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On Mystical Metamorphosis in Christianity and Islam: Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Rumi's *Masnavi* in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

Journey emerges in multiple faces in literature. But when this substantial subset of quests adopts the mystical aspect, it creates a mystery that triggers the discovery sense in human beings. The present article develops a comparative analysis on the complex nature of mystical metamorphosis as expressed in two of the most influential writings of the East and West: Rumi´s *Masnavi* and Dante´s *Divine Comedy*. The first part discusses the concept of mysticism and poetry, and reveals the nature of their connection. The second part of this work investigates the historical setting of Dante´s and Rumi´s lives in relation to the social environment of the time. The last part emphasizes the idea of mystical metamorphosis as expressed in the *Divine Comedy* and *Masnavi* through two fundamental vehicles: love and faith. This work demonstrates how, in a world rife with wars and misery, mysticism provides a vital key to building a strong bridge between Islam and Christianity, and on a larger scale, to metamorphosizing the "clash of civilizations" into a "confluence of civilizations".

Keywords

Dante, Rumi, Divine Comedy, Masnavi, comparative mysticism, poetry, spirituality

Introduction

Longing to discover whatever is mysterious has powerfully excited the interest of human nature. At its most profound ranges, entering into zones that desire to be spoken is that which defines the mystical experience. Those who aspire to solve uncertainties and reach beyond the promised paradise to unite with the creator of paradise are the seekers of mystical truth. What is presented in this work is a comparative analysis of the mystical metamorphosis as personified in two great masterpieces of the East and West: Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Rumi's *Masnavi.*

The study introduces mysticism and poetry and discusses the relationship between both concepts. The first chapter of this work contextualizes the setting of Dante´s and Rumi´s lives within a socio-historical framework. As for the second chapter, it emphasizes the idea of mystical metamorphosis expressed in *Divine Comedy* and in Masnavi through two fundamental media: love and faith.

Mysticism

Can the knowledge of God Himself be acquired beyond the fact that He exists? Can the soul with her living in corporeal matter attain the vision of His Essence? An answer to these questions can be achieved when the human soul undergoes a purifying process that allows her to contemplate and to gaze upon holier spheres. Spurgeon declares in her book *Mysticism in English Literature* (1913) that such mystic vision is that of a unity underlying diversity.

It is not an easy task to construct a precise definition of mysticism especially knowing that from a mystical mode of perception reality is ineffable. In "Paradise I", Dante accepts that the ineffable cannot be put into words.

> Words may not tell of that trans human change:
> And therefore let the example serve, though weak,

For those whom grace hath better proof in store"

In a similar mode, Rumi expresses in *Masnavi*:

Naught but love itself can explain love and lovers!
None but the sun can display the sun,
If you would see it displayed, turn not away from it.

"Do not ask me what love is? Don't ask anybody ask love itself what is love? (Rumi, *The Mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi*)

Therefore, what can be done to appreciate the range of the term *mysticism* is an examination of the ideas associated with the concept.

Mysticism celebrates the matrimony of spirit and matter, and of time and eternity. It surpasses all the differing theological divisions of religions and by that creates a region of harmonious encounter between all faiths. Beyond laws and ordinances, religion is conceived as an experience of eternity. By believing in the possibility of coming into contact with the Divine, the soul unites herself with the interminable enjoying the fruition. This experience is not merely abstract as it deals with the very concreteness of human progression; that is the self, sin, death, life, joy. In mysticism, what is expressed is the profound yearning for self-knowledge as well as the hunger to experience the Divine through love and belonging. It is in this way that mysticism comes to form the motivating force in Dante's *Divine Comedy* as it does in Rumi's *Masnavi*.

It is indispensable to include in this discussion where poetry stands in relation to mysticism. In his article "Mystical Poetry," Lings highlights that poetry in the world of mysticism acts as a means of actualizing presence in absence. The distance between the Divine and the Human is only exterior, but it remains crucial to the internal soul of the latter to experience it concretely. Poems in their wording dominated by the sighs of love form here the necessary discourse that attempts at making the Divine present. In other words, poetry by uttering words of separation from the One and at the same time expressing the experience of His presence plays the role of a mediator that bridges the gap between the Divine and his creature

In both *The Divine Comedy* and *Masnavi*, poetry functions as a vehicle that allows the aesthetic expression of the mystical quest. In a transcendent journey towards the encounter with God through visions, words admit their insufficiency to describe the indescribable and for that must make use of imagery to convey the idea of the ineffable. In front of this incredible endeavour, only a talented few have the power to express the unspeakable reality and these are the ones whose hearts have been touched by the experience of true love converting them into Poets: Rumi and Dante are among the gifted few.

