



Non-Dual consciousness and cross-cultural mysticism: Rumi in dialogue with indic spiritual traditions

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Abstract

The West has often depicted India as a land of sages and mystics, where people seek divine love, transcendental selfhood, and a spiritual oneness and union with the Supreme Being. The 13th century Persian poet Jalaluddin Rumi has proliferated and promulgated this image of India as an exotic other through his writings. Although he never visited India, his poetry reflects a deep knowledge and interest in Indian culture, heritage, religion and tradition. Several of his poems are a testament to his engagement with the much-talked-about Indian mystics, such as the Nath Yogis (their spiritual practices), ancient Indian religions and mythologies, like Vedanta and Hinduism, particularly the idea of non-duality (Advaita Vedanta) and the cycle of birth (samsara), and a synthesis of Sufism and Indian spiritualism. His works also showcase a deeply entangled relationship between Indian Bhakti traditions and his universal ideas of Sufism, love, devotion, compassion and spiritual growth. This paper examines the resonances between Rumi's ideas of non-duality, divine love and key Indic philosophical traditions such as Advaita Vedanta, Buddhism, and Kashmiri Shaivism.

Keywords: Mysticism, sufism, rumi, advaita vedanta, non-duality, bhakti tradition

Introduction

India has long been cited by the West as a spiritual and mystical hub. This assertion, however, is justified because India had been a land rich and replete with ancient Hindu philosophies, schools of thought, spiritual gurus and mystics. Since its inception, these doctrines, schools of thought, and the people associated with them have been attempting to take us to a path of Enlightenment, wherein we discover our true and unique potentials and nature by reconciling and merging ourselves with the omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient Supreme Being.

Ancient Indian philosophies and religions like Advaita Vedanta, Buddhism, Upanishads, Kashmir Shaivism, and Tantrism, though having structural and doctrinal differences, have reiterated the same idea of a unified spiritual existence, wherein all beings, setting aside their religious and socio-political beliefs, come together to gain an eternal non-dual, unified and all-encompassing experience.

Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi (Rumi hitherto), one of the greatest and gifted Sufi spiritual and mystical leaders of all time, had shared parallel ideas with these ancient Indian philosophies and religions. While propagating his expressions and understandings of love (as a transformative force), divine unity, self-discovery, inner self, non-dual soul, surrender and trust, the power of music and dance, compassion and unity, Rumi knowingly or unknowingly had invoked and touched upon Indian mystics, spiritualists, philosophies and religions. Therefore, comparative studies have frequently noticed a striking point of convergence between Islamic Sufi tradition, Rumi's articulation of divine love, self-annihilation (fana), and the non-dual unity of several Indic metaphysical groups. Instead of showing or claiming influence of one branch of thought over another, this paper draws parallels through the lens of cross-cultural mystical convergence as the different and distinct traditions articulate comparable ontological and spiritual concerns.

This paper, therefore, places Rumi's mystical philosophy in dialogue with Advaita Vedanta, Buddhist notions of non-self, and Kashmiri Shaivite metaphysics. It identifies shared approaches to non-duality and the transformation of the self. Furthermore, this comparative framework demonstrates how Sufi and Indic traditions meet around shared concerns regarding ego-transcendence, ultimate reality, and spiritual transformation.

Analysis

Convergence of Rumi and Advaita Vedanta

One of the most significant ideas of Rumi is his conceptualisation of non-duality and non-dual existence. Non-duality goes against the idea of entities having separate and distinct identities. Instead, it reinforces that every particle and entity of this universe is, in fact, the same. The apparent differences that we witness are an illusion. This illusion hinders our vision to see and go beyond the apparent separateness of things, people, habits and customs. Rumi's non-dual love and God emphasise that everything is interconnected. This idea of non-dual consciousness has also been discussed in relation to Advaita Vedanta and Zen Buddhist philosophy by scholars such as Nasaru. For instance, the core message of Upanishadic teachings is Advaita or non-dualism. It is a Sanskrit word, meaning non-dual. Dvait means two, and the prefix 'a' negates what follows it, i.e., non-two. Rumi frequently engages with the unity of the soul with the divine and suggests that the separation between the soul and the ultimate reality is illusory. Therefore, when Rumi writes in his poem "Say I Am You", "I am dust particles in the sunlight... Say I am you," he gestures towards the mystical unity of the soul with the universe (Rumi 280).

