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The Seven Avatars of Love: Deliberations on Rūmī's *Mathnawī*

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Abstract

An 'avatar' is a technical Sanskrit term used in Indian mythology, referring to a divine manifestation on earth. The ultimate goal of an avatar is to save the earth and guide its occupants to salvation. Similarly, Rūmī equates true love with God and introduces seven different personifications of love on earth as divine agents who are there to lead mankind to the ultimate joy of liberation – liberation from their own egos and from their surroundings. The typical stories of love revolve around the lovers' fears, pains, joys, and other emotional states, and the path they follow in order to experience the ultimate ecstasy of union with the beloved. In the *Mathnawī* the issue of love has been discussed in various passages and stages. A detailed analytical study of the magnum opus shows an effort by Rūmī to represent various stages of love in bodily forms. That is to say the lover, in his mystical journey, faces individuals who are in fact personifications of love. In his journey of self-discovery, the lover encounters seven mysterious individuals, whom we have termed the Seven Avatars of Love. These seven avatars appear at various stages of the journey in order to test, help, and provide guidance to the lover. They are in fact manifestations of a single reality disguised in seven forms: the Blood-shedder, the Spiritual Guide (Pīr), the Constable, the King, the Caliph, the Angel Gabriel, and finally, the Musician. Together they display various intellectual, mental, and emotional challenges that are experienced by true lovers on the path of love.

Keywords

avatar – personification of love – Masnavi – Mathnawī – samā‘ – Persian literature

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غلام عشق شوکه اندیشه این است
همه صاحب‌دلان را پیشه این است
جهان عشق است و باقی زرق سازی
همه بازی است الا عشق بازی

Be a slave to love – that's true contemplation!
– that's every courageous man's vocation.
The world is love, the rest's false fabrication,
Everything is a game, save the game of adoration¹

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The Sanskrit term *avatar* (*avatāra*) that appears in the title of this essay refers to the divine modality and its means of ‘descent’, and is used specifically in Hindu religious teachings to suggest the manifestation or embodiment of God, particularly of Vishnu, in animal or human form on earth.² The actual term *avatar* comes later, but the concept that Hindus later describe by this term *avatar* is already evident in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (4.6–8 and 9.11), where although Krishna is an unborn (*ajāḥ*) incorruptible spiritual essence (*avyayātmā*) – indeed the Lord himself in creaturely form (*bhūtānām īśvaro*) – he grants himself a material form (*prakṛtiṁ svām adhiṣṭhāya*) and ‘comes into being from age to age’ (*saṁbhavāmi yuge yuge*), ‘assuming a body in human form’ (*mānuṣiṁ tanum āśritam*) on earth ‘in order to protect the good and punish the wicked; in order

1 Nizāmī Ganja‘ī, *Khusraw va Shūrīn*, ed. Wahīd Dastgirdī and Sa‘īd Ḥamīdiyān (Tehran: Nashr-i Qaṭra 1376 A.Hsh./1997), p. 32. Translations by Amir H. Zekrgoo. (This paper follows Nicholson's edition of the *Mathnawī* for the Persian text of the poem, and sometimes follows his translations, but also uses the translations of Jawid Mojaddedi, and sometimes that of Amir Zekrgoo, as indicated variously in the notes.)

2 Margaret Stutley and James Stutley, *A Dictionary of Hinduism* (London, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1977), under ‘Avatāra’, pp. 32–33.

to make a firm foundation of righteousness' (*paritrāṇāya sādḥūnārṇ / vināsāya ca duṣkṛtām / dharma-saṁsthāpanārthāya*).³ The ultimate goal of an *avatar*'s descent to earth is to maintain or restore cosmic order, that is, to save the earth and guide its occupants to salvation.⁴ *Avatars* provide guidance to 'that soul who is all set to climb the mighty peak of self-realization' so as to 'show the stages in the spiritual journey of Perfection'.⁵

In the Islamic spiritual tradition, love can function in a parallel way as a purifying agent, an aid to self-realization, and even the ultimate realization of the Self. According to a famous Hadith, self-realization leads to realization of God: 'Whoever knows himself, has known his Lord' (من عرف نفسه فقد عرف ربه).⁶ In fact, a number of Muslim scholars and Sufi mystics identified God with love itself. Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, d. 428/1037), for instance, saw God as lover, beloved, and love.⁷ Aḥmad Ghazālī (d. 520/1126) equated spirit (*rūḥ*) with the divine essence (*dhāt*), and love (*ishq*, or love as eros) with the divine attributes (*ṣifāt*).⁸ In other words, love is regarded as an outer manifestation (*zāhir*) of the inner essence (*bāṭin*). In his *Mathnawī* (1v: 521) Mawlānā Rūmī too views man as a microcosm (*'ālam-i aṣghar*) in appearance and a macrocosm (*'ālam-i akbar*) in

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- 3 For texts, glosses and translations, see *The Bhagavad Gītā: Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition*, trans. Winthrop Sargeant, ed. Christopher Key Chapple (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 2009), pp. 206–8, 387; and *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Juan Mascaro (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin 1962), pp. 61–62, 81; and also *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is*, trans. A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust 1983), pp. 224–30, 466–70.
- 4 David Kinsley, 'Avatara', in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan 1987), vol. 2, p. 14.
- 5 V. A. K. Aivar, 'Dasavatara Symbolism in Spiritual Sadhana', in *Symbolism in Hinduism*, ed. R. S. Nathan, 2nd ed. (Bombay: Ameet Offset 1989), p. 61.
- 6 This is understood as a Prophetic Hadith in *Kanz al-ḥaqā'iq*, but as a saying of 'Alī in *Naḥj al-balāgha*. Rūmī clearly describes it as a Prophetic Hadith and renders it in the *Mathnawī* (v: 2114) in Persian verse as *har ki kh'ud bishnākht yazdān rā shinākht*. Elsewhere, see Badī' al-Zamān Furūzānfar, *Aḥādīth-i Mathnawī*, 5th ed. (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr 1370 A.Hsh./1991), p. 167; and Amir H. Zekrgoo and Leyla H. Tajer, 'Science of the Self As Depicted in the Story of the Snake-Catcher: Rūmī's *Mathnawī* in Context', *Kanz Philosophy: A Journal for Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism* 6/1 (2016) (Jakarta: Sekolah Tinggi Filsafat Islam Sadra 2016), pp. 1–16.
- 7 Leonard Lewisohn, 'Sufism's Religion of Love, from Rab'ia to Ibn Arabi', in *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2015), p. 163; see also Etin Anwar, 'Ibn Sina's Philosophical Theology of Love: A Study of *Risālah fī al-'ishq*', *Islamic Studies*, 42/2 (2003), p. 341.
- 8 Aḥmad Ghazālī, *Majmū'a-yi āthār-i fārsī-yi Aḥmad Ghazālī*, ed. Aḥmad Mujāhid (Tehran: Tehran University Press 1370 A.Hsh./1991), pp. 115–16.

