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*Makmor Tumin*

# Mystical Dimensions of Morality in the Selected Short Stories of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī

Homam Altabaa,<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Naqib bin Othman<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's works are famous for educating readers regarding morality. They have been read and quoted by various people from different backgrounds. However, it is easy to misinterpret the messages in his works, especially his short stories, as they appeal to a wider audience. This study examines the mystical dimension of morality in Rūmī's short stories. The study was conducted using a critical moral approach, which analyses the moral messages that are present in five selected short stories found in Rūmī's *Mathnawi*. The moral messages in the selected short stories are analysed based on several examples of moral characteristics that are defined by al-Qushayrī, using textual analysis. The analysis shows that Rūmī's moral messages in his short stories are related to the journey of a Sufi on the path. The moral messages can be connected to the characteristics of a good Sufi that are described by al-Qushayrī. Additionally, this study found that the characteristics of Sufi morality described by Rūmī show its superiority against other moral theories.

**Keywords:** Rūmī, *Mathnawi*, Morality, Mysticism, Short Stories

## Introduction

This study analyses the mystical dimension of morality and various examples that can be found in the famous short stories of Jalāl al-Dīn

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Rūmī (henceforth Rūmī) in the *Mathnawi*. Additionally, this study analyses the implications of the moral messages portrayed in the short stories based on Sufi mystical concepts. In the journey on the Sufi path, a Sufi must be guided by his teacher. The teacher is responsible for ensuring that the student is not being led astray from the path. Rūmī is one of the most famous Sufi teachers. His literature is one of his methods of reaching people on the mystical path. Rūmī presents some of his advice in the form of short stories and poetry. According to Choo (2021), the messages found within literature can be used to educate the readers regarding morality. It is common to view literature as a didactic tool, rather than merely for entertainment. In a similar manner, Rūmī attempts to educate readers about Sufism and Sufi morality through his writings. Furthermore, Rūmī was interested in presenting the practical aspects of Sufi teachings in the form of stories to make it easier for readers to apply its teachings in their daily lives. This study aims to analyse the mystical dimension of morality and the examples shown in the five selected short stories of Rūmī.

Rūmī's works have been known to be poetic and full of messages that could educate the readers. Currently, his works have attracted readers from various backgrounds, not just Sufi and Muslim readers. The mystical concepts that are preached in his works can be related to other religions, such as Christianity. The core of Sufism is related to the refinement of morality and character for those on the Sufi path, and this is what Rūmī preaches in his works. In addition, Sufi morality concerns two aspects, which are the internal and external dimensions of morality. The Sufi journey is a process where the heart undergoes purification. In this process, the good inner dimension of morality will manifest itself externally as good moral values and acts. However, without prior knowledge of mysticism and Sufism, readers could misinterpret the messages that are present in Rūmī's works, therefore deviating from the messages that he is preaching. This claim is supported by Chittick (2005), who mentioned that the moral messages portrayed in Rūmī's works require an in-depth understanding of Sufism in order to correctly interpret the messages within. Furthermore, the abundance of emerging moral theories that use science and reason, especially in modern times, have created a society that doubts the relevance of a moral theory that focuses on mysticism.

Therefore, this study attempts to analyse the mystical dimension of morality in Rūmī's collection of short stories from the *Mathnawi* based on several examples of moral characteristics, which are awareness of God (*murāqabah*), trust in God (*tawakkul*), renunciation (*zuhd*), patience (*sabr*), sincerity (*ikh̄lās*), striving (*mujāhadah*), repentance (*tawbah*), humility (*k̄hushu'*) and generosity (*sakh̄ā'*). These moral characteristics are defined by al-Qushayrī (2007), who preaches Sufi morality through the journey of internal refinement of the heart. These moral characteristics emerge when the internal dimension is refined with practices of worship in pursuit of being closer to God. By analysing the moral messages in Rūmī's *Mathnawi* from a Sufi perspective, the true essence of the messages can be correctly understood.

### Theoretical Framework

This study analyses the mystical dimension of morality in Rūmī's five selected short stories found in the *Mathnawi*. Multiple theories can be adopted to analyse morality in a literary text. Since Rūmī was a Sufi writer, a Sufi moral approach is appropriate to analyse aspects of morality in his short stories. This section provides an explanation of morality in Sufism and the different moral characteristics.

In Sufism, the development of morals is not static. It is a journey that a Sufi must take to purify his soul while improving his moral characteristics. This journey takes him on a path to becoming the perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*). According to Chittick (2005), the embodiment of the perfect Man is Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Prophet Muhammad has shown multiple moral characteristics that are exemplary for Sufis to follow. The journey that a Sufi takes on the path is to become like Prophet Muhammad.

Next, Heck (2006) noted that there are two moral goals that Sufis strive to accomplish in the journey. The first moral goal is the annihilation of the lower soul from its inclination towards evil. Similarly, Sameh (2020) noted that in Sufism, perfection in morality could only be obtained after one has successfully overcome the ego (*nafs*). The ego, which is responsible for Man's self-centred nature, prevents him from having authentic moral characteristics. Without overcoming the lower soul, one's action, however good it may seem externally, will not be

moral in Sufism. The second moral goal mentioned by Heck (2006) is to progress the soul through different stations (*maqām*) and states (*hāl*). The way to truly achieve this is to practise perpetual recitation. As the soul is purified, the external dimension will reflect it as good manners or moral characters.