Poetry externalizes the inner contemplative state of the poets. According to Elior (2007), the creative language shared by God and human uncovers the hidden and mysterious layer of meaning that lies beyond the literal sense of the text. Dante has Beatrice show how poetry functions to express the theological understanding of the inexpressible. Beatrice asserts that due to the limitation of human language in revealing divine truths, metaphoric language is a must to substitute for its referent. According to Schildgen, Beatrice reveals that the allegorical mode uses literal language and imagery to connect with human senses. In this way, allegory suits Dante's intellect because for him the souls must represent their spiritual state concretely so they can be apprehended through the senses.

And in Masnavi, the allegories employed by Rumi are parable as they mention at the end the moral lesson to the audience. In his poetic creation, Rumi states:

And when I write a letter
To my beloved friends,
The paper and the inkwell,
The ink, the pen is He.
And when I write a poem

And seek a rhyming word—
The one who spreads the rhymes out
Within my thoughts, is He! (Schimmel, *I Am Wind You Are Fire* 45)

What is emphasized here are both the material existence and the dynamic efficiency of the Divine. He, the creator, is the very fundamental reality of all poetic manifestation. In other words, poetry is a participation in the Divine Act of creation and the poet is a transmitter of that which is expressed through Him.

What can be said is that poetry in Dante and Rumi's works draws a moral frame that mirrors the design of the universe and of creation. Both poets transcend external appearances by conjuring up the mystical inner reality, while being entirely realistic about the limitations of their words.

Historical setting of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*

European civilization would not have arisen had it not been for great minds such as Dante Alighieri. A poet, philosopher, and political thinker of the Middle Ages era, Dante paved the way for an anthropocentric movement in which the human being comes at the centre of life, literature, and art. It is in his masterpiece *Divine Comedy* that Dante lies down an encyclopaedic map before our eyes from which we are guided to knowing the eternal implication of any particular earthly human act. An aim that was achieved with a firm presentation of the general principles on which Dante believed God's plan is based.

Dante, an abbreviation of Durante, was born in 1265 to a noble Florentine family. He had the opportunity to receive an education that would enable him to exercise politics in the future. And though he was attracted to poetry since childhood, he had no teacher on the subject, and for that he tried to learn on his own taking as a reference the Sicilian school, Siculo-Tuscans and Guido Guinizzelli among many other artists belonging to Dolce stil novo (Dante).

But it is his beloved Beatrice Portinari that had the greatest influence on Dante. After her death in 1290, he converted his ideal love for her into a veneration that formed the central axe of his extensive narrative poem, *Divine Comedy*. Moulded in 100 cantos and divided into three massive parts, the masterpiece narrates Dante's imaginary journey throughout the afterlife kingdoms: Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise.

Historical setting of Rumi's *Masnavi*

Jalaloddin Rumi was born in 1207 in the city of Balk (at the borders near Afghanistan) and comes from a family of eminent theologians. It is said that Rumi became enkindled by the Sufi doctrine under the influence of a former disciple of his father, Borhanoddin Mohaqqeq along with two big figures of Persian mystical poetry, Attar and Sana'i. The main concern of the teachings he received was to pass all stages of mystical life in order to reach the complete union with the Beloved.

However, it is the encounter with Shamsoddin of Tabriz that can be considered the turning point of Rumi's life (Nicholson). It is in this *dervish* that Rumi perceived the perfect image of the Divine. The spiritual connection between Rumi and Shams absorbed Rumi in a way that he showed indifference to social duties. This triggered a great distress in the religious community of Konya. And, Shams disappeared under obscure circumstances leaving Rumi heartbroken yearning for his beloved who he finds finally in himself, alive beyond the confines of the material world. Therefore, Shams becomes the inspiration of the *Masnavi* as Beatrice was for Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Rumi's *Masnavi* is a massive epic poem composed of six volumes: the first two volumes are principally concerned with the evil tendencies of the *nafs;* the third and fourth volumes share the main themes of Reason and Knowledge which come personified in the Biblical and Quranic figure of Moses; the last two volumes present the universal ideal that human beings must deny their earthly physical existence in order to understand God's existence. Therefore, in *Masnavi* Rumi narrates a spiritual journey to the Divine driven by his profound sense of loss of Shams. Rumi calls everybody to love regardless of their religion and differences in attitudes and beliefs:

Come, come, whatever you are, it doesn't matter
Whether you are an infidel, an idolater or a fire-worshiper,
Come, our convent is not a place of despair
Come, even if you violated your swear
A hundred times, come again. (Rumi, *The mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi*).

