

## On Rumi's Philosophy of Language

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### Abstract:

This paper examines the nature of language in the works of Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi and consists of three sections: Language and Reality in Rumi; the Complex view of Language in *Fihi ma Fihi* (*the Discourses of Rumi*); and, Poetry and Mysticism in Rumi.

The paper discusses three main topics: Rumi's ambivalent attitude to language, which is seen as both a means of conveying truth and guidance and yet ultimately inadequate for expressing Divine Realities; the nature of mystical inebriation in Rumi's poetry, and the diverse ways in which this is expressed in the *Divan-e Shams* and the *Mathnavi-e Ma'navi*; and the intimate connection between imagery and the expression of mystical truths in Rumi's writings. Finally, this paper will show how these three themes are interrelated, giving a complete picture of language in the works of Rumi.

**Key Terms:** Rumi, Language (sokhan), mystical inebriation, *Fihi ma Fihi*, *Divan-i Shams*, *Mathnavi-ye Ma'navi*.

### 1. Language and Reality in Rumi

Throughout the works by Rumi, we find a great number of his sayings about "language". In this case, by the English word "language" I mean "language" in the modern linguistic sense. When

Rumi discusses language in a linguistic sense, he usually employs the Persian “*sokhan*” which could be rendered into the English “speech” or “word”. However, “*sokhan*” in Rumi’s usage often signifies “language in general” in modern linguistics rather than “speech” or “word” in an ordinary sense. It is possible to say that Rumi’s sayings about “*sokhan*” cover the various subjects of the modern linguistics.

Language is explained generally in modern linguistics as a system of symbols or a system of signs for expression and communication. Such an explanation of language may well illustrate the functional aspect of language which is the main object of academic concern for modern linguists. However, such an explanation of language in modern linguistics is not necessarily a direct answer to the essential questions about language’s relation to reality as well as language’s relation to consciousness.

In Rumi’s sayings related to “*sokhan*”, his view of language’s relation to reality and consciousness is expressed in his own way. Rumi himself is not a philosopher of systematic thinking, but he is a poet with mystical insight into Reality. Therefore, his view on language may be based on his poetic insight and mystical intuition rather than on logical analysis and inference. Furthermore, his views about “language” are fragmentally expressed and proposed to us in his works. Consequently, it is necessary for us to arrange his remarks on “language” and put them in order to understand his true intention contained in his remarks on “language”. His remarks on “*sokhan*” below may offer us a clue for understanding his view on language.

The wise man sees speech as grand speech coming from heaven, it is not something paltry.

When you do not speak good words, they are not a thousand, they are one; but when you speak well, one word is a thousand.

Speech will come out from behind the veil—then you will see that it was the Attributes of God the Creator. (D 9896-98)<sup>1</sup>

Speech, though it rises from the soul, is a veil for the soul; Language is a veil for gems and seashore.

(D921)

Speech is a ship, and meaning the sea center quickly, so that I may pilot the ship!<sup>2</sup> (D1518)

In Islamic theology, God created the universe with his word “Be!” according to Qur’anic evidence. Therefore, “language” is believed to exist prior to the creation of the universe, and this preexistent “language” is counted as one of the divine attributes. Language in this sense is one of the eternal beings and it is also the cause of the existence of all beings. This view is held by Rumi, as seen in the first quote above. The eternal language as one of the attributes of God, the Pure Good, is itself good. All the words which are used in this experimental world have an ontological relation to language as one of the divine attributes. Therefore, “language” in our daily life is indirectly related to divine language. If a word or a phrase in our daily life is uttered in the state of keeping a connection with divine language, it will hold eternal and universal value as the divine language has. It will be recited and repeated by thousands of people. This may be the true meaning of the second couplet of the first quote, “When you do not speak good words, they are not a thousand, they are one; but when you speak well, one word is a thousand”.

