

METAPHORS OF MUSIC & DANCE IN RUMI'S *MATHNAWI*

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*The sages have said: the melodies we hear
from the rotation of the celestial sphere
(Rumi)*

Abstract

The sound of music has often been used metaphorically by Sufis and other mystics to introduce connections to a true domain that may not be seen or touched externally, but could be felt as strong, if not more! Persian Poetry is full of such symbolic expressions. Rumi's *Mathnawi* is among the sources where such metaphors find creative and colorful manifestations. The *Mathnawi* begins with a profound passage at the core of which stands a musical instrument: "The Flute". The Flute (or the reed) symbolizes a pure natural man who, despite being hollow of ego and worldly desires, feels empty and sad, for in the void within he feels strong longing for the Beloved who is absent; and that is why the melodies produced by the flute are often sad. Sufis maintain that melodies and rhythms prepare the soul for a deeper comprehension of the divine realities and a better appreciation of a music that is celestial in nature. Rumi views *samā'* (the spiritual Sufi dance) in the same manner. Body, which is the carrier of the soul, in the process of *samā'* is supposed to find its true rhythm. True *samā'*, according to him, transcends the movement of body to unite the dancer's soul with the Source. This paper presents the

symbolic significance of music, musical instruments and musical movements in the process of self-realization as reflected in Rumi's *Mathnawi*. It also addresses the concepts of "language of presence" and "language of tongue" in the context of esoteric and exoteric realities.

Key words: *Mathnawi*, Music, Sama, Self-realization, Selflessness,

1. *Mathnawi* : the Musical Poetry

Persian poets have expressed themselves using various styles and formats of classical Persian Poetry. These include Qasidah, Ghazal, Ruba'i and *Mathnawi* or *Masnawi*. In *mathnawi* style of Persian poetry the two half-lines (مصراع = hemistich) of a couplet or verse (Persian = بيت) are rhymed. A hemistich is followed and preceded by a [caesura](#) that makes up a single verse unit.¹ This is true both in musical notation and poetry recitation. In *mathnawi* style of poetry the two hemistiches also carry the same number of beats or weight (Persian = وزن). This rhythmic quality makes *mathnawi* easily adaptable to music, and for this, *mathnawi* has often been adopted for epic themes; it goes perfectly with the rhythmic beats of a marching army. The famous *Shahnameh* (Book of the Kings) by Ferdowsi (940–1020), for instance, has been composed in this style. The same style was used by distinguished poets such as Nizami Ganjavi (1141 - 1209) and Fariduddin Attar (1145-1146 – 1221) to express mystical/spiritual themes and love stories. Rumi's world renowned poetic account *Mathnawi-e Ma'nawi* / *Masnawi-e Ma'nawi* was named after the style in which it was composed. The term *Mathnawi-e Ma'nawi* means "Rhyming Couplets of Profound Spiritual Meaning." The *Mathnawi* is considered by some to be the most important work of the Sufi literature. Rumi himself referred to the *Masnawi*, in its prose introduction, as "the roots of the roots of the roots of the Religion." The *Mathnawi* comprises six books of poems that amount to more than 50,000 couplets; it pursues its way through 424 stories that illustrate man's dilemma in his search for God.

2. The Perfect Man and the Melodies of Separation

Rumi's *Mathnawi* has a page of introduction in Arabic. The body of the book begins with a preface called *Nay-Nameh* (The story of the Reed / Flute) in 34 couplets, the first 18 being of utmost importance. Among all chapters of the *Mathnawi*, the *Nay-Nameh* is most famous of all. It is essential for understanding the *Mathnawi* as well as its author – Rumi. The word 'Nay' (Persian = نی), has two literal meanings, 'the reed pen' or 'the bamboo flute' – both being instruments of expression! The former communicates by the means of written words, the latter by the melody. The reason behind the dual meaning of the Persian term 'nay' is to be found in the similarity of the material of both instruments – the bamboo. The hollowness of the flute, in the *Mathnawi*, symbolizes the perfect man, who has made his inner self hollow from worldly desires. The void within this superior man makes him sad, for it reminds him of the empty place of the Beloved. Man's feeling of sadness due to separation from the Source is symbolically expressed in the *Mathnawi* through comparing him to a bamboo shoot that is cut off from bamboo field, where all souls once lived in the bliss of unity – the *Tawhid*. The sadness of the sound of the flute, in Rumi's view, is a result of this ontological need for reunion. Hence the very beginning couplets of the "Nay-nameh", the opening chapter of the *Mathnawi*, may be designated as 'the melodies of separation'.

