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The Poetics of Divine Love: Metaphorical Expressions of *ʿIshq* in Rūmī's *Masnavī-i Maʿnavī*

İlâhî Aşkın Poetikası: Mevlânâ'nın Mesnevî-i Maʿnevî'sinde Aşkın Metaforik İfadeleri

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Abstract

Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's (d. 672/1273) *Masnavī-i Maʿnavī* is replete with metaphors of love that function as epistemological and ontological instruments, serving both to impart knowledge and to reflect the structure of reality. This study examines how Rūmī employs the language of love as a means to express ineffable mystical realities of divine love and union, and to catalyze the transformation of the soul. Rūmī's poetic metaphors—such as likening love to the astrolabe of God's mysteries or to a consuming flame, images that frame love as both a navigational tool to the Divine and a fire that purifies by consuming the self—convey the paradoxical nature of divine love, wherein intense longing and self-annihilation lead to spiritual fulfillment. Through allegorical narratives and symbolic imagery, Rūmī articulates profound insights into the soul's journey toward the Divine and its inner metamorphosis through love. The analysis highlights the indispensable role of metaphor in expressing what is beyond ordinary language, illustrating that in the *Masnavī* love is not merely a theme but a deliberate pedagogical tool and an existential principle guiding the seeker toward experiential knowledge of divine unity.

Keywords: Sufism, metaphor and symbolism, *ʿishq* (divine love), metaphorical expressions of love, *Masnavī-i Maʿnavī*, allegory, *fanāʾ*.

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Özet

Celâleddîn Rûmî'nin (ö. 672/1273) *Mesnevî-i Mânevî*'si, hem bilgi aktarmaya hem de hakikatin yapısını aksettirmeye hizmet eden epistemolojik ve ontolojik araçlar olarak işlev gören aşk metaforlarıyla doludur. Bu çalışma, Mevlânâ'nın aşk dilini, ilâhî aşk ve tevhidin tarif edilemez mistik gerçekliklerini ifade etmek ve nefsin tekâmülünü hızlandırmak için nasıl bir araç olarak kullandığını incelemektedir. Mevlânâ'nın şiirsel metaforları -örneğin onun, aşkı, Allah'ın esrarının usturlabına ya da hem Hakk'a giden yol gösterici bir araç hem de benliği yakarak arındıran yakıcı bir aleve benzetmesi gibi- ilâhî aşkın paradoksal doğasını aktarır ki bunun içinde kişiyi mânevî itminâna götüren yoğun iştiyak ve ifna-yı nefs yer alır. Mevlânâ, alegorik anlatılar ve sembolik imgeler aracılığıyla, ruhun Hakk'a doğru yolculuğuna ve aşk yoluyla içsel dönüşümüne dair derin anlamları dile getirir. Bu çalışma, günlük dilin ötesinde olanı ifade etmede metaforun vazgeçilmez rolünü vurgulamayı ve *Mesnevî*'de aşkın sadece bir tema değil, bilinçli bir pedagojik araç ve tâlibi, ilâhî birliğin tecrübî bilgisine yönlendiren varoluşsal bir ilke olduğunu göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tasavvuf, metafor ve sembolizm, ilâhî aşk, ilâhî aşkın metaforik temsilleri, *Mesnevî-yi Mânevî*, alegori, fenâ.

Introduction

In the vast and profound world of Sufi literature, the concept of love (*ʿishq*) has occupied a central role, serving as both a cosmic principle and an existential reality. Sufi poets and philosophers alike have engaged deeply with the notion of love, depicting it as the force that binds creation to the Divine.[1] Yet within this discourse, love is not a singular or uniform experience; rather, it unfolds in a spectrum, encompassing both the transient affections directed toward worldly attachments and the ultimate, all-encompassing love that draws the soul toward God. Classical Sufi thought differentiates between *ʿishq al-majāzī*, the metaphorical love that manifests in human desires and inclinations—including one's attachment to the self (*nafs*)—and *ʿishq al-ḥaqīqī*, the true love that transcends all finite objects of affection and is directed solely toward the Divine.[2] In the realm of mystical discourse, the concept of love is seldom articulated through direct definitions. Rather, it is encoded within layers of symbolism, allegory, and poetic imagery, rendering it accessible only to those who can decipher its hidden meanings. This dynamic is evident in the works of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273),[3] whose *Masnavī-i Maʿnavī*—often revered as a masterpiece of Persian mystical poetry—presents love not as a theoretical construct but as a lived reality that finds its truest articulation in experiential form.[4] Rūmī inherits and expands upon this literary legacy in the *Masnavī,* crafting interconnected layers of narrative and symbolic discourse that probe deeply into love's existential and ontological realities, particularly through motifs such as the annihilation of self (fanāʾ) and the ceaseless longing (shawq) toward union with the Beloved. This dual focus reveals the paradoxical nature of love in Rūmī's vision: at once intimately personal and cosmically all-encompassing—a paradox that the body of the paper will unpack in detail.

1 Süleyman Uludağ, "Aşk (Tasavvuf)," *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, 1991, IV: 11–17; Omneya Ayad, "Divine Love and Direct Witnessing in the Thought of Ibn ʿAjība," *The Maghreb Review* 45, 4 (2020): 839-855.

2 William C. Chittick, *Divine Love* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2013), viii, 41-51.

3 Reşat Öngören, "Mevlânâ Celaleddin Rûmî", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* 2004, XXIX: 441-448.

4 Semih Ceyhan, "Mesnevî", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, 2004, XXIX: 325-334.

Unlike philosophical treatises that attempt to define love in abstract terms, Rūmī resists explicit conceptualization, adhering instead to the Sufi understanding that true knowledge cannot be transmitted through discursive reasoning but must be realized through experience.[5] At the heart of Rūmī's discourse is an understanding of love as an ontological principle that underlies existence itself. He writes that "love is the astrolabe of God's mysteries,"[6] suggesting that love is the instrument by which one navigates and uncovers the deepest truths of the Divine. In Rūmī's cosmology, love is not confined to personal sentiment; it is the very force that "makes the wheel of the Heavens turn," without which "the world would be inanimate" —a creative power woven into the fabric of reality. The ontological dimension of love in the *Masnavī* thus emerges through myriad examples: each parable and lyrical digression ultimately points back to love as the source and sustainer of the universe, echoing the Sufi notion that divine love is the *raison d'être* of creation. Rūmī is careful to note that worldly loves are but pale reflections of the one true Love, *ʿishq al-ḥaqīqī.* As he indicates, to love anything apart from God is "metaphorical love" that must eventually lead the seeker to the Real Beloved. This perspective sets the stage for Rūmī's intricate use of symbolism, where every earthly tale of longing or devotion in the *Masnavī* becomes a doorway to understanding the love of God.

Because divine love in Rūmī's vision transcends ordinary definition, metaphor and narrative become essential tools for expressing what cannot be directly stated in prose. The *Masnavī*, opens with the plaintive song of the reed flute, separated from its reed-bed—a metaphor for the human soul's estrangement from the Divine and its yearning to return . This iconic image immediately situates the reader in the symbolic world of Rūmī's poetry, where literal events and characters signify deeper spiritual realities.[7] Throughout the *Masnavī*, Rūmī relies on such figurative narratives to articulate the process of mystical transformation. The imaginal dimension of love manifests clearly in how seemingly mundane stories—a lover's heartache or a moth's fatal attraction to a flame—are imbued with transcendent meanings concerning the soul's journey toward God.[8] For Rūmī, these metaphors are not decorative; they are necessary, for the truth of love transcends earthly desires and attachments and eludes ordinary rational discourse. The transformations depicted in these tales (the moth annihilated in the flame, or the self-dissolved in the beloved's presence) illustrate what Rūmī sees as love's power to fundamentally change one's state of being. In his view, love is a transformative force that carries the soul from the realm of separation to the realm of union. The *Masnavi*'s rich imagery—drawn from everyday life, nature, and Islamic lore—serves to bridge the gap between ineffable spiritual truth and the reader's own experience, preparing one to grasp insights that logic alone cannot convey.[9]

Rūmī's insistence on the primacy of experience is closely tied to his epistemology of love. He maintains that love can never be

5 While Rūmī's corpus—encompassing the *Dīwān-i Kabīr* and didactic prose works such as *Fīhi Mā Fīhi*—frequently engages with the theme of love, it is in the *Masnavī* that love unfolds through a complex interplay of metaphors, narratives, and archetypal lovers. See Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaluddin Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 32-42.

6 Reynold A. Nicholson, (ed. and trans.), *The Mathnawí of Jalálu'ddín Rúmí: Edited from the Oldest Manuscripts Available, with Critical Notes, Translation, and Commentary*, (London: Luzac & Co., 1926), I: 109-114.

7 *Masnavī*, I: 1-18.

8 Emine Yeniterzi, *Sevginin Evrensel Mühendisi Mevlânâ* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2011), 7-11.

9 Amir H. Zekrgoo and Leyla H. Tajer, "The Seven Avatars of Love: Deliberations on Rūmī's Mathnawī," *Mawlana Rumi Review*, 9 (2018): 67–75.

understood through abstract definitions or dry intellectual proofs; it must be *tasted* and lived. As one scholar observes, for Rūmī love is "something that has to be experienced to be understood." No amount of second-hand description can substitute for the direct knowing that comes when the heart is enraptured by the Beloved. Rūmī dramatizes the limitations of reason and language in multiple passages of the *Masnavī.* He cautions that "however much we describe and explain love, when we fall in love, we are ashamed of our words," and that while "explanation by the tongue makes things most clear, … love unexplained is clearer." Intellectual discourse falters at the threshold of this mystery: when the pen of reason reaches the subject of love, "it splits in twain… paper [is] torn." Only love itself, Rūmī concludes, "can explain love and lovers." This epistemological stance—that true knowledge of divine love comes only through loving—is a cornerstone of Sufi thought. By emphasizing the limits of rationality, Rūmī prepares the reader to approach the *Masnavī* not as a set of doctrinal teachings, but as an invitation to personal transformation. The poems aim to engender an experience in the reader, using words as catalysts for an inner realization that ultimately transcends words.