The book *al-Risālah* by al-Qushayrī is used for this study's analysis. It presents a list of good characteristics and manners that are derived from the teachings of past Sufi masters and the words of the Prophet. The moral characteristics that are used in this study are awareness of God, trust in God, renunciation, patience, sincerity, striving, repentance, humility and generosity.

The first moral characteristic is awareness of God. Al-Qushayrī defined this moral characteristic as being aware of the presence of God in our daily lives. To elaborate, the awareness that a Sufi feels of God's presence is as if he could see God, even though he cannot, because God is able to see his every action. The people who have mastered this virtue will always maintain good behaviour. This awareness also involves the internal dimension in which the human thought and heart reside. In this case, the Sufi is also aware that every single thought and intention are under the observation of God and, therefore, his intentions must remain pure.

The second moral characteristic is trust in God, which is defined by al-Qushayrī as having the utmost trust in God. It creates a person who is unbothered by any challenge that he is facing. As a result, his behaviour will always reflect positively in any situation. Furthermore, it creates a person who remains satisfied with the position that he is in. In other words, he is not being driven by greed and lust for momentary success in this world.

The third moral characteristic is renunciation, which is defined as rejecting the temptation for worldly pleasures. This includes sins that are clearly wrong as well as pleasures that are permissible but could drive a person further away from God. A Sufi who possesses this moral characteristic finds pleasure in being closer to God and actively practises worship for the love of God. The pleasure that he feels from being closer to God is far greater than the momentary pleasures that he can obtain from this world.



The fourth moral characteristic is patience, which is defined as enduring the challenges and the temptation of this world. A person who possesses this characteristic will manage to stay on the right path as he cannot be distracted by other things that could lead him away from God. Patience is needed for a person to tread on the mystical path because of its challenging nature.

The fifth moral characteristic is sincerity, which is defined as being sincere to God in every action. The level of sincerity that is practised by a person who possesses this characteristic is extremely high. In Sufism, a person who is truly sincere in his actions towards God is not aware of it. If a person is aware that he is being sincere, then there is still an element of the self in his actions. Furthermore, a person who is sincere disregards the view of others about his actions. This means that he does not care what others might think of his actions.

The sixth moral characteristic is striving, which is described as being committed and hard-working on the path. The journey towards mystical perfection is an active pursuit. This means that a person must go through active practices of worship to reach the goal and be united with God. Therefore, it is necessary that a person possesses this characteristic for him to be successful.

The seventh moral characteristic is repentance, which is typically listed as one of the earliest in the list of moral characteristics that a Sufi must possess on the path. For a person to stay on the path, repentance is necessary as it cleanses any past sins. A pure heart is important on the journey as it serves as the foundation for one's characteristics.

The eighth moral characteristic is humility. To put it simply, humility is defined by al-Qushayrī as the absence of pride. However, the implication of being humble in Sufism is much more complex. Although humility stems from the heart, it will translate to the outward appearance of the person. A person who possesses this characteristic disregards any greatness that he possesses and attributes them to the greatness of God.

The final moral characteristic that is used in this study is generosity. Al-Qushayrī (2007) mentioned that the definition of generosity is having an easy time giving to others. Even though people who give others abundantly can already be considered as generous by the general

population, a Sufi can be considered generous when he gives to others while leaving very little or nothing for himself. This action shows that a Sufi is completely separated from his interests while looking out for others.

These characteristics are some of the most common good characteristics that are found in Rūmī's short stories in the *Mathnawi*. The moral characteristics that are taught in these short stories are those of a Sufi who follows the model of the perfect Man. To capture the true essence of these moral characteristics, the death of the lower soul (*nāfs*) has to take place. Essentially, a soul that is plagued with worldly intentions deviates from the pursuit of the true goal, which is to be closer to God.

To analyse the mystical dimensions of morality in Rūmī's short stories, this study opts to use textual analysis as the method. According to Mckee (2001), textual analysis is the method used to analyse the meaning behind the content of a text. Furthermore, Allen (2017) mentioned that textual analysis includes understanding the text's language, symbols and pictures in order to understand how people communicate through it.

This study utilises the English translation of Rūmī's five selected short stories found in Maryam Mafi's *The Book of Rūmī: 105 Stories and Fables that Illuminate, Delight, and Inform*. First, the moral message in the short stories is analysed using textual analysis. Then, this study compares the analysis with a list of moral characteristics given by al-Qushayrī (2007). However, it must be noted that this study does not strive to present an accurate interpretation of the text used. Mckee (2001) explained that there could be multiple possible interpretations of a single text. Some are more accurate than others, depending on the situation. This analysis merely presents one possible interpretation of the text through a Sufi moral lens.

## Overview of Analysis

In this section, this paper analyses each of the five selected short stories from the *Mathnawi* by identifying the moral messages and the mystical concepts within in order to elaborate on the moral implications of the moral messages. The moral messages are analysed through

the motifs used by Rūmī in each short story. This paper agrees that Rūmī's messages in the selected short stories suggest that morality through God's commands is superior in forming a moral individual. Furthermore, this paper analyses the characteristics and the outcome of Sufi morality as described by Rūmī in the selected short stories.