reality.⁹ The mystical interpretation of love by Sufis and Muslim philosophers alike, equates love either with God or with God's attributes. This notion, we might propose, can metaphorically be associated with the personification of God on earth, which is similar to the role of an *avatar*. Among Muslim contemporaries in the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia the idea of the *avatar* and how far it can be compared to the concept of prophethood in the Islamic tradition has indeed been frequently debated.¹⁰

Sufism traditionally regards love as the core element of spiritual devotion and elevation. Muslim scholars, basing themselves on the Qur'ān and the Hadith, have written a great deal of philosophical and theosophical explication of the concept of love (*'ishq*) from this perspective. It is beyond the scope of the present study to elaborate on this discourse, but the role of love in Sufi tradition has been theorized at length, including in English, by contemporary scholars such as Leonard Lewisohn and Carl Ernst.¹¹

In deliberating on the various terms related to love in the *Mathnawī*, a few passages prominently stand out. Using a variety of erotic terminology, Rūmī courageously steps out of the conventional debates about love – which too often revolve around the abstract psychological experiences of caring, longing,

9 Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī, *The Mathnawī of Jalālūddīn Rūmī*, ed., trans., and comm. Reynold A. Nicholson, 8 vols. (London: Gibb Memorial Trust 1925–1940), Book IV: 521.

10 There is a large amount of literature produced in the Persian language by Hindu and Muslim writers who emphasize the common spiritual/mystic grounds of the Hindu and the Islamic tradition, going back at least to the seventeenth century. Mīr Abū al-Qāsim Findiriskī (d. 1050/1640), for example, studied Hindu philosophy and mysticism, and developed an account of their affinities to the pantheistic doctrines of Sufism. He wrote extensive marginal notes on the *Laghu-yoga-vāsiṣṭa*, made a glossary of its technical terms, and composed verses in its praise, comparing it with other holy scriptures. He also compiled a book of extracts from its mystical teachings, and paralleled each passage with a piece of Sufi poetry. See Mīr Findiriskī, *Muntakhab-i Jūg-bāsiṣht*, ed. Fathollah Mojtābai (Tehran: Mu'assisa-yi Pazhūhishī-yi Ḥikmat va Falsafa-yi Īrān 2006). Muḥammad Dārā Shikūh (1615–1659), on the other hand, made a bolder and more specialized move in comparing *Vedānta* and Ṣufism in his *Risāla-i-Ḥaqqnamā* (Truth-revealing Epistle), and *Majma' al-baḥrayn* (Mingling of the Two Oceans). As argued in Fathollah Mojtābai, 'Hindu – Muslim Dialogue: A Historical Flashback', Paper presented at the International Symposium on Mystical Aspects of Islamic Art and Literature, Kuala Lumpur 2009, 'In the former work (*Risāla-i-Ḥaqqnamā*), he suggests the identity of the four states of being – namely *nāsūt*, *malakūt*, *jabarūt* and *lāhūt* of the Sufis with the Upanishadic states of the soul, namely, the states of waking (*jāgrana*), dreaming (*swapna*), deep dreamless sleep (*su-shupti*), and the fourth state of absolute non-duality (*turiya*). In the latter work, he makes bold identifications of Islamic mystical conceptions with Vedāntic thought.'

11 For example, Leonard Lewisohn, 'Sufism's Religion of Love, from Rābī'a to Ibn 'Arabī'; and Carl W. Ernst, 'The Stages of Love in Persian Sufism, from Rābī'a to Rūzbahān', in *The Heritage of Sufism*, vol. 2: *Classical Persian Sufism from Its Origins to Rūmī*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn (Oxford: Oneworld 1999), pp. 435–56.

suffering, liberation, and so on – and creatively personifies those abstract notions in tangible form. In such passages Rūmī equates true love with God and introduces various personifications of love on earth as divine agents that are here to lead human beings to the ultimate joy of liberation – liberation from their own ego and from their surroundings. It is this aspect of personified love that leads us to think of these personifications of love in terms of *avatars*. Rūmī's stories of love in the *Mathnawī* usually revolve around the lovers' fears, pains, joys, and states of being, and the path they must follow in order to become united with the beloved. The lover, on his mystical journey, can be seen to encounter seven mysterious characters, which we might think of as the Seven Avatars of Love. These seven *avatars* appear at various stages of the journey of love in order to test, help, and provide guidance to the lover. But the seven *avatars* of love introduced in the *Mathnawī* are in fact manifestations of a single Reality that is formless in its essence, but which manifests Itself in the guise of seven different forms: Blood-shedder, Spiritual Guide (*pīr*), Constable, King, Caliph, the Angel Gabriel, and the Musician. Each of these seven *avatars* manifests a different face of love – harsh, kind, compassionate, angelic, and so on, portraying in a palpable manner a wide range of moods and feelings experienced on the path of love, while displaying various intellectual, mental, and emotional challenges confronting the lover.

Love, for Rūmī is a guiding light or leading agent that assists the wayfarer to attain eternal felicity. The lover (*āshiq*) and beloved (*ma'shūq*) become manifestations of love (*ishq*) – which is sometimes used as a synonymous term for God/Truth (*Ḥaqq*). Love/Truth makes the lover (seeker of the Truth) submit to the will of the beloved (manifestation of the Truth) with whom he desires to unite. The *Mathnawī* introduces love in various guises, as an attribute of the divine (VI: 971 and V: 2185); as a physician who cures all sufferings and diseases (I: 23); and as the master unifier of all the particles in the universe (II: 3727). Indeed, Rūmī's poem grants love a distinct, fundamental and universal status:

دورگردون‌ها ز موج عشق دان گر نبودى عشق بفسردى جهان

The heavens rotate with the waves of love;
The world will freeze in the absence of love.¹²

Through a detailed analysis of the *Mathnawī*, this article sketches out how Rūmī represents the various stages of love using the metaphors of anthropomorphic figures who test, help, and provide guidance to the lover. These avatars, each

12 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, v: 3854. Translation by Amir Zekrgoo.

individually, and taken together as a whole, display various intellectual, mental, and emotional challenges experienced on the path of love.

