



The Perception of Jalaluddin Muhammad Balkhi-Rumi, Muslim Poet and Mystic Living in the 13th Century, in Popular Culture Then and Now

Marek MOROŃ

MAREK MOROŃ

Katedra Porównawczych Studiów Cywilizacji, Uniwersytet Jagielloński

E-MAIL: marekpl99@hotmail.com

Introduction and Perception of Rumi by his contemporaries

The political and social context of Khwarazm state, Balkh city, and other regions of Rumi's life is the background against which the perception of his contemporaries may be understood. Jelalaldin Muhammed was born in Balkh in 1207 CE.

The region known as Khorasan, which later became the Eastern part of Khwarazm Empire, was conquered by Arab armies in campaigns between 651 and 652 CE. (Wintle 2003, 58).

Thus Persia, because of these campaigns was Islamised but never Arabised. Persian culture retained its own characteristics and had a significant influence on Islam, which it embraced and enriched, to the point that it is sometimes called the second advent of Islam (Islam-i Ajam). That enrichment and influence refers to culture, with special emphasis on poetry and literature.

Rumi was born into a noble family of scholars. His father Muhammed Baha al Din (also spelled Bahaeddin) Veled was also known as Sultan al Ulama, Leader or Sultan of the Learned (Turkmen 1992, 37). Bahaeddin, being an authority as an Islamic scholar and a person of great spirituality, which was not a contradiction in the Balkh of his time, was the first teacher of Rumi. Even though Sunni was the official Islamic denomination, many Sufi schools and other communities were free to practice their way living in the Islamic creed. There were the Mutazaliya, Jabriye, Shia, and other schools or what is sometimes called, perhaps not very accurately, sects (Ibid.).

As a result of competition between different parties or “sects,” Rumi’s father Bahaeddin and his family had to leave Balkh. This happened after birth of Rumi, probably in 1208, and their family stayed in Wakhsh, which is not distant from Balkh.

They left Wakhsh sometime between 1215 and 1217. Therefore, it was not the Mongol invasion and massacres of Balkh and the whole region which took place in 1220, which was the reason for Rumi’s family undertaking the journey westwards.

Rumi and his family, by 1220, were already far away from Wakhsh and Balkh.

The diversity of schools of teaching and practicing within Islam was accepted as a natural state of affairs. Political and social life was, as always, a theatre of competition, conflicts, and intrigues but also a space of human diverse efforts to reach the Divine, which was openly exercised and enjoyed popular respect. Diverse Islamic schools and groups of murshids-students, competing and engaged at the same time in various mundane professional activities, formed the world in which Rumi grew and lived. Rumi’s family arrived in Konya in 1228.

The seeds of knowledge and spirituality were sown in Rumi by his father (Ibid.). Following the first stage of education, Rumi spent some 8 or 9 years as a student of Burhaneddin Muhaqqaq – Tirmizi. Tirmizi was one of the closest students and disciples of Bahaeddin, Rumi’s father. Burhaneddin’s teaching influence on Rumi is indicated in many verses of Masnevi listed by Dr Erkan Turkmen (Ibid.).

Other personalities which had an influence upon Rumi in later years were Selah al Din Zerkub, who was a goldsmith, and had his shop in Konya, and found him a fitting partner, and began the practice of Sama (Subhan 2002, 113–16); and Zia al Haq Husam al Din Hasan Chelebi (he may rather be considered a student of Rumi who inspired him (Turkmen 1992, 50–2)).



A person who influenced Rumi in a profound and significant way was Shams e Tabrizi or Shams al Din Muhammed, as he was named at birth in 1185 in Tabriz.

Some authors say Shams-i Tabrīzī, belonged to the Galandariyya School, stating that Shams “was probably a qalandar in form and action” (Ibid.). In other sources, Shams-i Tabrīzī is said to had been born into the Assassin tribe, which is also called a “fanatical Syrian sect” (*Rumi’s Divan of Shems of Tabriz* 1997, 8).

They met in 1244. A noble Islamic scholar, poet and mystic of high social position and authority as Rumi was, with a wandering dervish (hence some conception of possible association with the Qaladars), known for his unorthodox behaviour, moving from place to place (flying Shams), searching for a master-student. There are many versions of the Miraj ul Bahrain “the meeting of two seas” or “where oceans meet.” This meeting with the wandering Shams changed Rumi entirely in his religiosity and spirituality. Rejecting scholarly guidelines as a prime source of knowledge and journeying towards God was a basic element of this change. In their stead spirituality rooted in longing and profound love for God as well as the sorrow of separation influenced Rumi, which allowed for the emergence of poetry of incomparable power and beauty.