### *Analysis of "Spitting at Imam Ali"*

The first short story analysed in this paper is titled "Spitting at Imam Ali". The story tells the tale of Imam Ali, who refuses to kill an enemy while being influenced and motivated by his anger. In this short story, the moral messages found are to control one's emotions, to be aware of God, and to align one's actions with one's intentions. First, the moral message about controlling one's emotions is portrayed through the character, Imam Ali, who abstains from performing actions while being influenced by his anger. The moral characteristic that reflects this ability is patience (al-Qushayrī, 2007). This characteristic can be seen in the line, "What suppressed your anger at that instant?" (Rūmī, 2018, p. 26), following Imam Ali's action of not killing the enemy he fought against after being spat on. His answer to that question entails that he is refraining from doing anything motivated by his own emotions, in this case, anger. The sword in this story symbolises the emotions of a Sufi. Although emotions still exist, a Sufi has to be aware of when they would bring him closer to God or further away from him. The control that Imam Ali had over his emotions can be seen when he said, "Anger is my obedient slave" (Rūmī, 2018). A Sufi who has successfully controlled his emotions can be seen as a person who has successfully overcome his ego (self).

Through this moral characteristic, a person can practise self-control so as to prevent him from acting irrationally. For example, a person influenced by anger might commit actions that harm others, or even break laws to maintain order. This example is true for most human emotions, such as happiness and sadness. In the case of a Sufi, a rational mind is one that is connected to the will of God through his commands. By abstaining from performing actions influenced by one's emotions, one can stay on the right path, which is towards unity with God. Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh (2010, p. 57) mentioned a similar message in his discussion of intense emotions: "Do not fear that the way (to Allah)

may be puzzling to you but feel afraid of passion overpowering you.” This aphorism by the Sufi master warns about the dangers of emotions or “passion” because it can threaten a person’s “spiritual prospects”. This means that a person’s connection with God is threatened when he acts according to his own emotions.

Second, Rūmī communicates the idea that God views our actions. Consequently, a servant who is aware of this will be much more aware of his actions. This characteristic reflects the mystical station of awareness (al-Qushayrī, 2007, p. 202), whereby a person is aware that his actions and intentions are being viewed by God. As a result, everything that he does is in the interest of God’s will. In this story, Imam Ali is aware that God views his every single action. Therefore, he refrains from performing actions for egotistical reasons. The lines that capture this are, “I only fight for God.... I’m not in the business of saving my own skin” (Rūmī, 2018, p. 26). For a person to possess the characteristic of awareness, he must first identify his own weaknesses to avoid being influenced by his ego. Once he is aware of it, he can avoid performing actions that deviate from the will of God.

Through this moral characteristic, Rūmī proves the relevance of Sufi morality. In this short story, Rūmī is implying that the presence of God is constant. Despite being in a situation where another human being is absent, one still must act morally because every single one of our actions is being viewed by God. The belief in this idea encourages a person to act morally in every situation, despite not being seen by others. For example, if a person is thrown into a forest, he is still obligated to act according to God’s commands. If every human being successfully practises this moral characteristic, the occurrence of crime would be diminished, thus creating a perfectly moral society.

Next, the idea that one’s actions must be aligned with one’s intentions is reflected in this short story. Imam Ali refrains from killing the soldier because of his anger, despite having nobody else to judge his intentions. In this case, we can see that the message preached by Rūmī involves not just moral action, but the principles and intentions behind it. This is preached in a famous Hadith in Islam:

Actions are according to intentions, and everyone will get what was intended. Whoever migrates with an intention for Allah and His messenger, the migration will be for the

sake of Allah and his Messenger. And whoever migrates for worldly gain or to marry a woman, then his migration will be for the sake of whatever he migrated for. (*Sahih Bukhari & Muslim*)

The above Hadith highlights that the intention of one's action plays a huge role in the eyes of God. If the intention behind an action is not pure, then despite seeming as morally correct, the action will be deemed morally incorrect. In addition, this Hadith is also in line with the mystical station of sincerity (al-Qushayrī, 2007). A person who possesses this characteristic performs every single action for the sake of their love for God. This characteristic is essential in a Sufi's actions because his love for God serves as the primary motivation for his journey (Zarrabi-Zadeh, 2014).

If a person successfully practises this concept, this closes the option for him to manipulate the idea of morality for his own cause. He can perform an action that is considered morally correct by society, but for an egotistical reason. For example, if Imam Ali were to kill the soldier that he was fighting against, his action would be justified as he was in the middle of a war with the soldier. Therefore, his action can be deemed as morally correct without knowing his intention. Furthermore, no other human being in this story could judge his action other than himself. However, he still refrains from killing the soldier because he practises the characteristic of awareness. Furthermore, he believes that the guidelines provided for him by religion are superior to his own reasoning. Therefore, he refrains from performing this specific action by his own logic.

### ***Analysis of "The Angel of Death"***

"The Angel of Death" tells the journey of a man who is struggling to escape death by seeking the help of Prophet Solomon. Two moral messages that can be extracted are about the power of Divine decree in Sufism and the negativity of being too attached to this world. First, as part of the Islamic faith, a Sufi must be faithful to what God has decided for him as this is essential in becoming a moral Sufi. This characteristic is displayed in al-Qushayrī's (2007) writing, in which

trust in God as one of the mystical stations (p. 178). In this short story, Rūmī illustrates the antithesis of faith through the character of the man and how it impacts his life. For example, the character is shocked when he catches the angel of death staring at him. The line reads, “We all know that Azrael takes his orders only from God and never wavers in his duty.” Rūmī is pointing out the fact that one should not worry about matters that have been decided for him, in this case, death. Human willpower holds no power against the power of the Divine. Therefore, believing in the fact that one could change his own destiny, against Divine decree, creates a person who assumes that he could abuse his time in this world. For example, a person who thinks that he could manipulate his own destiny would become reckless in his actions. This is because he would assume that he could repent before his death.

