

Pursuit of Bhaktism in Rumi's Poems: An Aesthetic Appreciation of *The Love Poems of Rumi*

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Abstract

Literature limns life in the most creative form. One can transcend the physical plane and can experience "The Absolute" through a profound literary work. Rumi, a seer poet offers aesthetic experience to a competent reader. He believed that *Allah* can be worshipped by all and not just by some; his idea coincides with the belief of the followers of Bhakti Movement. His belief is reflected in *The Love Poems of Rumi* which is a search of divinity through Bhakti in true sense. This paper attempts to trace Bhakti Movement features in a Sufist poetry and also enforces the idea that literature when read with single-mindedness, self-surrender and a desire to have aesthetic experience can help in attainment of redemption as the path of Bhaktism as it is.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetic experience, Bhaktism, Sufism, Equality

Literature is the delineation of life in the most imaginative and interesting form. The basic twin fold purpose of literature is to educate and entertain mankind and through it bring a transformation in human beings. Literature with its essence and profundity gives reader an extra-ordinary experience like aesthetic experience. The aesthetic experience is a divine experience. It is the cognizance of the essence of aesthetic object and not the visible form. Literature which is aesthetically rich becomes a source of joy and its value never recedes. Keats starts his famous poem *Endymion* (1818) with "A thing of beauty is a joy forever. Its loveliness increases. It never passes into nothingness" which aptly explains the richness of an aesthetic object. A work of art which is aesthetically rich transcends the spatial and temporal boundaries and becomes universal in kind. Aesthetics refers to beauty of literature which awakens the spiritual sensitivity in a competent reader or spectator and unveils the path of salvation for them. Abhinav Gupta in his initial pages of commentary on *Natyashastra* states that in this world, "sensory inputs and meditation is the means of acquiring knowledge of the four ends of life (*purushartha*)", similarly drama also promotes the four ends of life. He explains that "the experiencer, the performer and the scholar of drama achieve the same result that the scholar of Veda does" (Kapoor 146).

Bhaktism was a devotional movement that arose in medieval India and largely influenced Jainism, Buddhism and Christianity. It advocates the unity of God and total surrender to the divine. "Bhakti refers to the perfected state of consciousness – exclusive and continuous love of God, the natural condition of the soul; eternal, enlightened bliss" (radhanathswami.com). The real purpose of human life is to attain this perfected level of consciousness by adopting spiritual path. *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama* and *Moksha* are the four ends of life and Bhakti or total devotion to the God helps in attaining the highest end i.e. *moksha* ("salvation").

This paper attempts to reiterate that the literature which is aesthetically rich can spiritually elevate a competent reader just as Bhakti of a deity can spiritually awaken a soul. The spiritual love of Rumi and his ardent desire to get one with the Supreme Being are echoed in all his poems. Rumi's poems are serious in tone, deep, majestic and soul-pacifying. The perusal of Rumi's poems with single minded focus and the sense of detachment from worldly cares transcend a reader from the physical plane to the spiritual plane. This paper will focus on tracing the features of Bhakti movement in *The Love Poems of Rumi* which is about the craving of the God by a mystic lover and show how literature which is the outcome of aesthetic outlook preaches similar to a theistic movement.

Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Balkhi (1207-1273) or Rumi was a Persian poet in the 13th century. He was an Islamic dervish who showed tariqah ("holy path") to Sufi Muslims. Rumi is regarded as a mystic poet who talks of spirituality and noble life. His works are a product of influence by Muhammad, Al-Ghazali, Muhaqqeq Termezi, Abu Sa'īd Abulḥayr, Ḥaraqānī, Bayazīd Bistāmī, Sultan Walad and Šamse Tabrīzī. His famous works include *Mathnawī-ī ma'nawī* ("Masnavi"), *Dīwān-ī Shams-ī Tabrīzī* ("Diwan-e Shams-e Tabrizi") and *Fīhimāfīhi* ("It Is What It Is"). Rumi's works have become famous especially in Persian speaking countries like Iran, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Many of his works have been translated into different languages thus making Rumi reachable to other nations too. UNESCO declared 2007 as 'International Rumi Year' for the influencing the world with his great thoughts. UNESCO quoted Rumi as "one of the great humanists, philosophers and poets who belong to humanity in its entirety" (spiritualeducation.org). Deepak Chopra, a Rumi's aficionado translated and edited some of Rumi's best poems and collected in a book *The Love Poems of Rumi*.

