

# Cyclical history, gnosis, and memory: a study in the role and significance of Mystical Poetry as a medium of Popular Culture for Persian Sufism

Milad Milani

## INTRODUCTION

The 'automatic' sense in immediately identifying and relating to what is 'right,' 'just,' 'true,' or 'real' is just an example of how cunningly our inner-selves **know** 'who we are,' 'what we are,' 'where we come from' and 'where we are going.' Just as quickly as this 'hyper' sense identifies with the good, not a moment is wasted in informing us of the 'wrong,' the 'bad,' the 'lie,' or the 'evil.' This has prompted humankind to ask the question 'What is in us that knows? How does it know? Most importantly, where does this knowledge come from?' In one simple answer, this knowledge is within; it is our 'real self' that knows because we were meant to know. In mystical or esoteric language, it does not get any more confusing than this, and paradoxically, no simpler. Answers to life's riddles and much more have been laid to claim by gnostic persons or groups for centuries on end. Their admission to this spiritual wealth is the result of a spiritual alchemy that transforms the common man of flesh to the 'Man of Light,' to adapt Henry Corbin's title.<sup>1</sup> In Iranian gnoseology, this theme is profoundly important and prevalent among its religious heritage, especially within Sufism. Sufism, which is, among other inheritors of 'gnosis,' a contemporary face of today's spirituality, finds an ongoing relevance in the heart of the second millennium through not only the great lyrical poets of Persia but also through its obvious links with the various spiritual or gnostic contents or themes as manifested in popular film.

Whether it be the historical realism of *Gladiator* and *Braveheart* in promoting 'nobility' and 'chivalry' or traditional tales and mythology in *King Arthur* and *Crouching Tiger: Hidden Dragon*: conveying 'honour' and 'virtue,' there is a special kind of spiritual phenomenon that continually speaks through popular culture. Science fiction

---

<sup>1</sup> Henry Corbin: *Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, New York, 1978.

blockbusters with their dazzling imagery and imagination, like *The Matrix*, *The Lord of The Rings* trilogy and the *Star Wars* saga, are comparable, in style, to the popular Sufi literature of the tenth to thirteenth centuries and serve much the same purpose, not only for their entertainment value but also for their praised esoteric content. Their popularisation generally displays the (human) hunger for spiritual awakening and a general and predominant interest or shift towards the 'gnostico-religious' arena. Specific spiritual themes come to the fore in such films where, for instance, detailed attention has been paid to the subtle relationship between master and apprentice; the role of the 'seeker' amidst the populace, the layout of cosmogony; cosmology; eschatology, soteriology and many other areas of relational concern. What these films show, on a popular plane, is on one level the return to and rethinking of the perennial issues of good and evil, right and wrong, truth and untruth, justice and injustice and, on another level, the individual's private search for solace and personal spirituality.

Similar to Persian Sufi literature, these films bring to life the Classics and Antiquity in an almost modern renaissance of spiritual or inner-personal quest to recapture the meaning and value of such age-old virtues for and within a contemporary setting. The 'automatic' or 'hyper' sense, in an unconscious fashion, is an indication of the inherited wealth of knowledge accumulated from the dawn of the human species, and not a mere reduction of the ideological conventionalism prevalent in popular film. One of the reasons for Sufism's great success and continuation, despite the fact that it is not a proselytising tradition, lies in its incorporation of poesis and its subsequent literary success on a popular cultural level. I would like, therefore, to present here a brief and introductory journey through both the hidden and popular levels of Sufi understanding as related to the literary material of three specific classical Persian poets.

#### **REFLECTIONS ON POPULAR RELIGIOSITY AND THE QUESTION OF ITS DIRECTION**

Whether it be the high spirited and modernised Pentecostal evangelism of Pastor Brian Houston's Hillsong Church or the presence of Dhammakaya and Mandaean energies in Sydney, what is noticeable is a shift in focus that is generally directing the Australian population toward a more intimate relationship with the

## *The Value of Sufi Inheritance*

'mystico-spiritual' or 'esoterico-gnostic' world on the quest for redefining and reinventing its own spirituality. Theologically, the shift in direction is naturally one which steadily moves away from the rigid interpretation of transcendence and exclusivity of the divine to a more holistic, inclusive, inner and more personal representation. Where each individual seeks to re-interpret 'what it means for them' to be 'religious' or to belong to a 'religious group,' the effect of this act is still a positive one for religious history and religious traditions as a whole. 'Religion' itself is given further impetus to carry on its 'essential' legacy in the socio-cultural psyche of contemporary community. The notion of the divine is then fast becoming the subject of an 'internal' discourse and personal identification rather than the 'external' entity of a higher metaphysical imaging. This internal shift yearns to tell more about the place and importance of the 'human.'