In this poem, Rumi urges us to listen to the teachings of the soul, and in the poem, he asks us to concentrate our mind and energy on our inner self. Importantly, Rumi considers the soul as one unified entity that has all the secrets of the

universe, and as the soul resides within us, he, therefore, guides us to seek ourselves because within us lies the universe and God. It is interesting to note that Rumi experienced God in every creation. Thus, his ideas of invoking God differ from traditional orthodox teachings of Islam, that believes that nothing can be equated with God.

However, Rumi's God is love, which is seated in the human heart. All spiritualists see existence in love, and likewise, Rumi's Sufi love is omnipresent in every object of creation. According to him, love binds and unites for achieving the eternal and one soul. Love, as a matter of fact, is a way to reach God. Thus, he equates love with God as a means through which the God seeker is able to see and feel God in his or her acts of love. Rumi and other spiritualists call it "Divine Love". Thus, in one of his love poems, he writes:

There is no work (being done) in it except love of God: there is no inhabitant except the idea of union with Him.

I have swept the house clean of good and evil: my house is filled with love of the One. (Rumi, Masnavi 2800)

Mustafa Vaziri argues in his book Rumi and Shams' Silent Rebellion: Parallel with Vedanta, Buddhism, and Shaivism that non-duality and oneness are preached in Upanishadic teachings and Advaita Vedanta by resting its beliefs in 'The Brahman', which holds ultimate reality and absolute state of existence (145). Everything else other than the Brahman is part of an illusion or 'maya'. The Brahman represents and stands for the self 'Atman', which is the one and same unchanging reality (Vaziri 149).

The Upanishads proclaim that we fear otherness and thus love the self: "Ātmanastu kāmāya sarvaṃ priyaṃ bhavati," meaning that everything is loved for the sake of the self (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.4.5).

Notably, the pantheistic approach of Rumi, who experiences an abundance of love as a means to seek God, is also evident in Lord Krishna's proclamation that the real nature of existence can be understood only through 'bhakti', or divine love: "Bhaktiā māṃ abhijānāti yāvān yaś cāsmi tattvataḥ; tato māṃ tattvato jñātva viśhate tad-anantaram" (*Bhagavad Gita* 18.55).

This verse means that genuine knowledge of the divine is attained solely by loving devotion, and upon achieving true understanding of the divine, the devotee ultimately achieves unity with it. Rumi gestures at a similar bhakti love in one of his Masnavi poems: "Whatsoever the man in love (with God) speaks, the scent of Love is springing from his mouth into the abode of Love" (Rumi, Masnavi 2880).

Dr Balram Shukla, in his article "Rumi and the Confluence of Indian and Islamic Spiritualism", said that all of the Vedanta schools except Sankara emphasise highly on the importance of the bhakti tradition (33). In fact, bhakti is one of the main propositions of Narada, Sandhya Bhaktisutras and Pancaratra texts. Additionally, the Nasadiya hymn and the Rgveda state that love preceded the genesis.

Thus, Brahman of the Upanishads is a non-dual entity that asks us to merge ourselves with the eternity of existence. Similarly, Rumi uses love as both a symbol and a source to attain the final non-dual existence. Consequently, both Rumi and the Katha Upanishad have emphasised the importance of listening to our hearts to attain the highest self.

It is needless to say that Rumi has incorporated the image of the heart in his ghazals and verses. Scholars such as Mohammad Rustom have argued that the heart is regarded as the central locus of spiritual perception and divine knowledge. Rumi writes, "The heart (spirit) is faring to the

Ka'ba at every moment, and through (Divine) bounty the body assumes the nature of the heart" (Rumi, Masnavi 530). Additionally, Rumi's use of the Sun as symbols and metaphors in his poems can be analogised with the Brahman. This is so because the Sun, being one and without a second, is a non-dual entity.