The Love Poems of Rumi is a treasure for lovers of literature as it gives a sight of "a beautiful world of love" created by Rumi in his poems. His poems are not ruled by time and hence relevant even today. In the "Introduction" of the book, Deepak Chopra himself writes "These poems reflect the deepest longings of the human heart as it searches for divine. They celebrate love. Each poetic whisper is urgent, expressing the desire that penetrates human relationships and inspires intimacy with the self, silently nurturing an affinity for the Beloved". Rumi's burning desire to meet the divine is reflected in his poetry. His poems showcase the spiritual love in the most beautiful form.

Bhakti Movement was a divine movement which propagated oneness of the God. The word 'Bhakti', is derived from the Sanskrit word '*Bhaja*' which means 'to utter'. It is used in the context of respecting someone with intense love or to adore someone. The term 'Bhakti' is used for devotion and unflinching faith in the Supreme. Bhakti Movement is believed to be propagated by Keralite Brahmin named Shankracharya in the 9th century. The impetus to it was given by the moral teaching and lessons of poets and saints in South India known as Alvars and Nayanars. The Sufi Muslims advocated that each Sufist must be devoted to Allah. This view affected the Bhakti Movement as its followers also emphasized on the devotion to God for all irrespective of caste and gender. Bhakti Movement accentuates egalitarian society where a Brahman and a Shudra can also attain salvation by walking on the path of bhakti. In the Bhagavad Gita also *gnana*

(“knowledge”), *karma* (“action”) and *bhakti* (“devotion”) are told as three ways to break the attachment from the earthly life and rise above and transcend the material plane. Bhakti is a pathway which can be taken by all human beings and not merely by a scholar or a Brahman. Vedas also promote the view of equality in society: “If Brahmins came from God’s mouth and Shudras from feet, it only means that all humans are equally Brahmins and Shudras for all of us have mouth and feet” (agniveer.com).

The followers of Bhakti Movement were utterly devoted to the God and had an unmitigated attachment with the God. Rumi also talks about his devotion and desire to meet the Almighty. All the poems in *The Love Poems of Rumi* reflect intense devotion of him towards the God. His thirst for the God is beautifully limned in words which give a lot of scope for aesthetic appreciation to a reader. In the poem “Desire”, he shows his desire to meet the God and his body, mind and sense are hungry to taste the relief of the God,

I desire you
More than food
Or drink
My body
my senses
my mind
hunger for your taste. (34)

In “The Mythical Lover”, he writes, “My love for you/has driven me insane” (51). In all the poems Rumi has beautifully shown his devotion towards the God. The followers of Bhakti Movement believed in devotion and surrender of oneself to the God. In the poem “Aroused Passion”, he talks of becoming one with Him. He writes, “I beseech you / Don’t let me wait / Let me merge with you” (20). However, a true devotee desires attention from Him even if He hurls insult upon the one. In the poem “The Awakening”, Rumi says,

I shall be happy
even for insults from you.
I only ask that you
keep some attention
on me. (22)

In “Defeated by Love”, the poet is ready to relinquish all the earthly pleasures to witness the magnificence of the Supreme. He says,

I am ready to forsake
this worldly life
and surrender
to the magnificence
of your Being.(33)

Rumi titles one of his poems as “Surrender”, and asserts his total submission to Him. He wants to feel the presence of God and disappear from this world. He says, “I just want to know you and then disappear”. But, “She said, “Knowing me does not mean dying”” (55). It means that the knowledge of God does not come only by dying but His existence can be felt even while living on the earth too. An ordinary bhakta or a devotee also loves the God. But most of us do routine prayers and beg for mercy. Only aesthetic minds can express just the way these poets do. They tell us about true meaning of devotion and surrender to the God in the most beautiful form.

As Sufi Muslims the Bhakti Movement believers also considered the God as their companion or beloved. The poet longs for his union with the God as a lover longs to become one with his beloved. In “The Mythical Lover”, the poet says, “My longing for you / keeps me / in this moment” (51). Rumi also longs for seeing His face and witness the presence of Him. In “Looking for Your Face”, he writes, “From the beginning of my life / I have been looking for your face” (45). Rumi has intense love for the God but is scared to call it divine which reflects his humility and modesty. In “Looking for Your Face”, he says,

I am ashamed
to call this love human
and afraid of God
to call it divine. (46)

Poets who are born with aesthetic bent of mind give much more life to the God. They make Him a companion, friend, lover, Father and the one who steals our sleep with the undying thirst to just have one glance of His face.