This may in one sense seem, or be taken as, an indication that the notion of 'God' is being further pushed from our consciousness as we ground ourselves in gnostic themes, but we must at the same time understand that those traditions which are deeply immersed in gnostic thinking all profess to an idea of divinity which is hidden behind complex barriers of esoteric encoding. Apparent anthropomorphic currents (like the Buddhist and Sufi traditions) have become quickly popularised in the forms of neo-Buddhist and neo-Sufi practices that accommodate the [post]modern person; allowing them to tap into the rich cultural heritage and literature of such age-old traditions but in a more relaxed, interpersonal, and less intense religious manner. To hone in on the thought and spirituality of Buddhist and Islamic traditions, the two have, from the first centuries of Islam, had close encounters in the regions today known as Afghanistan and Pakistan. In fact prior to this, Buddhism's spread into China before the rise of Islam was through the eastern regions of the Persian Empire and one of the first harbingers of the Buddhist message into China was called in Chinese 'The Persian.'<sup>2</sup>

Despite the difference in spiritual expressions of theistic and non-theistic attitudes of Islamic and Buddhist spiritualities, the priority that both place upon the 'human being' and the 'human condition' remains a trademark of prolific similarity between the two. The esoteric

---

<sup>2</sup> S H Nasr: 'Reply to Kenneth Inada' in L E Hahn, R E Auxier and L W Stone, Junior, editors, *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, Chicago, 2001, 326.

## *Buddha of Suburbia*

expressions of their thought mutually reveal a profound journey and transformation that is guided by the senses and the intuition (defined through the categories of 'love' and 'gnosis') and strict ascetic practices. Interest in such expressions as found within contemporary popular film and literature in the past or recent years does not indicate a pre-occupation with the abandonment of divinity, or divine elements (as it may seem), but instead reveals an interest and exploration into the esoteric facet of religious and spiritual understanding. Rather than moving away from the divine, this highlights the effort to search for its expression through other channels that 'dare to make sense to the seeker.' Traditionally, the prevalent alternate channel has always been understood to be 'the individual;' beginning always with the recognition of the value of the person as an agent of spiritual quality, through which and only after this realisation, would any metaphysical or metamorphic prospect follow. This has been none other than the individual and the individual's personal quest for meaning: coming to understand one's self in the true sense, and subsequently the purpose of one's existence in relation to the other. This archaic method of **self-knowledge** famously known in the Greek and Latin tradition of 'know thyself,' is the very epistemological method incorporated by the 'gnostic' shift.

This is important in that we are made aware (through such films as mentioned above) of the power of the individual and the divine or transcendental gift that is placed within each and every soul. There is no surprise that films concern themselves less explicitly with the divine and depict more overtly the arduous journey of growth, change and empowerment of the individual figure (repeatedly hinting at notions of 'rebirth' and 'liberation' in the secret yearning for the powerful truths of Buddhist and Sufi experiences of 'annihilation' and 'subsistence.')

Misconception of the complex and intimate teachings of esoteric schools of the East has led to many atheistic impressions of its religious thinking. More often, such inadequate reflection had not accounted for the deeper subtleties of esoteric agenda and exegesis at play. After all, how could it have, as esoteric exegesis of religious material predominantly remains highly initiatory in nature and kept well within the subterranean levels of each culture's spirituality? Nevertheless, it has to be mentioned that esoteric knowledge can also have its unorthodox expressions through the production of art, film and literature in contemporary society,

reflecting and drawing on the 'formal' and 'traditional' sources of this teaching. It is indeed through this medium of film and literature that secular interests in the classical motives of arcane traditions such as Buddhism or Sufism have flourished.

### **GNOSIS AND HISTORY**

The reference to 'cyclical history' is an indication of the 'discovery' and 're-discovery' of gnosis that has taken place on the greater historical plain. Despite its socio-cultural aspect, this is in fact the overt search for what is actually an internal phenomenon. In anticipation, history in the hands of eminent persons has come to be adapted for purposes of such quests; hence the role of 'macrohistory' and, further still, 'esoteric macrohistory,' is worth mentioning.<sup>3</sup> However, with the entire focus of this paper being on the hermeneutical weight of the term 'gnosis' and its usage within Sufi literature, it is pertinent to state that 'gnosis' is only found via the internal compass; the heart. It is widely attested by Sufis that the memory of gnosis is eternally preserved in human genealogy, thus with progress and in time, this human component comes to its own fruition and eventual blossoming in the given agent. Gnosis is therefore not perceived as an external object to us (that is in time forgotten and then found again as history may have it), but rather, Sacred Knowledge or gnosis, is ultimately internal and requires self-[re]cognition and self-awareness for its illumination. This is why it is often related to the 'true self' or the 'inner being,' or otherwise known as the 'source' or 'origin' of humankind in esoteric language and popular mystical literature.