To present the perception of Rumi by his contemporaries, one may try to visualise the daily life and the atmosphere of social environment Rumi was an element of. Imagine the 13th century daily rush and business bustle of the markets in Konya, where merchants met their customers, craftsmen and artisans were busy in their shops, donkey and camel carts moving, catering establishments with aromatic food and smells, tea sellers, cha khanas, buyers, beggars, musicians, story tellers, and men with dancing bears. Magicians, all busy earning their living, were what we imagine as life of a city in Asia (whether Middle east, India or Central Asia) being like a living organism.

This was the environment where people met who appreciated and held in high esteem and respect poetry and spirituality.

In the history of Rumi’s life, we have basket weavers, gold, smith artisans, who join the spiritual Sufi space of journeying to God that, as many present commentators say, were a kind of elite in the social fabric of towns.

Upon this, we may try to imagine the meetings of the mureeds of Sufi masters, meetings of brotherhoods which became the component of the futuvvat societies, rich family life with elaborate protocol based on Muslim jurisprudence. All these existed in the dense emotions of business greed for profit, formal religiosity, jealousies, spiritual attempt of progress organised in groups or sometimes as individual efforts, tense relations with the authorities,



gossiping, spying, events celebrating the joys of life, family functions, visits from other regions, travelling to other places. Meetings of Sufis, masters and students may have taken place in homes, khanagas and mosques, but they also took place in the market and in the workshops in the midst of the daily business of people's lives.

This was the same or similar "world" in the whole region of the present Middle East and much of Central Asia, be it Balkh, Wakhsh, Damascus, Nishapur, Karman, Baghdad etc. This was the Islamic world. The ocean of Islam from Arabia, that had merged with the cultural ocean from Persia, were a significant part of that world. All these existed within the space of Islam. During his lifetime, Rumi was considered a great Muslim personality of poetry and Sufi spiritualism.

Rumi – in the 20th–21st century West

At the end of 18th century, arguably with Napoleon's Egyptian campaign of 1798, an organised European interest in the cultural heritage of Orient started to emerge. The first translations of verses of Rumi into European languages are dated to the end of the 18th century. Sir William Jones, in his lecture to the Asiatic Association in 1791, presented the translated beginning verses of Masnavi. The German translation of Rumi was made by the Austrian diplomat Joseph von Hammer Purgstall, in 1809 (Karimnia, Ebrahimzade, and Jafari 2012, 1).

The presence of Rumi in the popular perception of the West is a product of over one hundred years of translations made by academics in Great Britain and later on in the USA. It was Reynold A. Nicholson, the first translator of Masnavi into English language and his successor as the head of Oriental Languages Department at Cambridge, A. J. Arberry, who may be considered the most important personalities in the story of translations of Rumi in the West. They brought Rumi the poet and mystic into the culture of Europe or more generally the West. With the passing of A. J. Arberry in 1969, the translation of Rumi, together with promoting his works into public culture, including in pop music, shifted to the USA (*Translating Rumi* 2013).

The names of Coleman Barks and Kabir and Camille Helminsky must be mentioned here. Each has to be noted for a particular contribution. Coleman Barks, a poet himself and a performer and promoter of Rumi's poetry, Kabir, and Camille Helminsky are known for spiritual recitations and promoting awareness of Rumi and spirituality.



Whenever Sufism or poetry constituting a component of Sufi expressions reach a mass and popular audience in the West which approves of them and makes it a part of its culture, it will most likely become, what I have called earlier, “McSufism.”

Thus, the Rumi phenomenon in pop culture is the outcome of three factors present in the Western perception of what comes from Asia or the East.

Firstly, since XIX century there has been, within the Eurocentric discourse (Moroń 2009, 4–10) (which is an extrapolation of the colonial discourse), a softcore line (contrary to the Hegelian hardline of contempt of Asia (Ibid.)) of orientalism, which interprets Asia and the Orient as a place of mysterious wisdom, rituals, spiritual hidden secrets, and the source of secret wisdom etc.

Secondly, it seems that, for some time already, many people, mainly academicians and the youth, have noticed that European or Western mind is ever busy searching for “the truth”, announcing successes in finding one, then abandoning it and declaring it as an error, only to declare new “truths” and so on, in that manner, for the last few centuries.