1 Love, the Blood-shedder ('Ishq-i khūnī)

Introducing love as a ruthless blood-shedder does not seem harmonious with the nature of love, insofar as the lover's initial experience of love is typically one of delight. The lover's exposure and attraction to the beauty, grace, and gentleness of the beloved causes pleasure, such that the realm of love at the beginning gives the impression of being an exclusively joyous domain. Beauty's attractions naturally charm the soul, so a desire to pursue the beloved's beauty is provoked in countless lovers. This provocation, however, is not stimulated by a genuine interest in love, but rather by a mere thirst for pleasure and its satisfaction. Potential lovers are, at this stage, unaware of the risks involved in the game of love. As they move along the path, however, a different and harsher face of love is revealed. As Ḥāfiẓ put it:¹³

که عشق آسان نمود اول ولی افتاد مشکل‌ها

The path of love appeared easy at the beginning,
but then sufferings unfolded therein.

Evidently, suffering is an essential aspect of love; the pain and adversity is there to distinguish true lovers from the pleasure-seeking ones. This is so, in Sumnūn al-Muḥibb's ('the Lover', d. 298/910–11) words, 'that each and every ignoramus will not lay claim to love, and being confronted with adversity, they will be forced to retreat'.¹⁴ In other words, those who do not belong in the realm of true love need to be weeded out, and it is precisely in this domain that love becomes personified as a ruthless blood-shedder (*khūnī*), so as to chase away all those who are 'outsiders'.¹⁵

عشق از اول چرا خونی بود تاگزید آنک بیرونی بود

13 Ḥāfiẓ, *Dīwān-i Ḥāfiẓ, Khwāja Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad*, ed. Parviz Nātil Khānlari, 2 vols. (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Khwārazmī 1359 A.Hsh./1980), vol. 1, p. 18 (ghazal 1, line 1b). Translation by Amir Zekrgoo.

14 See Lewisohn, 'Sufism's Religion of Love', p. 158.

15 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, III: 4751 (Persian text).

Why does love shed blood so relentlessly?
 – To make outsiders to love's truths all flee.¹⁶

The Persian term *khūnī* is an adjectival derivation from the noun *khūn* (blood), signifying anything connected to blood: bloodstained, bloody, blood-shedder, killer, and so on.¹⁷ The battle of love that is meant to expel the impostors and allow only the most deserving lovers to remain in the arena is an ongoing conflict. For this reason, in Rūmī's view, the path of love is often associated with hardship and blood. The *Nay-nāma*, the very first section of the first book of the *Mathnawī*, is said to contain the essence and spirit of this magnum opus. In it Rūmī paints the path of love as a 'bloodstained path'. The wayfarers on this path are reminded of the sufferings of Majnūn, the legendary lover who was regarded by the masses as a madman.

نی حدیث راه پر خون می‌کند قصه‌های عشق مجنون می‌کند

The reed tells a story of a bloodstained path.
 It narrates the legends of Majnūn – 'the Mad'.¹⁸

But, as we shall see, this furious face is not the only face of love. And at times of disorientation and doubt, love can become a kind spiritual guide – a *pīr*:

2 Love as a Spiritual Guide (Pīr-i 'ishq)

In the following couplet Rūmī equates love to a spiritual guru or *pīr* who has the healing power to cure those who are in despair:

پیر، عشق نُست نه ریش سپید دستگیر صد هزاران ناامید

16 Translated by Jawid Mojaddedi, in Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī, *The Masnavi: Book Three*, trans. Jawid Mojaddedi (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004), p. 287, (111: 4754; note the difference in the verse number from Nicholson's edition; Mojaddedi's translation follows Isti'lāmī's edition of the Persian text).

17 'Alī Akbar Dihkhudā, *Lughat-nāma*, ed. M. Mu'īn and M. Ja'far Shahīdī (Tehran: Mu'assasa-yi Lughat-nāma-yi Dihkhudā; Tehran University Press 1373 A.Hsh./1994), s.v. '*khūnī*'.

18 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, 1: 13. Translation by Amir Zekrgoo.

Love is your elder guru; it is not the white beard!
To a hundred thousand hopeless hands, love is a saviour.¹⁹

The ancient Persian term *pīr* appears in Avestan texts as well as in Middle Persian sources. Among Zoroastrians, the *pīr* figures as a guide or mentor, while in the Jewish community of Persia the term is associated with prophethood.²⁰ In some Middle Persian sources and in certain contemporary northern Iranian dialects the same term is also used for ‘father’.²¹ *Pīr*, in the above couplet, is love personified. The term literally refers to an old man, normally marked by a white beard, and is practically synonymous with the Arabic term *shaykh* – or in the spiritual context, *murshid* (spiritual teacher). In Persophone Muslim society, the title *pīr* has been reserved for the highest position in a social and devotional hierarchy or ‘the founder or chief of any religious body or sect’,²² and it was with this meaning that Sufis adopted it for the master of a confraternal or mystical order (*ṭarīqa*), or indeed for a spiritual teacher in general.²³ A *pīr* is highly revered for his in-depth knowledge based on first-hand life experience, and for his power of intuition. As such, the *pīr* is an embodiment of wisdom, a spiritual guiding light both for the individual devotee and for the wider masses. The *pīr* also represents an archetypal entity, symbolic of the apogee of human spiritual growth and maturity.²⁴

Because of the eminence and experience of the *pīr*, it is expected that his disciples will be fully obedient to him. An entire passage in Book I of the *Mathnawī* is dedicated to ‘The Qualities of the *Pīr* and (the Duty of) Obedience to Him’ (*dar šifat-i pīr va muṭāwā‘at-i vay*).²⁵ In one of the couplets in this passage, the *Pīr* is identified with the Sufi Path itself:

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- 19 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, v: 3276. Translation by Amir Zekrgoo.
- 20 Iraj Porushani, ‘Pīr’, in *Dānishnāma-yi jahān-i islām* (Tehran: Bunyād-i Dā‘irat al-Ma‘ārif-i Islāmī 2000), vol. 5, p. 892.
- 21 Dihkhudā, *Lughat-nāma*, s.v. ‘Pīr’. See also ‘Alī Tājdīmī, *Farhang-i namād-hā va nishāna-hā dar andīsha-yi Mawlānā* (Tehran: Surūsh, 1383 A.Hsh./2004), pp. 202–7.
- 22 Francis Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian–English Dictionary* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services 1992), s.v. ‘Pīr’.
- 23 *Murshid* is a nearly synonymous term from Arabic for a guide on the spiritual/Sufi path.
- 24 See E. Geoffroy, ‘Shaykh’, *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., vol. IX, p. 397 (Leiden: E. J. Brill; also available at http://dx.doi.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_6890) accessed 21 June 2019. Geoffroy notes that in India, *shaykh* denotes ‘a category of descendants of the Prophet’, but the same concept is recognized in different spiritual traditions, such as, of course, in the case of the Indian subcontinent, by the term ‘guru’.
- 25 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, the prose heading for the section I: 2934–58.