بشنو ازنی چون حکایت می‌کند
 از جدایی‌ها شکایت می‌کند
 کز نیستان تا مرا بریده اند
 در نفیرم مرد و زن نالیده اند

Listen to the reed: hear the story it tells!

In the agony of separation it complains & quells

"Ever since I was sliced, off the reed field", it cries,

"People have lamented from my moans and cries" (Mathnawi 1:1-2)

"The Reed/Flute" complains about separations, but this is not a typical 'complain' (*shikāyat*); it is rather a mystical way of

expressing a lover's infinite longing for The Beloved". The *Shikayat* (complaint) is really no more than a story (*hikāyat*) of love. In this love-story God is the ultimate Beloved and all men of enlightened hearts are lovers with burning desires.² In order to understand such delicate feelings one must attain certain degree of spiritual maturity; only then eyes and ears could grasp esoteric realities. In other words, one needs to 'qualify' first.

3. The Qualified Listener

Thorough understanding of fellow humans' state of mind as well as their inner feelings would be impossible unless the listener is able to penetrate in the world of the person who is expressing himself. This is a state of empathy – the 'capacity' to share and understand *another's* 'state of mind' or 'emotion'. The flute (which here represents the poet himself) seeks to desperately share his emotions with someone who would empathize with him:

سینه خواهم شرحه شرحه از فراق
تا بگویم شرح درد اشتیاق

*I need a torn chest – worn to shreds – from separation,
Then only I may explain the burning pain of aspiration.
(Mathnawi 1:3)*

Thus, the 'Nay-nameh' penetrates deeper into the heart of the moaning flute and clarifies that the message behind the melodies can only be deciphered by a 'qualified' audience.

من به هر جمعیتی نالان شدم
جفت بد حالان و خوش حالان شدم
هر کسی از ظن خود شديار من
از درون من نجست اسرار من

*In the circle of masses I poured my screams
With the joyous and the sad I shared my dreams
Out of speculation, each became my friend!
Yet none could discover my secrets at the end
(Mathnawi 1:5-6)*

The qualification is attained only through esoteric means, i.e. the inner vision that can transform the eyes and the ears and enables them to see and hear things that are otherwise invisible or silent. Sadly however, Rumi complains, peoples' eyes and ears aren't equipped with such inner light.

سر من از ناله‌ی من دور نیست
لیک چشم و گوش را آن نور نیست
تن ز جان و جان ز تن مستور نیست
لیک کس را دید جان دستور نیست

*My moans (notes) aren't far from the secrets in me
Yet the ears cannot hear, and the eyes cannot see
Soul isn't veiled from body, nor is body from soul,
Without the inner vision though, none may reach the goal
(Mathnawi 1:7-8)*

Ordinary men regard the sound of music as mere variations of waves of wind. They gain momentary pleasure from it and do not recognize that it is the burning heat and dazzling brilliancy of the inner flame that finds external melodic manifestation. The fire that Rumi refers to is the primordial fire of existence; it is the warmth of life, the explosive blaze of passion, the burning feeling of desire and the intoxicating heat inherent in the wine.

آتش است این بانگ نای و نیست باد
هر که این آتش ندارد نیست باد
آتش عشق است کاندلر نی فتاد
جوشش عشق است کاندلر می فتاد

*The cry of the flute is indeed fire, not air,
He who lacks the fire, may he die in despair
It's the blaze of love that sets the flute on fire,
It's for the yearning of love that wine boils in desire
(Mathnawi 1:9-10)*

4. The Dual Quality of Music

Despite its essential status in human life, music acts like a double-edged blade: on the one hand it could be harmful to the mental health of the player/listener and, on the other hand, it could be an effective remedy. The melody of the flute, therefore, introduces the engaged audience to a dangerous and deceitful realm:

نی حریف هر که از یاری برید
برده هایش پرده های ما درید

*The (song of the) flute heals the wounds of separation
Its (empathizing) melodies remove the veils of desperation
(Mathnawi 1:11)*

همچو نی زهری و تریاکی که دید
همچو نی دمساز و مشتاقی که دید

*What can be both venom and cure? Only the reed!
Who can be both consoler and yearner? Only the reed!
(Mathnawi 1:12)*