Scholarly studies on the *Masnavī* have long recognized Rūmī's mastery of metaphor and his intricate use of representational language, tracing its roots within the broader Sufi tradition. His metaphors and allegorical expressions do not merely ornament the text; they serve as epistemological tools, guiding the reader toward an embodied understanding of divine love. Existing research has examined individual representations— the reed flute,[10] such as water, light, fire, and intoxication, exploring their ontological and mystical implications.[11] Studies specifically addressing love and the lover in the *Masnavī* have also contributed to this field, emphasizing their role in articulating mystical transformation and the evolving states of the seeker. However, while these studies offer valuable insights, a systematic examination of the metaphorical framework through which Rūmī constructs the themes of love (*ʿishq*) and the lover (*ʿāshiq*) remains absent.[12] However, while these studies provide crucial insights, they often isolate such images from the broader narrative framework within which they operate. The *Masnavī,* as a poetic and didactic work, does not present a static repository of allegories but constructs a fluid and interconnected web of metaphorical relationships, in which love, and the lover emerge as central figures. The text does not simply describe love; it enacts it, structuring its discourse in a manner that compels the reader to engage with love's paradoxes experientially rather than conceptually.

This study seeks to explore how Rūmī's *Masnavī* articulates a definition of love not through explicit theological discourse but through an evolving system of metaphors and literary representations.[13] Rather than extracting a singular definition of love, the body of the paper will closely examine key tales and metaphors in the *Masnavī* to show

10 Şener Demirel, "Sembol, Sembolik Dil ve Bu Bağlamda Mesnevî'nin İlk 18 Beytindeki Sembolik Unsurlar," *Turkish Studies - International Periodical for the Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic* 7, 3 (2012): 915–947.

11 Hasan Çiçek, "Kadîm Üç Felsefe Problemi Bağlamında Mevlânâ'nın *Mesnevî*'sinde Metaforik Anlatım", *Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 44, 1 (2003): 293-311; Ali Alizadeh Amoli and Bahaeddin Eskandari, "Cognitive Metaphors of the Unity of Existence in Rumi's Masnavi," *Journal of Language Studies* 2, 1 (2024): 167-190; Abdullah Öztürk, "Mevlânâ'nın Mesnevî'sinde Gece Sembolü," *Eskiyeni* 5, 2 (2020): 77-96.

12 Musa Kaval, "Mesnevi'de Aşk ve Âşık," *EKEV Akademi Dergisi - Sosyal Bilimler* 15, 49 (2011): 117-128.

13 Emel Sünter Yalçın, "Mesnevî'de Aşk," *Türk-İslâm Medeniyeti Akademik Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 3 (2007): 223.

how Rūmī's poetic method illuminates love's transformative power. The key question driving this inquiry is: Can we discern from Rūmī's metaphorical language an implicit articulation of how he conceptualizes love? Although he refrains from defining it in explicit terms, his verses, rich with allegory and mystical signification, appear to construct a poetic framework that reveals his understanding of love's nature, function, and ultimate purpose.[14] By situating Rūmī's use of metaphors within the broader tradition of Sufi discourse, this analysis aims to illuminate the epistemological and existential dimensions of love as presented in the *Masnavī*.

1. Sufi Tradition and the Symbolic Language in Rūmī's *Masnavī*

The Sufi tradition has long been characterized by its distinctive use of symbolic language, an involved system of metaphors and allegories through which the ineffable dimensions of divine reality are expressed.[15] This reliance on symbolic discourse emerges from a fundamental epistemological conviction: the ultimate truths of existence—those concerning God, love, and the human soul—transcend the limitations of conventional language.[16] Moreover, as al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) notes in his *Risāla*, this esoteric knowledge was intentionally veiled to protect it from those unprepared to grasp its deeper significance.[17] Indeed, within this framework of caution and reverence, from the earliest periods of Sufism, symbolic language was employed as both a necessity and a protective strategy. As Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988) observed, Sufi discourse often relied on *ramz* (symbolism) and *ishāra* (allusion), forms of speech that concealed mystical knowledge from the uninitiated while allowing the enlightened to discern deeper meanings.[18]

The Sufi adoption of symbolic language is respected as deepening of Islamic tradition's inherent epistemology, in which hidden realities (*bāṭin*) are suggested through outward forms (*ẓāhir*). The influence of the Qur'ānic and Prophetic precedent for symbolic discourse is also evident in early Sufi canon, where scriptural references are seamlessly woven into a broader mystical semiotics. The Qurʾān itself provides the foundational precedent for this mode of communication, frequently using parables (*amthāl*) and metaphorical language to articulate realities that defy human comprehension.[19] For instance, the Qurʾānic statement, *Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth*,[20] is not a literal description but a metaphysical metaphor that suggests divine immanence and illumination. This principle is equally evident in the sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad, whose use of symbolic gestures and metaphoric speech sought to convey truths inaccessible to discursive reason alone. Similarly, *ḥadīth qudsī* traditions often employ symbolic imagery, such as the famous saying, *I was a hidden treasure, and I desired to be known*.[21] Thus, from its inception, Islamic spirituality articulated itself through symbols and metaphors, preparing the spiritual soil from which the rich garden of Sufi poetry would flourish.

14 Coleman Barks, *The Essential Rumi* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 193-199.

15 A. J. Arberry, *Classical Persian Literature* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1958), 5–19.

16 Sadık Kılıç, *İslâm'da Sembolik Dil* (İstanbul: İnsan Yayınları, 1995), 56.

17 Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, ed. Abdülhalim Mahmûd, (Matabah Muassasat Dāralşab, 1989).

18 Semih Ceyhan, "Remiz", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, 2007, XXXIV: 566-568; Süleyman Uludağ, "İşaret", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, 2001, XXIII: 423.

19 Necdet Çağıl, "Hakikat-Mecaz Kutuplaşması Bağlamında Kur'an'da Temsili (Simgesel) Anlatım," *İslami İlimler Dergisi* 8, 1 (2013): 93–112; Murat Sülün, *41 Temsil ile Kur'ân Gerçeği* (İstanbul: Çamlıca Yayınları, 2017), 30.

20 Nûr 24/35.

21 Aclūnī, *Keşfü'l-Hafā*, II: 132.

These textual precedents established a fertile foundation for Sufi hermeneutics, which approaches sacred language as dynamic expressions whose layers of meaning progressively unfold through contemplation and direct spiritual realization.[22] As a result, Sufis have sought alternative means of expression, employing poetic and imaginal forms that gesture beyond the constraints of ordinary speech. Thus poetry emerged as the primary medium for Sufi self-expression, precisely because it accommodates ambiguity, paradox, and multiplicity of meaning—all essential features of the mystical path.[23] Unlike rational discourse, which seeks to categorize and define, poetry allows for a simultaneity of meanings, reflecting the paradoxical nature of divine love: it burns and nourishes, annihilates and fulfills, veils and reveals. The inherent flexibility of poetry made it an ideal instrument for Sufi instruction, where literal explication was often deemed insufficient to convey the depths of spiritual experience.[24] Poetry became the most natural vehicle for this symbolic discourse, offering the fluidity necessary to capture the paradoxical nature of divine love. This symbolic tendency is further reflected in early Sufi poetry, where divine love is typically expressed through intense imagery—fire representing purification, the ocean signifying divine vastness, and the nightingale and the rose symbolizing the lover's longing for the Beloved.[25] Unlike discursive prose, poetry allows for simultaneous meanings—layered expressions that veil and unveil at the same time, mirroring the Sufi understanding of reality as both hidden and revealed. As the tradition matured, poets such as Sanāʾī (d. 525/1131?), ʿAṭṭār (d. 618/1221), and finally Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī developed this symbolic language into a comprehensive system, where metaphors were not mere literary embellishments but instruments of spiritual transformation.

Among the most illustrious figures to embrace this symbolic mode of expression is Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, whose *Masnavī-i Maʿnavī* stands as a preeminent testimony to the ways in which symbolic language serves as both a pedagogical tool and a vehicle for mystical illumination.[26] Love (*ʿishq*), a central theme of this voluminous work, is never described in straightforward doctrinal terms but is instead given shape through metaphors and symbolic representations. Fire, ocean, intoxication, and madness—these and other evocative images structure the discourse, not merely as literary flourishes but as ontological markers that embody the transformative power of divine love. Unlike rational theological discourses that define love within doctrinal frameworks, Rūmī presents love as something that must be experienced rather than explained—an all-encompassing reality that shapes the soul's journey.[27] A defining feature of Rūmī's approach is his highly dynamic use of metaphor, where love shifts fluidly between different images, depending on the aspect being emphasized. Rather than describing love as a static concept, Rūmī immerses the reader in its unfolding mys-

22 Annabel Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics: The Qurʾan Commentary of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 107-124.

23 Seyyid Hüseyin Nasr, *Seyyid Hüseyin Nasr: Tasavvufi Makaleler*, trans. Sadık Kılıç, (İstanbul: İnsan Yayınları, 2002), 191–207.

24 Mahmood Jamal, "Introduction", *Islamic Mystical Poetry*, *Sufi Verse from the Early Mystics to Rumi* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), i-xxii.

25 Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 309-327.

26 William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 19-35; Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun*, 32-42.

27 İbrahim Gamard, "Jalaleddin Rumi and His Place in the History of Sufism," in *The Routledge Handbook on Sufism,* ed. Lloyd Ridgeon, (London: Routledge, 2020), 103-117.

tery, enacting its fluidity through the movement of his verse. This interplay of shifting metaphors—fire and moth, ocean and ship, intoxication and madness—establishes love as both a process of self-annihilation and an ecstatic fulfillment.

2. Metaphorical Expressions of Love in Rūmī's *Masnavī*:

2.1. Love as the Ocean: The Boundless and Transformative Power of *ʿIshq* in Rūmī's *Masnavī*

Rūmī's depiction of love (*ʿishq*) in the *Masnavī* is deeply rooted in a symbolic framework that transcends conventional descriptions, offering an experiential and transformative model of divine love instead. In Rūmī's *Masnavī*, love is not a mere sentiment or abstract principle but the very fabric of reality—the primordial force that gives rise to creation and sustains all existence. Among the most enduring and potent metaphors in Rūmī's *Masnavī* is that of love as an ocean—an unfathomable and inexhaustible expanse, whose depths remain beyond the reach of the intellect. This image captures the incomprehensibility and all-consuming nature of divine love, which engulfs the lover (*ʿāshiq*) entirely, dissolving all traces of selfhood into the overwhelming presence of the Beloved (*maʿshūq*).