Therefore, the West and its culture and media agents often realise that the Western mind will keep on creating novelties, other schools of thought, and new ideas announcing the “truth” but only to be rejected by that same mind and substituted with something else.

Thirdly, we may take note of the statements of the conference which took place in Kyoto in July 1942. The title of the conference was “How to overcome the modern” (Buruma and Margalit 2004, 8–9). The Japanese academicians identified “the modern” with “the West” and “the West” with “America”, not as a state or its politics but understood in a spiritual sense as a “rootless, cosmopolitan, superficial, trivial, materialistic, racially mixed, fashion addicted civilisation” (Ibid.).

We may take the above three points as a background for the phenomenon of “McRumi”, and the creation out of a real historical personality of Rumi as a pop culture entity, which will not be identified with the never-ending attempt of Western mind (Ibid.) to find “the truth and sense of life” and, at the same time, will fit the conviction that the mysterious, exotic Orient may answer the questions that Western mind cannot answer. That detachment of pop Rumi (or “McRumi”) from Rumi the historical person, makes it limited and tailor made in a manner that fits the “fashion addiction, triviality and rootlessness” of modern and perhaps postmodern expectations. At no point was there any emphasis in the above listed European or Western discoveries of Rumi on Islam. It was as if somehow, out of the Orient, something had been discovered which appeared to be interesting for a Western audience.



During the conference “Understanding the Contemporary Appeal of Rumi, the Medieval Sufi”, which took place at Lehigh University (Pennsylvania USA) on April 2, 2015, opinions were presented that most popular presently translations of Rumi (Coleman Barks) contributed significantly to the “growing reluctance to attribute this growing popularity to the historical Rumi himself” (*Understanding the Contemporary Appeal of Rumi* 2015). Rumi’s popularity may then be related to the “tailor made” Rumi fitting popular expectations within the fashion industry, unrelated to the original Rumi rooted in Islam (Ibid.).

That tailor cutting of Rumi to fit the capability of receptors of the Western mind was and is performed by the erasure of Islam from the poetry of Rumi (Ali 2017). It detaches Rumi from his cultural, religious, and social context, which was Islam and the civilisation growing from Islamic roots.

Within the “McRumi” chapter, based on some translations and commentaries (and Coleman Barks, who, in some places, is called the maker of “pop-Sufism for dummies” and is always regarded as prime and enthusiastic activist of it), different questions mirroring present-day fashion arise (*Reading Rumi in the West* 2022). Below are some of these “fashionable” questions:

Were the poet Rumi and Shams gay lovers? (or was it simply Bhakti love?) (Bjornes 2011). Was Rumi a Muslim? Did Rumi’s son murder Shams? Was Rumi gay? Was Rumi the poet and Sufi Mystic inspired by same sex love? (Cherry 2022)

That popularity of McRumi was also found in the behaviour and actions of personalities of the Mc Culture industry, pop music stars, media people, film stars (Hollywood and Bollywood). Pop singer Beyonce named one of her children Rumi; Brad Pitt has a tattoo of Rumi poetry’ music band Coldplay included Rumi poetry in their concert; media person Oprah Winfrey ran a program on Rumi; Coleman Bark’s interpretations of Rumi poetry has been the bestselling poetry in America in recent years etc. (Safi 2017).

The important event of Rumi’s life, which was his meeting Shams e Tabrizi the Darvish, has also been included beyond Western narrations.

In his paper during the seminar “Universal Influence of Moulana Jalaluddin Rumi”, held in Mumbai in January 2005, one of the speakers (Desai 2007, 8) included in his whole paper about Rumi’s life, only the following few words about Shams.

He (Rumi – MM) at various times took a number of “spiritual guides”, the most effective of them a mysterious personage who appears in the pages of Rumi’s biography under the name of Shams I Tabriz (The Sun of Tabriz). So completely did he (Rumi – MM) merge his personality into this “other self” that,



in an enormous divan which he composed, he substituted the pen name “Shams-i Tabrīzī” for his own.

The author, it seems, is not certain if Shams-i Tabrīzī existed at all.