There are countless gnostic masters and personas in Sufism alone, each of whom are known to have reached the many peaks of the limitless ladder of gnosis. Where every lifetime allows for its own limited moment of appreciation, each death has only spawned the birth of another magnanimous figure, unique in their own appreciation of gnosis in the ongoing tradition of the Sufi masters. This is not to imply a process of metempsychosis or re-birth maintained between lineages of masters; where this may be argued to be the case in the instance of one *firqe* or sect, how are we then to explain the

---

<sup>3</sup> G W Trompf: *The Idea of Historical Recurrence in Western Thought*, London, 1979; G W Trompf: 'Macrohistory' in W J Hanegraaff, editor *Dictionary of gnosis and Western Esotericism*, Volume 2, Leiden, 2005, 701-716.

commonalities that occur on a larger and disconnected plain, like, for instance, the hermeneutical value of 'gnosis' for the varieties of other groups who identify with it or incorporate its concept? Rather, what is insisted is that there is no lateral connection, but only the fact that gnosis is a **human** phenomenon.

Sufism generally maintains that gnosis is not exclusive to any particular religious or sub-religious group; rather gnosis is understood as a human phenomenon that is in continuous motion moving through the waves of time as each individual searches for his or her own truths. Having no collective sense of an eschatological (or end-times) outlook, this notion is instead largely played out on an individual level whereby Sufi soteriology is defined in light of the predetermined movement of Fate or *qismat*, much like the Zoroastrian and Manichean view of the inevitable triumph of the forces of Good over Evil. Salvation for all is inevitable, as the cycle will continue to filter out the 'negative' until every last human soul (or the light element) is released from its (material) bonds. This concept therefore plays itself out in the ascetic practices and devotional elements that endorse the virtues of **patience** and **love** as the prominent methods of achieving spiritual enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> Those whom we refer to as 'the masters of the path,' however, are constantly watching and waiting for the right and necessary moment to enter the scene where, in a Sufi parable, they are likened to a lifeguard who watches over the swimmer, only intervening when the swimmer is just about to drown.<sup>5</sup>

Knowledge of the esoteric is gained through contact with those whom are recognized as 'men of wisdom,' commonly referred to in esoteric and or mystical language as 'gnostics' or (in Persian) *arefs* (a derivative term from *'irfan* which signifies *gnosis* in Iranian culture). The word *aref* basically means to 'recognize' or literally to 'know' something, thus it is already at this level connected to the practice of 'Self Knowledge' as mentioned earlier. These persons also play the part of 'gate keeper,' standing between the seeker and the desired

---

<sup>4</sup> For further clarification of the Sufi practice and usage of the terms 'patience' and 'love' see J Nurbakhsh: *The Psychology of Sufism*, London, 1992, 16-19.

<sup>5</sup> The teaching indicates that the seeker must be willing to journey and it is through the journey's difficulties that the master or guide will intervene only to set the seeker back on course. In Sufism, initiation is highly selective but Sufism does not demarcate the uninitiated as damned souls. By definition, Sufism is a pro-cosmic 'gnostic' group.

## *The Value of Sufi Inheritance*

*gnosis*. In this sense, they not only have the power of selection for initiation but also the control of that knowledge. However, Trompf's<sup>6</sup> reference to the 'Master motif' in a more recent article has a special place in the main concern of this paper as we discuss and familiarize ourselves with the eminent Sufi Masters of the ages, three of whom are of particular concern here, as they are the celebrated and much loved masters of Persian literature whose works, much like themselves, have become treasured relics of Persian culture. Namely, The *Mathnawi* of Jalaladdin Moulavi Rumi; the *Divan* of Khwaja Shamsuddin Mohammed Hafiz Shirazi and the *Ruba'iyat* of 'Umar Khayyam, not only convey the depths of gnostic inheritance, but also demonstrate an unequalled and unsurpassable poetic mastery of the various forms of Persian rhyme.