نی حدیث راه پر خون می کند
قصه های عشق مجنون می کند

*The reed tells a story of a blood-stained path
It narrates the legends of Majnun – 'the mad'
(Mathnawi 1:13)*

5. Language of Presence & Language of Tongue

In the sources of Islamic mysticism (*'Irfān*), constant discussions and great emphasis are made upon the 'inner' and the 'outer' realities that represent the 'hidden' and the 'manifest' layers of existence. Man stands on the confluence of the two magnetic fields; in fact he, as the microcosm, carries both domains within. Each force/domain displays its own version of reality: The inner guiding light speaks to man in the "language of presence" (لسان الحال) through signs and inspirations and connects him to a universal reality that is timeless and primordial. The outer force, on the other hand, puts forward manifested realities that are attributes of the

time-bond world. It is expressed in what Sufis call the “language of tongue” (لسان القال). The two modes of expression are representatives of two aspects of reality. When the inner and outer realities work harmoniously, led by the “language of presence”, man is guided to the right path. If, however the “language of tongue” takes the upper hand, then superficiality dominates life and, as a result, man will go astray.³

Life is an art, and living must be treated like an artwork. Every form of art consists of two main aspects: form and content. Form is a vehicle by which the artist expresses the content, and through which the audience is led to it. Thus, in a successful artwork – and in a healthy life alike – form and content must work in perfect harmony; and, maybe, that is why everything has been created in pairs that complement one another! Like heaven & earth, day & night, man & woman, lover & beloved, the balance manifests in pairs. Singles are usually incomplete and lonely!

The issue is the same even with God and His manifestations. The pair attributes known as “Attributes of Perfection” or, in the Qur’anic terminology, “The Beautiful Names” (*Al-Asma al-Husna*) refer to the same concept. Among the Qur’anic pair attributes of the Divine, that is relevant to our discussion, are “The Manifest and The Concealed” (الظاهر و الباطن). Thus, the two - fold perception of reality (the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’, or the esoteric and exoteric) constitutes an essential aspect of Sufi teachings.

6. The Melodies of Resurrection

Sufis maintain that melodies and rhythms prepare the soul for a deeper comprehension of the ‘divine realities’ and a better appreciation of ‘heavenly music’. Music, like other beautiful things, draws the Sufi closer to God – Who is regarded, according to a famous *hadith*, both the manifested beauty and its appreciator.⁴ The initiating sign of resurrection of the dead souls in the Day of Judgment, according to the Qur’an, is the sound of the Trumpet of Archangel Israfil. "And [on that Day] the trumpet [of judgment] will be blown, so all those that are in the heavens and all those that are in the earth will fall down senseless, ... And then it will sound

again – and lo! Standing [before the Seat of Judgment], they will begin to see the [Truth]’—*Qur'an* (39.68).

Rumi, like some later poets in the East and West,⁵ presents a metaphoric explanation of the musical instrument and its transforming sound in his Mathnawi:

سازد اسرافیل روزی ناله را
جان دهد پوسیده‌ی صد ساله را
انبیا را در ذرون هم نغمه‌هاست
طالبان را ز آن حیات بی‌بهاست
*In the (Divine) Trumpet, one day, Israfil will blow
In a century old rotten body, life will begin to glow
The Prophets too have their melodies within
The Seekers shall find a priceless life therein
(Mathnawi 1:1917-1918)*

He then takes the status of music to a higher level and assigns a heavenly cause for the earthly melodies:

پس حکیمان گفته اند این لحن‌ها
از دوار چرخ بگرفتیم ما
بانگ‌گردش‌های چرخ است اینکه خلق
می‌سرایندش به طنبور و به حلق
*The sages have said: the melodies we hear
From the rotation of the celestial sphere
It's the music of that whirling sphere
That people sing and lutes play here
(Mathnawi 4:733-734)*

7. *Sama'*: Mimesis of the Cosmic Dance

It has been recorded that Rumi's spiritual peak was a result of his encounter with unique personality! On November 1244 in Konya, Rumi met a wandering dervish by the name of Shams-e Tabrizi (the Sun from Tabriz). The very first encounter revolutionized Rumi's life. The wandering, fast-tempered dervish transformed Rumi from an *Ālim* (scholar) to an *Ārif* (mystic), from a philosopher to a lover. Shams made a poet out of a renowned

preacher and, in Rumi's own words, after meeting Shams he was transformed from a bookish, sober scholar to an impassioned seeker of the truth and love. It was then only that he began to perceive music and dance in a complete different light – Divine light!