> "When the envoy brought her (to him), the captain straightway fell in love with her beauty. Love is an (infinite) ocean, on which the heavens are (but) a flake of foam: (they are distraught) like Zalíkhá in desire for a Joseph. Know that the wheeling heavens are turned by waves of Love: were it not for Love, the world would be frozen (inanimate)."[28]

Here, Rūmī presents love not merely as an aspect of existence but as its very animating principle. Love is the undercurrent that sets the cosmos in motion, sustaining all things in a ceaseless state of flux and transformation. The heavens, seemingly immutable and distant, are described as nothing more than fleeting foam upon love's oceanic expanse—impermanent, transient, and wholly contingent upon the deeper reality that is love itself. In this cosmological vision, love operates as the force that prevents stagnation, ensuring that creation remains dynamic and perpetually unfolding.[29]

Rūmī conveys this boundless force through the following lines:

> "The servant (of God) desires to be freed from Fortune; the lover (of God) nevermore desires to be free. The servant is always seeking a robe of honour and a stipend; all the lover's robe of honour is his vision of the beloved. Love is not contained in speech and hearing: Love is an ocean whereof the depth is invisible. The drop of the sea cannot be numbered. The Seven Seas are petty in comparison with that Ocean. This discourse has no end, nor can it be grasped through mere desire.

28 *Masnavī,* V: 3852-54.

29 Rūmī's depiction of love as an infinite ocean in the *Masnavī* resonates deeply with his poetic elaborations in the *Dīwān-i Kabīr*, where the *baḥr al-ʿishq* (ocean of love) emerges as a central metaphor for the boundless and transformative power of divine love. While the *Masnavī* portrays love as the cosmic force that animates existence and keeps the universe in perpetual motion, the *Dīwān-i Kabīr* presents this ocean as the site of complete immersion, where the lover dissolves into the Beloved's limitless expanse. In the *Masnavī*, the heavens, described as mere foam upon love's waves, depend entirely on this force for movement and vitality. Similarly, in the *Dīwān-i Kabīr*, Rūmī expands upon this imagery, emphasizing the annihilating and regenerative nature of love: "Love is the water of life—immerse yourself in it. Every drop of this ocean contains another life, another eternity." Just as the world would fall into stillness without love's motion in the *Masnavī,* the lover in the *Dīwān* recognizes that love is the only reality, dissolving worldly attachments and ushering the seeker into an eternal realm. See Mevlânâ Celâleddîn Rûmî. *Rubailer (Rubāʿiyyāt*). trans. Şefik Can. 2 vols (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1990–1991), 2090, 946, 1389, 857, 1911, 614.

> Love is an ocean whose depths remain unfathomable."[30]

In this passage, Rūmī extends beyond mere analogical expressions between love and the ocean, collapsing any distinction to illustrate that love itself manifests as the ocean. Rather than employing a simile (*tashbīh*), which would retain a conceptual separation, he engages with metaphor (*istiʿāra*), whereby love is not like the ocean—it is the ocean. This metaphorical fusion underscores the boundless and immersive nature of divine love, suggesting that the human experience of love is akin to being in the ocean's embrace, a profound existential and ontological melding. This subtle yet profound distinction aligns with the ontological framework of Sufi thought, wherein love is not merely an emotion or a psychological state but the very force that animates existence. The ocean, vast and unpredictable, mirrors the nature of divine love—limitless in depth, transformative in its movement, and ultimately inescapable. Just as the ocean dissolves all that enters it, love eradicates the illusion of individual selfhood, leaving only the unifying presence of the Beloved.[31]

Yet, the ocean Rūmī describes is not a tranquil expanse; rather, it is turbulent, boiling, and tempestuous, mirroring the restless, transformative power of love: "Love makes the sea boil like a cauldron. Love crumbles the mountain like sand."[32] Here, love emerges as a dynamic current of immense upheaval, resonating deeply with the Sufi doctrine of *fanāʾ* (self-annihilation in the Divine), which articulates a profound fusion with the ultimate reality. The boiling sea represents the paradox of divine love: it nourishes and destroys, grants life while demanding sacrifice, simultaneously drawing the seeker toward union (*waṣl*) while subjecting them to the agonies of longing (*shawq*) and separation (*firāq*). This oscillation between fulfillment and yearning—between presence and absence—defines the mystical conception of love in the Sufi tradition. Through this imagery, Rūmī does not simply describe love's effects; he immerses the reader in its turbulence. Love is not something that can be understood from a distance—it must be plunged into, surrendered to, and endured. The seeker cannot remain an observer on the shore; they must cast themselves into the waves, allowing love to submerge them entirely.[33]

If the ocean represents the vastness and peril of divine love, the ship emerges as its counterpoint—a metaphor for guidance, surrender, and the salvific power of love. Rūmī frequently likens the lover to a voyager at sea, carried upon a ship that navigates the uncertain waters of love's trials:

> "Intelligence is (*like*) swimming in the sea; he (*the swimmer*) is not saved: he is drowned at the end of the business. Leave off swimming, let pride and enmity go; this is not a Jayḥūn (Oxus) or a (*lesser*) river, it is an ocean. And, moreover, (it is) the deep ocean without refuge; it sweeps away the seven seas like straw. Love is as a ship for the elect; seldom is calamity (*the result*); for the most part it is deliverance. Sell intelligence and buy bewilderment; intelligence is opinion, while bewilderment is (*immediate)* vision. Sacrifice your understanding in the presence of Muṣṭafā."[34]

Here, the ship functions as a symbol of divine guidance, recalling the Qurʾānic motif of Noah's Ark, which saves the faithful while

30 *Masnavī* , V: 2728–2732.

31 Süleyman Uludağ, "Deniz", *Tasavvuf Terimleri Sözlüğü*, (İstanbul: Kabalcı Yayınları, 2007), 104.

32 *Masnavī*, V: 2735.

33 The lover is not the captain but a passenger, carried by forces beyond their control: "The lover is tossed upon the waves of longing / Drifting without anchor/ Pulled by unseen tides toward the horizon of love." (*Masnavī*, III: 4435–4457).

34 *Masnavī,* IV: 1403–1408

leaving behind those who reject divine mercy. Yet, Rūmī's metaphor extends beyond conventional eschatological narratives. In his cosmology, love's ship is not granted to all; it is available to those who surrender to its currents. Some remain on the shore, bound by reason, fear, and attachment to worldly concerns. Others cast themselves into the sea, trusting that love will either carry them to safety or obliterate them entirely. The metaphor also highlights the contrast between those who seek security in reason and those who abandon themselves to love. Rationality, in Rūmī's cosmology, is like the shore—a stable ground that offers the illusion of safety but ultimately prevents the soul from journeying toward the Divine. The lover, by stepping onto the ship, renounces this false security, embracing the uncertainty of the open sea in pursuit of union (*waṣl*). This distinction reflects a key aspect of Sufi epistemology: true knowledge is not attained through reason alone but through surrender. Love, like the sea, cannot be charted, predicted, or controlled; it must be yielded to. The ship, then, represents both the means of salvation and the necessity of trusting in the unseen, a principle central to the Sufi path. Beyond the structured imagery of the ship as salvation, Rūmī also depicts the lover as a helpless voyager—one who is at the mercy of love's currents, unable to control their destination.

The ship of love is not navigated by human hands but moves according to the pull of the Beloved.[35]

This passage also introduces a critical epistemological distinction which echoes throughout the *Masnavī.* Rūmī explicitly contrasts intelligence (*ʿaql*) and bewilderment (*ḥayrat*), suggesting that conventional reason is insufficient for navigating the depths of divine love. The intellect, like a swimmer, may temporarily remain afloat, but ultimately, it will be overcome by the vastness of love's ocean. The ship of love, by contrast, represents surrender—the relinquishing of self-will and rational calculation in favor of a deeper, experiential knowing (*maʿrifa*). The lover, rather than attempting to master the sea, must yield to the guidance of the ship, which moves not by his own will but by the unseen hand of the Beloved. Within this framework, the ship also signifies the role of the *quṭb* (the spiritual pole or perfected guide). As Rūmī states elsewhere in the *Masnavī*, "the Qutb of the time," or *ʿārif*,[36] is the ship of salvation"[37] underscoring the Sufi understanding that true spiritual navigation requires the guidance of one who has already traversed love's perilous waters.[38] This notion is rooted in the classical Sufi concept of the *murshīd al-kāmil* (the perfected guide), one who transcends book knowledge and rational inquiry, having attained divine knowledge (*ʿilm al-ladunnī*) through unveiling (*kashf*).[39] Yet, even aboard the ship, the journey remains perilous. The sea of love is

35 Bekir Köle, "Mevlânâ'nın Mesnevî'sinde Gemi Metaforu," *Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi* 9, 42 (2016): 1869-1877.

36 In the *Masnavī*, Rūmī expounds on the distinction between intellectual (*ʿaqlī*) and transmitted (*naqlī*) knowledge, as well as the divergence between the scholar (*ʿālim*) and the gnostic (*ʿārif*). This thematic focus is further accentuated in his work *Fīhi Mā Fīhi*, which comprises a compilation of his conversations (*soḥbat*). For an example, see Muhammed Celâleddîn Rûmî *Fîhîmâfîh,* trans. Meliha Anbarcıoğlu (İstanbul: Konya Mülâhakatı Eski Eserleri Severler Derneği, 2006), 38-39.

37 *Masnavī*, IV: 1418.

38 Mojaddedi offers a fresh theological perspective by comparing Rūmī's concept of intimate divine friendship (*dūstī*) with classical Sufi love theories and connects Rūmī's poetic imagery of the Lover–Beloved with the notion of *walāya* (friendship/saintship), showing how Rūmī recasts ecstatic love for God in terms of spiritual companionship. This work from a reputable press situates Rūmī's metaphors of love within broader Sufi thought. Jawid Mojaddedi, *Beyond Dogma: Rumi's Teachings on Friendship with God and Early Sufi Theories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 55–63.