On the contrary, a person’s faith in preordained matters will make him committed to purifying his soul while building good moral characteristics. One figure who has discussed similar messages in his work is Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh. In a translation of his aphorism on predestination, Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh (2010) mentioned, “Intentions cannot intrude the walls of preordained things” (p. 3). He tried to portray similar messages using Quranic verses, just as Rūmī did in the short story. As mentioned before, Rūmī emphasises on the message of death in the short story. Therefore, instead of being fixated on death, one ought to focus on building his relationship with God by venturing on the path. By focusing on this aspect, one can become closer to God, therefore becoming a moral individual.

Second, Rūmī implies in the story that the attachment of an individual to this world is a negative quality. Based on Sufi teachings, a person must be detached from the pleasures of this world, including attachment to one’s life. In this story, the character’s unwillingness to die according to his fate, as he saw the angel of death staring at him, shows that he is too attached to the idea of living in this world. This is captured in the lines where he asks for the Prophet’s help to save him from the angel of death: “I beg of you, my life’s in your hands. Please tell the wind to carry me to India, where I’ll be safe from Angel’s harm” (Rūmī, 2018, p. 8). From this scene, it is quite clear that the man was unwilling to leave the world that he loves very much, instead of loving God. Al-Qushayrī (2007) elaborated on the moral characteristic of renunciation, in which a person abstains from performing acts that are

clearly prohibited in Islam as well as things that are allowed but could bring pleasures that would distract a person from God. For instance, a person's obsession with living in this world could reflect an absence of this moral characteristic.

Rūmī is trying to warn readers not to be distracted by the pleasures of this world. In the context of the short story, the man is too worried to leave this world for the world of the hereafter. This is because he is too distracted by the pleasures that he could obtain when he is in the world of the living. As a result, he intends to cheat his death by seeking the assistance of a Prophet. Similar messages can be found in Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh's (2010) aphorism, which mentions that a heart that is distracted by worldly pleasures will not be illuminated with the light that attracts people towards God (cleansing the heart of blemishes). Without the Divine light to guide a person, he will continue to drown in his own lust. Both Rūmī and Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh preach attachment to God and the hereafter because it creates a person who is wary of committing sin. When a person is warier of sin, the possibility of committing it becomes lower. For example, if a man is set to walk through a road filled with thorns, the thorns are symbolic of the sins that a person can commit in his life. If he is more aware of the thorns on the road, then he would walk more carefully, avoiding the thorns in order to get to the other side of the road.

### *Analysis of "The Fly Who Thought She Was a Sailor"*

"The Fly Who Thought She Was a Sailor" tells of two characters, a hardworking donkey following the instructions of its owner, and a fly who is lost in her own pride. In this fable, Rūmī is implying two moral messages, which are to be careful with one's pride and to constantly work towards being closer to God. First, Rūmī implies the danger of pride in the story through the fly: "The fly was gloating in her pride, floating on the stream of urine, believing that she was sailing the seven seas" (Rūmī, 2018, p. 9). Here, Rūmī is trying to demonstrate the role of pride in clouding a person's judgment of what is right and wrong. Since the fly is too consumed with her pride in being a captain, she fails to notice the reality of the situation. This entails an absence of the moral characteristic of humility (al-Qushayrī, 2007), which leads men to drown in pride, believing that they possess greatness produced

by their own skills. Without pride, men would be open to looking at the real picture, which is to find God. Pride becomes an agent that aids the illusion of greatness that leads a person away from God. This discussion leads to the mystical idea of illusion versus reality.

Chittick (2005) discussed the concept of illusion as the ego and reality as unity with God. Through this short story, Rūmī is encouraging readers to undergo this transformation, known as *fana'* and *baqa'*, in order to be able to realise the reality of the world through the correct path (*ṭarīqah*), which is towards union with God. In addition, Rūmī talks about the pleasures of the world as another agent that traps people in an illusion. This can also be seen in the character of the fly in its monologue: "I'm sailing away on the sea. I'm the captain in this ship, and what a perfectly seasoned navigator I am! Who dares to stop me now?" (Rūmī, 2018, p. 9). From these lines, we can infer that the fly is drowning in the pleasures of sailing in the urine, not realising that she is indeed in a filthy substance. Through this, Rūmī is trying to portray the urine as the pleasures of this world, such as wealth and lust. Through the lens of a man who is influenced by his greed, the man is not aware that the pleasures that he feels are nothing but a filthy thing that distracts him from his journey on the path.

Illusion is connected to the concept of unveiling, which is another common idea discussed among mystical scholars. The pride of Man and the pleasures of the world act as a veil that clouds human judgment from seeing the true reality, which is unity with God. Chittick (2005) mentioned that this veil is called the ego. The ego is responsible for separating Man and God. If human beings do not eliminate the ego, they will forever live under the illusion of it, separated from the ultimate reality. As a result, they will not be able to fulfil their true potential as servants of God. As they become aware of the existence of the ego, they can start the process of internal refinement that could subdue it. Eventually, the good internal dimension will reflect itself externally as good moral characteristics.

The illusion that prevents Man from seeing reality can be seen as a form of delusion. Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh (2015) described this delusion as something that stirs up the focus of human beings from their true purpose. He mentioned that illusion "misleads" (deludes) a person into thinking that his true purpose lies in being great in this world, instead



of being a great servant. Furthermore, the goals that human beings set in delusion can cause them to do terrible acts in pursuit of those goals. For example, a person obsessed with being wealthy might be involved in corruption and bribery as a way to accumulate more wealth. In this circumstance, he will neglect his true responsibilities as the servant of God, while being drunk in the pursuit of wealth. In addition, a person who hopes to become a better servant must actively pursue the goal. Since Sufism's moral goal of inward refinement can only be achieved through practices of worship, a servant must continue to do so in order not to be swayed.