The role of these persons in history and the continuation of their tradition is significant for one primary reason; the preservation of Sacred Knowledge. To explain, we must first appreciate the sense of immanence that surrounds the notion of 'preservation,' especially where sacred or highly praised *gnosis* is the topic of the agenda. This finds importance in the fact that knowledge, in general, is considered to be primarily a result of experience. Although it is accepted in Sufism that knowledge, to a degree, comes from experience, the spiritual as well as the mental growth of the individual must also be seen as important contributing factors to the development of knowledge. Suhrawardi in this regard teases out the question of the nature of knowledge in his *Hikmat al-Ishraq*<sup>7</sup> by explaining the subtle interplay of *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge in assessing that in the end we are properly guided to what is 'true' or 'certain' through sense-perception only.<sup>8</sup> For Suhrawardi, and Persian Sufism in general, the cornerstone of their theosophical epistemology is that an epistemological relationship can take place if and only when 'we

---

<sup>6</sup> G W Trompf: 'From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again' in *Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge*, edited by Edward F Crangle, Sydney, 2004, 22-63; and G W Trompf: 'Macrohistory in Blavatsky, Steiner and Guenon' in *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion: Selected Papers presented at the 17<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions*, Mexico City, 1995; *Gnostica*, 2, edited by Antoine Faivre and Wouter J Hanegraaff, Peeters, 1998, 269-297.

<sup>7</sup> Translated into Persian by Sayyid Ja 'far Sajjadi, Tehran, 1357. See M Aminrazavi: 'The Significance of Suhrawardi's Persian Sufi Writings in the Philosophy of Illumination' in L Lewisohn, editor *The Heritage of Persian Sufism*, Volume 1, Oxford, 1999, 259-285.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 263-265.

know ourselves first.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, where the transference of sacred knowledge is concerned, the effectiveness of 'one on one' *dialogic* method (or master and apprentice style) is undoubtedly deemed a more prominent method of teaching.

Preservation in itself is, however, not the gnostic's ultimate objective. This resides in the appreciation of another concept, 'the control of knowledge.' Contrary to its common implications, this has less to do with power and status than it does with its more imminent concern; the problem of 'memory' in a broader historical frame. If knowledge is not passed on or recorded in some way, it is completely forgotten in time, and consequently erased from the memory of human history. Though time goes on, and we move on, it becomes the important task of those in possession of gnosis to continually re-assert its importance in their relevant contexts. The importance here lies in what has been abovementioned in regards to the way 'true gnosis' is acquired. In Sufism, it is the quest of each individual alone that brings them to the knowledge of truth and it is believed that gnosis is not a separate entity transported (to another), but an internal quality invested within. This then is awakened in the proper recipient in its proper time.

### **GNOSIS AND POPULAR SUFI LITERATURE**

Thus far I have attempted to elaborate on the general hermeneutics of esoteric teaching within the broader Sufi tradition in order to outline the thematic importance of 'the value of Sufi inheritance.' Now it is necessary to further discuss this with a closer look at the literature of the three introduced Persian poets, leading firstly to the appreciation of 'poetry' as the means through which gnosis has been preserved and taught for centuries and, secondly the importance of 'poetic method' as the safeguard of gnosis against the scrutiny of religious conservatism and traditional orthodoxy. As both these occupy two significant aspects of the development of Islamic mysticism within the Persian geo-social arena, it is with the former that primary concern is placed. The very practical genius of poetry has made it the instrument of spiritual knowledge where it engages its audience through conjuring the imagination and allowing for a diversity of approaches through its multi-layered quality, in much the same way that films like

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 265.

## *The Value of Sufi Inheritance*

*The Matrix* trilogy entice the viewer with innovative 'camera art' and conceptual ambiguity, the purpose of both is clear from the beginning; its architect intends to create a work of art that challenges its viewers' perception and given assumptions by an invitation to take part in a journey that will lead the subject to some form of intellectual or spiritual 'awakening.' Mystical poetry appeals, to a great extent, to the individual need for questioning and subsequently plays on the assumption that something is already amiss in order to further tease out particular individual concerns with the [or their] current existential condition.

A central theme that runs through the articulation of Sufi doctrine is the idea of 'transformation,' which finds its importance in relation to the idea of the 'self' in Sufism and its prospect of 'spiritual awakening.' The hermeneutical implication of this is a notion that is drawn from the biblical motif of the 'first man' or Adam by the Sufis to discuss 'fulfillment' and 'completion' in the context of 'purpose' and 'meaning' for human existence. It is therefore, that the reference to the term 'human' carries an inherent quality that is loaded with spiritual meaning signifying the 'spiritually accomplished' person or *ensaan-l kaamel* 'the fulfilled human.' This theme is recapitulated continuously throughout Sufi literature by varying Sufi masters who in their own unique way 're-imagine' the connection of this mystical motif.