In contrast, Rumi says in couplet of D921 that “Speech (*sokhan*), though it rises from the soul, is a veil for the soul / Language is a veil for gems and seashore”. The first hemistich of this couplet illustrates the duplicity of language. Language arises from the human soul in order to describe its experiences. However, language cannot describe them as they are. Language is always limited in its capacity to express reality. It always describes and expresses its object in an imperfect manner. Therefore, language does not convey to the human soul the true nature of things as they are. In this sense, language is a barrier for the human soul in grasping the true nature of things as they are. This may be the reason why Rumi composed the first hemistich of the above couplet. In addition, Rumi expresses his view about language’s relation to meaning, as seen above in the third quote. Speech is likened to ships on the sea of meaning. This signifies that in Rumi’s view, language never reaches that which lies underneath the surface of the sea of meaning. He says:

The expression always fails to reach the meaning;  
Hence the Prophet said, (Whoso knows God) his tongue falters.  
Speech is (like) an astrolabe in its reckoning;  
How much does it know of the sky and the sun (M.Vol II. 3013-3014)<sup>3</sup>

In this quote, the original Persian word for the English word “expression” in the first line is “*lafz*” instead of “*sokhan*”. The word “*lafz*” here, has almost the same meaning as language (*sokhan*). Rumi is accurately aware of the drawbacks of language in its function of conveying the meaning of the signified. In this quote, the insufficiency of language in encompassing meaning is clearly stated. Language’s relation to meaning (*maʿni*) is one of his main concerns about language. He says:

The letters are the vessel; therein the meaning is (contained) like water,

(but) the sea of the meaning is (with God) “*with Him in the Umm al-kitab*”.

In this world the bitter sea and the sweet sea (are divided) between them is *a barrier which they do not seek to cross*.

Know that both these flow from one origin. Pass on from them both, go (all the way) to their origin! (M. Vol.1. 295-298)<sup>4</sup>

In this quote, Rumi employs the word “letters” (*harf*) instead of “language” (*sokhan*). However, from the viewpoint of its context, it is clear that he means by the word “letters” almost the same meaning as “language”. “Language” here is likened by him to the vessel for keeping water. But, the water in the vessel is only a part of “the sea of the meaning” (*bahr-i māni*) which is limitlessly wide because it is being kept in the original Book, preserved in the eternal, divine world. Therefore, it is clear that Rumi believes that “language” is insufficient for expressing the entirety of the meaning. Again, in the famous story of the elephant in the dark house, Rumi says;

This (manner of ) speech, too, is imperfect and maimed; the speech that is not imperfect is Yonder.

If he (the saint) speak from that (source), thy feet will stumble. And if he speak naught of that, oh, alas for you!

And if he speak in the likeness of a (material) form, thou wilt stick to that form, O youth! (M 1277-79)<sup>5</sup>

According to Rumi, “the speech that is not imperfect” (*an sokhan ki nist naqis* ), that is, the perfect language, exists only in the divine world. Only the chosen messengers of God can bring it from the

divine world to the human world. As far as human language is concerned, it is always imperfect and insufficient for comprehending reality in the perfect way. As regards the role of language, Rumi aptly states:

“Words (*Sokhan*) are but “shadows” of reality (*sayah-yi haqiqat*). They are as it were, a branch of reality. If the shadows can attract, how much more so can reality attract!

Words are just pretexts. It is the element of sympathy that attracts one man to another, not words.”(*Fihi ma fihi*, Chapter 2)<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, it is possible to say that Rumi, one of the most outstanding language artists in the world, did not have perfect reliance on language. Or, we should say that Rumi was such an eminent poet with deep insight into language that he knew very well the limit of the effective range of language. Language is nothing but the shadow of reality.

## 2. The Complex view about Language in *Fihi ma fihi* (Discourses of Rumi)

Rumi's views on language in terms of its effects are also stated frequently in his *Fihi ma fihi* (Discourses of Rumi). He compares language to different things in this work, including water, the sun, a ship, and so on. In one place, he highly appreciates the role of language as seen in his saying; “Speech is like the sun. All men derive warmth and life from it. The sun is always existent and present, and everyone is always warmed by it” (*Fihi ma fihi*, Chapter 52). He says in another place that “language” (notq) exists perpetually” (*ibid.*, Chapter 53).

But, in another place, he says, “words are impermanent, sounds are impermanent, lips and mouth are impermanent” (ibid., Chapter 4) or “these words are not so great. They are not so strong. How could they be great? They are just words after all” (ibid.).