بر نویس احوال پیر راه دان پیر را بگین و عین راه دان

Write down the conditions of the Pīr who knows the Path.

Choose the Pīr earnestly and know that he is the Path.²⁶

Rūmī's veneration of the *Pīr* harmonizes with Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) view of the eminence of the spiritual guide. In his correspondence, Muḥammad Ghazālī uses the term *pīr-i ṭarīqat* (master of the Sufi Path), and describes the status of the *pīr* in relation to his followers as parallel to that of the holy Prophet in relation to his companions (*aṣḥāb*),²⁷ a view that Rūmī endorses in the *Mathnawī*.²⁸ The importance of the *pīr* as a guide for those on the spiritual quest is so great that being bereft of a *pīr* is equated to being bereft of a prophet. Even today, the compound word *bī-pīr* (*pīr*-less) in Persian is used as a common insult.

The safety of the wayfarers along 'the terrifying and dangerous path' of life can only be guaranteed, according to Rūmī, by the presence of the *pīr*,²⁹ who is associated with warmth and light and described as 'the ladder to the Heavens'.³⁰ While the masses are associated with autumn and night, the *pīr* is likened to summer and the moon.³¹ For this reason, Rūmī bluntly declares that:

من نجوم زین سپس راه آئیر پیر جویم پیر جویم پیر پیر

From now on I will not seek the way to the celestial sphere

I will seek the *Pīr*, I will seek the *Pīr*, the *Pīr*, the *Pīr*!³²

The *Pīr* has occupied a distinct position in Sufi mystical poetry and the visual arts that has complemented and often illustrated this poetry. In such artworks

26 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed., trans. and comm. Nicholson, I: 2938. Translation by Amir Zekrgoo.

27 See *Makātib-i Fārsī-yi Ghazālī*, ed. 'Abbās Iqbal (Tehran: Ibn Sīnā 1333 A.Hsh./1954), p. 103; cited by Nasrollah Pourjavady, 'Pīr', in *Dānishnāma-yi jahān-i Islām*, ed. Gholam Ali Haddad Adel et al. (Tehran: Bunyād-i Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif-i Islāmī 1996–), vol. 5, p. 893.

28 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, III: 1774. Both authors probably derive this position from a well-known Hadith: 'The shaykh/elder amongst his household is like the Prophet among his community' (*al-shakhyh fi baytihi ka'l-nabī fi qawmihi*). [See Furūzānfar, *Aḥādīth-i Mathnawī*, p. 82 – Ed.]

29 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, I: 2943.

30 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, VI: 4125.

31 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, I: 2939.

32 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, VI: 4124. Translation by Amir Zekrgoo.

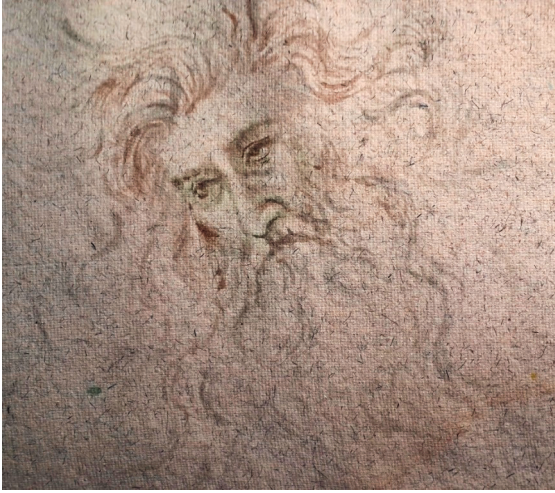


FIGURE 1 The Wise Old Man (*Pīr*)
 Medium: Ink & water on handmade paper (11.5 × 12.5 cm).
 Artist: Amir H. Zekrgoo

the *Pīr* is often depicted as a wise old man with long white hair and a similar beard, totally detached from the happenings in his surroundings.

3 Constable of Love (*Shiḥna-yi 'ishq*)

The term *shiḥna*, which we may translate as more or less equivalent to ‘constable’, was an official post ‘appointed by the king to keep order and [protect the] safety of a town’,³³ or a ‘chief of police’.³⁴ In the *Mathnawī* the term *shiḥna* often appears as an oppositional figure to a thief.³⁵ The term is also used for addressing the Prophet Muḥammad, who has been given the epithet *shiḥna-yi chahārum kitāb* (the constable of the fourth book) in a number of sources referring to his position in safeguarding the words of revelation in the Qur’ān, which Muslims consider the fourth holy book in the history of the Semitic

33 *Ānandrāj*, quoted in Dihkhudā, *Lughat-nāma*, s.v. ‘*shiḥna*’.

34 *Nāẓim al-Aṭibbā’*, quoted in Dihkhudā, *Lughat-nāma*, s.v. ‘*shiḥna*’.

35 See for example, Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, v: 721 and v: 3058, where *duzd* and *shiḥna* (thief and constable) are set as perfect opposites.

religions.³⁶ Interestingly, the Prophet has also been designated as *shihna-i daryā-yi 'ishq* (constable of the sea of love).³⁷

In one passage in Book VI of the *Mathnawī*, love presents itself at various parts of the story disguised as different characters: a constable, a king, and even the Archangel Gabriel. The anecdote recounted in this passage revolves around a pigeon and its keeper. The pigeon symbolizes the lover, or to be more precise, the seeker of truth; the keeper depicts the beloved, or *pīr*. The house of the *pīr* signifies both the pigeon's point of departure and its destination, while love is the force that bonds and binds the two together.

Pigeon keepers have their homing pigeons practise the discipline of flying high on a daily basis, to strengthen their wings and develop their stamina. If a pigeon feels tired or hungry and makes an effort to return to the roof, its owner will resist, pushing it back to soar high and away. Rūmī uses this metaphor to explain the relationship between the lover and the beloved, or the disciple and his *pīr*.

