ISLAMIC MYSTICISM AND PERSIAN LITERATURE: 
THE CASE OF RUMI’S MATHNAWI

Ali Ashgar Mirbagheri Fard

Since the onset of Sufism, it has been felt that mystics, just as philosophers, theologians, interpreters, and other Muslim cultural classes, should convey their basic tenets and beliefs to others. Yet mystics were impeded in this by a number of factors. Firstly, mystical gnosis originated from mystical experience and private intuition. These experiences, unlike philosophical or theological speculation, could not be objectively conveyed. Only the mystic himself could make optimum use of his own experiences. If he wished to avail others of these experiences, however, there existed no form or model with which he could successfully proceed.

Secondly, Sufis were committed to veracity and sincerity. One implication of veracity, as it is understood in Sufism, is that one’s inward and outward dimensions or, in other words, one’s heart and one’s tongue, should remain concordant: that is, that which one says, one should believe. The possession of veracity and sincerity was a provision of the spiritual journey, that is, the task of a disciple was to align his outward behavior with his inner beliefs. Verbalizing mystical experience, however, compromised the concept of veracity. Verbal utterance could not objectively manifest a mystic’s inward experience and thus, contrary to the principle of veracity, that which a disciple perceived became different from what he portrayed.

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The third difficulty facing Sufis in the public expression of their beliefs was a fear of hypocrisy and sedition. Sufis endured spiritual struggle and asceticism only for the sake of God, and many regarded efforts for the expression of their mystical experience as a kind of hypocrisy and sedition, and strove to render their pious acts evident only to God. In spite of these various impediments, Sufis nevertheless gradually applied a language to express their mystical experiences and states. This language, due to its characteristics, can be termed “mystical language.” Mystical language is conventionally a language in which mystics have written or expressed their intellectual foundations, experiences and states. It is this language, in fact, which holds the mystics’ sayings and writings, however dissimilar or contrasting these may be. Considering the differences involved, this language can generally be grouped into two main branches: expressive or discursive language, and allegorical or allusive language. Expressive language is one in which mystical states and experiences are, as far as is possible in words, directly described, and in which mystical foundations are defined to the relevant audience using specific terminology. This language was utilized primarily by Sufi elders to illustrate and explain the various states and stations of the spiritual journey.

Allusive language, on the other hand, is inclined to vague and mysterious locutions, and does not rely solely upon words themselves to express specific mystical experiences. Allusive language is in fact a language which, due to the subtlety and delicacy of its meaning, cannot be conveyed in discursive expressions. Contrary to the language of expression, which addresses the public at large, allusive language speaks only to the elite who can surpass the literal and discover esoteric meaning and truth. Expressive language can be said to constitute the Sufis’ language of teaching, and the books, biographies and

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