This 're-imagination' becomes important for the trajectory of Sufi [spiritual] identity as it carries on in its own typological fashion. In relation to the notion of Sufi inheritance, it is a particular 'memory,' defining a certain type of mystical continuum, that is importantly carrying out the role of the 'preservation' of gnosis in the Sufi tradition. How this is technically accomplished is in the coming into being of poetic corpuses like Rumi's *Mathnawi*, or the *Diwan* of Hafiz or the *Ruba'iyat* of 'Umar Khayyam, which in turn become (as apart from the Koran) 'sub-sacred' components of interpretation which allow for a new drive or impetus of mystical expression.

The dual quality of 'preservation' and 'awakening' invested in the construction of major poetical texts act as a trigger for the inbuilt gnostic feature of individual agents. The case is made then for the activation of gnosis on a 'conscious' level. Sufi theosophy inherently implies that every individual is capable of receiving true gnosis,

though accomplishing such a task has its very complex and detailed conditions, which cannot be entered here, suffice to quote Rumi who, in his *Mathnawi*, conveys the 'essential' *gist* of the issue in the following line:

Centuries must come to pass for in order that one is made fit for selection of knowing.

#### **'IRFANIC SUFISM**

The turbulent backdrop of Sufi history, particularly in Iran, gave way to a seventeenth century adaptation of Sufism which identified itself as apart from 'Sufi Order Sufism' or *tasawwuf*, going under the alias *'irfan*, which identified itself as 'gnostic wisdom.'<sup>10</sup> The greater tradition of thought to which Khayyam, Hafiz, and Rumi seem to be drawing on is this kind of Sufic identity. It is known that neither figures were identified members of any particular Sufi school, and controversies surrounding the question of their Sufi identities appears to centre around the confusion of an 'Irfanic Sufism' with that of 'Formal Sufism.' All three of the candidates carry heavy undertones of subversive sentiments toward both the state and religion (orthodoxy) in their work with their criticism extending not only to religious and state authorities but also particular Sufis (and Sufism) as seen in collaboration with questionable authorities.

Rumi's famous 'awakening' comes with his meeting the mysterious figure of Shams-i Tabrizi (a wandering gnostic), who was to ignite Rumi's heart to the 'true gnosis,' by implication 'true Sufism,' taking Rumi 'to a far loftier level of Sufi mysticism.'<sup>11</sup> Rumi was at the time the respectable head of his father's (Baha Valad) Sufi school in Konya, a position which he abandoned in pursuit of Shams.

Khayyam's simultaneous adaptation and rejection by later Sufis is indicative of the subtleties that surround the question of Sufi identity and the intrigues that surrounded Sufism as a socio-political force. Similarly, the continuous tensions are carried right through the fourteenth century where Hafiz who was no formal advocate of Sufism (but undoubtedly familiar with the intimate teachings of the

---

<sup>10</sup> Matthijs van den Bos: *Mystic Regimes: Sufism and the State in Iran, from the late Qajar Era to the Islamic Republic*, Leiden, 2002, 51

<sup>11</sup> Jawid Mojaddedi: translator, *Rumi The Masnavi: Book I*, Oxford, 2004, xvii.

## *The Value of Sufi Inheritance*

Sufis) is seen as an agent of 'Irfanic Sufism who openly slanders both Sufis and Jurists alike, and equally suffering criticism in return from both parties.

Such works then, need to be understood as products of a dynamic spiritual event occurring within mystical agents *par excellence*, and in particular those that were inaugurated by the agent's own relational social 'crisis.' This mystical insight then feeds into society as such figures are later recognised and nurtured as 'sub-sacred' components of that particular culture. Sufi, Shiite and, similarly Buddhist manifestation of agents of mystical embodiment, play an important role in the creation of their histories as certain Saints, Imams, and *Bodhis* become objects of remuneration and *foci* of a projecting religious and historical consciousness.

The content material of this literature primarily reverberates the Sufi idea of Union (*tawhid*) among other important teachings and the tumultuous journey for its accomplishment. The texts as a whole make the very serious attempt at conveying a 'freer' form of Sufi mysticism that is released from the boundaries of strict religious codification in its plain pursuit for reaching a wider appreciation of audience with respect to gnosis. The popular themes that colour their verses incorporate the old Persian vestige of poetic descriptors that unveil the feelings of rapture commonly accompanying the experience of Union.<sup>12</sup> Hafiz, Khayyam and Rumi are no doubt celebrated for their embellishment of the Persian imagination and their significant role (amongst many celebrated Persian poets like Fersdausi and Sa'di for example) as its rejuvenators in an extreme age of non-Iranian overlordship.