Buddhism and Rumi

The core similarity between Rumi and Buddhism lies in their respective propagation of non-self and Nirvana or enlightenment. According to the Buddhist philosophy, the urge to hold onto the egoistic self creates all sorts of anxiety, pain and suffering. Therefore, true Enlightenment or Nirvana is channelised when we detach ourselves from the self and try to go beyond the ever-changing and transitory notion called the self. It means entering into a non-self understanding where the mind deliberately loses hold of this illusory material world. This same principle is echoed in Rumi when he declares 'fana', 'bi-khwishi', or 'bi-khodi' as a medium to reach to the non-self.

Rumi reiterates that we reach this state when we are absolutely immersed and absorbed in love. As Buddha considered this material world of birth and death to be always in a state of flux and thus illusory, Rumi, too, has walked on the same path when his ghazals try to take us away from this material world. Rumi writes about the rapid spiritual ascent of the mystic in one of his Masnavi poems: "The mystic's progress is (an ascension) at every moment to the throne of the (Divine) King; the ascetic's progress is one day's journey every month" (Rumi, Masnavi 2180). Rumi has argued throughout his writing that the path towards the non-self is a difficult but necessary one.

Rumi invokes Buddhist non-self. He asks us to transcend this terrestrial world and visualise that empty, non-dual and eternal state of being. He often uses 'fana' to refer to the inner soul and being of existence. According to him, 'fana' helps us connect to the soul by disconnecting it from the functioning faculty of the mind. He writes, "How should this 'I' be revealed by thinking? That 'I' is revealed (only) after passing away from self (fana)" (Rumi, Masnavi 4145). Vaziri shows another point of similarity between Buddha and Rumi in their respective approach to relieving pain and suffering. Drawing a parallel between them, he states that life's dissatisfaction stems from three poisons: "greed, anger and delusion." Similarly, he argues that Rumi emphasises the need to overcome the impulses such as hers (greed), khasham (anger), and shahvat (lust) in the process of attaining final liberation (Vaziri 155).

Rumi and Shaivism

Rumi bases his non-dual worldview on love, and Kashmiri Shaivism does the same by showing 'Siva' as an epitome of a non-dual figure. According to Kashmiri Shaivism, the 'Siva' is the soul of the universe. In Siva lies the oneness and unification with God. Siva is a non-dual entity that is present in every soul, and the mind's energy is controlled in the non-dual heart. Everyone has been endowed with the Siva consciousness, and we need to follow the 'Saivite' practices to vibrate with the absolute consciousness of 'Siva'. Vaziri argues that "Siva is the personification of pure consciousness" (160). Thus, when Rumi talks about absolute unification with God, by embracing love through the non-dual heart, he invokes the same idea of Kashmiri Shaivism, which only replaces love with 'Siva'.

However, the vehicle of transformation remains the same, i.e., the heart. Also, not only love but sometimes Shams (Rumi's guru) takes the role of the non-dual entity. Rumi finds the essence of oneness in Shams. On the other hand, Kashmiri Shaivism gets the same transcendental feeling in the image and being of 'Siva'. Rumi enlightens us in one of his poems that genuine spiritual knowledge comes when the heart is illuminated, and the soul becomes receptive to divine insight. He also adds that this kind of knowledge is not realised through books or intellectual reasoning.

Tantric Practices and Rumi

The purpose of Tantric practices hinges upon similar ideas. It aims to achieve a non-dual self through its unorthodox practices. However, it has been looked down upon by conservative Buddhists, Brahmins, and even practising Yogis because it incorporates sexual deities and practices. Nevertheless, Buddha has separately taught Tantrism to reach the Enlightenment. Therefore, it is not shocking to find similar grounds between Rumi and Kashmiri Tantrism when they talk about eternity, oneness and the Enlightened soul. They intersect in two points. One is the complete veneration of the Guru. As Kashmiri Tantrism puts the female sexual Goddess on the pedestal, so does Rumi with his complete submission to his Guru Shams Tabrizi. The second is the respect for the female deity.