آن کبوتر را که بام آموخته ست تو مخوان، می رانش کان پر دوخته ست

گر برانی مرغ جانش از گراف هم بگردِ بام تو آرد طواف

Don't summon the homing pigeon to the roost on the roof it knows;
Chase it away, for its wings are stuck to the roof ...
Even if you chase off the bird with anger
About your roof his spirit will still circle.³⁸

However, there will always be traps diverting the bird (the wayfarer) from flying, distractions that detract from and sap his faith, loyalty, and obedience to the *pīr* and his focus on his true abode. It is at this point that the Constable of Love (or love disguised as a constable) appears, severely punishing the wayfarer for having allowed his heart to become diverted from the spiritual path:

شخنه عشق مکرر کینه اش طشت آتش می نهد بر سینه اش

36 The three other holy books named in the Qur'ān are the Torah (*Tawrāt*, revealed to Moses), the Psalms (*Zabūr*, revealed to David), and the Gospels (*Injīl*, revealed to Christ).

37 *Burhān-i qāṭi'*, quoted in Dihkhudā, *Lughat-nāma*, s.v. 'shihna'.

38 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, VI: 1990; 1992. Translation by Amir Zekrgoo.

With endless vengeance, the Constable of Love
Will burn its breast with a cauldron of fire.³⁹

According to Shams-i Tabrīzī, there are four passions that distract the mind of the spiritual wayfarer: the genitals, the belly, wealth, and status.⁴⁰ Should a devotee who has spiritually grown by the nourishing power of love (through the attention of the beloved spiritual master) become disloyal (even in his private thoughts), then the zeal of love, personified as this zealous constable, will repeatedly punish the devotee. This punishment is nothing but the burning pain in the heart of the wayfarer of separation from the beloved.

4 The King of Love (Shāh-i 'Ishq)

The personification of love as 'king' appears in the same narration (the pigeon/lover) and passage from the *Mathnawī*, and in an extension to the actions of the Constable of Love. To unveil the mysterious behaviour of love, the constable voices his intention behind the harsh punishment, saying:

که بیآسوی مه و بگذر زگرد شاهِ عشقت خواند، زوتر بازگرد

Rush high to the moon, leave the dust behind!
The King of Love calls you, return to him at once!⁴¹

The above couplet contains a number of symbolic features, namely 'moon' (*mah*), 'dust' (*gard*), and of course, 'King' (*shāh*). The moon, which is the guiding light for travellers on the path in the dark of night, symbolizes the *pīr*. Its position high in the sky denotes the *pīr*'s exalted status. In contrast to the moon are the particles of dust associated with earth – the lower terrestrial sublunary realm – which act as obstacles to the clarity of vision of the voyagers. The lover, keeping himself clear from the dust of lower desires, is led by the guidance of the moon to the glorious privilege of an audience with the King of Love. A king, Rūmī argues, must be adorned with godly attributes, such that his mercy must precede his wrath. Although 'kings shed blood for the sake of righteousness', the *Mathnawī* declares, 'their mercy must exceed their severity'.

39 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, VI: 1995. Translation by Amir Zekrgoo.

40 Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Tabrīzī, *Maqālāt-i Shams-i Tabrīzī*, ed. Muḥammad 'Alī Muwaḥḥid, (Tehran: Kh^wārazmī 1369 A.Hsh./1990), p. 791.

41 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, VI: 1996. Translation by Amir Zekrgoo.

شاه را باید که باشد خوی رب رحمت او سبق گیرد بر غضب

A king must have the manners of the Lord:
His sense of mercy preceding his wrath.⁴²

5 Love's Caliph (Khalifa-yi 'ishq)

The term *khalifa*, rendered as caliph in English, implies vicegerent, successor, or deputy in Arabic. It occurs in the Qurʾān in various contexts. In one sura, God speaks to the angels about Adam, addressing him as God's 'successor' on earth (Qurʾān 11: 30ff); at other places (Qurʾān xxxv: 39; xxvii: 62) the believers in general are regarded as inheritors of earth and as God's successors. The successors of the prophets have also been addressed as their caliphs; Noah's followers, for instance, in Sūrat al-Aʿrāf (Qurʾān vii: 69), are referred to as his caliphs.

The caliph is the 'one who is obeyed', and Ghazālī, in his *Mishkāt al-anwār*, identifies him with the Prophet.⁴³ In the history of Islam the term 'caliph' was first used as a specific religious and political position in reference to the four Righteous Caliphs (*al-khulafā al-rāshidūn*) who directly succeeded the Prophet Muḥammad as leaders of the entire Muslim community. The term continued to be used by many later Muslim states, mostly hereditary monarchies.⁴⁴

In the Sufi tradition, a successor or representative of a Sufi *pīr* or master is often also referred to as a *khalifa*. The connective link between the first political institution of a caliphate (the four successors of Prophet Muhammad) and most of the initiatic lineages (*silsila*) of the Sufi orders is 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet. The esoteric wisdom that was carried by Muḥammad, according to the tradition, was transmitted to 'Alī and through him handed down to the masters of the Sufi orders, who trace their lineage to the Prophet through him.⁴⁵

A long passage of the *Mathnawī* (11: 906–35) is devoted to the *khalifas*, who are said to have the mission of carrying and passing on the divine light

42 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, iv: 2435. Translation by Amir Zekrgoo.

43 See Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press 1975), p. 223.

44 Wadad Kadi and Aram Shahin, 'Caliph, Caliphate', in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, ed. Gerhard Böwering, Patricia Crone, Mahan Mirza, Wadad Kadi, Muhammad Qasim Zaman, and Devin J. Stewart (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2013), pp. 81–86.

45 See Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 27.

(*Mathnawī*, 11: 909) from the beginning of creation of mankind until the end of time. What qualifies the caliphs to carry the light is their love and devotion to the source of light (beloved/creator; *Mathnawī*, 11: 910). Their genealogy on earth begins with Adam, passes through the major Prophets mentioned in the Qur'ān (11: 911–21), then the four 'rightly guided' caliphs (11: 922–25), and continues after them to connect directly with five famous early Sufis (11: 926–30), and beyond them to hundreds of thousands of unknown persons or entities whom God keeps hidden from us (11: 931ff).