### **ESOTERIC EXEGESIS AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS IN MYSTICAL POETRY**

In Sufi tradition, the three popular masters are classified into three categories or levels, which are not necessarily hierarchical but more indicative of a certain type, method or way of approaching God. Although each and every one of the

---

<sup>12</sup>For a further discussion on the significance of Sufi themes in Persian poetry see J Nurbakhsh: *Sufi Symbolism: the Nurbakhsh Encyclopedea of Sufi terminology*, translated by Leonard Lewisohn, Volume 1, 2, London, 1984.

three are understood to have been true masters of gnosis, they are yet compared and contrasted with further precision to tease out some of the finer qualities of the nature of gnosis as is found in the three distinct mystical agents.

**Khayyam's** *rubai'iyat* in their brevity are decisive and direct to the point. His turbulent life experience has left its mark on his poetry as in the first instance it appears that Khayyam is the ultimate pessimist confounding his audience with a powerful sense of futility constantly hinting at 'our' pretentious attempt to 'fully' know the mysteries of life. Khayyam deliberately sets out to highlight this theme and to further articulate the spiritual robbery and religious corruption of twelfth century Persia. Stuck in a karmic cycle of ignorance and egoic frenzy, humanity in general becomes subject to the bitter reprisal of Khayyam's tarnished aspiration for an ideal world. Therefore, his quatrains speak out a resentful and defiant tone toward manifestations of formal religiosity and its inevitable hypocrisy. Yet in contrast, Khayyam finds enormous comfort in submission to Fate (*qismat*) as the ultimate form of retribution. Upon closer inspection Khayyam's intentions become clear in his aim to reveal the essential formula of our divine covenant. What is brought to bear in his poetry is a descriptive illustration of forgetfulness of mankind in regards to our responsibilities and toward the truth of our hearts. Khayyam is celebrated for his strong pragmatism and clarity of style and that unforgettable sharp wit.

*Ruba'iyat* or quatrains (literally 'four-liners') is in actual fact comprised of two sets of couplets that make up a *ruba'i*. This poetic form is famous for its simple sophistication, pithiness and flexibility in style. The rhyme scheme is *aaba*, an arrangement that delivers a short but potent burst of melodic expression.

The following two quatrains are translated in verse applying the metrical rules of poetry with the aim to render into English a closer feel of the Persian original in the hope to convey the potency of the Khayyamic punch-line effect of his quatrains.

## *The Value of Sufi Inheritance*

For some time from infancy<sup>13</sup> to educator<sup>14</sup> I proceeded  
For some time in this achievement I exceeded<sup>15</sup>

Heed the concluding remarks of what became  
From dirt we' ere conceived and by the wind we' ere succeeded<sup>16</sup>

In another quatrain he says,

This Ferris wheel within which we are perplexed and turning,  
The lantern of our imagination, from it in likeness<sup>17</sup> learning

The Sun both illuminates and is a beacon for this dark universe  
But still we are phantoms going round forever yearning<sup>18</sup>

**Hafiz** is unmatched as the master panegyric that takes the poetic style of the *ghazal* (sonnet) to its zenith. The *ghazal* is an ancient form of poetry originating in tenth century Persian verse and is mainly composed of rhyming couplets (or distich) usually of eight to twelve lines that adhere to an alphabetised rule where the last word of the second hemistich sets the rhyming tone for the rest of the poem. The meaning of the term 'ghazal' in Farsi and Urdu relates to the last cry of a deer cornered by hunters and is highly symbolic of the content and theme of the *ghazaliat* of Hafiz.

The mystical quality of his poetry is rich with words of sorrow and anguish of the never-ending disappointment played out in the theatrical tale of the lovers; the 'lover' and the 'beloved' of course being the traditional emblems of the 'seeker' and 'God,' used by Hafiz

---

<sup>13</sup> 'Infancy' as opposed to 'youth' (used commonly in other translations), better conveys the Persian word *Koodaki* in portraying the image of innocence and obliviousness, which is desired in the quatrain.

<sup>14</sup> Also, *ostaadi* is not used in the sense of master or mastery, but Khayyam is talking about education and being educated (about the world) – a sense of loosing the innocence and carelessness of infancy.

<sup>15</sup> Here the idea is in boasting or getting excited by an achievement, though the pun being that this is somewhat like an infant receiving a minor reward (to us), which to its eyes is like the keys to the world.

<sup>16</sup> Self-translation in rhyme from Farsi to English. For the original Persian (also including Arabic and Fitzgerald's rendition) see *The Ruba'iyat of Khayyam*, edited by Brigadier-General Dr Hossein-Ali Nouri Esfandiary, Tehran, 1949.

<sup>17</sup> The word *messaal* could translate as either 'example,' or 'likeness.' The alternate usage would allow it to be read as 'from it an example learning.'