Mystical metamorphosis in Dante and Rumi

A search for absolute morals expressed with intense emotions and a spiritual ardour is a value shared in Rumi's *Masnavi* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the most influential medieval works of the East and West, respectively. Their inner selves undergo a purifying process from sins and get beautified with traits that permit their union with the Divine.

Vehicle of Love

Love transforms the human heart by purifying its mirror and consequently prepares it to attract the Divine. Its personification comes in the figure of Shamsoddin of Tabriz that reflects the Sun of Truth for Rumi; while for Dante what is synonymous with such kind of love is the figure of Beatrice. Both poets, as it will be demonstrated in more details in this work, present love as the divine essence making the beloved a fundamental element in human's search for the Eternal; in this way, love becomes the animating spirit of mysticism which in turn lies at the very heart of Dante's and Rumi's work.

In the *New Life,* Dante's declaration that "ladies understand Love's every way" signals that love is the soul of knowledge. Dante the poet is seeking wholeness through love. A thorough examination of his mystical journey shows that since the beginning the quest was set by his love for a woman, Beatrice Portinari, with whom his relationship evolved back on earth in Florence, who would lead him through a synchronicity of time and eternity to his ultimate transcendence as he attains redemption.

For, Beatrice, when I thought to see,
I saw instead a senior, at my side,
Rob'd, as the rest, in glory. Joy benign
Glow'd in his eye, and o'er his cheek diffus'd,
With gestures such as spake a father's love.
And, "Whither is she vanish'd?" straight I ask'd (Dante, *The Divine Comedy*)

This reveals how the love for a woman comes as the escort to the culmination of the Divine. And, in Paradise I

I saw Beatrice turn'd, and on the sun
Gazing, as never eagle fix'd his ken.
As from the first a second beam is wont
To issue, and reflected upwards rise,
E'en as a pilgrim bent on his return,
So of her act, that through the eyesight pass'd
Into my fancy, mine was form'd; and straight,
Beyond our mortal wont, I fix'd mine eyes
Upon the sun. Much is allowed us there,
That here exceeds our pow'r; thanks to the place
Made for the dwelling of the human kind. (Dante, *The Divine Comedy*)

Beatrice appears as the muse that incarnates material eros and spiritual agape. Also, in Paradise XVIII and X,

his only-of that moment-can I tell:

that even as I gazed at her, my soul
was free from any other need as long
as the Eternal Loveliness that shone
on Beatrice directly, from her eyes,
contented me with the reflected light.

The one who guides me so from good to better
is Beatrice, and on our path her acts
have so much swiftness that they span no time.

Dante reveals that beauty is a fundamental element in the road towards salvation. He sees God's manifestation in Beatrice, but is aware that the ultimate goal is not his union with her but with God. He departs from God's love as manifested in his beloved Beatrice only to realize during the spiritual journey that the real goal is seeking the essence of His love and not the form of it:

O lady in whom my hope shall ever soar
And who for my salvation suffered even
To set your feet upon Hell's broken floor;
Through your power and your excellence alone
Have I recognized the goodness and the grace
Inherent in the things I have been shown.
You have led me from my bondage and set me free
By all those roads, by all those loving means
That lay within your power and charity.
Grant me your magnificence that my soul,
Which you have healed, may please you when it slips
The bonds of flesh and rises to its goal.
(Dante, *The Divine Comedy*)

Accordingly, Beatrice's romantic love guided him to the Divine knowledge which made Dante love her more. Beatrice is a means of perception of God. And, this explains why Dante does not seem to be concerned primarily with Beatrice's physical appearance, rather he focuses on her force of good that removes all evil intentions from him.

From the point of view of eternity, Dante experiences reality at the moment the coalition of the inner and outer realms occurs. Dante muses aloud questioning himself. But, his existential awakening does not take place until he meets Beatrice. His love to Beatrice transcended the incident of her death. Beatrice becomes the revelation of his soul as he undergoes the purifying process in his quest of unity with the Divine. Thus, Dante's mystical metamorphosis starts with his love to Beatrice who holds the source of his inspiration and his salvation and expands until it transforms into the union with God. And in a mystical moment, Dante recognizes that for the union to be flawless, it has to be that of love and free will.

but my desire and will were moved already—
like a wheel revolving uniformly—by
the Love that moves the sun and the other stars. (Dante, *The Divine Comedy*)

At this point, Dante's emotional and intellectual being comes to perfection.