In the above quotations, Rumi states his negative opinions about the value of language in parallel with positive views. Rumi seems to be wavering between a negative view and a positive view about language. Sometimes he says that language is an impermanent thing, but on the other hand, he says that language is a permanent thing. This contradiction in his sayings about language may reflect his understanding of language's relationship to human consciousness. As a pious Muslim, Rumi never believes that humans can become the real agent of their activities. All human activities including speech are created by God, the All mighty, who creates all human activities. He says as follows;

*‘God hath caused us to speak, who giveth speech unto all things (41:21). He causes me to speak who causes everything to speak, who Causes doors and walls and stones and mud clumps to speak. The creator who can endow all those things with speech gives me speech also; just as He gives your tongue the power of speech. Your tongue is a piece of flesh, and so is speech. Is the tongue intelligent? From many things you have seen it should not appear impossible that might be. Otherwise, the tongue is just a pretext of God. When He commands it to speak it will, and it will say whatever He tells it to.*

Speech comes in proportion to man's capacity. Our words are like the water the superintendent of waterworks turns on” (ibid., Chapter 25).

Humans are agents of God and their language is caused by God.

This view is held not only by Rumi but also by Muslims in general. According to such a view, humans by themselves are not able to be creators of their language. Language is a borrowed thing from the store of God. But, as seen in the previous section, language is the “shadow” of reality as well. It is never able to express reality itself. Therefore, Rumi was always frustrated with the capacity of language. Perhaps it was this frustration about language that made Rumi say such contradictory statements about its value.

On the other hand, Rumi has his own linguistic cosmology to illustrate the position of language in his world view. According to his linguistic cosmology, language which is composed of the represented things (*musawwarat-o mahsusat*) is understood as a sensible manifestation of mental images which exist in the world of mental images (*‘alam al-khayal*). Therefore, this world of mental images is the hometown of language, the existence of which is a rank higher than the existence of sensible things. This world of mental images is broad and wide. However, there is another vast world which is the world of the Creator. Rumi says:

“In comparison with the world of concepts and sensibles, the world of mental images (*‘alam-i khayal*) is broader because all concepts are born of mental images; but the world of mental image is narrow in relation to the world where mental images are given being. This much can be understood from words, but the reality of the substance is impossible to understand through verbal expression.

“Of what use then is verbal expression?” someone queried.

The usefulness of words is to cause you to seek and to excite you, but the object of your search will not be attained through words. If it were not so, there would be no need for strife and self-annihilation. Words are like seeing something moving at a distance: you run toward



it in order to see the thing itself, not in order to see it through movement. Human rational speech is inwardly the same. It excites you to search for the concept, although you cannot see it in actuality. (ibid., Chapter 52).

From this paragraph it becomes clear that in Rumi's cosmology, the universe is divided into three realms, that is, the realm of language, that of mental images and that of God. The realm of language is the experiential world, while the realm of mental images is beyond human perception. Furthermore, the world of the Creator, that is, the realm of reality, exists above the realm of mental images. Language is unable to comprehend the realm of mental images as well as the realm of the Creator.

In this cosmology, the realm of mental images has a very important place. The realm of mental images is an ontological as well as transcendental dimension which is an intermediary world between the realm of God and the realm of language. The mental images which exist in this intermediary world produce words and phrases, that is, language. Therefore, the realm of mental images could be compared to the world of primordial images (*'alam al-mithal*) in the cosmology of the school of unity of being. Just as primordial images are formative causes of beings in the sensible world but they are not perfectly the same as the sensible beings, the mental images are formative causes of words, but they are far beyond comprehending the capacity of words.

Based upon such knowledge of the limits of language, the role of language is restricted by Rumi to the role of inducing humans to search for reality. Language itself is not reality, but is the guiding sign for reaching reality. Therefore, once reality is attained, language has no use and no value. The value of language is regarded by Rumi to be restricted and transitory. However, he is aware of the importance of language in terms of its relation to action. He says:

“The basis of things is all talk and speech (*asl-i chiz-ha hameh goft-ast*). Now you know nothing of this “talk” and “speech”. You despise it; yet talk is the fruit of the tree of action (‘*amal*), for speech is born of action. God created the world through speech by saying *Be! And it was* (36:82). Faith exists in the heart, if you don’t say it out loud, it is of no use. Prayer, which is a set of actions, is not correct without recitation of the Qur’an. Now by your saying that in this age words are not credible, how is it that we hear you saying that words are not creditable? This too you have said by means of words (*ibid.*, Chapter 16).