<sup>18</sup> Self translation in rhyme from Farsi to English.

## *Buddha of Suburbia*

to convey the tradition of 'gnostic wisdom' masterfully enveloped in the playful discourse of the 'truths of love.'

His poetry is filled with beautiful lamentations of bitter-sweetness that directly convey the lover's desire for union with the Beloved. Hafiz then portrays the 'lover's' attempts to court the 'Beloved' by drawing on Persian folk tales, biblical figures and other such Persian mythologies of star-crossed lovers by example.

Disguised in tragic tones, Hafiz tactfully places his criticism of state and religion wherever he sees injustice and hypocrisy while delivering the subtle appreciation of mystical insight. Where Khayyam belabours the point of agnosticism, Hafiz is more telling in that he more readily engages the various 'ins and outs' of the mystical journey. Hafiz displays his cunningness and wit in that he is well aware of the twists of fate and the delicate game in which one has to partake on the road to gnosis. Hafizian poetry is a rich embellishment of Persian culture and thought, and a literary masterpiece of both its own time and the present. Hafiz, who by profession was a court poet and panegyrist, ensured the place of his work as a literary phenomenon of Iran through his broad appeal to a wider audience. This also allowed the gnostic quality of his work to be better appreciated within the popular trend. Therefore, it is understandable that the *Divan* of Hafiz is today by far the most commonly read and consulted poetic corpus.

Below is an example of Hafizian poetry translated from the Persian and offered here in prose:

In the exchange of our views those uninformed are perplexed  
I am as I have shown it, others must decide the rest

[The] Intellectuals are the center-point of the compass, but!  
Love only knows that within this circle they are lost

The display of His face and cheek is not only seen by me alone  
The sun and moon too circulate the same reflection

Our covenant God sealed through the lips of the sweet-mouthed ones  
We are all [but] servants and they our Lords

Indigent are we but long for wine and music  
Lo, if they do not accept our woollen robes in exchange

## *The Value of Sufi Inheritance*

Why ask the blind night-moth of the sun's light  
When the clear-sighted themselves are admittedly perplexed by its  
mysteries

To talk of love and to complain of Companion is naught but talk of lie  
For such a lover is destined for separation [and kept at a distance]

Unless by favour of Your doing  
Not just anyone can [maintain both] concealment and drunkenness<sup>19</sup>

If, to the dwelling place of the Spirit were the wind to take your scent  
Intellect and life,<sup>20</sup> those jewels of existence [you] would scatter in joyous  
offering

What should occur if the pious were not to comprehend the slyness of  
Hafiz?  
Demons shall [even] take flight from those who literally recite the Sacred.

If the zealous were to truly comprehend the meaning of our thoughts  
No longer would they accept the Sufis robe in assurance for that wine.<sup>21</sup>

To some, Hafiz is no more than a literary master. Yet his poetic genius has robbed from them the gnosiological value of this giant of Iranian *'irfan*. Hafiz so skilfully penetrates the heritage of the great *arefs* in illustrating the journey, passion, joy and suffering of 'love' that stems from the desire to know or to reach the 'Beloved,' and it is in the subtle hints of apparent 'un-satisfaction' and 'un-accomplishment' (of this desire) that the 'truth' is disclosed in his poetry; ultimately stating that there is no separation but from the heart.

**Rumi**, on the other hand, to speak figuratively, allows no individual to spend comfortable time in his presence, as his focus, concentration and determination is sharp, precise and to the point. Rumi himself is often likened to the 'the blade' in Sufi lore, where he draws a distinct line that separates the 'aware' from the 'unaware.' In this regard, the message of his *Mathnawi* has become more a source for the

---

<sup>19</sup> Coupling the terms *mastouri* (concealment) and *masti* (drunkenness) is an expression that defines the delicate task of the 'sufi' who is while drunk with the truths of love, must at the same time maintain this 'state' (*haal*) with keeping the secrets veiled in their purity and uncorrupted condition.

<sup>20</sup> Also 'soul.'

<sup>21</sup> Self-translation from Farsi to English. For original Farsi see *The Diwan of Hafiz*, edited by Mohammad Ghazvini and Dr Ghani, Tehran, 1982.

## *Buddha of Suburbia*

mystically inclined. Nevertheless, the poems of Rumi remain a highly sought after work by Iranians and fellow admirers of his poetic genius and spiritual wisdom.