On the other hand, we have a story from, the “McRumi files”, where Shams appears as an important character in the soap opera narration of Rumi, giving his daughter from first marriage Kimia as wife to Shams. However, Rumi’s young son from the other first Ala al din Muhammad has fallen in love with Kimia, and they planned to get married. This was destroyed by old Shams becoming the unloved husband of Kimia. Kimia died after a short marriage with Shams, and Ala al din in revenge killed Shams to the sorrow of Rumi, who does not know who killed his guide tutor. And so, they did not live happily ever after (*Rumi’s Untold Story*, point 5 and 6).

There are also voices in the West seeing Rumi and his works as a bridge between cultures and religions (Acim 2012).

The term “McRumi”, even though sounds ironic if not with note of contempt, is not really meant by me to be so.

The “McSufism” popularity in the West should not be rejected. The continuation of orientalist’s interest since the XIX century has contributed, in my opinion, to the emergence of Theosophic movements (*The Theosophical Society in America 2022*), genuine curiosity about creeds of India, Brahmanism, and Buddhism. As did a serious academic interest in Islam and its cultural heritage and its relevance for future of Europe.

Those such as Samuel Lewis, with his hyperactive, enthusiastic interest in Rumi, Islam, Buddhism, Zen techniques and practices, promoting dances (dances for peace), appear to me like a climber who wants to climb the peak of the mountain and uses all the paths and tracks at the same time, running from one to another.

Such behaviour is not unique to the Western mind. There was, at one time, a huge interest in the Hare Krishna movement and spirituality. Then, Buddhism appeared to many in the West as the best provider of knowledge of spirituality. In the sixties, the most popular pop music band, The Beatles, had an enthusiastic acquaintance with the alleged master of spirituality from India, one Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. They have even composed a song “Within You, Without You”, with very spiritual lyrics rooted in “Eastern ways.”

We should not therefore make a big issue of the dynamic fashion in the West of Rumi becoming “McRumi”, a pop culture icon.

While the West creates “McRumi”, the rejection of Rumi and his works comes from different quarters.



Professor Omid Safi, on the subject of detaching Rumi from Islam and the rejection of Rumi by large Muslim communities, says:

...the real crisis is not merely that the modern consumers of Rumi have taken the Islam out of Rumi in rendering him into a generic and marketized spirituality provider. There is a greater crisis that we have not done enough to address. In far too many Muslim communities, it is Rumi and the entire path which produced Rumi which has been taken out of Islam. In far too many corners, we hear an Islam that is being preached without poetry without humour without spirituality, without compassion and without reaching out to God as the beloved (Safi 2017).

I would like to support the words of Professor Omid with an example from my life.

Throughout 1993, I lived in Manama on the island of Bahrain. Once we were sitting with local acquaintances in a cafeteria and talking about Sufism and Rumi's poetry. After some time, the owner of the place (or someone in charge) came to our table and, in very kind words, asked us politely not to talk about Rumi and Sufism because he does not want to "have troubles."

And another different example.

In India, I found that, during different occasions and functions, people from various walks of life, be it academia, public service, politicians, cultural life, were often quoting Rumi in their speeches or presentations (in Persian or Hindi). They were quoting lines of his works which they knew by heart. In 2005, I participated in Mumbai in a conference on "Universal Influence of Moulana Jalaluddin Rumi" (*Proceedings of the National Seminar on Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi 2007*). If we were to apply the religious index, then the participants of the conference presenting their papers were Zoroastrians, Hindus, and Muslims. The message with congratulations were sent to the conference, inter alia, by the President of India and Governor of Maharashtra.

Some papers were about the influence of Rumi upon the Bengali Bauls and their music and upon the mystics of Bihar. One paper was about the impact of Rumi upon the "Indian mind."

I thought these two cases from my own many experiences regarding Rumi would support the case of Prof. Omid. In a Muslim country (Bahrain); it was delicate if not dangerous to talk publicly about Rumi while India, at the time of the above mentioned conference, was a place where Rumi was admired as a poet and mystic coming from Islamic civilisation.

Therefore, when talking about the popular perception of Rumi in the West, one has to first emphasize that there are many Muslim countries where



Rumi has been more than erased or detached from Islam, and he is strongly stated not to be a part of Islam whatsoever.

In my opinion, Rumi, even as “McRumi”, may bring many people in the West closer to Islam. I would like to state that at present the popular perception of Rumi in the West is characterised by a detachment from Islam. Media, with their power over people’s minds, are present their picture of Islam as a danger, breeding terrorists, and as a primitive cult of desert tribes.