Second, Rūmī implies the importance of spiritual progression in the Sufi's journey. During his journey towards mystical perfection, a Sufi must work towards his soul's progression throughout the mystical stations. This journey is necessary for him to become mystically and morally enlightened. In the fable, Rūmī illustrates this characteristic through the donkey. The donkey is characterised as an animal that is very committed to his job of carrying heavy loads for his owner. This characteristic can be seen in the line, "A poor donkey had been patiently carrying his heavy load all day long without a moment's respite" (Rūmī, 2018, p. 9). This reflects the characteristic of a Sufi who is ardently committed to his continuous and long journey, while motivated by the love for God. Without the commitment of the Sufi, he would not be able to fulfil the journey towards mystical perfection. Furthermore, the characteristic of being committed is related to one of the mystical stations that is listed by al-Qushayrī (2007), which is striving. This station is important because it creates an individual who continues to work hard to purify his soul and progress on the journey towards mystical perfection.

Furthermore, a Sufi who is committed to his journey also follows the Divine command. Since one of the dimensions of Sufism includes law (*shariah*), this means that a Sufi must first master the rules of Islam and practise them while on the journey. Although his journey to purify his soul concerns mainly the mystical and internal dimensions, the laws set forth in the Quran and Hadith are still the main guidelines for his behaviour. Moreover, in the fable, another symbol that reflects the Sufi's efforts on the journey is the urine released by the donkey after a long day, which can be seen as the renunciation of a committed Sufi from the worldly pleasures and sins that he ignores. It is these sins and

pleasures that are instead enjoyed by the fly, which represents those who are ignorant.

A Sufi's commitment to his journey is extremely important because his value is based on the efforts that he has shown while on the journey. Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh (2010, p. 134) preached this in one of his aphorisms on a person's lifespan: "Some lives are long in terms of years but short in terms of results, while others are short in terms of years but abundant in terms of results." This aphorism talks about the productive life of a person who strives towards mystical perfection. Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh mentioned that the longevity of a person's life is irrelevant if it is not filled with efforts to be closer to God. This aphorism highlights the importance for a person to continue to work and progress on the journey to become someone with value. In the fable, Rūmī is comparing the life of the donkey, which contains more value, to that of the fly. So, a person who understands this moral message will be motivated to embark on the journey towards mystical perfection.

### *Analysis of "Chinese and Greek Painters"*

The short story titled "Chinese and Greek Painters" tells of two great groups of painters, the Chinese and the Greeks, who engage in a battle to prove themselves as the superior painters of the world. The two different techniques that are used by each group contain important mystical messages that reflect the moral education that is being taught by Rūmī to the readers of the *Mathnawi*. The two moral messages are the cleansing of the heart and the pursuit of Divine beauty. First, Rūmī hints at the idea of cleansing the soul. As part of the Sufi moral upbringing, the cleansing of the heart is a big part of the journey that a Sufi must undergo to achieve mystical perfection and become the perfect Man. Rūmī explains the need for this spiritual cleansing through this short story by using the Greeks to represent the Sufi masters who have completed this process. Al-Qushayrī (2007) mentioned the mystical station of repentance. Although different Sufi scholars have debated on the number of mystical stations, most agree that the station of repentance is a necessary step in the journey towards mystical perfection. Furthermore, this station is typically listed as the earliest by most scholars, proving its importance at the beginning of the

journey. In Islam, the one who successfully repents from his sins can be completely forgiven, essentially being pure from all his past bad deeds.

The houses mentioned in this story play a significant role in the first moral message presented by Rūmī. They are symbolic of the human heart (Nicholson, 1925). When the Greeks remove the old paints of the house by “polishing the surface of the walls”, Rūmī is portraying the act of repentance, which is cleansing the heart of past sins and evil intentions (Rūmī, 2015). By doing so, one can start the journey with a pure heart. In contrast, Rūmī uses the Chinese painters to portray a different group of people or method used on the journey. In the short story, the Chinese do not clean the years of accumulated dirt and old paint that had tainted the walls of the house. Instead, they ask for bright and beautiful colours to cover up the walls. Although the result turns out to be very beautiful, it still fails to compete with the beauty of the house that the Greeks decorated by first cleaning its walls. Similarly, on the journey towards moral and mystical perfection, a person must cleanse their heart before proceeding with any action to achieve the goal of unity with God. Even if a person becomes highly knowledgeable in religious affairs, without a pure heart, he can never reflect the true beauty of God preached by Rūmī.

Similarly, Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh (2010) preached on the process of cleansing the heart so as to achieve enlightenment from God, which results in good moral characteristics. He preached regarding the eligibility of people to receive the “light” that guides them in their actions. Only a person with a pure heart is eligible for that guidance from God. Authentic moral characteristics cannot be produced without a pure heart, which is essential in becoming a moral Sufi. Without the help of God, a person can continually be swayed by the illusions of this world. When he attempts to do good deeds, he can be manipulated into doing things that are not truly good, or even be influenced into doing bad things. To successfully cleanse the heart of corruption, one must first weed out the human attributes that sway him away from God. Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh mentioned that the existence of negative human attributes, such as pride and greed, can prevent a person from being closer to God. Rūmī illustrates this example through the Chinese painters who covered their corrupted hearts with beautiful colours. The temptation of negative human attributes, such as greed, create superficial beauty, such as wealth and lust, which keeps a person from undergoing the

process of eliminating these attributes. This is because human beings are blinded by it. Servanthood is the core human personality that contributes to acquiring the qualities of the perfect human being. The qualities that do not reflect servanthood steer a person further away from God. As a result, any other attributes are considered unnecessary; therefore, weeding out such a personality is needed in order to achieve the perfect attributes of a servant of God. By contemplating this moral message, readers of the *Mathnawi* would realise that the cleansing of the heart is a necessary act to be closer to God.