39 Süleyman Uludağ, "İnsan-ı Kâmil", 185.

vast and untamed, and those who embark upon it must endure its tempests. The lover is not promised a safe arrival; rather, they must withstand the storms of longing, separation, and despair (*ḥuzn*). The ship does not move according to the will of the passenger; it is directed by the Divine, and the lover's task is not to steer but to submit.

Through these interwoven metaphors of ocean and ship, Rūmī articulates a vision of love that is both overwhelming and redemptive. Love is an all-encompassing force—an ocean that drowns all distinction between self and the Beloved, a sea that boils with the intensity of longing, a tempest that both devastates and delivers. And yet, amid this boundless expanse, the ship of love remains, carrying those who surrender toward an unseen destination. This duality—between immersion and guidance, obliteration and deliverance—is central to Rūmī's depiction of divine love.

3. Love as Fire, Love as Magnetism: The Dual Pull of Devotion in the *Masnavī*

Rūmī's portrayal of love (*ʿishq*) in the *Masnavī* is deeply paradoxical, shifting fluidly between seemingly contradictory elements—water and fire, expansion and annihilation, journey and stillness. While earlier, he likened love to an unfathomable ocean, boundless and consuming, elsewhere he casts it as fire—burning, refining, and ultimately obliterating all that is not the Beloved. Unlike the tranquil ocean, love as fire signifies a relentless energy, a transformative trial that purges the lover (*ʿāshiq*) of all illusions. Fire, in Rūmī's cosmology, is not simply a destructive force; it is a furnace that shapes the soul, reducing its impurities while illuminating its essence. Just as a crucible tempers gold, so too does love's fire refine the lover into a being fit for divine proximity. The reed, from which the *nay* (flute) is crafted, is hollowed out and burned within so that it may produce music—just as the lover must be emptied of selfhood to become an instrument of divine song. Wine, another potent symbol of spiritual intoxication, carries the same fervor; it consumes reason, dissolves boundaries, and fills the soul with ecstatic surrender. Thus, Rūmī declares: "Tis the fire of Love that is in the reed, 'tis the fervour of Love that is in the wine."[40] He pushes this theme further, equating true love not with comfort or understanding, but with a state of complete immersion, an all-encompassing burning:

> "How much more of these phrases and conceptions and metaphors? I want burning, burning! Become friendly with that burning! Light up a fire of love in thy soul, (and) burn thought and expression entirely (away)! O Moses, they that know the conventions are of one sort; they whose souls and spirits burn are of another."[41]

Here, love's fire manifests as an existential reality, actively transforming perception by surpassing conceptual thought and unifying all distinctions. The transformative power of love is not something the seeker can merely observe—it is something that must be *become*. This notion echoes the Sufi idea of *fanāʾ* (annihilation), in which the self is completely effaced in the presence of the Divine.[42] This transformative process represents an essential metaphysical reality, for authentic love requires the total assimilation of the lover into its own luminous essence. The lover is drawn into this fire, consumed in its heat, yet paradoxically sustained by it. The imagery of fire in the *Masnavī* operates on multiple levels: it is both the trial and the

40 *Masnavī*, I:10

41 *Masnavī*, II: 1762-1765.

42 Carra de Vaux, Bernard. "Fanāʾ," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, First Edition Online, 2012, accessed March 18, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1163/2214-871X_ei1_SIM_2270.

fulfillment, the means of purification and the mark of divine proximity. This metaphor actively embodies an existential reality; the lover fully merges with love's fire, experiencing it as his very being. Unlike an ordinary flame, which destroys indiscriminately, the fire of love burns selectively, reducing the self (*nafs*) while leaving behind only the Beloved's light. In this way, love's fire functions as the mechanism of *fanāʾ* (annihilation in the Divine). The lover must undergo complete obliteration, mirroring the fate of the moth (*parvāna*) drawn irresistibly to the candle.

The well-known Persian motif of the moth and the flame encapsulates the lover's condition: he does not approach the fire cautiously, nor does he attempt to control its blaze—he surrenders to it completely, knowing that true illumination comes only in self-loss. "To lovers there is a burning (which consumes them) at every moment: tax and tithe are not (imposed) on a ruined village."[43] Yet, fire is not the only force at work in Rūmī's poetic cosmology. Alongside the image of the moth drawn to the flame, Rūmī presents another metaphor—that of straw helplessly attracted to amber—which conveys love's magnetic pull. In contrast to fire, which actively consumes, amber exerts an invisible force, drawing the lover toward the Beloved without resistance. This interplay of fire and magnetism—annihilation and attraction—defines the Sufi understanding of love. Love is not merely a choice or an intellectual pursuit; it is an elemental force, one that moves the lover in ways beyond his comprehension.[44]

By employing *istiʿāra* (metaphor) rather than mere *tashbīh* (simile), Rūmī intertwines love and fire so intimately that they become indistinguishable, rendering the flame both the journey itself and the lover's ultimate destination. This is the essence of *ʿishq*, a love that is neither passive nor possessive but one that unmakes the lover entirely. Love's fire does not merely reduce to ashes—it transmutes, refining the lover until nothing remains but the radiance of the Beloved.

3.1. Flame and *Parvāna*

One of Rūmī's most evocative metaphors for love is that of the moth (*parvāna*) drawn toward the flame (*nār-i ʿishq*). The moth (*parvāna)* serves as one of the most vivid symbols of this surrender, a recurring motif in Persian mystical poetry. This dynamic is poignantly captured in the allegorical narratives common to Eastern literatures, where the moth's dance around the candlelight (*sham'*) has long been emblematic of the lover's spiritual journey towards the Beloved.[45] Unlike other creatures that recoil from fire, the moth is drawn to it, seeing in the flames not destruction but fulfillment. As Rūmī's imagery suggests, the true lover does not merely endure the fire—he seeks it, knowing that to burn is to be transformed. In this sense, love is not a passive sentiment but an active trial, a process of purification that demands total sacrifice.

The notion that death within the fire is not an end but a passage into a higher state is central to Rūmī's conception of love. He affirms this mystical reality, where love's annihilation is paradoxically a means of renewal:

43 *Masnavī*, II: 1765.

44 Sadık Armutlu, "Şem ü Pervâne", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, 2010, XXXVIII: 495-497.

45 The allegorical love story of the moth (*pearvāna*) and the candle (*sham'*) has been interpreted through Sufi symbolism by several prominent mystics. Notably, Manṣūr al-Hallāj (d. 922) presented this motif in his *Kitāb al-Ṭawāsīn*, where he explores profound mystical themes. See Manṣūr al-Hallāj, *The Tawasin of Mansur al-Hallaj*, trans. Aisha Abd ar-Rahman at-Tarjumana (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2002), 16; Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, *Sawāniḥ: Inspirations from the World of Pure Spirits*, trans. Nasrollah Pourjavady (London: KPI, 1986), 180.

> "Inasmuch as in death he sees a hundred existences, like the moth he burns away (his own) existence."[46]
>
> "I am seated at the edge of a fire with an exceedingly unpleasant blaze and flame; Ye are hastening towards it like moths, (while) both my hands have become moth-flaps (to beat you off).[47]
>
> "Listen to what passes between the rose and the nightingale, though in that case there is no overt speech. On mute eloquence and the understanding of it. Listen also to what passes between the moth and the candle, and pick out the meaning, O worshipful one. Albeit there is no speech, there is the inmost soul of speech. Come, fly aloft, do not fly low, like the owl."[48]

Here, Rūmī invites the reader to move beyond literal meanings and instead contemplate the unspoken truths revealed in nature. The silent exchange between the rose and the nightingale, like that between the moth and the candle, conveys the depths of love's mystery. The rose's allure and the nightingale's lament, the moth's destruction and the candle's flame—each relationship speaks to a fundamental law of attraction and sacrifice.[49] Love's essence, Rūmī suggests, is not bound by language; it is known through experience, through surrender, and ultimately, through obliteration. Rūmī implicitly urges the soul to ascend beyond the domain of the ordinary, affirming that only by embracing the luminous fire can one soar toward the transcendent heights of authentic love.

In this imagery, Rūmī captures the essential paradox of divine love: it is a force that both attracts and destroys. The moth does not approach the flame out of ignorance but out of necessity; its very being compels it toward the light, even as it knows that this journey will end in its own dissolution. Similarly, the *ʿāshiq* does not love in order to preserve himself but to erase himself, to be absorbed completely into the Beloved. Here, Rūmī does not merely liken love to fire; he equates the two. Love is the very flame that consumes all that is other than God.

By employing metaphor *(istiʿāra*) rather than simile (*tashbīh*), Rūmī unites the lover and love, the moth and the flame, the subject and object into a single existential reality. The lover fully embodies love, merging with the very essence that once appeared distinct. This notion aligns with Sufi ontology, in which love functions as an all-encompassing force that guides the seeker beyond individual identity into divine unity. The flame resides within the moth as its hidden essence, and to burn is to embrace one's true nature, dissolving into the greater reality of love's infinite expanse.

The fire of love does not merely destroy—it purifies, refining the lover in the same way that gold is purified in fire. This echoes the classical Sufi notion that selfhood (*nafs*) must be incinerated before the divine presence can fully manifest. What appears to be destruction is, in fact, illumination; the moth's annihilation is not the end but the moment it merges with the light it seeks. Through the profound deployment of metaphor (*istiʿāra)*, Rūmī unifies the lover and the beloved, the moth and the flame, the perceiver and the perceived, into a single luminous reality. The lover surpasses mere experience and fully embodies love itself, merging seamlessly into that Reality which previously appeared separate from his own being.

46 *Masnavī*, I: 3965.

47 *Masnavī*, I: 2855.

48 *Masnavī,* I: 3624-3626.

49 The motif of the rose and the nightingale, originating in Persian literature, entered Arabic literary tradition and subsequently reached European literature through Andalusia and Sicily, thus becoming a common literary symbol bridging Eastern and Western cultures. One of the earliest examples attributed to this theme is the *Bulbulnāma,* traditionally ascribed to Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār. Mustafa Özkan, "Gül ü Bülbül," *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*, 1996, XIV: 222-223.