Another important feature of the Bhakti Movement poets is that they believed that rituals and sacrifices in the name of the God were futile and were not required to attain salvation. They believed that superficial sacrifices hold no meaning and just with utter

devotion one can acquire spiritual union with the God. In the poem “The Agony and Ecstasy of Divine Discontent: The Moods of Rumi”, he clearly states this view by saying,

With lamps in hand
the sheikhs and mullahs roam
the dark alleys of these towns
not finding what they seek. (16)

Rumi searches for transcendental beauty in his poems which he believes cannot be found by *sheikhs* and *mullahs* who promise to be the biggest religious preachers. He does not have faith in them and suggests that these preachers themselves are in darkness then how can they enlighten other's lives. Rumi's poems have suggestive power which makes them beautiful and aesthetically rich. His poems act as a catalyst in bringing a transformation in a reader's outlook and suggest correct pathways for attaining spiritual bliss.

The Bhakti poets decry the image worship and believed in the omnipresence of God like the transcendental poets who saw God everywhere; similarly, Rumi also belittles image worship and see God in breeze, river, trees, garden etc. In “Behind the Scenes”, he says, “You are easy to find here. / You are in breeze / and in this river of wine” (23). In “Looking for Love”, he clearly states “the one I love is everywhere” (44). In another poem “Intoxicated by Love”, he writes,

In the garden
I see only your face
From trees and blossoms
I inhale your fragrance. (43)

Rumi like Bhakti movement followers had faith that the Supreme can be found anywhere and everywhere and not only in mosques. His artistic vision makes him paint the true picture of God who is omnipresent and universal. It is the visualization of the poet who educates the mankind about the real existence of God.

Another important doctrine followed by the poets inspired by Bhakti Movement was that they strongly opposed the discrimination among people on the basis of caste and gender. The Bhakti Movement brought a revolutionary change in the Hindu medieval society as it demolished the long existing belief that the salvation can be acquired only by Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaishya. They spread the idea that by walking on the path of devotion any individual irrespective of caste can attain *moksha* as the God is not only for upper caste people but for all. Rumi also suggests the same idea in his poem that who can

envison equality and has real understanding of the meaning of God can attain salvation. As in the poem “The Alchemy of Love” Rumi says that the God gives joy and happiness to everyone. He writes, “Brining joy / to ruler and ruled / To peasant and king” (18). In the poem “Desire”,also Rumi says that the Superpower belongs to everyone. He writes,

I can sense your presence

in my heart

although you belong

to all the world. (34)

In the poem “Precious Love”, Rumi suggeststhe idea of universal brotherhood as he says, “I offer my salutations / to the stars and the moon / to all my brothers and all my sisters” (53). The poet shares comradeship with all human beings and calls other human beings as his brothers and sisters. Literature is a modest way of retaining humbleness in mankind as it talks about universal brotherhood and makes us realize that first we need to respect the creation of the God i.e. human beings before thinking to attain oneness with the Almighty.

Bhakti movement followers and poets yearned to break the shackles of earthly temptations and attachments. Rumi also wants to detach himself from such baits and set his soul free to get one with his Beloved. In the poem “Dying to Love”, he writes,

Die! Die!