Second, Divine beauty is a mystical idea that is pursued in a Sufi moral upbringing. There are two types of beauty in this world, which are Divine beauty and superficial beauty. Divine beauty is the true beauty that reflects the true reality, while superficial beauty is a temporary pleasure that disguises itself to sway human beings. According to Sufi beliefs, all beauty seen in this world is a reflection and manifestation of Divine beauty (Lumbard, 2021). Therefore, a Sufi must contemplate and work towards reflecting true Divine beauty on the journey. Thus, his journey to purify the heart is intended for the search and reflection of Divine beauty. In Rūmī's own mystical journey, he was faced with a similar situation. Iqbal (1991) mentioned about Rūmī's activities before his famous meeting with Shams al-Tabrizi. During that time, he was focused on acquiring knowledge of the religious sciences without going through the internal transformation necessary to achieve mystical perfection. However, after his meeting with Shams, Rūmī changed his way of living as Shams indirectly convinced him of the relevance of the mystical path. Therefore, this short story reflects his experience of purifying his heart in order to obtain the authentic moral characteristics that he preaches in his short stories.

In addition, Rūmī is trying to warn readers about the dangers of superficial beauty instead of the desired Divine beauty. A Sufi who fails to reject the temptation of superficial beauty would have failed to achieve the mystical station of renunciation (al-Qushayrī, 2007). Rūmī uses the characters in the short story to exemplify this failure. For instance, the Sultan is responsible for holding the competition between these two groups of great painters. When the Sultan sees the paintings by the Chinese, he becomes reluctant to see the result of the Greek painters' work in the other cottage. This is because he is seduced by the superficial beauty shown by the Chinese painters in their house.

These two houses could be equated to the beauties of this world as well as the hereafter. Similarly, when people are presented with things that could bring them pleasure in this world, they will become distracted. As a result, they will not try to seek the true Divine beauty that could bring them ultimate pleasure, as it is presumably incomparable to the pleasures of this world.

Furthermore, Rūmī describes the distinction between superficial beauty and true beauty, or Divine beauty. The paintings produced by the Chinese can be categorised as superficial beauty, as opposed to those of the Greeks. This is because the beauty of the Chinese paintings on the wall only covers up the years of accumulated rust and dirt. Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh characterised the idea of superficial beauty as a veneer. He mentioned that:

There are two types of veneer (protection): one that protects you from disobedience and one that protects you in disobedience. The layman who is afraid of losing his status among people seeks Allah’s covering in disobedience, while the privileged one who is afraid of losing his position with the Real King seeks Allah’s protection from disobedience. (Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh, 2010, p. 70)

The Chinese painters in the short story can be categorised as people who seek God’s protection to cover up their sins. When a person is plagued with disobedience and seeks God’s protection to protect his reputation, he will be dragged further away from God. The reason behind it is that when one commits sin, without any direct consequences, there are possibilities that those sins will be repeated.

In a real-world scenario, this type of behaviour could lead to acts of corruption, such as bribery and theft. For example, a person who holds power in managing a state treasury might steal some money from it. However, he could hide this act by bribing others who also manage the treasury. The hope that they would not get caught for their immoral actions is the veneer that they seek. Although this sort of behaviour is frowned upon by any moral standards, the advantage of Sufi morality to curb this behaviour is by promoting the believers of God to cleanse their hearts from the greed to seek such pleasures. By

ultimately blocking the tendency to seek such wealth, human beings are less likely to commit such crimes.

### *Analysis of “The Shaykh and the Tray of Sweets”*

The short story titled “The Shaykh and the Tray of Sweets” tells the tale of a Shaykh who is considered as one of the most generous people of his time. His generosity transcends the normal definition of a generous person as he always gives to people to the extent that he possesses very little or nothing for himself. The moral messages of this short story are being generous and having trust in God, as embodied in the characteristics and actions of the Shaykh in his daily life. The first and most obvious moral message that Rūmī portrays in this short story is about generosity. During the journey on the path, one of the spiritual stations, as stated by al-Qushayrī (2007) is generosity, which is a required characteristic to achieve mystical and moral perfection. The standard for generosity in Sufism is high, where a person can only be regarded as generous when he is truly concerned about others to the extent where he loses the tendency to care about himself in terms of wealth. This is shown in the short story, where Rūmī (2018, p. 30) writes, “With the last donation he received, he built a Sufi House, leaving himself with nothing.” The word “nothing” plays a significant role in this story. It reflects the tendency in Sufism to be selfless in all actions, here being in terms of wealth. This reflects a Sufi’s journey of attempting to void himself from having the desire for worldly gains and riches. The desire to be financially wealthy is driven by greed, an unfavourable characteristic that prevents a Sufi from attaining his desired goal in life.