> "The moth, though it burns itself by striking the candle and perishes, is still called to surrender to this fiery embrace; yet, if a creature were to withstand the candle's light without hurling itself into the flames, it could not truly be called a moth. Similarly, the candle itself must possess the capacity to consume the moth in its fiery glow, for if the light does not incinerate, it is not a candle. Thus, those who lean upon God without striving to reach Him are not truly human; likewise, if God is comprehended and known, then what is understood is not truly God. Humanity is defined by the relentless endeavor around the divine light, never finding peace or respite therein. God is the One who both annihilates and transcends understanding, yet no intellect can fully grasp Him."[50]

Rūmī's metaphor, which links the moth to the flame, does not merely illustrate a passive journey but underscores a profound engagement with the path of annihilation—a theme vividly portrayed through the allegory of the moth. This motif aligns with the quintessential Sufi aspiration towards *fanā'* (annihilation) where the self dissolves within the divine.[51] As we contemplate this merging, we must ask: While the moth's destruction in the flame signifies union, what of the agency that propels it towards this fiery end? Is it merely destiny, or is there a deeper volition at play within the soul of the moth? These questions, essential yet unresolved, weave through the narrative of the *Masnavī*, reemerging in varied forms such as the interplay between the straw and the amber, inviting the reader to ponder the complexities of divine love and human destiny.

3.2. The Lover as Straw to Amber

If the moth represents the lover's active pursuit of love's fire, the image of the straw (*kāh*) drawn helplessly toward amber (*kāhrubā*) illustrates the opposite: the passivity of surrender. In classical Islamic thought, amber's natural magnetism was often employed as a symbol for divine attraction (*jadhba*), the irresistible force by which the Beloved draws the lover into His presence. This dynamic of longing and response unfolds within a reciprocal framework, where the lover's yearning is met by an equally profound, albeit veiled, attraction from the Beloved. Rūmī expands on this notion by invoking a broader cosmic order, where love functions as the binding force between all things. In illuminating this universal attraction, Rūmī pens:

> "The earthenware (basins) of two lamps are not joined, but their light is mingled in (its) passage. No lover, in sooth, is seeking union without his loved one seeking him; but the love of lovers makes the body (thin as) a bowstring, (while) the love of loved ones makes it comely and fat. When the lightning of love for the beloved has shot into this heart, know that there is love in that heart. When love for God has been doubled in thy heart, without any doubt God hath love for thee. No sound of clapping comes forth from one hand of thine without the other hand. The thirsty man is moaning, "O delicious water!" The water moans too, saying, "Where is the wa-

50 Rūmī, *Fihimâfih*, 30.

51 From the passage in *Fihimâfih*, Rūmī seemingly elucidates the allegorical interaction between the straw and the amber as reflective of the moth and the flame—a pervasive theme of mystical union within Sufi literature. This interpretation, as Rūmī himself confirms, extends the narrative to embrace a broader metaphysical discourse, harmonizing individual dissolution with divine presence. As the moth sacrifices its being to the flame, so does the lover relinquish selfhood in the consuming fire of love, a dynamic vividly portrayed in this allegory. "Do not prolong this; it is through your profound love that you have not vanished, you do not perish… If you vanish, if you perish, then you exist with His existence, you revive with Him." This profound symbiosis, where annihilation begets eternal existence, encapsulates the quintessential Sufi journey toward divine absorption." Rūmī, *Fihimâfih*, 180-182.

> ter-drinker?" This thirst in our souls is the attraction exerted by the Water: we are Its, and It is ours. The Wisdom of God in destiny and in decree made us lovers of one another. Because of that foreordainment all the particles of the world are paired as mates and are in love with their own mate. Every particle of the universe is desiring its mate, just like amber and the blade of straw. Heaven says to the earth, "Welcome! To thee I am (in the same relation) as the iron and the magnet."[52]

This passage from the *Masnavī* articulates a fundamental principle of Sufi metaphysics: love moves in a reciprocal rhythm, woven into the very structure of existence. The lover's yearning arises in response to the Beloved's call, just as the straw gravitates toward the amber's unseen pull. Rūmī dissolves the illusion of separation between seeker and sought, unveiling love as both a human longing and a cosmic law that sustains all things. This attraction is not merely emotional but ontological, manifesting the deeper reality that the existence of each being is fundamentally relational. Just as two hands must meet to create a clap, every act of love is met with a corresponding attraction from its source. The lover and the Beloved, much like the thirsty one and the water, engage in an eternal dialogue, drawn toward each other in a relationship that precedes individual volition.

> "(The desire of the soul is for ascent and exaltedness; the desire of the body is for gain and the means of procuring fodder. That exaltedness too hath desire and love towards the soul: from this (fact) understand (the meaning of He loves them, and they love (Him). If I explain this, 'twill be endless: the Mathnawi will amount to eighty volumes. The gist is that whenever anyone seeks, the soul of the object sought by him is desiring him. (Whether it be) man, animal, plant, or mineral, every object of desire is in love with everything that is without (has not attained to) the object of desire. Those who are without their object of desire attach themselves to an object of desire, and those desired ones draw them (on); But the desire of the lovers makes them lean, (while) the desire of the loved ones makes them fair and beauteous. The love of the loved ones illumines the cheeks; the love of the lover consumes his soul. The amber loves (the straw) with the appearance of wanting naught, (while) the straw is making efforts (to advance) on that long road."[53]

Unlike the moth, which actively seeks its annihilation, the straw has no will of its own. It is utterly powerless before the pull of love, moving not by choice but by necessity. This reflects a fundamental shift in the Sufi conception of love—from one of effort (*mujāhada*) to one of surrender (*taslīm*).[54] In the earlier stages of the spiritual path, the seeker believes that he is striving toward the Beloved through ascetic discipline, devotion, and longing. Yet, as he progresses, he comes to realize that his journey was never his own; he was always being drawn, not by his own volition, but by the unseen hand of the Beloved. This shift from agency to passivity mirrors the Qurʾānic declaration: *He draws toward Himself whomever He wills*.[55] In this light, the lover's longing is not self-generated but is itself a divine gift. His love was never his own possession but was placed within him as a sign of the Beloved's pre-eternal desire to be known. This is a theme echoed in Ibn ʿArabī's doctrine of *taʿalluq*—the idea that all love originates from God and returns to Him, with the lover serving only as the passive medium through which love manifests.

Through these two metaphors—the moth and the flame, the straw and the amber—Rūmī

52 *Masnavī*, III: 4391-4405.

53 *Masnavī,* III: 4439-4447.

54 Uludağ, "Mücâhede", 259.

55 Şûrâ 42/13.

articulates the paradox of love's nature. On one hand, the lover appears to rush toward the Beloved with reckless abandon, seeking annihilation in the fire of longing. On the other, he is shown to be entirely passive, drawn inexorably toward his fate without the ability to resist. These two images do not contradict one another but instead reveal love's dual reality: it is both an act of devotion and an inevitability beyond human agency. While Rūmī does not resolve this paradox explicitly, his poetic structure itself enacts it. The shifting nature of his metaphors mirrors the fluidity of love's movement, resisting any fixed definition. The lover is neither fully active nor fully passive; he both seeks and is sought, burns and is consumed, moves and is moved. Love, in Rūmī's cosmology, is not a mere emotion but the fundamental law of existence—the unseen force that governs all things, leading every soul toward its destined reunion with the Beloved.

4. Love's Enchantment and the Bewildered Lover: Sorcery and Madness

Rūmī's poetic cosmos is one of perpetual transformation, where love emerges not as a static ideal but as a force that unravels and remakes the lover's perception of reality. Within this intricate symbolic network, love is simultaneously depicted as an act of enchantment and as a state of divine intoxication.[56] The lover (*ʿāshiq*), under the spell of love, oscillates between bewilderment (*ḥayrat*) and ecstasy (*wajd*), as reason (*ʿaql*) is dismantled, and perception is restructured. Love does not merely alter the lover's state of mind; it reconfigures the very fabric of his being, suspending him between the veils of illusion and the unveiling (*kashf*) of truth.[57] The theme of love as sorcery (*siḥr*) has deep roots in Sufi poetry, particularly in the Arabic and Persian traditions. As Meisami has observed, classical Persian poets such as ʿAṭṭār and Sanāʾī employed the imagery of enchantment to describe the radical transformation of the lover's awareness, wherein love functions as a invocation that erases the conventional boundaries of perception. Similarly, Ernst notes that early Sufi authors drew upon Qurʾānic and folkloric traditions of sorcery to symbolize the overwhelming, reality-shifting effects of divine attraction (*jadhba*), wherein the lover loses control over his own will and becomes subject to a force beyond himself. In Rūmī's *Masnavī*, this metaphor reaches its full expression, depicting love as both an illusion and the very means of penetrating illusion.[58]

Throughout the *Masnavī,* love emerges as a force that transcends ordinary perception, at times depicted through the evocative metaphor of a sorcerer whose enchantment reshapes reality, illuminating truths accessible only beyond the realm of reason. Here, love actively embodies a profound sorcery whose enchantment reveals hidden realities and illuminates the deeper dimensions of existence. Central to Rūmī's cosmology is the understanding of love's spell as an initiatory veil (*hijāb*), steering the lover beyond the confines of illusion (*ghurūr)* into the luminous realm of higher truth. Before being overtaken by love, the *sālik*, spiritual seeker, perceives the world through the limitations of rational

56 Chittick notes that Rūmī describes the joy of spiritual union through "a great variety of images, most of them connected with love and wine." He cites a ghazal in which Rūmī writes "When I come to the gathering, He (the Beloved) is the wine and the sweetmeats… When I go to a banquet at the time of joy, He is the *sāqī* (cupbearer), minstrel, and cup," meaning that the Divine Beloved is both the giver and the substance of mystical intoxication Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, 233–238.

57 *Masnavī*, V: 3257–3283.

58 Julie Scott Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 221–236.

understanding. Once love exerts its transformative influence, however, the constraints of reason yield to intuitive knowing, arising directly from spiritual experience. Rūmī further illustrates love's enchanting power through vivid and poetic imagery:

> "Love and imagination weave (create) a hundred (forms beautiful as) Joseph: in sooth they are greater sorcerers than Hārūt and Mārūt. They cause a form (of phantasy) to appear in memory of him (your Beloved): the attraction of the form leads you into (conversation with it). You tell a hundred thousand secrets in the form's presence, just as a friend speaks (intimately) in the presence of a friend. No (material) form or shape is there; (yet) from it proceed a hundred (utterances of the words) "Am not I (thy Beloved)?" and (from you) a hundred "Yeas."[59]

The reference to Hārūt and Mārūt, the fallen angels sent to test humanity with knowledge of sorcery, highlights love's paradoxical nature—both its power to liberate and its potential to ensnare.[60] Love, like the enchantment of these celestial beings, can unveil the highest truths or lead the seeker into the perilous depths of bewilderment. This dual potential underscores Rūmī's vision of love as a transformative force that does not simply dissolve perception but reconstructs it, guiding the lover through an initiation that is as disorienting as it is illuminating. In this framework, love's magic is not an illusion to be dispelled but an instrument of unveiling—an alchemy of perception that reveals the Beloved where once there was only absence.