Another commonality lies in their highest regard for the female deity. Rumi took a similar trajectory by showing, "the seductive beloved (ma'shuq) or other times Saqi, the beauty with curly hair who hides behind the veil and seduces the hearts; in Tantra it is the female deity, often Saki" (Vaziri 165). We also notice an echo of it in Hinduism, as Gurubhakti is highly regarded in the Upanishads. Moreover, similar statements are there in Sufism too, about the Peer. Translating one of the Sufi sayings, Shukla writes, "He who differentiates Guru from the God is no way a disciple" (36).

Dance and Music

As a corollary to the previous point, Rumi was the first to introduce dance and music into Sufism. Sufis believe that fine music and dance create a delicate mind that becomes conducive to Enlightened thoughts. Therefore, through the esoteric dance and music of Sufism, our minds become connected to the Supreme Being. In several of his ghazals of the Divan-e-Shams, Rumi reiterates that the supreme presence of the divine beloved dispels fear and hierarchy. It also creates a space where the seekers gather and become one in spiritual freedom.

Rumi writes

Dance (only) where you break (mortify) yourself and (when you) tear away the cotton from the sore of lust.
(Holy) men dance and wheel on the (spiritual) battle-field: they dance in their own blood.

When they are freed from the hand (dominion) of self, they clap a hand; when they escape from their own imperfection, they make a dance. (Rumi, Masnavi 95)

Also, Tantric feasts can be composed with majlis (assembly). Tantric spiritual feasts have music, wine, dance, chant, food and female company. These feasts are called ganacharika (gathering circle). The whole point of both of these gatherings is to remove non-duality.

Another point of convergence is both Rumi and Kashmiri Tantrism's promotion of wine as a way to the ultimate unity.

However, we have to be cautious about the fact that Rumi was talking about wine symbolically. In his poem, Rumi remarks, "How will he that is intoxicated with God be restored to his senses by (the soft breath of) the west-wind? The God intoxicated man will not come to himself at the blast of the trumpet (of Resurrection)" (Masnavi 685).

Moreover, these Tantric expressions are reflected in Doha poetry of Kabir. Mostafa Vaziri argues that these Dohas serve a similar purpose to Rumi's as a means of revering his guru Shams, and for inspiration, spiritual instruction, paradox, and challenge to the mind, to promote ecstasy within a devoted group (169).

The Sun-God in Kashmiri Shaivism is elevated to gain the ultimate non-dual consciousness. It resonates with Rumi's admiration for the sun as it also alludes to Shams, whose name literally means 'sun'. Revering the Sun-God, Rumi also composes, "The assembler of (all) these motes was the (Divine) Sun: He knows how to seize thy (bodily) particles (and draw them together again) without nutrition" (Masnavi, 1760).

Conclusion

The comparative analysis argues for a cross-cultural, transborder discourse on non-dual consciousness. By juxtaposing the similarities between Rumi's Sufism and Indian spiritualism, this paper has brought into the limelight the fact that spiritualism, while looking for the Supreme Being, follows a path that may look different, but ultimately shares equal ideas. It demonstrates how, although coming from distinct theological and philosophical contexts, Sufi metaphysics and key Indic traditions converge at some point. Rumi's concept of 'fana' and divine love reflect in Advaita Vedanta's formulation of Brahman, Buddhist reflections on non-self, and Kashmiri Shaivism's emphasis on universal consciousness. These comparisons do not just gesture at cross-cultural borrowing of ideas, but point toward larger and grappling questions of ultimate reality and self-transcendence with comparable ontological insights. Thus, by situating Rumi within this cross-border and cross-cultural wider horizon, this paper underscores the value of understanding the value of a nuanced comprehension of such philosophically and spiritually dense and profound ideas. Further, the intersected ideas reveal a heterogeneous and shared spirituality. Thus, it universalises Rumi's poetry as part of a larger intellectual and spiritual conversation that extends beyond cultural and religious boundaries.

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