In this paragraph, Rumi says that speech or language is the basis of things and speech is born of action. As far as the creation of the cosmos is concerned, the cosmos is created by the divine word “Be!” as stated in the Qur’an. In this sense, language is doubtlessly the basis of all things. The word “Be” is not only a word but the action of creation. Therefore, language is considered to be action in this case. In other words, language with utterance is identical with action. This means that language in its actuality is action itself. Before the act of utterance language is silent language which means language in potentiality. Therefore, language in potentiality is not action and is not recognized. It remains in the sea of meaning as the unspoken language. If speech is to be effective, it must come together with the action of utterance.

Speech in potentiality is speech before utterance, and it is not action, but meaning before articulation. Speech in potentiality remains in the world of meaning. Through the act of speaking, language in the state of potentiality is realized and becomes effective. The phrase “talk is the fruit of the tree of action, for speech is born of action” in

the above quote means that speech is not the result of action, but speech always is accompanied with action when it has effects.

However, Rumi is aware also of the unuttered language. Silent language before utterance is called by him rationality (*notq*) which is regarded as a kind of language which is immanent in humans as seen below;

”Man is a rational animal” Man is a mixture of animality (*haywani*) and rationality (*notq*), and his animality is as inseparable a part of him, as his rationality. Even if he does not speak out loud, still he does speak inwardly: he is always speaking. He is like a torrent in which mud is mixed. The clear water is his rational speech, and the mud his animality. The mud is only coincidental. Don't you see that when the mud and the shapes it takes go away or disintegrate, the power of rational utterance and the knowledge of good and evil remain? (ibid., Chapter 16) .

A rational animal is considered by Rumi to be that which is always speaking inwardly. Even if a human does not utter any word, he/she is regarded to be a being who is speaking inwardly because humans have rationality (*notq*) which is the cause of speaking outwardly as well as speaking inwardly. The word “rationality” here could be compared to “I-language” (internal language) in modern linguistics.

Now, we have already seen Rumi's linguistic cosmology which depicts the cosmos as threefold, which is composed of the realm of sensible language, the realm of mental images and the realm of the divine essence and attributes. Then, rationality as “the unuttered language” must belong to the world of mental images because the realm of rationality in the unuttered state contains the mental images as well as their rational forms.

Through surveying Rumi's remarks on language in the first chapter and the second chapter, we now have a sketch of Rumi's view on

language. In Rumi, language is regarded as restricted in its ability of comprehending Reality, but it works effectively as symbols and signs for guiding humans or wayfarers to Reality. Therefore, language is effective and valuable for humans before they attain Reality. On the other hand, language is considered to be one of the things created by God and humans are not able to be creators of language. Language is believed by Rumi to be originated in the realm of mental images which is wider than the realm of language. Because of such a limitation, language is able to express a part of those mental images which is rationality as well as meaning. Therefore, language is likened to the ship on the ocean of meaning.

However, Rumi is a poet above all. Although he is keenly aware of the true nature of language and its limits, he has left us so many poems. I will examine the philosophic structure of his poesy below.

### 3. Poetry and Mysticism in Rumi

Rumi left us two big collections of poems, that is, *Diwan-i Shams-i Tabrizi* and *Mathnawi-yi Ma'nawi*. Both of them are collections of mystical poems. Based upon the opinion of the late Professor Izutsu, I will examine Rumi's poesy and its relation to language. According to Izutsu's understanding, there is a difference between *Diwan-i Shams-i Tabrizi* and *Mathnawi-yi Ma'nawi* in terms of mysticism and language. The late Professor Izutsu says about the true nature of Rumi's poesy and mysticism in *Diwan-i Shams-i Tabrizi* that "Beautiful images spring infinitely out of the bottom of deep mystical experience into which ordinary people have no insight. Those images collide with each other and intertwine with each other so that they turn into words with a peculiar rhythmical undulation. It is said that in Persia, there are so many genius poets who can express their mystical experiences in various levels and dimensions with beautiful poetical images. But, it is also said that Rumi's poetical rhythm is an