This is the paradox of love: it both blinds and illuminates, disorients and guides. The lover, caught in its spell, no longer distinguishes between self and other, real and unreal. His perception, once anchored in certainty, now drifts in the tides of love's unseen currents. This transformation mirrors the classical Sufi doctrine of *jadhba* (divine attraction), in which the Beloved *(maʿshūq*) actively pulls the lover toward Himself, rendering all personal effort meaningless.[61] The imagery of love presented here as an enchanting force closely parallels the Sufi concept of *maḥw* (obliteration), wherein the lover's identity is dissolved through direct encounter with the divine presence, transcending intellectual reasoning. The enchanted lover does not merely perceive a new reality—he is absorbed into it, becoming inseparable from the force that has overtaken him. Yet, if love's magic is an enchantment, what becomes of the self that once clung to reason? Does the lover retain any agency, or is he entirely dissolved into the fabric of love's possession? Rūmī does not resolve this tension; rather, he deepens it, emphasizing that the very state of bewilderment is a form of knowledge. Love, like sorcery, does not offer clarity—it dismantles the structures of perception, compelling the lover to navigate a reality where all distinctions between self and Beloved are erased.

5. The Lover as a Drunkard: The Ecstasy of Love's Wine

If love as sorcery conveys the bewilderment of perception, love as intoxication represents the complete surrender of selfhood. The imagery of wine (*sharāb)*, the cupbearer (*sāqī)*, and intoxication (*mastī*) has long been a staple of Arabic and Persian poetry, originating in the convivial verse of pre-Islamic poets and later becoming central to the

59 *Masnavī*, V: 3260-63.

60 Roberto Tottoli, "Hārūt and Mārūt," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Third Edition Online, accessed May 3, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_30337.

61 Arin Salamah-Qudsi, "The Concept of Jadhb and the Image of Majdhūb in Sufi Teachings and Life in the Period between the Fourth/Tenth and the Tenth/Sixteenth Centuries," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 28, 2 (2018.): 255–71.

bacchic themes of Abbasid-era court poetry.[62] This profane motif was reinterpreted by Sufi poets as a means to express ineffable spiritual experiences, particularly the states of ecstasy (*wajd)* and annihilation in the Divine (*fanāʾ*). Early Sufis recognized that direct exposition of mystical truths was inherently limited by language and rational discourse; thus, they turned to figurative expression, adopting familiar poetic symbols to convey the overwhelming experience of divine love. The first notable Sufi appropriation of wine symbolism appears in the ecstatic utterances of Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 261/874 or 234/848), who described his mystical states using intoxication metaphors, marking the beginning of a tradition that would flourish in Arabic, Persian, and later, Turkish Sufi poetry.[63] Schimmel notes that this transformation of secular imagery into a mystical lexicon was deliberate; it allowed Sufis to communicate the rapturous states of divine union in a language that was at once veiled and revelatory. Over time, poets such as Abū Nuwās (d. 198/813), Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235) in Arabic, ʿAṭṭār and Rūmī in Persian, and Yūnus Emre (d. 720/1320) in Turkish integrated this motif into their verse, each adding layers of meaning to its spiritual connotations.[64]

The earliest Sufi poets, inspired by themes of divine joy and abundance found in their spiritual tradition, adopted the motif of the cupbearer (*sāqī*), the wine, and the barroom as allegorical expressions of mystical inebriation *(sukr*)—a state in which the self is overwhelmed by the presence of the Divine. For Sufi poets, wine symbolizes divine love—an authoritative force that overwhelms the self, dissolves the boundaries of ego, and leads to mystical absorption in God. The cup, in turn, represents the heart that receives this divine outpouring, while the cupbearer serves as the intermediary who imparts spiritual knowledge, often identified with the spiritual master (*shaykh*) or God Himself. The tavern, frequently referenced in Rūmī's poetry, becomes a metaphor for the space where worldly constraints are shed, allowing the seeker to taste the ecstasy of divine proximity.[65] With this symbolic foundation established, we turn to Rūmī's *Masnavī,* where the imagery of wine and intoxication is intricately woven into the fabric of his mystical discourse.[66]

From the very outset of the *Masnavī*, Rūmī links wine with the fire of divine love. In the famous *Song of the Reed* prologue, he declares: "'Tis the fire of Love that is in the reed, 'tis the fervour of Love that is in the wine."[67] Here, the ferment of love is explicitly identified as the "wine" that inspires spiritual fervor. The image of wine represents the enrapturing sweetness of Divine Love, an inebriant that induces spiritual ecstasy. Rūmī's choice of metaphor is deliberate—rather than depicting love as a concept to be grasped intellectually, he presents it as an experience that overwhelms the senses and dissolves ordinary perception. The motif of wine appears throughout his poetry as a symbol of mystical intoxication, signifying a state in which rational boundaries collapse, allowing the soul to move beyond ordinary cognition. This intoxication, however, is not mere

62 Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 221–236.

63 Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1914), 102–105; Th. Emil Homerin, *The Wine of Love and Life: Ibn al-Fāriḍ's al-Khamrīyah and al-Qāysarī's Quest for Meaning* (Chicago: Middle East Documentation Center, 2005), 1–15; Leonard Lewisohn, "Jāmī and the Wine of Love," in *The Heritage of Sufism: Volume II: The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism (1150-1500)*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), 311–328.

64 Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 43–45.

65 Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, 102–105.

66 Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, 212–217.

67 *Masnavī*, I: 10.

loss of reason but a *sukr* that elevates the lover beyond the confines of selfhood. In this state of rapture, Rūmī offers a prayerful appeal to God to be drawn into the tavern of true lovers: "Take hold of our ear and draw us along to the assembly where the joyous revellers drink of Thy wine. Forasmuch as Thou hast caused a waft of its perfume to reach us, do not stopple the head of that wineskin, O Lord of the Judgement!"[68] In these lines, the seekers have caught only a whiff of God's wine and are already enraptured, begging God to pull them in completely and not cut off the supply. In this symbolism, the "perfume" of this celestial wine alludes to an initial grace–a hint of divine love that ignites an irrepressible yearning. Such mystical drunkenness entails a conscious *emptying* of mundane senses and intellect. Rūmī often encourages the loss of "head" (*intellect)* in love's inebriation so that a higher perception can take over. In other words, by drinking the wine of love, the mystic's ordinary mind is obliterated, making room for the "supra-rational" insight of the soul.[69]

Indeed, intoxication in Rūmī's path of love is not an end in itself, but a means to achieve *fanā'* – the complete dissolution of the individual self in the Divine. Repeatedly, Rūmī's verses link the theme of dying to oneself with that of drunken love, declaring: "I am drunken with desire for non-existence, not for the existent, because the Beloved of (the world of) non-existence is more faithful."[70] This startling line encapsulates the essence of *fanā'*: Rūmī craves the obliteration of his ego ("non-existence") because only by becoming *nothing* can he be united with the truest Beloved, God, who dwells in the realm of the Unseen. The lover's *inebriation* here is directed not towards any earthly pleasure but toward erasing the illusion of independent existence. In Nicholson's commentary, we find that Rūmī "is not more crushed than non-existence, from the mouth of which all these peoples have come forth" – a reference to the mystical notion that creation emerges from the void of God's essence. Rūmī's "drunkenness" is thus a passionate self-negation: under love's influence he actively seeks to *destroy* his own selfhood, trusting

68 *Masnavī,* V: 305–307.

69 Rūmī dramatically illustrates this in a bold paradox: "I am drunken…not with wine of the grape. Be drunken in love, for love is all that exists" (a sentiment echoed throughout his lyric and didactic poetry). The "drunkenness" here is entirely spiritual – Rūmī is careful to distinguish it from literal alcohol. Indeed, he elsewhere admonishes that one should drink from God's cup, not from Dionysian spirits. In Rūmī's ghazals, symbolism takes on a markedly distinct, more immediate, passionate, and intensified form compared to the instructive tone and structured symbolism found in the *Masnavī.* Particularly, symbols such as wine, the cupbearer (*sāqī*), and the cup (*kāsa*) are depicted with an elevated emotional resonance, diverging significantly from their more pedagogical employment in the *Masnavī.*

"All the time / I am forging an idol/and then in front of your eyes / I melt down all the idols / I conjure myriad forms infuse them with spirit / When I see your form / I cast them all in flames." These verses articulate the transformative path to divine love through symbolic imagery powerfully and directly. The ghazal continues, illustrating the profound impact of the symbolic wine on consciousness: "Are you / wine-pouring vintner? / foe to consciousness? / or sworn to destroy each home that I build?" (Ghazal, 1462). Thus, the symbolic language in Rūmī's ghazals possesses a more dynamic and emotionally profound resonance, sharply contrasting with the gradual and instructive symbolism typical of the *Masnavī*. The *Masnavī* itself, often called "the Qur'ān in Persian," uses the language of taverns and cupbearers as a cipher for mystical truths, embedding the wild imagery of intoxication within a framework of piety and orthodoxy. Rūmī's audience would have understood this symbolic language in context, appreciating that the joy of spiritual *sukr* (intoxication) actually reinforces devotion rather than negating it. She notes how Rūmī's verses lead the reader through an emotional performance – from yearning and rapture to an eventual awe-struck silence –thereby "elevation of the soul through mystical intoxication" as a real and transformative process. Franklin D. Lewis, *Rumi: Swallowing the Sun* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 70.

70 *Masnavī,* V: 310-314.

that what will remain is the Beloved alone. In Sufi psychology, this is the state of *fanā fī'l-maḥbūb* (annihilation in the Beloved). By emptying himself, the lover makes space for God to subsist in him (*baqāʾ*).

