grammarian.³⁰ It would result in equivoque and the meaning would be either that the boatman spoke loud, for which there is no reason, or he spoke to the lofty grammarian. The harmony (*tanāsub*) between *bād*, *kashtī*, and *girdāb* is beautifully displayed and it runs, respectively, parallel with pride, existence, and demise.

The symbolic significance of swimming can be inferred from the only Qur’anic verse where swimming is mentioned: “It is He Who created the Night and the Day, and the Sun and the Moon: all (these celestial bodies) swim along, each in its rounded course.”³¹ Swimming for Rumi, unlike its literal meaning, designates the same self-effacement and its symbolic equation with *maḥv* can probably be linked to the aforementioned Qur’anic verse. Turning and whirling movements of celestial bodies was viewed by Rumi as the state of ecstasy, spiritual intoxication, and *fanā* and *baqā*.³² Since God himself called this state swimming, Rumi would not call it anything else. It is probably and/or primarily for the same reason that *samā’*, whereby the Sufi dervishes whirl endlessly, is regarded as the representation of spiritual intoxication.

The material body, which in this story represented by the boat, which has not attained the state of extinction, is inevitably going to drown in the whirlpool of death. Death and demise are symbolized by a whirlpool to im-

²⁹ Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun*, p.269.

³⁰ Şarī ‘Abdullāh Efendī, *Meşnevî-yi Şerif Şerhi* (Istanbul: Maṭba‘a-i ‘Āmire, 1288), v.4, p.87.

³¹ Qur’an, 21:33.

³² Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), pp.178-186.

ply the inevitable. Everything is drawn to it and the attempts of fleeing are futile; however, the possibility of survival is not. The only solution is self-effacement or, as the Prophet had said, death before death.

Rumi explains *maḥv* as the death to the attributes of flesh. Al-Qushayrī defined *maḥv* as the eradication of customary (base) attributes and *fanā* as the elimination of reprehensible attributes.³³ The state of annihilation, *maḥv* and *fanā*, is the ultimate goal for the Sufis through which the union with the Divine is realized.³⁴

Elsewhere, in his *Dīvān-i Kabīr*, Rumi also symbolized the human being with a ship in an ocean, and it was the billow of ‘am I not?’ and/or the wave of *a-lastu* that wrecked it. When the ship wrecks, the Divine address goes to those who would be the objects of the Divine union.³⁵ *A-lastu* is the symbol of God’s love and it will only dawn onto those who will be able to reaffirm the *balā* and those who have attained the state of annihilation. But those who have not reached the ultimate goal and have remained the prisoners of their carnal soul will be drawn only to death and demise. The medieval commentator Şarī ‘Abdullāh mentioned a few verses of ‘Aṭṭār where the same allegories of the boat, the ocean, the whirlpool, drowning, and the necessity of diving into the sea in order to attain Divine love are employed.³⁶

The notion of non-existence has its roots in the Qur’anic verse: “Everything but his face is perishing.”³⁷ Elsewhere in the *Mathnavī* Rumi related the notion of annihilation and the attainment of true life to the formulaic expression of *shahāda* where man rises from “*lā*” of negation to the “*illā*” of affirmation that only God truly exists.³⁸ In another instance, Rumi expressed the true existence with attachment to His Face (essence) and equated it with Divine union.³⁹ Al-Qushayrī noted that the true knowledge or the witnessing of grandeur, termed by Rumi as *kibriyā*, and beauty would result in the state of *fanā* whose possessors will become unaware of anything but the witnessed and the beloved. The evidence was found in the story of the prophet Joseph (Yūsuf), the symbol of beauty, at the sight of

³³ Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, v.1, pp.211-222.

³⁴ Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun*, p.308.

³⁵ Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun*, p.311.

³⁶ Şarī ‘Abdullāh, *Meşnevî-yi Şerif Şerhi*, v.4, p.88.

³⁷ Qur’ān, 28:88.

³⁸ Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun*, p.309.