incomparable one and no one can imitate it. When a virtuoso of poetical recitation recites his poems, listeners are always induced into an ecstatic state in which the marvelous world of intoxication surrounding human consciousness becomes manifest in the state of deep meditation. In his *Fihi Ma fihi*, Rumi himself says that his words spoken in such a state are no longer his own words. Words come out of somewhere and flow to somewhere. The flow of words has an ineffable rhythm and undulation, which is identical with the rhythm and undulation of consciousness of mystics in the state of meditation. In this manner, poesy and mysticism are fused into one in Rumi. As regards Rumi's poems, it is not appropriate to say that he had expressed his mystical experience with his poems. But, it should be said that his poetical experience is equal to his mystical experience. In his case, his words themselves are in the state of mystical intoxication. This intoxication not only exists in the expressed meaning but also in the flow of words apart from their meaning. Therefore, the words themselves are mystical intoxication"<sup>7</sup>. (paraphrased translation of Izutsu's postscript to his Japanese translation of *Fihi ma fihi*).

This is the true nature of Rumi's poesy in his "*Diwan-i Shams-i Tabrizi*". In other words, the poetic words themselves are densely tinted with mystical inebriation.

However, according to Prof. Izutsu, this illustrates one of the two facets of poesy of Rumi. The second facet of Rumi's poetry is found in *Mathnawi-yi Ma'nawi*. *Mathnawi-yi Ma'nawi* is a genuine mystical work. This is clear from the title itself *Mathnawi-yi Ma'nawi* because the Persian or Arabic word "Ma'nawi" means "being based upon mystical insight" or "being derived from the true aspect of reality manifested in the mystical experience". In fact, the pivotal philosophy formed in the 26000 lines of the six volumes, full of poetical images as well as innumerable number of experience, is the philosophy of

Sufism or mysticism above all. It is a book of confession of a Sufi's own actual experience. In this sense, *Mathnawi-yi Mā' nawi* is not different from *Diwan-i Shams-i Tabrizi*.

However, a fundamental difference is found between these two works because *Mathnawi-yi Mā' nawi* is a collection of poems produced with Rumi's self-examination and reflection of consciousness, while *Diwan-i Shams-i Tabrizi* was produced with mystical intoxication.<sup>8</sup>

According to Izutsu, in *Diwan-i Shams-i Tabrizi* one finds the intoxication of consciousness. Izutsu says:

In *Diwan-i Shams-i Tabrizi*, Rumi's intoxicated consciousness utters directly the words of mystical intoxication. In contrast, Rumi's consciousness in *Mathnawi-yi Mā' nawi* is sober. In *Mathnawi-yi Mā' nawi*, Rumi's mystical experience of Reality itself is not directly articulated, but his sober reflective consciousness examines the mystical experience of Reality and after this examination his reflective consciousness utters the words about the deep experience of Reality.<sup>9</sup>

For this reason, *Mathnawi-yi Mā' nawi* is an extremely philosophic work in terms of its content. In this work, a mystic metamorphoses into a metaphysician. This means that the mystical experience of Reality has been transformed through reflective consciousness into a metaphysical world view. However, unlike Ibn 'Arabi and Sadr al-Din Qunyawi, one of Ibn 'Arabi's disciples and a good friend of Rumi, who both expressed their thought in the form of philosophy, Rumi did not express his metaphysical world view in a philosophic form in *Mathnawi-yi Mā' nawi*, but expressed it in the form of a long series of beautiful poetical images. Therefore, in spite of the fact that *Mathnawi-yi Mā' nawi* is essentially a philosophic work, its philosophic dimension becomes apparent only after philosophic