Rūmī illustrates this process with rich paradoxical imagery, where proclaims that what appears to the world as "death" is in fact the soul's true life in God: "(But) those who quaff the cup of death are living through His love: they have torn their hearts away from life and the Water of Life." To "quaff the cup of death" means to willingly drink one's own annihilation. The reward of this fearless self-sacrifice is to *live by God's love* eternally.[71] Rūmī pointedly says that such lovers turn away even from the "Water of Life" – the legendary fountain of immortality – because they have found a better wine in God's love. In other words, physical immortality or worldly paradise (symbolized by the Water of Life) becomes worthless once one has tasted the immortal love of the Divine:

> "Endeavour to gain freshness (spiritual grace) from God's cup (of love): then you will become selfless and volitionless. Then all volition will belong to that Wine, and you will be absolutely excusable, like a drunken man. Whatsoever you beat will (then) be beaten by the Wine; whatsoever you sweep away will (then) be swept away by the Wine. The drunken man who has quaffed wine from God's cup— how should he do aught but justice and right? The magicians said to Pharaoh, 'Stop! He that is drunken hath no care for his hands and feet. The wine of the One (God) is our (real) hands and feet; the apparent hand is (but) a shadow and worthless.'"[72]

This is a direct allusion to the Qur'ānic story of the Water of Life, which Rūmī reinterprets: true life is not gained by drinking an elixir to extend one's earthly existence, but by relinquishing one's mortal self to merge with the Eternal Beloved. Rūmī continues in the same passage to describe how undergoing continual "spiritual death and resurrection" by the grace of God has made the prospect of literal death utterly non-threatening to him: "Thou didst bestow on me a (spiritual) death and a resurrection continually, that I might experience the conquering power of Thy bounty. This dying became (as unformidable) to me as sleeping, from my confidence that Thou, O God, wouldst raise me from the dead."[73] Here Rūmī testifies that through love he dies and is reborn *multiple times in this life* – each ego-death followed by a rebirth in the spirit by God's "bounty". Because of this repeated experience, dying has become "as easy as falling asleep" for him, with full faith that God will awaken him into true life. This beautifully reflects the Prophet's saying (which Rūmī explicitly cites) that "None ever died without wishing that he had died (to self) earlier," (*Masnavī* V: 600-605) since the righteous only regret not reaching God sooner. Rūmī has so embraced *fanāʾ* that he perceives the death of the ego as a gentle slumber and a gateway to union, rather than a terror. Keshavarz, in her analysis of Rūmī's poetry, stresses that this notion of *self-annihilation* is far from bleak or nihilistic. Instead, it is depicted as an ecstatic consummation of love – a transformation in which the lover "dies" to all that is false and is resurrected in a new identity grounded in God.[74] The seemingly morbid imagery of decapitation, burial, or drowning in Rūmī's verses is consistently accompanied by images of rebirth, golden treasure, or wine, signaling the joyous outcome of *fanāʾ*. For example, when Rūmī's speaker cries out

71 *Masnavī*, V: 4220.

72 *Masnavī*, V: 3110-3115.

73 *Masnavī,* V: 4222–4224.

74 Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric: The Case of Jalal al-Din Rumi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 89–95.

that he is drunk on "non-existence," reading this as the lover's exhilaration at shedding the constraints of the ego to partake in the infinitude of the Beloved's being.[75] Indeed, in another verse he links it directly with the primordial act of creation: "He who drank of the cup of Alast (the Pre-Eternal 'Am I not your Lord?') last year, this year he suffers the pain and headache (in consequence of having drunk)."[76] This refers to the mystical idea that all souls tasted the "wine" of God's love at the beginning of time (when God's voice declared *alastu bi-rabbikum* – "Am I not your Lord?" – and all souls replied *balaa* – "Yes!"). That first draught has left us *spiritually hungover* – longing and aching to return to that intoxicating moment of nearness to God. Thus, even our present spiritual quest is driven by a faint memory of that *fanāʾ* in the divine presence. In Rūmī's view, the soul's highest ambition is to regain that state by dying to self *now*. Ultimately, annihilation in love is for Rūmī the doorway to abiding in God (*baqāʾ*). Once the "mirror" of the heart is polished free of self, it reflects nothing but the Divine. The *Masnavī* therefore portrays *fanāʾ* not as loss, but as supreme gain – the *"death"* that opens into union.

6. Love as Illness, the Lover as Patient: The Affliction That Leads to Healing

In Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's *Masnavī*, love appears as a double-edged ailment – a malady that wounds the lover even as it heals the soul. Rūmī portrays love's suffering through a literary-mystical lens, describing the heart inflamed by love as if stricken by illness. Yet this "illness" is a Divine intervention and mercy, meant to transform the lover and prepare the soul for union (*waṣl*) with the Beloved. Embracing classical Sufi imagery and epistemology, Rūmī develops the paradox that the pain of love, however debilitating, is ultimately redemptive. The *Masnavī*'s stories and verses repeatedly depict how the affliction of passionate love refines the self, drawing the lover away from worldly illusions toward spiritual truth. Love's "sickness" thus becomes the very remedy for all other sicknesses of the self, aligning Rūmī's thought with a long Sufi tradition that celebrates *'ishq*, passionate love, as the path to God. In this vision, the lover is not merely one who suffers for love—he is defined by this suffering, shaped by it, and ultimately redeemed through it. Love does not grant comfort; it unsettles, disrupts, and ultimately annihilates all that is other than the Beloved (*maʿshūq*). Just as gold is purified through fire, so too must the soul be refined through love's affliction:

> "Nowise was it possible (for him) to open his lips in discussion, but never for a moment did soul cease to converse with soul. It came into his mind that 'twas exceedingly mysterious— "all this is reality: whence, then, comes the form (appearance)?" ('Tis) a form that frees thee from (the illusion of) form, a sleeper that awakens everyone who is asleep (to the Truth). The words (spoken by him) deliver (thee) from words (of idle disputation), and the sickness (of love inspired by him) lets thee escape from the sickness (of sensuality). Therefore, the sickness of love is the (very) soul of health: its pains are the envy of every pleasure."[77]

Here, Rūmī's imagery is unmistakable: pain is not simply a byproduct of love but its essen-

75 The *Masnavī* uses storytelling to reinforce this lesson: tales such as "the candle and the moth" or "Jesus and the dying sick man" all underscore that to burn (or die) for love is to truly live. In one place, Rūmī uses the metaphor of a moth circling a candle – the moth's fatal attraction to the flame mirrors the lover's yearning to obliterate himself in God's light, and when he finally burns, he becomes light himself.

76 *Masnavī*, V: 830-836.

77 *Masnavī*, VI: 4590-4599.

tial condition. Love unsettles the soul, forcing it out of complacency and toward transformation. The lover, once burdened with the weight of his own existence, is broken open, made raw by longing (*shawq*), and stripped of all that is lifeless within him. This suffering, however, is not destructive—it is regenerative. The fire of love does not consume aimlessly; it purifies, reshaping the lover into something wholly new.

> "Being in love is made manifest by soreness of heart: there is no sickness like heartsickness. The lover's ailment is separate from all other ailments: love is the astrolabe of the mysteries of God. Whether love be from this (earthly) side or from that (heavenly) side, in the end it leads us yonder. Whatsoever I say in exposition and explanation of Love, when I come to Love (itself) I am ashamed of that (explanation). Although the commentary of the tongue makes (all) clear, yet tongueless love is clearer. Whilst the pen was making haste in writing, it split upon itself as soon as it came to Love."[78]

This conception of love aligns with the broader Sufi understanding of suffering as a divine intervention, a means of drawing the seeker (*sālik*) closer to the ultimate truth. Tribulation is not seen as punishment but as guidance, a veiled mercy that redirects the lover toward his true origin. The greater the suffering, the deeper the purification; the more intense the affliction, the nearer the soul is drawn to the Beloved. The *ʿāshiq* does not seek relief from his suffering, for the very nature of his pain is transformative. This aligns with the Sufi conception of tribulation (*balāʾ*) as a necessary means of spiritual refinement.[79] Love is the fire that burns away the dross of the self, leaving only the purified essence of the soul.[80]

Yet, if pain is intrinsic to love, why does the lover not seek relief? Why does he not attempt to escape his suffering? The answer lies in the paradoxical nature of love itself—its wounds are not wounds in the ordinary sense; they are openings through which divine reality enters.

Rūmī pushes this paradox further by declaring that whether one's love is "from this earthly side or from that heavenly side, in the end it leads us yonder"[81] the lover's suffering thus contains its own cure: embedded in the very affliction is an awakening to higher reality. He addresses Love as a "sweet madness" (*an affliction*) that "healest all our infirmities" (a remedy). "Hail, O Love that bringest us good gain – thou that art the physician of all our ills, the remedy of our pride and vainglory, our Plato and our Galen!"[82] The true lover does not flee pain; rather, he recognizes pain as the indispensable evidence of love's presence and the means to its fulfillment. Rūmī encapsulates this in a concise oxymoron when he elsewhere refers to love as "pain with remedy." The greater the lover's agony, the greater the potential for wholeness hidden within it. Thus, the *Masnavī* portrays

78 *Masnavī,* I: 109-114.

79 Uludağ, "Belâ", 71-72.

80 The *ʿāshiq*'s longing (*shawq*), his separation (*firāq*), and his despair are not signs of his demise but the necessary conditions for his eventual union (*waṣl*) with the Beloved. Rūmī's likening of love to an illness also echoes Qurʾānic and *ḥadīth* traditions that speak of trials as divine tests. Just as a physical illness may serve to purge the body of impurities, so too does love to cleanse the soul. However, whereas the common patient longs for recovery, the ʿāshiq desires only to remain in this state of affliction, knowing that his suffering brings him ever closer to the Beloved. Julian Baldick, *Mystical Islam: An Introduction to Sufism* (New York: NYU Press, 1989), 115–120.

81 *Masnavī*, I: 111.

82 *Masnavī*, I: 23–24 ; Rūmī uses the metaphor of the reed flute (whose song symbolizes the agony of love) as something that contains both poison and its antidote – again portraying love as both the ailment and its cure. In he writes: "Who ever saw a poison and an antidote like the reed? Who ever saw a sympathizer (to our pain) and a longing lover like the reed?" *Masnavī*, I: 12. Together these verses show love itself is a hurt that heals, a "poison" and a "remedy" in one.

the heart wounded by love as the heart made receptive to grace – a state of weakness that becomes strength, an illness that becomes healing.