³⁹ Chittick, *The Sufī Path*, p.71.

whom the women cut off their fingers and said that he was not a human.⁴⁰ They did not have any sense of existence that, without feeling any pain, they cut off their fingers, and the state of bewilderment which resulted from the state of *fanā* made them utter words that were not true.

Rumi does not use the word *baqā* in this story; however, we may infer its meaning from the image of floating “dead” body on the surface of the sea. He beautifully describes the process of death and life with symbols that relate to the image drawn by the Qur’an. Since death and life are described as the creations of God in the Qur’an,⁴¹ Rumi also depicted them as the effect of the symbol of the Sea, which in the Sufi literature represents God. The critical point that Rumi makes is that death is inevitable; however, one can make it a prize (of the ultimate union) or let it be a catalyst for demise. He urges his audience to achieve the former and employs the word death for *maḥv* in accordance with the prophetic tradition “die before you die.” The notion that the prize and spoils come after death and nothing else other than death avails with God, and the notion of death and life as both the cause and effect for each other are one of the paramount topics in *Mathnavī* and in his other works.⁴²

Rumi does not necessarily dismiss the science of grammar or any other science for that matter. He, as well as the earlier Sufis before him, is interested in the esoteric meaning of sciences and in the true and esoteric purpose of acquiring knowledge. For Rumi, the Sufis are the only ones who go beyond the formal aspect of sciences, realize the essence of them, and finally translate them into practice.⁴³ This sort of knowledge, also known as *‘ilm-i ladunnī*—divinely inspired and/or immediate knowledge—is the knowledge to which the Sufis constantly aspire. In an analogy, Rumi compares *‘ilm-i ladunnī* with the knowledge that lacks essence and goal, and equates the former with water and the latter with sand. Since it is legally prohibited to use sand in the presence of water to perform ritual purity—ablution—it is also prohibited to exert oneself before the Sufi master.⁴⁴

As was mentioned earlier, Rumi’s discomfort with the grammarians was due to the fact that they were too much drawn into arguing for insignificant matters and because of their tenacity to the formal aspects of grammar. He

⁴⁰ Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, v.1, p.213.

⁴¹ Qur’an, 67:2.

⁴² Chittick, *The Sufi Path*, pp.183-186.

⁴³ Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun*, p.297.

⁴⁴ Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun*, p.298.

furthermore applies the same notion to the sciences of Jurisprudence (*Fiqh*) and Morphology (*Şarf*). In his Arabic introduction to *Mathnavī*, Rumi named his work as the God's greater jurisprudence—*fiqh allāh al-akbar*. The medieval Ottoman commentator Anqaravī (d.1041/1631) noted that for Sufis, *al-awliyā'*, *Fiqh* meant the knowledge of the Hereafter and the knowledge of the tricks of the carnal soul and the ways of overcoming them.⁴⁵ He also quoted al-Ghazālī (d.505/1111) saying that *fiqh*, during the first century, meant the knowledge of the path to the Hereafter, the knowledge of the details of the calamities of carnal soul, the knowledge of what corrupts the deeds as well as the knowledge of fear of the Divine prevailing over heart, all of which is in accordance with the Qur'anic verse: "to devote themselves to studies of religion, and admonish the people when they return to them."⁴⁶ Al-Ghazālī concluded that admonition could only be executed through *fiqh*, which is far beyond the definition of oath of condemnation (*al-li'ān*), forward buying (*al-salam*), divorce (*al-ṭalāq*), and manumission (*al-ītāq*).⁴⁷ Elsewhere, Rumi urged the believer to go beyond the superficiality of definition and look for the true definition of oneself whence one is hoped to attain union with Him who has no definition. Furthermore, with a much more approximated resemblance to our story, Rumi stated that: "(Your) life has gone (to waste) in (the consideration of logical) predicate and subject: (your) life, devoid of (spiritual) insight, has gone in (study of) what has been received by hearsay. Every proof (that is) without (a spiritual) result and effect is vain: consider the (final) result of yourself."⁴⁸ In the story of the grammarian and the boatman, Rumi intended to demonstrate that the purpose of every science is *maḥv*, and wanted to teach the grammarian that he ought to learn the grammar of *maḥv*. *Naḥv* in *naḥv-i maḥv* could either mean the grammar of the *maḥv* or the purpose and the goal of *naḥv*. With the former, Rumi might be conveying the message that just as the sound expression is built through the knowledge of the grammar of speech, the sound and complete self-effacement (*maḥv*) can only be achieved through the knowledge of the grammar of real existence. With the latter, he may be aiming at the fact that the knowledge of the grammar of Arabic speech is to be acquired for the sole purpose of absorbing the depth of Divine message. In a similar vein, Rumi also uses equivoque in *fiqh-i Fiqh*, *naḥv-i Naḥv* and