Sufi poetry is a form of expression of spiritual experience; it is used in two levels: At an individual level, it is used for devotional reading and purification of one's soul, while at a spiritual gathering, it manifests in the form of lyrics for music played during worships. Rumi (who is known among the Persian and Turkic speaking population of Central Asia as *Maulawi*) was also the founder of a Sufi order called '*Maulawiya*' (*Mevlevi* order in Turkic), better known as the "Whirling Dervishes": in their collective gatherings they engage in a form of ceremonial whirling dance called *Samā'*. *Samā'* represents a mystical journey of man's spiritual ascent to the 'source' in search of perfection. The seeker, in his spiritual quest, engages in a spinning movement of the body – enters in a state of trance, grows into a selfless love and finds the truth in his union with the "Perfect." The worshiper is expected to attain a degree of purification and maturity, so that through a universal affection he can serve the entire creation.

The issue of music has been a controversial one, especially from the perspective of *Shari'ah*. However, quite a number of Muslim thinkers in the classical history of Islamic thought and civilization were well versed in music and wrote extensively on it. Abu Nasr al-Fārābī (259-339 AH/870-950 AD), for instance, compiled a monumental treatise entitled "*الكبير فى الموسيقى*" (The Grand Book on Music) in which he gives an elaborate account of the Theory of Music. Al-Ghazālī, in his writings, gives a long account of music, approaching and analyzing it from different angles; his argument eventually leads to the permissibility of music, but under certain conditions – depending on the state of mind and type of feelings provoked in an individual in the course of performing or listening to the music. (Zekrgoo 2008).

Rumi regards music as a transforming force descended from Paradise – a power that "*Beautifies sounds of unpleasant guise*" (*Mathnawi* 4:735). *Man's attraction to music is because, he expresses, "Those melodies we'd heard in the Heavenly Realm."*⁶ And as a result, he perceives *Samā'* as an act of harmonization with

the cosmos, a mimesis of Cosmic Dance. Thus *Samā'* is not a movement of the body initiated by lust or worldly desires (as is the case for most forms of modern dances); It rather transcends the movement of body to unite the dancer's soul with the Source. It is a devotional movement and requires contemplation, selflessness and skills.⁷ And that is why, in Rumi's words, "*Not everyone is capable of a true Samā'*" (*Mathnawi* 1:2762). Shaykh Ahmad Zarruq, a 14th century North African Sufi, extends the same definition to Sufism in general when he expresses that "Sufism is a science whose objective is the reparation of the heart and turning it away from all else but God." And Rumi sees *Samā'* as a means to nourish the soul of the devote worshiper:

پس غذای عاشقان آمد سماع
که درو باشد خیال اجتماع
قوتی گیرد خیالات ضمیر
بلکه صورت گردد از بانگ و صغیر

*Samā' is the nourishment for the lovers (of God),
It portrays the fantasy of the union (with Him)
The inner images gain strength and grow
Marked in music and songs they go
(Mathnawi 4:742-743)*

This union is supposed to bring about a spiritual liberation from ego; the Sufi at this stage experiences a kind of unity with the heart of existence that would result in the purification of his soul.

در هوای عشق حق رقصان شوند
همچو قرص بدر بی نقصان شوند
جسمشان رقصان و جان ها خود میپرس
وانکه گرد جان - از آنها خود میپرس

*In the air of Divine Love they begin to dance
Like the full moon's orb flawless in trance
Their bodies in dance, their souls – beyond words;
And all that surrounds them, they too, beyond words
(Mathnawi 1:1347-1348)*

8. Destruction of Ego and Liberation of the Self

Art is the most ancient form of human expression. Unlike the modern perception of art, that has given it a more individual and emotional edge, in the ancient times and in traditional societies this expression was mainly seen in a spiritual light. Painters and performers of many tribes were, and in certain remote communities still are, respected as magicians and healers; they are believed to have esoteric powers and the ability to receive signs from the unseen realm. Artworks produced or performed with such metaphysical inspirations formed an important activity at societal and spiritual level. In the passage of time, art became more personal and came to be regarded as a medium by which artists express their feelings. Among various forms of art, the performing arts – particularly as dance, have more impact on performers' ego. This is because the end of such arts is limited to the skills of the performers and confirmation and appreciation of the audience. Even if there is a spiritual, divine or metaphysical aspect to the art, it will be regarded as successful only if the audience is pleased. Rumi presents a totally different perspective: he leaves the audience out of the picture and introduces art as a means of self purification. He holds that dance is meant to crush one's ego and liberate him from himself:

رقص آنجا کن که خود را بشکنی
 پنبه را از ریش شهوت بر کنی
 رقص و جولان بر سر میدان کنند
 رقص اندر خون خود مردان کنند
 چون رهند از دست خود دستی زنند
 چون جهند از نقص خود رقصی کنند
Dance in a way that would crush your 'self'
Remove the cotton from the blaze of lust
The dancing ground is indeed a battlefield
Where true men dance in their own blood
They clap, when freed from the grip of 'self'
They dance, when released from their own flaw
 (Mathnawi 3:95-97)

Rumi goes on with the concept of spiritual dance (*Samā'*) as a means of self purification and extends the idea metaphorically to the story of Moses and Mount Sainai:

کوه طور از نور موسی شد به رقص
صوفی کامل شد و رست او ز نقص
چه عجب گر کوه صوفی شد عزیز
جسم موسی از کلوخی بود نیز

*The radiance of Moses brought Mount Sainai to dance
It (Sainai) became a perfect Sufi – purified in trance
Is it astounding that a Mountain be an admired Sufi? - Ney;
The body of Moses too was at first formed from clay
(Mathnawi 1:867)*

True Sama', in a nutshell, should lead to evaporation of one's ego, loss of one's individuality in the ocean of reality and, eventually, expression of one's spiritual Self. This is certainly not an easy task, and only those of high spiritual age could comprehend it. And for this reason, in the concluding couplet of his *Ney-nameh*, Rumi refrains from further elaboration on the subject, and *insists*:

درنیابد حال پخته هیچ خام
پس سخن کوتاه باید و السلام
*The state of being "Ripe"
is no doubt beyond the "Raw"
Let's then cut the story short,
keep quiet – withdraw
(Mathnawi 1:18)*

9. Conclusion

Worldviews, as the term indicates, play a significant role in people's evaluation of their lives, their surroundings, their origins and destinies, and the meaning of each phenomenon. A God-oriented mind provides a different explanation of the world than a mind that is secular or self-oriented. The world of a person like Rumi, extends from both directions: from pre-eternity (*yaum al-*

Alast) to the afterlife (*yaum al-Qiyamah*). In his genius mind, no doubt, incidents and experiences have deeper and vaster meanings! To him music, like any other creation has a divine origin, and its destined role is to open man's eyes to the light of the 'other side', from which the small lights of this world are but dim reflections. Likewise, the spiritual dance known in the Sufi tradition as *Samā'*, is meant to attune man with the rhythm of the cosmos, to free him from the prison of his ego and lead him to a greater self – that is the cosmic self, so that he may eventually be united with the ultimate Self. This is an approach from the side of a liberated man – a man who is absolutely free, except from the service of his Creator! Such a man knows his origin as well as his destiny, and is therefore aware of his orientation at each place and each point in time. He knows when to stand still and when to move, when to speed up and when to slow down, when to increase his voice, and when to keep quite. A superior man is like a piece of fine poetry – full of meaning, feeling and rhythm. He can dance in perfect harmony – selfless and effortless – immersed in the inspiring heartbeats of the cosmic music. Yes, a perfect man is humble and light like a bamboo flute – with a rigid and stiff appearance, that secures the free flow of the breath of life within. He produces sounds that are familiar to all men, and makes moves – spiral and circular – that reflect both repetition of the old traditions and continuity towards future. He is a sage, a hero, a prophet; he is the man for all ages.

Footnotes

¹ A caesura denotes a brief, silent pause, during which metrical time is not counted.

² The *Qur'an* (5:54) introduces God as both the ultimate Lover and the Beloved: "He loves them and they love Him". But these two loves are not of the same quality: The love of God for His servants is out of compassion while the love of people for Him is an inner need; with that they can elevate and grow to become God-like, superior beings.

³ For an elaboration of the two languages see Zekrgoo (2008, 2010)

⁴ ان الله جميل و يحب الجمال

⁵ The American poet Edgar A. Poe (1809 –1849), for instance, in his poem entitled “Israfel” introduces the angel as an entity “Whose heart-strings are a lute”. See Chivers (1952, pp. 78)

⁶ *Mathnawi* , *Book 4*: 736; also Zekrgoo (2008)

⁷ See “Dance and Devotion” in Zekrgoo (2008)

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