For Sufi mystics, reality is what "neither philosophy nor reason can reveal. Only the wisdom of the heart, gnosis, may give insight to some of its aspects" (Schimmel 4). Therefore, the heart is considered the central axe of human spiritual consciousness. Every love should lead to the divine love, that is the infinite

kind of love known as *Al-'Ishq Al-Hakiki.* "The feet of the philosophers are wooden / And the wooden feet are not stable" (Masnavi 4:2).

In these verses, Rumi clearly reflects the priority of love over thought.

"Come, Shams-it-Tabrizi, source of light and radiance for this illustrious spirit without your splendour is frozen and congealed." (Rumi, *Mystical Poems of Rumi*)

In this plain, I am the All Merciful nightingale
Do not look for my limit and border – I have no limits.
Shams-i- Tabriz has nurtured me through love
(T*he Sufi Path of Love,* 349)

Shams and Beatrice are the equivalent of muses that inspire their poet lovers to dialogue with what they see as the absolute reality that makes experimenting divinity possible. For Rumi, *Mawla* "Master" Shams is the pure Saint that reflects the Divine. While for Dante, Beatrice is the incarnation of God's love in human form. In both cases, Rumi and Dante find their beloved ones a necessity to unite with the One. And in both cases, their attraction towards the beloved is not sexual.

Rumi in Masnavi says: "The people are kids except the man of God / There is no wise man except one who is free from lust" (4:11).

Also in more than one instance Rumi declares the necessity of Shams in the spiritual ascendency mentioning that Shams made him ageless and that the emanation of his light protected him from burning in the fires of hell.

Therefore, what is revealed in Masnavi is a universe created because of love, and without which God would not have created anything.

Vehicle of Faith

In *Divine Comedy*, Dante embarks on a query for individuation and self-knowledge. The poet undergoes the process of becoming "lighter" in a journey that Rountree (2007) calls a "Divine pilgrimage to love". The creative endeavors of this soul's voyage aim to provide Dante with an ultimate healing for his desolate midlife passage.

Dante's mentor was Virgil. In the inferno, Virgil states:

But as for thee, I think and deem it well
Thou take me for thy guide, and pass with me
Through an eternal place and terrible"
and Dante's reply comes as
"Poet, I thee entreat,
By that same God whom thou didst never know,
So that I may escape this woe and worse,
Thou wouldst conduct me there where thou hast said,
That I may see the portal of Saint Peter,
And those thou makest so disconsolate. (Dante, *The Divine Comedy*)

And it is Virgil who ceded Dante to Beatrice who would enlighten Dante's heart giving it the key to transform into a revelation of the mysterious divine. And with that metamorphosis, Dante's soul is reborn in gaining new life.

The concept of oneness with the Divine appears in Paradise, XXVI where Dante declares to St. John

Philosophy," said I, ''hath arguments,
And this place hath authority enough
'T' imprint in me such love

In Dante's masterpiece, God appears to be the Eternal light from which all other rays derive. Therefore, human beings become good due to His source of goodness. This can be deducted from Beatrice's definition of Dante's intellect as a shining existence from which springs the Eternal light. She asks him to follow the Eternal light, the creator, and not to follow His rays, His creation

> Well do I see how the Eternal Ray,
> which, once seen, kindles love forevermore,
> Already shines in you. If in your way
> Some other thing seduce your love, my brother,
> It can only be a trace, misunderstood,
> Of this, which you see shining through the other. (Dante, *The Divine Comedy*)

Beatrice leads Dante to San Bernardo who will substitute her place in guiding Dante in the 10th heavens. This is essential because it reveals the necessity of a saint figure in opening the last gate towards accessing the transcendent union with the Divine. With such coexistence, the human construction of time collapses as the past, present, and future lose themselves in the festivity of simultaneity.

> From human to divine had past, from time
> Unto eternity, and out of Florence
> To justice and to truth (Dante, *The Divine Comedy*)

This asserts that mystical metamorphosis occurs outside the continuum of time as this is ordinarily constructed by humans in the kingdom of earth. Rather, a new form of reality is created in the kingdom of light and is lived by the spirit only after moral regeneration.

In Paradise XXXIII, Dante grasps the conception of the illuminated light, God's representation in creatures and the illuminating light which refers to creatures as a manifestation of God.