The distinguishing feature of all these designated 'caliphs', Rūmī proclaims (11: 908), is that they are 'purified from the temperament of earthly beings' (*pākishān kard az mizāj-i khākiyān*), for God has 'caused them to outrun the celestials' (*bugdharānīd az tag-i aflākiyān*). The list of prophets (*nabī*) totals twelve, beginning with Adam, and including Seth, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, David, Solomon, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Jesus, and finally Muḥammad. Rūmī briefly characterizes each prophet by mentioning the particular miracles associated with each: Abraham and the blazing furnace into which he was cast, Joseph and his gift of dream interpretation, Moses and his rod that turned into a dragon, Muḥammad and his miracle of cleaving the moon in two, and so on.

Each of the four Righteous Caliphs is also associated with a certain attribute. For Abū Bakr his righteousness is emphasized in his epithet, 'The Truthful One' (*al-ṣiddīq*); 'Umar's nickname, 'The Discerning One' (*al-farūq*), underscores his commanding ability to differentiate between right and wrong. 'Uthmān has been glorified with the title 'The Possessor of Two Lights' (*dhī'l-nūrayn*), alluding to the historical fact that he was blessed to have two daughters who were married to the Prophet (at different times). Finally, 'Alī is praised as 'The Lion of God' (*shīr-i khudā*) in the Pasture of the Soul' (*Mathnawī* 11, 922–25).

The viceregency is further extended to the early Sufi masters (*Mathnawī* 11, 926–30), namely Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 297/910), Bāyazīd-i Bisṭāmī (d.c. 261/875), Ma'rūf al-Karkhī (d.c. 199/815), Ibrāhīm ibn Adham al-Balkhī (d.c. 165/782), and Shaqīq al-Balkhī (d. 194/810). Ma'rūf al-Karkhī is specially designated among them all in the *Mathnawī* with the title 'Love's Caliph':

چون که کرخی کرخ او را شد حرس شد خلیفه عشق و ربانی نفس

When Karkhī became the guard of the city (of divine light),
He became Love's Caliph and was granted divine breath.⁴⁶

46 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, 11: 928. Translation by Amir Zekrgoo.

Ma'rūf al-Karkhī figures as a forerunner of the Baghdad School of Sufism, and many of the later Sufi orders trace their chains of initiation through him,⁴⁷ all of which evidently sufficed to make Karkhī personify 'Love's Caliph' (11: 925) for Rūmī. The belief that love motivates all of God's actions is a common doctrine among Sufis, buttressed by the famous saying, 'I was a hidden treasure and loved to be known' (*kuntu kanzan mahfīyan wa aḥbabbtu an 'urafa*), to which Rūmī alludes in the *Mathnawī* (1: 2862–63); we may therefore suppose that many readers identified the divine light carried or represented by these vicegerents in *Mathnawī* 11: 909 with love. As such, these beings that have been purified from material elements (*mizāj-i khākiyān*) and turned from fire into pure light (*bar girift az nār-u nūr-i šāf sākht*), have hearts illumined with the light of love.⁴⁸

6 The Gabriel of Love (Jibrā'il-i 'ishq)

In Book VI of the *Mathnawī* we come across an angelic personification of love. Rūmī, while conversing with Ḥusām al-Dīn Chalabī, addresses himself as the 'Gabriel of Love' and equates Ḥusām to the Lote Tree of the Utmost Boundary (*Sidrat al-muntahā*), the paradisaical Tree of Life mentioned in the Qur'ān (LIII: 14–16).

جبرئیل عشقم و سدره م توی من سقیم، عیسی مریم توی

I am the Gabriel of Love; you are the Lote Tree;
I am an ailing one; you are Jesus of Mary.⁴⁹

The *Sidrat al-muntahā* is imagined to stand in the seventh and highest realm of the heavens, said to be so huge that it would take seventy years for a horseman to ride through its shade.⁵⁰ This miraculous tree, thought to be the abode of the Archangel Gabriel, stands on the confluence of the phenomenal world

47 'Abd al-Ḥusayn Zarrīnkūb, *Justujū'ī dar taṣawwuf-i Irān* (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr 1357 A.Hsh./1978), p. 113.

48 See Ernst, 'The Stages of Love in Early Persian Sufism,' p. 440; also Mahmūd-Riḍā Isfandiyyār and Fāṭima Sulaymānī, 'Maḥmūd-i 'ishq az didgāh-i Rūzbihān Baqlī', *Pazhūhish-nāma-yi adyān* 4/7 (2010), pp. 31–46.

49 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, VI: 1998. Translation by Amir Zekrgoo.

50 Abū'l-Qāsim Maḥmūd ibn 'Umar Zamakhsharī, *Tafsīr al-Kashshāf* (Qum: Nashr-i Ādāb al-Ḥawza 1947), vol. 4, p. 421, as quoted in Karīm Zamānī, *Sharḥ-i jāmi'-i Mathnawī-yi Ma'nawī*, Book 2 (Tehran: Ittilā'āt 1381 A.Hsh./2002), p. 451.

and the exalted domain beyond matter.⁵¹ It is at this stage and in this station (*maqām*) that Gabriel was charged with relaying the divine messages of revelation (the *waḥy*), and made their intermediary. In other words, this 'Lote Tree of the Utmost Boundary' acts as a medium between the Archangel Gabriel and the Creator. Gabriel also takes human form while appearing to Mary (Maryam), and through her miraculous pregnancy the Christ, 'the Spirit of God' (*Rūḥullāh*), is born. It is through this spirit that Jesus performed miracles in the form of healing the sick and bringing the dead back to life.⁵²

In the above-cited verse, Rūmī uses Gabriel, the Lote Tree of the Utmost Boundary (*Sidrat al-muntahā*), and Jesus's miraculous power to heal diseases as metaphors to explain his relationship with his leading disciple and his first *khalīfa* (successor), Ḥusām al-Dīn Chalabī (d. 683/1284), whom he praises, as Carl Ernst has pointed out, 'in the most eloquent of terms as the pinnacle of spirituality, the Abū Yazīd and Junayd of his day, and a man of noble lineage ... like a star that shines and becomes a refuge for the divine and spiritual ones possessing insight, who are undoubtedly the elite mystics'.⁵³

The emphasis here is on the importance of an intimate friend, a perfect companion without whom the *Mathnawī*'s inspiration would not find a platform for manifestation. Historically speaking, Rūmī experienced the lack of such a companion when Ḥusām al-Dīn's wife died. This caused Ḥusām al-Dīn to experience a profound sorrow that persisted for two years. Not surprisingly the flow of the composition of the *Mathnawī* during the exact same period was disrupted. The first book of the *Mathnawī* was already complete, but the second book did not begin for nearly two years until Ḥusām al-Dīn recovered from his period of mourning and returned to the project.⁵⁴ The event was so special that Rūmī recorded the year 662 (1263–64) in the text of the *Mathnawī* (II: 6–7) as the date when the composition of Book II began.