Let me conclude on the question as to whether Rumi is a part of Islam or not with a quotation from Rumi’s works, as translated by professor Jawid Mojaddedi.

I am the servant of the Quran as long as I have life. I am the dust on the path of Muhammad, the chosen one. If anyone quotes anything except this from my sayings, I am quit of him and outraged by these words – Mawlana Rumi (*Reading Rumi in the West* 2022).

It may be lamented that Rumi is detached by the West from his Islamic roots and space but with many Muslim communities and states rejecting Rumi as part of Islam, one may face a dilemma as to where the promotion of Rumi’s poetry of Islamic spirituality should take place; in the “McRumi” West or in these Muslim environments, where neither Rumi nor “McRumi” is accepted.

Bibliography

- Acim, Rachid. 2012. *Rumi: A Poet Bridging Cultures and Religions*. Accessed July 7, 2022. <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2012/04/34576/rumi-a-poet-bridging-cultures-and-religions>.
- Ali, Rozina. 2017. *The Erasure of Islam from the Poetry of Rumi*. Accessed July 7, 2022. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-erasure-of-islam-from-the-poetry-of-rumi>.
- Bjonnes, Ramesh. 2011. *Were the Poet Rumi and Shams Gay Lovers? (or Was It Simply Bhakti Love?)*. Accessed July 22, 2022. <https://elephantjournal.com/2011/08/was-the-poet-rumi-and-shams-gay-lovers>.
- Buruma, Ian, and Avishai Margalit. 2004. *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Cherry, Kittredge. 2022. *Rumi: Poet and Sufi Mystic Inspired by Same-sex Love*. Accessed July 22, 2022. <https://qspirit.net/rumi-same-sex-love>.
- Desai, Capt Hormazdiar J.M. 2007. “Rumi’s Life Sketch and Mysticism as Depicted in the Masnavi.” In *Proceedings of the National Seminar on Universal Influence of Moulana Jalaluddin Rumi: 15th & 16th January, 2005 under the auspices of Culture House of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mumbai, K.R. Cama Oriental Institute*. Mumbai: Culture House of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
- Jawid Mojaddedi. Accessed November 5, 2022. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jawid_Mojaddedi.



- Karimnia, Amin, Mahboobeh Ebrahimzade, and Zahra Jafari. 2012. "Mawlana and the West: With Special Reference to Translation." *Elixir Ling. & Trans.* 46: 8536–40.
- Moroń, Marek. 2009. *Dyskurs eurocentryczny w postrzeganiu i rozumieniu Azji*. Katowice: Górnośląska Wyższa Szkoła Handlowa.
- Proceedings of the National Seminar on Universal Influence of Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi*. 2007. Mumbai: K.R. Cama Oriental Institute & Culture House of Iran.
- Reading Rumi in the West: The Burden of Coleman Barks*. Accessed July 22, 2022. <https://zirr-ar.com/reading-rumi-in-the-west-the-burden-of-coleman-barks/>.
- Rumi*. Accessed July 23, 2022. <https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Rumi>.
- Rumi's Divan of Shems of Tabriz: Selected Odes (Element Classics of World Spirituality). A New Interpretation by James Cowan*. Rockport MA, USA: Element Books Ltd 1997.
- Rumi's Untold Story*. Accessed July 19, 2022. www.rumi.net/about_rumi_main.htm
- Safi, Omid. 2017. *Rumi Without Islam: the Cultural Appropriation of Rumi*. Accessed July 21, 2022. <http://www.baytalfann.com/post/rumi-without-islam-the-cultural-appropriation-of-rumi>.
- Subhan, John A. 2002. *Sufism: Its Saints and Shrines*. Delhi: Indigo Books.
- The Theosophical Society in America*. Accessed July 23, 2022. <https://www.theosophical.org/>.
- Translating Rumi*. 2013. Accessed July 21, 2022. <https://rumiscircle.com/translating-rumi/>.
- Turkmen, Erkan. 1992. *The Essence of Rumi's Masnevi. Including His Life and Works*. Kon-ya: Misket Ltd.
- Understanding the Contemporary Appeal of Rumi, the Medieval Sufi*. 2015. Lehigh University. College of Arts and Sciences. Center for Global Islamic Studies. Accessed July 22, 2022. <https://cgis.cas.lehigh.edu/content/understanding-contemporary-appeal-rumi-medieval-sufi>.
- Wintle, Justin. 2003. *The Rough Guide History of Islam*. London: Rough Guides.