examination of poetical images which appear to have no relation to philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, although both *Mathnawi-yi Mā'nawi* and *Diwan-i Shams-i Tabrizi* are poetry of mysticism, *Mathnawi-yi Mā'nawi* is more philosophic than *Diwan-i Shams-i Tabrizi*. Furthermore, *Mathnawi-yi Mā'nawi* has a more complicated structure than *Diwan-i Shams-i Tabrizi* because of the special nature of the words of mystical intoxication in it. Although the words in *Mathnawi-yi Mā'nawi* are not a direct expressions of mystical intoxication, they are expressed after self-examination of the experience of mystical intoxication. They are narrated in the state of sober consciousness after self-examination and a reconstruction of mystical intoxication. However, we discern still the color of mystical intoxication in the poetical expression of *Mathnawi-yi Mā'nawi* written with a sober consciousness. The phrasing rhythm in *Mathnawi-yi Mā'nawi* still keeps the perfume of mystical intoxication as well as ecstasy, and the consciousness of the readers of *Mathnawi-yi Mā'nawi* is induced to enter the ineffable state of mystical intoxication. However, this perfume of mystical intoxication is not originated directly in mystical intoxication itself because, as mentioned above, *Mathnawi-yi Mā'nawi* is a product of sober consciousness as well as a fruit of self-examination over Rumi's own mystical intoxication. The perfume of mystical intoxication discerned in *Mathnawi-yi Mā'nawi* must be understood to be the result of the linguistic reflection of the imagery of intoxication in the dimension of image experience. This could be a key to understand the inner structure of Rumi's existence.

Rumi was basically a man of images. In him, everything is grasped with images. Every experience, including even philosophic self-examination, takes its images and appears in the dimension of images. All kinds of experiences in the level of consciousness as well as

unconsciousness appear with images. Therefore, Rumi's way of thinking is essentially through imagery. This means that Rumi's experience of Reality in its totality is an imagerial experience. Even his experience of the utmost Reality, in other words, even his experience of Nothing (*fana`*) is an imagerial experience in spite of the fact that Nothing is beyond all kinds of images as well as description.<sup>11</sup>

All kinds of experiences in Rumi stimulate the sphere of images in his consciousness so that their accurate images are created in his mind. In other words, he re-experiences the experiences beyond images and descriptions in the sphere of images of his consciousness. This sphere of images is called the world of primordial images (*'alam al-mithal*) in Sufi philosophy which is called by Rumi the realm of mental images. This world of primordial images is an independent immaterial world in which even the pure concepts appear through images and material beings appear in their immaterial forms and images. At the moment of transition from the state of absolute tranquility to the state of activity in consciousness, numberless images spring forth in ecstatic delight of coming into mental being in his consciousness, and each of those images chooses its own word to get its direct linguistic expression. Because Rumi's words and phrases come into linguistic expression in such a process, his words are tinged with the delightful ecstasy of images. In such a state he utters his words which are not under his control. For this reason he says as follows;

“I am not in control of my words, and this pains me because I want to advise my friends; but the words will not be led by me. For this reason I am saddened; but, in view of the fact that my words are higher than me and that I am subject to them, I am glad because wherever words spoken by God come they give life and have profound effects.”<sup>12</sup>



From the above survey, it is possible to say that Rumi's soul was directly connected with the realm of mental images, or his consciousness was the world of primordial images itself. However, when those images are brought into words, the original forms of those images do not appear perfectly in language because of the limits of language. Then, mental images resort to other words in order to satisfy their desire for expression. This process repeats itself endlessly. For this reason, he says; "I am not in control of my words, and this pains me" as seen above. As a result, the sea of words comes into being. Probably this sea of words may be Rumi's poetry.

**References:**

1. See ` *The Sufi Path of Love; The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* ' by William C. Chittick, 1983, SUNY, p. 270
2. See `Speech is a ship and meaning the sea': some formal aspects in the ghazal poetry of Rumi by J. Christoph Bürgel in *Poetry and mysticism in Islam, The heritage of Rumi*, 1987, Cambridge U. P. p. 46.
3. See *The Mathnavi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi, Translation Volume 1* Edited and translated by Reynold A. Nicholson. Reprinted in 1977, Cambridge. p. 377.
4. Ibid., p. 19.
5. Ibid., p. 72.
6. The English quotes in this paper are taken from *Signs of the Unseen, The discourses of Jalalddin Rumi*. W.M. Thackston. New York, 1993.
7. See *Rumi Goroku*, Prof. Izutsu's Japanese translation of *Fihi Ma fihi*, Iwanami Shoten. 1978. p. 417
8. Ibid., p. 420
9. Ibid., p. 420
10. Ibid., p. 420
11. Ibid., p. 420
12. *Signs of the Unseen, The discourses of Jalalddin Rumi*, W. M. Thackston. New York 1993. p. 222