Let us now return to the narrative of the pigeon, which we discussed in relation to the 'Constable of Love'. Here the story takes another turn, as the pigeon appears as the Archangel Gabriel. The Archangel represents the lover – Rūmī himself. The beloved in this phase of the story is Ḥusām al-Dīn, represented

51 Muḥammad Ibn Ḥamzat Fanārī, *Miṣbāḥ al-uns*, as quoted in Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī's *Miftāḥ al-ghayb*, ed. Muḥammad Khwājū'i (Tehran: Mawlā 1374 A.Hsh./1995), p. 518.

52 Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. Abū'l-'Alā' 'Afīfī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Arabī 1946), vol. 1, p. 140fn. See also Ṭayyiba Karamī, 'Jibrā'il', *Dānishnāma-yi jahān-i islām* (Tehran: Bunyād-i Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif-i Islāmī 2005), vol. 9, pp. 602–4.

53 Carl W. Ernst, 'A Little Indicates Much: Structure and Meaning in the Prefaces to Rūmī's *Mathnawī*, Books I–III', *Mawlana Rumi Review* v (2014), p. 16.

54 Franklin Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oneworld 2008), pp. 219–20.

as the roof on which the pigeon roosts, which itself is symbolized by *Sidrat al-muntahā*.

گرد این بام و کبوتر خانه من چون کبوتر پر زخم مستانه من
جبرئیل عشقم و سدره م توی من سقیمم، عیسی مریم توی

Around the roof of this pigeon-house, so high
Drunken with bliss, like a pigeon I fly.
I am the Gabriel of Love; you are the Lote Tree;
I am an ailing one; you are Jesus of Mary.⁵⁵

7 Love's Musician (*Muṭrib-i 'ishq*)

Love in its final manifestation appears disguised as a musician, singing and playing melodies that unveil yet another face of love:

مطرب عشق این زند وقت سماع بندگی بند و خداوندی صداع

At the time of *Samā'* the musician of love chants this melody:
'Servitude is being in chains and lordship is all misery'⁵⁶

Here, the musician (love) speaks about the predicaments involved in the process of love, that is, the burdens of being a lover or beloved. In the Persian mystical tradition, the beloved is often portrayed as a royal figure, powerful and rich; the lover, on the other hand, is a needy and weak individual whose life depends on the grace of his lord – the beloved.⁵⁷ Four key terms in the above couplet require explication to elucidate the actual message: musician (*muṭrib*); audition, or the Sufi spiritual concert (*samā'*); servitude (*bandigī*); and lordship (*khudāvandī*).

55 Rūmī, *Mathnavī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, VI: 1997–98. Translation by Amir Zekrgoo.

56 Rūmī, *Mathnavī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, III: 4722. Translation by Amir Zekrgoo.

57 See, for example, ghazal 1670 and 1724 in Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī, *Kullīyyāt-i Shams yā Dīwān-i kabīr az guftār-i Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad mashhūr bi Mawlawī, bā taṣṣūḥāt va ḥawāshī*, ed. Badī' al-Zamān Furūzānfar, 3rd ed. (Tehran: Sipīhr 1363 A.Hsh./1984), vol. 4, pp. 27–28, 57–58.

The term *muṭrib* (musician) originates from the root *ṭarab*, which can be translated as cheerfulness and joy.⁵⁸ *Muṭrib* is then one who brings cheerfulness and joy to others through singing, playing an instrument, and/or dancing.⁵⁹ In Sufi poetry, the *muṭrib* often symbolizes the *pīr*, a spiritual grand master who unveils esoteric truths, and lightens and enlightens the hearts of his disciples.⁶⁰ The *Mathnawī* also regards the musician (*muṭrib*) as the revealer of the mysteries that took place in the primordial day of *Alast*:⁶¹

مطرب آغایزد پیش ترک مست در حجاب نغمه اسرار الست

In the presence of the drunken Turk the musician began to chant,
Under the veil of melody, the mysteries of the day of *Alast*.⁶²

The Arabic term *samāʿ* connotes listening, especially to a pleasant harmonious melody, which in Sufi tradition usually implies the chanting of poems or spiritual songs, with or without musical accompaniment, and rhythmic movement to those chants, especially in a state of ecstasy and trance.⁶³ The contemporary Mevlevi practice of *samāʿ*, at least until the orders were banned by the Republic of Turkey in 1926, was understood as a meditative act of love and devotion, in the process of which the *samāʿ-zan* (*samāʿ* performer) receives cosmic energy. *Samāʿ* is hence regarded as ‘the nourishment of the soul.’⁶⁴

Servitude (*bandiqī*) and ‘lordship’ (*khudāvandī*) are the other two key terms, the former representing the lover, the latter the beloved. Both states of being bring with them some sort of hardship. The lover is often pictured in

58 Dihkhudā, *Lughat-nāma*, s.v. ‘Ṭarab’.

59 Dihkhudā, *Lughat-nāma*, s.v. ‘Muṭrib’.

60 Sayyid Jaʿfar Sajjādī, *Farhang-i iṣṭilāḥāt va taʿbīrāt-i ʿirfānī* (Tehran: Kitābkhāna-yi Ṭahūrī, 1991), p. 727.

61 That is to say, the Day of the Covenant (*Yawm al-alast*), a scene in the Qurʾan (VII:172) depicting a pre-existent state when the primal covenant between God and Man was struck; in that primordial moment, the uncreated souls of Adam – the essence of all mankind – pledged a covenant to recognize their Creator as their Lord. God asks, ‘Am I not your Lord?’ and all reply, ‘yes’.

62 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed., trans., and comm. Nicholson, VI: 703. Translation by Amir Zekrgoo.

63 See Qāsim Ghanī, *Baḥṭh dar āthār va afkār va aḥwāl-i Ḥāfīz: Tāʾrīkh-i taṣawwuf dar Islām az ṣadr-i Islām tā ʿaṣr-i Ḥāfīz*, 3rd ed. (Tehran: Zawwār 1376 A.Hsh./1997), II, pp. 341–57.