Nevertheless, there is a motivation taught in Islam for a person to be generous with his material wealth. This motivation is recorded in one of Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh’s (2010, p. 40) aphorisms on rewards: “He chose the hereafter as a place to reward His believing servants.” This highlights the existence of rewards in the hereafter. Since this world is not the only world that exists, the rewards that will come for generous people will be given in the hereafter, which is an eternal world compared to the current living world that is temporary. Since the Islamic faith includes the existence of life after death, the balance of reward and punishment is not fulfilled in this world, but in the hereafter. However, the expectation

of reward is not central to the Sufi moral tradition. During a Sufi's moral upbringing, he is taught to be selfless by removing the aspect of the ego or selfishness in every course of action. This causes the motivation behind his every action to be only for the love of God. This also promotes the idea of caring for others before himself. Through this, Rūmī presents the idea about Sufi morality that is beneficial not just for individuals, but also for others. Furthermore, the values of kindness and generosity are universal moral values that are known to benefit other people, not just an individual. Some moral theories might suggest that the actions of the Shaykh would be considered as immoral. For example, consequentialism might dictate that the Shaykh's action is unfavourable because giving to others excessively might have a negative impact on the person giving the donation. However, the concern towards an individual in Sufi morality encourages a Sufi to give regardless of his wealth. Furthermore, the Shaykh's physical state of imminent death shows that a person does not have to be physically healthy to be kind and generous. One can show kindness even when faced with something as adverse as death.

Second, Rūmī promotes the idea of trust in God through the Shaykh's actions in the short story. As mentioned before, an established characteristic of the Shaykh is being generous, and this is possible because of his trust in God. Like generosity, trust in God is another mystical station that must be obtained by a Sufi to achieve mystical perfection. This station is described by al-Qushayrī (2007) as one's complete and utmost trust in the fate dictated by God. This characteristic can be seen in the line, "He remained untroubled, through as his debts had always been paid through the grace of God" (Rūmī, 2018, p. 33). The level of trust that a person must have to fulfil the requirement of this spiritual station is not bound only by wealth, but also in every other aspect of this world. For example, if a person is plagued by problems, such as a disease, he must have faith in God's fate after he has tried to cure his disease. Such faith in God can lead a person to have a serene heart and be unbothered by the problems that are plaguing him. As a result, he can focus on his goal of achieving mystical perfection by continuing his worship.

Having trust in God also makes a person quantify the value their good deeds less. This makes his actions more sincere, creating authentic moral characteristics. As mentioned by Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh (2010, p. 1),

“Losing hope when a slippage occurs is a sign of relying too much on (one’s own) deeds.” He elaborated that trust in God makes a person be less bothered by his mistakes because he knows that his value is not measured through his sins and deeds, but through his relationship with God. A man who values good deeds is considered as someone who values his skills and attributes. As a result, there is a feeling of pride (*takabbur*) in his actions, thus creating egotistical intrinsic values. In Islam, there is the concept of reward and punishment received after an action, which acts as a motivation and warning for a person to behave appropriately and continue his worship of God. However, Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh mentioned that an enlightened servant of God does not value this concept. Instead, he continues to improve his relationship with God through active practices of worship and by improving his inner qualities that lead to good moral characteristics.

In the discussion of moral theories, the concept of trust in God creates a person with unchanging moral characteristics and values. This is because he has fulfilled the requirements of this spiritual station by placing his utmost trust in God; his actions will only reflect the authentic inner qualities that he has worked on to improve. A person who relies on a situation or any external motivation for his action might change his decision or action based on the external stimuli. For example, a desperate person might resort to violence and corruption to achieve his goals when under intense pressure from his problems. This might harm others, which is a negative quality that is frowned upon, even in other moral theories. The trust a person has in God’s fate will cause him to stay true to his moral values, despite the situation that he is in. A person with these qualities is undoubtedly better than a person with changing values based on a given situation.

Based on the analysis done of each short story, this paper has identified a few key points. Rūmī stands as a proponent of Sufi morality, and he uses his writings as a method to educate readers about morality. In Sufi morality, moral decisions are made based on the commands of God (Piazza & Landy, 2013). In Islam, God’s commands are passed down through the Quran and Hadith, relaying His teachings to believers of Islam. Furthermore, with the Quran and Hadith as guides, the mystical nature of Sufi morality promotes Sufis to find a connection between them and God as guidance for their behaviour. This section compiles and elaborates on the moral messages as arguments for the



superiority of the Sufi moral theory in governing moral values. These arguments are shown through the characteristics of Sufi morality and the outcome for its followers.

Rūmī presents a few characteristics of the moral theory, which are Divine origin, lack of error and consistency of morality. To elaborate on the first point, Sufis believe that every single one of our actions is under the supervision of God. As demonstrated in “Spitting at Imam Ali”, the title character believes that his intentions are being viewed by God and, therefore, he refrains from performing any action that deviates from God’s will. One of the common moral questions involves the origin of morality. When an action is performed, who is the most qualified to determine the morality of that action, and where do the guidelines for morality originate? Human beings are not capable of knowing the intentions behind an action. So, judging an action solely based on the action itself might result in misinterpretation. In Sufi morality, God is the ultimate judge of human behaviour. Therefore, the mistake of misjudging a person’s action cannot occur as God knows the intention behind every action. Furthermore, God’s presence is constant in any circumstance. If the motivation behind an action is based on witnesses or a human judge of action, there is room for immoral actions. In an area where another human being is absent, a person who relies on human witnesses might commit immoral actions, such as torturing an animal or stealing. However, since God’s presence is constant, there is no opportunity for a person to commit immoral actions as every action is witnessed by God.