Despite its grandeur, love is also the cause of anguish, a force that unsettles the soul and drives it toward longing. The lover's suffering, however, is not a meaningless affliction but a necessary purification, a refinement that prepares the soul for union with the divine: "Pain (*dard*) is the ancient remedy made new again; pain breaks every dried and lifeless branch. Love is the fire that renews the weary heart, for in pain's presence, weariness cannot remain."[83] Here, pain and love are interwoven love is the cause of longing, but that very longing is what refines and elevates the soul. The suffering of love, when properly understood, is not a punishment but a transformative force, an alchemical process that strips away all that is impure. Rumi's imagery of broken branches and renewed growth emphasizes that through the trials of love, the lover is continually rejuvenated, made anew through the intensity of yearning.[84]

A further extension of this motif is Rūmī's depiction of love as an illness, a paradoxical affliction that does not weaken but strengthens, does not destroy but purifies.[85] He pens: "Love's illness is unlike any other/The more it afflicts, the greater its cure."[86] Rūmī portrays the lover as a willing patient, one who not only endures love's suffering but embraces it as part of the cure. There, a lover rebukes a counselor who offers conventional advice, insisting that no scholarly "doctor" can understand his condition. "Do not thou threaten me with being killed, for I thirst lamentably for mine own blood."[87] The lover here is "sick" with love and accepts even death as joyous treatment. He goes further declaring that pain from the beloved is sweeter than any cure: "If that One of friendly countenance (*the Beloved*) should shed my blood, dancing (*in ecstasy*) I will strew my soul upon Him."[88] In other words, the lover (*as a patient*) gladly sacrifices himself and finds healing in the very wounds inflicted by the beloved. This motif – the lover's willingness to "die at every moment" for love – recurs throughout the *Masnavi*. It illustrates that true lovers accept suffering as the price of love and even view that suffering as the remedy for their separation: "For lovers, there is a dying at every moment… if the Beloved slays me, 'tis through that death that I live."[89]

This paradox—where love's wound is simultaneously its remedy—recalls the doctrine of divine jadhba (*attraction)*, where it is the Beloved, not the lover, who initiates the journey. The affliction of love is not something the ʿāshiq takes upon himself; rather, it is inflicted upon him by the very nature of divine beauty, which pulls him irresistibly toward annihilation. In this sense, the *ʿāshiq* is not a mere metaphorical figure but a necessary ontological category within Sufi cosmology. His annihilation is not an end but a beginning, for it is only in ceasing to be

83 *Masnavī*, VI: 4302-4304.

84 Keshavarz provides a literary analysis of Rūmī's metaphors of suffering and healing, situating them within the broader context of Persian mystical lyricism. She discusses how Rūmī's poetic structure reinforces the experience of love as both an affliction and a means of transcendence. She examines how Rūmī portrays love's transformative power through medical and alchemical imagery, demonstrating that affliction (dard) is not accidental but central to the lover's journey. Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric: The Case of Jalal al-Din Rumi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 89–95.

85 For a broader discussion of the role of illness metaphors in Persian mystical poetry, see J.T.P. De Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry: An Introduction to the Mystical Use of Classical Persian Poems* (London: Curzon Press, 1997), 134–140.

86 *Masnavī*, VI: 4593–4599.

87 *Masnavī*, I: 23–24; *Masnavi* III: 3832–3833.

88 *Masnavī*, III: 3838.

89 *Masnavī*, III: 3835–3840.

that he can truly become. The path of love is thus not one of fulfillment but of dissolution—of vanishing into the reality of the Beloved, where all distinctions of self and other, being and nonbeing, love and madness, are finally erased.

7. Love as the Prime Mover and the Guide to the Origin: The Cosmic Motion of Love in Rumi's *Masnavī*

At the heart of Rūmī's *Masnavī*, love is not a passive sentiment or a mere subject of reflection; it is the primal force that animates existence, the unseen sovereign that commands the ceaseless motion of creation. Love is both the origin and the return, the cause of all longing and the final destination of that longing. It is a force that simultaneously draws all things toward their source while dismantling their illusions of selfhood. Rūmī's poetic cosmos is constructed through layered metaphorical frameworks, where love is depicted alternately as fire and water, a guiding light and an all-consuming darkness, a force that gives and a force that annihilates. Beneath these shifting images lies a fundamental dialectic between movement and stillness, a tension that defines the lover's journey. Love propels all things toward their ultimate destination, yet it also strips away the illusions of autonomy, leaving the lover bereft of independent will. It is this very tension—the simultaneous assertion and negation of agency—that underscores the deeper ontological reality Rūmī seeks to unveil. This is mirrored in Rūmī's treatment of love's visibility. Love, like the Beloved, is both manifest and concealed—it reveals itself through signs and metaphors, yet its essence remains veiled. The *Masnavī* frequently plays with this paradox, suggesting that love is both the light that illuminates the path and the darkness that blinds the seeker. "Love is a veil, concealing the Beloved from sight. Yet within this veil, the Beloved is closer than breath."[90] This notion of love as a veil (*ḥijāb*) underscores the impossibility of grasping it directly. The lover may strive to comprehend love, to define it, to name it—but each attempt only reinforces its ineffability. Love is not something that can be possessed; it is something that possesses. In this sense, the lover's journey is not one of acquiring knowledge but of being undone by it, of relinquishing the illusion of comprehension in favor of immersion.

The transformative nature of love extends beyond the realm of individual experience to the fabric of the universe itself. Rumi describes love as the great kinetic energy that moves all things, from the revolution of the planets to the fluttering of leaves in the wind: "Love has thrown the heavens into ceaseless motion; it has set the sun and moon on their course. If love did not stir them, they would remain still; without love, existence itself would be motionless."[91] This vision of love as the fundamental force behind all cosmic activity closely parallels the Aristotelian notion of the Prime Mover, an unmoved entity that imparts motion to the entire universe. Yet, in Rūmī's formulation, love is not an impersonal or indifferent principle but an active, dynamic energy that compels all things to seek union with their source. This relentless movement—whether in the form of celestial revolutions, the rippling of water, or the yearning of the soul—is ultimately the journey back to the Beloved. Love does not merely set things into motion; it provides them with direction and purpose. As Rūmī's metaphors unfold, the lover's path reaches its inevitable conclusion: he does not merely return to the Beloved—he ceases to exist altogether. His being is not merely transformed but eradicated, leaving behind only the reflec-

90 *Masnavī*, VI: 940–941.

91 *Masnavī*, VI: 932-934.

tion of love itself. This dissolution is not a loss but the fulfillment of love's demand: the lover does not *find* love; he *becomes* it. This idea is most powerfully conveyed through Rūmī's famous metaphor of the astrolabe: "Love is the astrolabe of divine mysteries, The instrument by which hidden truths are unveiled."[92] Just as the astrolabe reveals the movements of the celestial spheres, so too does love to unveil the hidden architecture of existence. Yet, for the lover to become this instrument, he must first be emptied—stripped of selfhood, purged of all that is other than the Beloved. In this final state, he no longer distinguishes himself from love; he is absorbed into its essence, his identity dissolved in the radiance of divine presence.

Ultimately, Rūmī's *Masnavī* refuses to resolve the paradox of love. It does not offer closure but instead leaves the reader suspended in love's unfolding mystery. Is the lover an active seeker or a passive recipient? Is love a force that moves or a stillness that absorbs? Does the lover reach the Beloved, or does he vanish before he arrives? The *Masnavī* offers no final answers—only the recognition that love, by its very nature, defies containment. It is a journey without end, a fire that both consumes and illuminates, a wound that heals as it deepens. And so, the lover remains in motion, forever drawn toward a Beloved who is at once infinitely distant and closer than his own breath.

Conclusion

Rūmī's metaphors of love in the *Masnavī* are integral to his didactic and mystical framework. Far from literary embellishments, they operate as deliberate pedagogical devices and reflect an ontological vision grounded in divine love. Through the language of passion and longing, Rūmī conveys truths that elude straightforward expression, communicating the ineffable via symbol and parable. In his poetry, love emerges as both a way of knowing and the very fabric of reality – an epistemological means to divine insight and the ontological foundation of existence. Thus, Rūmī's poetic symbolism simultaneously instructs the seeker's soul and articulates a cosmology in which love is the ultimate reality. Furthermore, Rūmī's metaphors illuminate love's paradoxical nature and transformative power. Only love, he suggests, can resolve the tension of opposites and "make them one"– uniting joy and sorrow, absence and presence, in the wholeness of divine unity. This unifying process requires purgation of self: love "burns away everything except the Everlasting Beloved," annihilating the ego's illusions. Yet in this annihilation lies the soul's revival, for "divine love makes the seeker capable of bearing… all the pains and afflictions" as trials that purify the heart . Rūmī's parables thus show that love's suffering is not contrary to its fulfillment but instrumental to it – a healing paradox for the soul. The *Masnavī*'s allegorical narratives do not merely describe this transformation; they facilitate it. Immersed in these tales, the reader is subtly guided through a similar spiritual experience. Rūmī's use of poetic symbols therefore serves as both a pedagogical method and an existential commentary on divine love, demonstrating how love's paradoxical fire ultimately transforms separation into union with the Divine. Each of these metaphors illustrates the paradox of divine love: it is both suffering and ecstasy, dissolution and fulfillment. Finally, the lover's return to the divine is framed through the imagery of the straw drawn by amber, the wanderer lost in the desert, and the astrolabe that unveils divine mysteries. At this final stage, the lover does not merely approach the Beloved but becomes the instrument through which the

92 *Masnavī*, I: 109–220.

divine is known. Love is not a path one walks but the very force that guides, moves, and ultimately consumes the traveler. By structuring his discourse in symbolic language, Rumi does not simply describe love—he enacts its transformative nature through the rhythm, imagery, and metaphoric density of his poetry. The *Masnavī*, then, is not a manual for love but an immersion into love's unfolding mystery. It does not offer a definition but a path, not an explanation but an experience. In the end, the only true articulation of love is not in words but in becoming love itself.

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