⁴⁵ İsmā'īl Anqaravī, *Şerḥ-i Meşnevī* (Istanbul: Maṭba'a-i 'Āmire, 1289), v.1, p.5.

⁴⁶ Qur'an, 9:122.

⁴⁷ Anqaravī, *Şerḥ-i Meşnevī*, v.1, p.6.

⁴⁸ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi: Illustrated Edition* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005), p.97. See also Rumi, *Mathnavī-yi Ma'navī*, ed. Hasan Lāhūtī, v.3, p.958, verses 560-567.

şarf-i Şarf. Furūzānfar, as well as Nicholson, commented that the first *fiqh*, *naḥv* and *şarf* meant the essence, the truth, and the ultimate meaning of the disciplines and arts of *Fiqh*, *Naḥv* and *Şarf*.⁴⁹ Anqaravī interpreted them as past participles meaning *mafqūh* (what is to be understood), *manḥuvv* (the trajectory or what it aims for) and *maşrūf* (what it boils down to). According to him, the first words are used in their linguistic meanings and the second words are used in their technical meanings.⁵⁰ Similar usage can be seen in *gharq-i īn girdābhāst* where *gharq* (literally the act of drowning) is to be understood as *maghrūq* (the drowned). Şarī ‘Abdullāh also interpreted it the same as Anqaravī and commented that “the meaning (*mafḥūm*) in *Fiqh*, the purpose (*manḥuvv*) in *Naḥv*, and the change, the result, the fruit, and the consequence (*maşrūf*) in *Şarf* are found in *maḥv* or ever-becoming less and less to the point of becoming extinguished and annihilated (*kam āmadan*).⁵¹ Şarī ‘Abdullāh also commented that for Sufis, every field of knowledge had a semantic and spiritual aspect in which the Sufis were primarily interested. Thus, the spiritual aspect of *Şarf*, in accordance with the Qur’anic verse “and the earth will shine with the light of its Lord”⁵² and “the day the earth will be changed to a different earth”⁵³ is the change of man from base attributes to high attributes. In these verses, the Sufis view that in order for the earth to witness the Divine beauty and shine with the light of its Lord, it must change its form. The earthly form of the earth is unfit for the attainment of the Divine beauty and it must be changed, in the Hereafter, to a different earth. So is the case with man: he needs to change (*şarf*) and evolve himself into a being of high spiritual and heavenly attributes, and strip himself off the base and earthly attributes; only then does he become fit to receive the Divine light. Similarly, the spiritual aspect of *Naḥv* is soundness, propriety and the knowledge of the result of things, and the spiritual aspect of *Fiqh* is to follow the path of the prophets.⁵⁴ Furthermore, Şarī ‘Abdullāh noted that al-Qushayrī wrote a treatise titled *Naḥw al-Qulūb*, in which he marked the line between a *naḥvī* (a grammarian) whose ultimate knowledge is to correct his language and a *maḥvī* (a seeker) whose ultimate concern is the cor-

⁴⁹ Furūzānfar, *Sharḥ-i Mathnavī-yi Sharīf*, v.3, p.1180.

⁵⁰ Anqaravī, *Şerḥ-i Meşnevī*, v.1, pp.539-540.

⁵¹ Şarī ‘Abdullāh, *Meşnevī-yi Şerīf Şerḥi*, v.4, p.89.

⁵² Qur’an, 39:69.

⁵³ Qur’an, 14:48.