64 See Amir H. Zekrgoo, ‘Sufi *Samāʿ* and the Cosmology of Mandala’, *Al-Shajarah, Journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 13/2 (Kuala Lumpur 2008), pp. 179–208. [For the practice of *samāʿ* in the later Mevlevi Order, see Roderick Grierson, ‘“All the Invisible Kingdoms”: Resuhi Baykara and the Mevlevi *Mukabele*’, *Mawlana Rumi Review* v (2014), pp. 107–36 – Ed.]

Persian poetry as a 'slave' to the beloved,⁶⁵ hence the expressions 'servitude' and 'chains'. The beloved, on the other hand, is the master who is constantly troubled by the lover's burning passion; therefore 'lordship' is accompanied by 'misery'. The musician (*muṭrib*), who is the personification of love, informs us of the trials and tribulations associated with the spiritual path, from which neither the lover nor the beloved can distance himself. This message is particularly expressed during *samā'*, a time when Sufis feel that prayers are especially answered.⁶⁶ The experience of a sense of selflessness is one of the aims of *samā'*, a state in which individuality is dissolved. 'At the stage of selflessness the lover, freed from the chains and headaches of servitude and lordship, is needless, and true love is his only treasure and with it he can elevate to a stage that is beyond hope and fear.'⁶⁷ When there is no self and no individuality, the barrier between lover and beloved disappears, for all divisions are rooted in the notion, or rather the illusion, of 'self'. The process of shifting from individuality to selflessness is the same process when individual instruments work together to create a symphony:

The individuals take part in this collective dance of whirling spins in order to become liberated from their 'individuality' that makes them limited and isolated. They, under the supervision of a *murshid* or *pīr* move toward absorption in the tempo of the cosmic symphony and become united with it, in the same way that the sounds of individual instruments are stripped from their individuality in the performance of a huge orchestra.⁶⁸

Love is that melting pot, that delightful symphony that represents the unity between individuals – the lovers and the ones beloved. When individualities

65

کار دل در عشق بازی بندگی است
بندگی در عاشقی پابندگی است

Heart serves love through servitude / Servitude is lover's immortality (Translation by Zekrgoo)

From Shāh Nimatullāh Walī, *Dīwān*, ed. Mohammad Rasa, pp. 119, 360 (available online: <http://www.sufi.ir/books/download/farsi/hazrate-shah-nematollah/divan-shahnematollah-kamel.pdf>), accessed 27 November 2018.

66 Leonard Lewisohn, 'The Sacred Music of Islam: Sama' in the Persian Sufi Tradition', *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 6 (1997), pp. 1–33.

67 Leyla H. Tager, 'The Ingredients, Stages and Experience of Love: A Parallel Exposition of Jalaluddin M. Rumi and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy', PhD Thesis (International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, Kuala Lumpur 2014), p. 250.

68 See Amir H. Zekrgoo, 'Sufi *Samā'*', p. 201.

are melted in the boiling pot of love, all the impurities are removed and inner peace prevails.⁶⁹

8 Conclusion

As we have seen, the six books of the *Mathnawī* offer various representations and depictions of love, and the poet seems preoccupied with symbolic depictions of various modes of love in the guise of individuals. The personalities that embody love – love's avatars – are, however, often overlooked. This may be because (1) these personifying characters may appear only briefly, in the midst of complex and multifaceted anecdotes or stories; (2) the poet names the characters, but does not go on to elaborate or overtly specify their role as personifications of love; or (3) the audience is often carried away by the stereotypical or stock character roles of certain of these personifications, and as a result, the connection between 'love' and its personifications is easily overlooked.

In this study we have attempted to identify and extract seven bodily incarnations or symbols of love. Each of these manifestations/personifications is introduced both in the context of the narrative – in relation to love – and in the context of the overall character and attributes by which it is made known. These seven manifestations or avatars represent seven phases in the path of love. Although these phases do not appear in a systematic progression in the *Mathnawī*, one can see a logical hierarchy that begins with the simplest manifestation of love, and ends with the highest and most abstract manifestation that removes the barrier between the lover and the beloved. However, as 'love' does not follow any logic known to man, one cannot claim that the stages in the path of love are the same in number for every seeker, or even follow the same order.

While the beloved symbolizes the eternal felicity of spiritual realization, the lover is depicted as a seeker on the Sufi path, with love symbolizing the Path itself. Love's seven personifications act as signs, guidelines, tests, and inspirations that are meant to lead the qualified candidates and neophytes, and filter out those with impurities.

In its first manifestation, love appears as the blood-shedder who does the initial winnowing of would-be lovers, scaring away those who do not belong in love's realm, and leaving room for the true lover, who is bold and fearless, and persistent to the end of the journey.

69 Zekrgoo, 'Sufi *Samā'*, p. 203.

The *Pūr*, the second manifestation of love, assists and guides the wayfarer with his wisdom, patience, and fatherly kindness. Through the guidance received from a *Pūr*, the wayfarer is allowed to move forward, using his knowledge and sense of orientation – just like a free pigeon. This is, of course, a test to evaluate the lover's strength and loyalty.

This is where worldly desires may enter, misleading the lover and undermining or robbing his faith. Once again the fierce face of love appears – this time personified as the constable. He arrests and punishes the thieving heart of the lover. The constable here is the compeller, symbolizing the feeling of guilt that burns the breast of the lover. This agonizing experience, however, is a blessing in disguise, because it increases the knowledge of the traveller about the traps that may waylay him, and most importantly, brings him to the audience of the 'king' – the royal face and next avatar of love – who gracefully receives him.

The 'caliph', whose authority is sanctioned by God, is the next personification. Due to his association with the divine, the position of the caliph is higher than that of a king. Hence, at this stage, love is introduced as an embodiment of the power of a higher spiritual order. All the prophets of God, spiritual leaders, and saints fall into this category, for they are carriers of divine light through whom the earthly paths to heaven are illuminated.

At the highest stage of this hierarchy stands the Archangel Gabriel – an angelic personification of love. Gabriel is the carrier of divine revelation – the very material by which the prophets of God are enlightened and the followers of faith are provided with guidance. Here love and revelation become synonymous.

The last personification of love, the musician, is categorically different from all the above. The musician questions the essential validity of any form of personification or individuality on the path of love. He encourages a fundamental shift from individuality to selflessness, for true unity can only be attained when individualities are dissolved. In other words, when lover and beloved are both stripped of their individual identities, the barrier between them is removed and what remains is pure love.

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