Cut off those chains

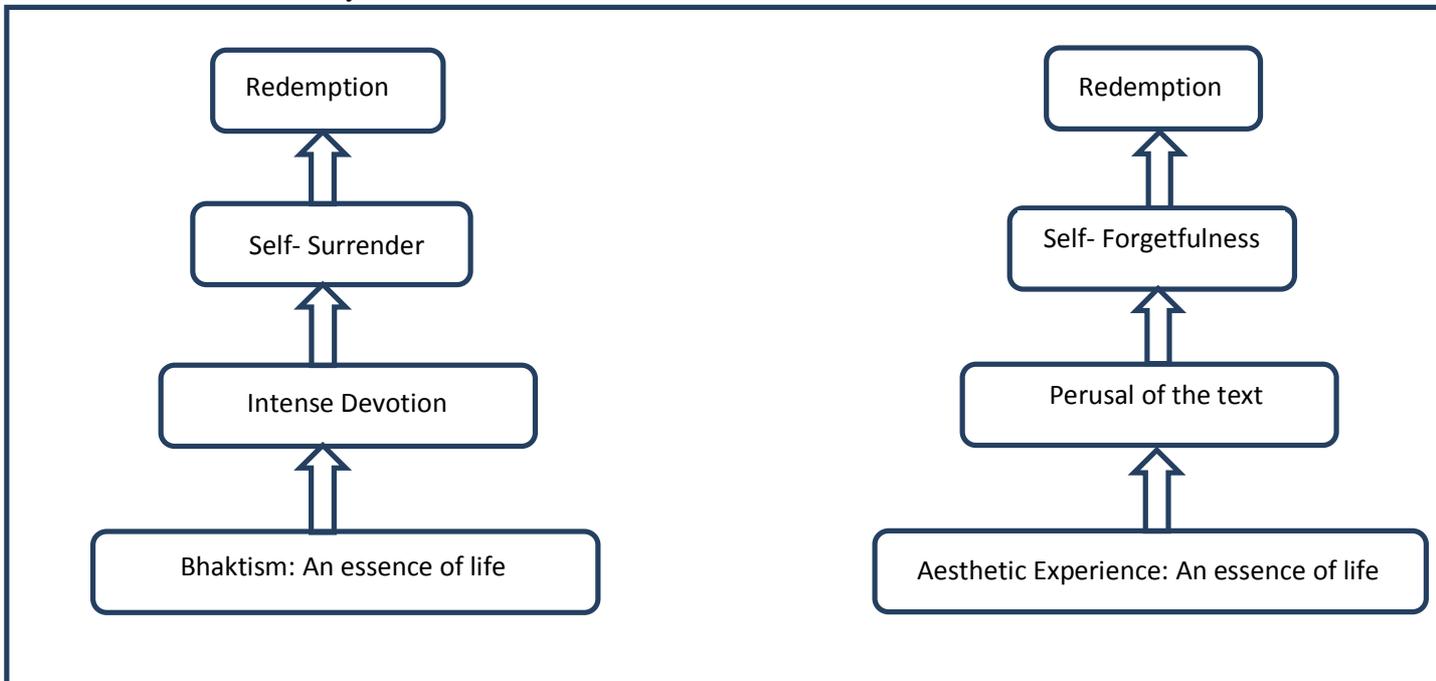
that hold you prisoner

to the world of attachment. (37)

In “The Lover’s Passion”, also he talks of breaking the chains which are not allowing him to witness the presence of God. He writes, “In his frenzied love for you / he longs to break / the chains of his imprisonment” (49). The poet envisions a uniting between him and the Lord which is possible only after getting sense of detachment from earthly attractions which act as a bait for human beings. To quench the thirst of seeing the face of the God or to have that epiphany one has to break ties from superficial world and will have to shift focus to eternal aspect of life.

Deepak Chopra and FereydounKia have beautifully translated the poems of Rumi without losing the real essence of his poems. In translation also he madethe use of some literary devices which add a dimension to their work. These poems present the profound ache of the mankind as one fanatically searches for the Supreme. There is a use of simple conversational tone which can be understood and appreciated easily. There is also use of

simile at some places like in the line “Know that in my heart she is as clear as the moon” (24). In another poem also he writes “My heart is pulsing with passion / likes waves on an ocean” (28). In the poem “Dying to Love” there is repetition of the line “Die! Die!” (37). There is use of a visual image in the line “I am rendered helpless; / my pen breaks and the paper slips away” (50). Rumi’s poems are brief and to the point yet they are deep and leave a reader with thinking. *The Love Poems of Rumi* is a wonderful attempt by Deepak Chopra to make Rumi accessible to the English speaking audience. It evokes a state of ecstasy and deeply moves a reader from within. The poems are wrapped up in magnificent meaning and each poem innuendos the grief of a heart longing for a spiritual union with the Beloved. Rumi who is wildly regarded as a Sufi poet can also be called as a Bhakti poet who sees the God as his lover and devotion as a trail to attain salvation. Just as Bhaktism is a way to be adopted to attain oneness with the God similarly reading literature which has thoughtful and insightful messages and offers an aesthetic experience can also be a way to have communion with the God.



Bhaktism teaches us about the real essence of life similarly aesthetic experience also helps in understanding about the essence of life. With true devotion and self-surrender a devotee can be liberated from the worldly life and attain redemption. In the same way, if a competent reader thoroughly reads a rich literature like Rumi’s poem in favourable situation then he/she can have a unique experience i.e. aesthetic experience and can surpass the material world and can experience transcendental bliss.

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