Next, Rūmī believes that human knowledge and reasoning are prone to error (Chittick, 2005). Although human reasoning is essential for the progression of humankind, we are still prone to committing a lot of errors. Similarly, in a situation where an action has to be judged on its morality, some moral theories rely on science and human reasoning to judge the said action based on the outcome. One such moral theory is classical utilitarianism, which determines the morality of an action based on the outcome that is most favourable for the majority (Choo, 2021). However, this type of morality relies on the limited cognitive ability and knowledge of human beings. Through his writings, Rūmī argues against the use of human reasoning to determine morality for this reason. Rūmī preached that morality is based on rules of conduct that are determined by religion. Thus, actions are judged based on the

guidelines provided in the Quran and Hadith, and not on flawed human reasoning. For instance, the title characters in “The Shaykh and the Tray of Sweets” and “Spitting at Imam Ali” display the characteristic of relying on religious guidelines on behaviour. The Shaykh’s ignorance of the creditor’s reasonings to pay up the boy before receiving the tray of sweets indicate that instead of relying on human reason, he relies on religious guidelines to act morally. Similarly, Imam Ali relies on God’s command to perform every action with a sincere heart in the story. These two characters act merely as agents of morality, while the Divine commands remain as the origin of morality.

Finally, Sufi morality is consistent throughout any circumstance or time. This morality produces an individual with consistent moral standards and behaviours. Rūmī exemplifies this through the various characters in his short stories. When an individual relies on certain standards of values prescribed to him, all his actions will be consistent throughout his life, regardless of the situation. The opposite of this behaviour would be to rely on external circumstances to determine his actions to benefit himself or his people. This produces an individual who is inconsistent with his actions. As illustrated in “Shaykh and the Tray of Sweets”, the title character’s physical as well as financial situation do not affect his actions. He stays true to his beliefs and continues to be generous in his wealth. A consequentialist might act differently in a similar situation as his reasoning might tell him to not be as generous with his wealth in a situation where he has very little to none left.

## **Conclusion**

Rūmī tacitly explores the outcomes of Sufi morality in his short stories, thereby creating a person with authentic moral characteristics. In addition, the internalisation of Sufi morality ensures that every action is met with sincere intentions. Therefore, morality through this theory produces authentic moral characteristics due to the alignment of actions and intentions and the production of a selfless human being. Concerning the intentions and actions of a human being, Sufi morality governs both aspects of controlling human behaviour. Rūmī illustrates these through the various characters and symbols in his short stories, among them being the donkey in “The Fly Who Thought She Was a Sailor” and Imam Ali in “Spitting at Imam Ali”. The characters

illustrate the tendency for the Sufi moral theory to govern both the actions and intentions of an individual. Consequently, Sufi morality can be viewed as a comprehensive moral theory. This is supported by Heck, who mentioned that Sufi morality concerns the outer (*ẓāhir*) and inner (*bāṭin*) dimensions. The outer dimensions include primarily the laws and legislation (*shariah*) that were clearly outlined in the Quran and Hadith, while the inner dimensions involve the mystical experience and journey of a Sufi. Only a Sufi who successfully practises both aspects can be considered as a true moral Sufi.

Next, Sufi morality produces individuals with the tendency of being selfless. In the journey, a Sufi who has successfully achieved mystical and moral perfection will become a perfect human being, essentially realising the truth (*haqīqah*). One of the characteristics of such a person is the lack of concern for himself. This makes him more caring for others and also perform every action for the sake of God. This eliminates his tendency to be egotistical. This concept is discussed extensively in Heck, who mentioned practices in Sufism that ultimately create a selfless individual. In addition, selflessness as a universal virtue cannot be argued against. Heck further elaborated that this creates a person who is humble, generous and attentive to others. Rūmī explains these qualities in the short stories “The Fly Who Thought She Was a Sailor” and “Shaykh and the Tray of Sweets”. Although Sufism primarily focuses on the refinement of characteristics in individuals, this could ultimately benefit others as well. This is displayed throughout Rūmī’s short stories. A Sufi who cares for others could benefit the whole society as it creates a more serene society. Furthermore, a Sufi’s kindness could inspire others to act in the same manner. Although not everyone could subscribe to the Sufi moral theory, or be a Muslim, the universality of the moral characteristics practised by a Sufi through the internal refinement of such actions could ultimately influence others to act in the same manner.

Elaborating on the point of selflessness, Sufi morality discards any pursuit of worldly pleasures that might lead a person astray. In this manner, this theory is in opposition to Hedonism as a moral theory. Hedonism focuses on the concept of pleasure. It dictates that the only thing that brings value in one’s life is acts that bring the most pleasure. From a moral standpoint, Hedonism is a self-centred moral theory, bringing benefits only to oneself. However, it could also bring harm

to an individual who practises it because excessive pleasure could bring harm to him, such as alcohol and drugs. On the other hand, Sufi morality opposes such acts that bring pleasure, at least in this temporary world. Instead, it promotes its believers to seek the pleasure that comes from serving God, which it teaches to be permanent as there is belief in the hereafter. The pleasure felt by believers who seek God is spiritual pleasure, which is different from the physical pleasures that one feels in the world. The temporary pleasure offered in this world could negatively impact an individual. Conversely, there is no harm in being drowned in the pleasure that comes from being closer to God. In a world where everyone only cares about their own pleasure, a highly egotistical society that is driven by lust and greed is inevitable. This would create a chaotic society with an absence of balance and well-being. A Sufi's refusal to indulge in worldly pleasures is displayed by the Greeks in "Chinese and Greek Painters", while "Angel of Death" highlights the consequence of being too attached to it. Therefore, it can be concluded that Rūmī's view of worldly pleasures is negative.

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