⁵⁴ Şarī ‘Abdullāh, *Meşnevī-yi Şerīf Şerḥi*, v.4, p.89.

rection of heart; the former is the possessor of expression and the latter is the possessor of allusion (*al-ishāra*).⁵⁵

The metaphor of donkey is a Qur'anic usage and it is the symbol for the lack of practical knowledge or the lack of knowledge that translates into practice. It came in the Qur'an that "the similitude of those who were entrusted with the *Tawrāh/Torah*, but who subsequently failed in it, is that of a donkey which carries huge tomes."⁵⁶ It was also used as the symbol of some of the base attributes in: "and be moderate in your pace, and lower your voice; for the harshest of sounds without doubt is the braying of the ass."⁵⁷ In another instance it was the symbol for those who turn away from admonition.⁵⁸ Donkey was also part of the material world and it was contrasted to Jesus who was part of the spiritual world.⁵⁹ The donkey, for Rumi, is also the symbol of the base soul whose death and/or loss should be considered spoils for its owner.⁶⁰ The ice is the symbol of the phenomenal earthly world which will melt on the Doomsday.⁶¹ In this story donkey is the symbol of the scholar of exoteric knowledge who, like a donkey on the ice, becomes confounded and unable to move in front of the ultimate truth on the Doomsday. In a similar vein, the ultimate truth, represented by the sun or the Divine Light, will melt away and consume the ice on which the exoteric scholar had been feeling haughty, and, at the same time, secure from the waves and dangers of the ocean.

Towards the end of the story, Rumi ties the story back to the story of the Bedouin and compares man's knowledge to the jug of water and the Tigris of God's knowledge to the caliph. Since the jug of water is nothing before the river Tigris, man's knowledge is also nothing before God's knowledge. The only thing that matters before God is spiritual poverty. The Bedouin was far away and did not know (*ghāfil*) about the Tigris. Had he known, as the Sufis have, he would not have carried the jug from place to place and/or when he found out about the Tigris he would have dashed the jug against the stone.

That although Rumi preferred to remain silent in the beginning but later became rather vocal is not without significance. Rumi left the floor to the

⁵⁵ Şarī 'Abdullāh, *Meşnevī-yi Şerīf Şerhi*, v.4, pp.89-93.

⁵⁶ Qur'an, 62:5.

⁵⁷ Qur'an, 31:19.

⁵⁸ Qur'an, 74:49-51.

⁵⁹ Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun*, p.181.

⁶⁰ Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun*, p.103.

⁶¹ Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun*, p.81.

Divine performance which materialized in the whirlpool. Only then did Rumi begin to explicate in speech the intricacies of Divine truth. Rumi's rhetorical strategy in his other stories tend to reflect a quintessential feature of his literary works: he believes that he has divinely been sanctioned to reveal the Truth. The Truth for Rumi is a secret about which none should utter a word. Paradoxically, a revealed secret is no longer a secret, and it ought only to be revealed by the owner of the secret or those who have been permitted to reveal it. Rumi regards himself as someone who has been given that permission which is represented in his various stories. Rumi probably takes the Divine performance in the earthly life as a signal for such permission.

*Bū ki fīmā ba'd dastūrī rasad
Rāzhāy-i guftanī gufta shavad*

*Bā bayānī ki bavād nazdīktar
Z'īn kināyāt-i daqīq-i mustatar⁶²*

Perhaps, afterwards, permission will come, (and) the secrets to be told will be told;

In an elucidating manner that is much nearer, than these subtle and hidden allegories.

Rumi viewed the whirlpool as the sign which permitted him to become vocal. It is these allegorical stories with which the audience can identify and through which they can internalize and absorb the Truth. Rumi, thus, does not appeal to abstract philosophical concepts and explanations. He rather concretizes his Truth in an everyday possibility with which man is familiar and urges his audience to pay attention to the Divine performance through which God constantly manifests Himself.

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⁶² Rumi, *Mathnavī-yi Ma' navī*, ed. Ḥasan Lāhūtī, v.3, p.1148, lines 5-6.

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