> "What then I saw is more than tongue can say.
> Our human speech is dark before the vision
> The ravished memory swoons and falls away.
> As one who sees in dreams and wakes to find
> The emotional impression of his vision
> Still powerful while its parts fade from his mind-
> Just such am I, having lost nearly all
> The vision itself, while in my heart I feel
> The sweetness of it yet distill and fall."

Here, the mystic Dante reaches through religion what Sufis call the state of *baqa* or permanence in which the achievement of perfection from human's union with the Divine makes a human being speechless.

As for Rumi´s works, transcendentalism appears in them as a fundamental dimension in mysticism as it affirms that knowledge is not limited to observation and experience.

> The knowledge of men of heart bears them up,
> The knowledge of men of body weighs them down.
> When 'tis knowledge of the heart, it is a friend;
> When knowledge of the body, it is a burden. (Rumi, *The mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi*)

Rumi confirms the difficult task of leadership and sees that not every individual in society can be enlightened. In such a case an enlightened leader is needed to show the path to those who are not enlightened. This parallels Dante's view on the purification process in terms of the necessity of a leader

when undergoing the journey of progressive cleansing from error. However, Dante inflames in everyone the obligation of involvement in the cleansing circle to acquire the ability of creating a larger circle that encompasses everyone.

Bausani states that the Saint is the guarantee of the existence of a dialectic man-god. In Rumi, the perfect saint comes reflected by the Divine Sun Shams. Furthermore, Rumi underlines that our seeing is full of mistakes (causes and effects). "Go and solve your seeing in the seeing of ultimate Truth (God)" (Rumi, *The mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi*).

This idea has also been expressed in *Divine Comedy* and the *Liber Scale Machometi*. To know whether or not the *Divine Comedy* was influenced by Arabic texts, one needs to prove that correspondence is not merely thematic but rather formal. And it is important here to indicate that Dante was able to blend together many different texts in one singular imaginative creation; that is *Divine Comedy*.

Dante did not know Arabic, and for that the mediation of Latin or Old French or a familiarity with the Arabic text within the literary context of the Florentine poet was indispensable. Regarding the *Liber Scale Machometi* written in the 8th century, it was translated into Latin and Old French by Bonaventure of Siena and its content was most likely carried on to Dante by Brunetto Latini.

In *Divine Comedy*, a similar analogical model to the *Liber* appears in regard to the situation dealing with the presence of light in the heavenly afterlife. Dante like Mahometa recurs to the idea of the substitution of the heart for the eyes (Corti and Hall).

> … my vision almost
> Wholly fades away, yet in my heart
> The sweetness born of it is still distilled
> (Dante, *The Divine Comedy*)

This means that the splendour of the divine light can be grasped by the human eye but only indirectly. Not to forget to mention that Dante stresses this also through a continuous reflection of God's light through Beatrice's eyes fixed upon the poet. The worship of a creature here is to reconcile his worship of the Divine.

Conclusion

Dante has become the embodiment of Western culture. But, this does not exclude ipso facto his responsiveness to non-Western influences. The dichotomic equation of Islamo-Arabic and Christian-Latin is mistakenly established when gazing back at the Middle Ages from today. The comparative analysis between *Divine Comedy* and *Masnavi* written by the Florentine poet Dante and the Persian poet Rumi respectively presents both writers as wayfarers on a spiritual journey attempting to get to the gates of eternal homeland.

Dante and Rumi close the Middle Ages, because although all their works have medieval thinking, they introduce new concepts about life, death, and the world. The epic storytelling of their works draws the allegorical map of the human condition leaving its mark on our collective consciousness. The real fulfilment is realized after the completion of a spiritual quest about the Divine which does not denounce human love, but rather embraces it as the vehicle to unite with the Divine. In this study, it has been demonstrated that it is Dante's and Rumi's mystical metamorphosis using love and faith as vehicles of enlightenment that allowed them succeed at the end of their journey as they unite with the Divine.

The world today is rife with wars and misery, but by turning to the writings of Dante and Rumi, we can discover that mysticism is the area where the "clash of civilizations" undergoes a metamorphosis and turns into a "confluence of civilizations." This, by broadening our understanding of each other and acceptance of one another, helps us solve the answer to a dilemma that has been questioned for long: How can we put an end to the chaos in our minds, relations, and the modern world of today?

The answer provided by Dante and Rumi is the following:

The only way towards salvation is love. Once the depth of love is understood, all interference of evil thought is erased and in a situation of perfect vision of the heart, every individual, whether Christian, Muslim, or from any other religion, can reach peace and freedom.

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