The *Mathnawi*, known as 'the Koran in Persian,' is a collection of 6 books that contain elaborate tales written in rhyming couplets, whence comes the *Mathnawi's* translation as the 'Rhyming Couplets of Profound Spiritual Meaning.' Rumi who was formally educated in Islamic Law and Theology and the mystical doctrines, becomes in the end the celebrated Sufi master and poet who transcends to the height of mystical experience and is viewed as one who truly attained the station of Unity. Rumi's poetry therefore surpasses that of Khayyam and Hafiz in its more detailed embodiment of mystical experience and engagement with Sufi theosophy. It is therefore, through his various couplets that the tale of human predicament in its search for God is colourfully told:

Wealth has no permanence: it comes in the morning,  
and at night it is scattered to the winds.

Physical beauty too has no importance,  
for a rosy face is made pale by the scratch of a single thorn.

Noble birth also is of small account,  
for many become fools of money and horses.

Many a nobleman's son has disgraced his father by his wicked deeds.  
Don't court a person full of talent either,  
even if he seems exquisite in that respect:  
take warning from the example of Iblis (Devil)

Iblis had knowledge, but since his love was not pure,  
he saw in Adam nothing but a figure of clay.<sup>22</sup>

The poetry of all three Masters possesses a number of layers that are peeled back as the reader journeys further 'inwards' toward the heart of the message. What is on the surface a delightful verse becomes a

---

<sup>22</sup>*The Mathnawi* VI: 255-260. See Camille and Kabir Helminski, 1996. [www.khamush.com/masnawi.html](http://www.khamush.com/masnawi.html). Following this much shorter *mathnawi*, I thought it appropriate to introduce a longer yet indispensable verse, *The Saint is a Mirror*, for its qualitative value. Though in consideration of space this longer tale by Rumi has been, still abbreviated for the sake of the reader and for highlighting the core message of Rumi's gnostic value, been included in Appendix 1.

## *The Value of Sufi Inheritance*

penetrating reflection that aims to reveal a 'mystico-spiritual' theme that is at the same time suggesting inherent politico-religious discrimination. Much of the esoteric exegesis is disguised in the component of Love, where this notion primarily acts as the ultimate allegory describing the true connection of the divine to humanity. It is also simultaneously the ascetic signature of 'justice' 'righteousness' and 'truth' in depicting the force of 'incorruptible good will' towards all things, and highlights both the spiritual and the socio-political motivations of 'the mystic' within his or her geo-social context.

In practice, the notion of 'love' or *ishq* represents the emotional and imaginative as opposed to the logical and rational qualities of the 'intellect' or *aql*. In a normative sense love is understood to be an experience that remains outside the bounds of reason and rationality. Similarly in its mystical sense, 'love' gives weight to the analogy of the force that helplessly draws the initiate toward the Beloved. In effect, **being in love** is what carries the subject through the 'labours of love.' Subsequently, then, the allegorical location of this 'insight' is described to be the heart, seen as the psycho-spiritual faculty in the mystical traditions. The gnostic or the *aref* does not ever come to know or conceive of the Beloved with the rational mind or the faculty of the intellect alone, but this person's 'knowledge,' or gnosis as such, is informed via 'intuitive' means and is therefore related to the mystical faculty of the *heart* as a balancing force between the Intellect and the Spirit.

### **CONCLUSION**

In its popular manifestation the lingering message that comes forth in observing the esoteric phenomena of such great masters as Hafiz, Khayyam and Rumi, is that the discovery and rediscovery of *gnosis* is the greater journey of not only the individual but also of collective humanity. The 'value of Sufi inheritance' is merely an indication of the wealth of 'human knowledge' preserved and nurtured through centuries of oral and literary culture. In a contemporary Western setting, such wisdom is now emanated through the medium of popular film in a particularly strong way, carrying with it recognisable gnostic motifs of Buddhist and Sufi flavour. What is interesting to take into account, however, apart from the entertainment value of these films, is their underlying aim to re-awaken a 'sense' or 'quality' of personal and collective spirituality. The post-Sassanid poetry of

### *Buddha of Suburbia*

Persia has had a continuously intimate relationship with Sufism whereby all its subsequent emerging poets have in some way drawn on the incredible wealth of Persian Sufi tradition in writing their poetic genres. It goes without saying therefore, that Hafiz, Khayyam and Rumi, are such masters in their successful adaptation of the Sufi world into their literary masterpieces that today still remain subjects of marvel. Thus through the timeline of history, a cyclical theme is detected in the continual 'connection' and 'reconnection' of mystical qualities within the socio-cultural sphere. On a final note, the purpose of gnosis (as it ties in with the **practice** of 'Self-knowledge' and 'recognition') has to be considered as an internal attribute that acts as the constitutor of individual and collective spirituality on a 'disconnected' yet relational continuum of mystical heritage.

## APPENDIX 1

### ***The Saint Is A Mirror***

The story of 'Glory be to me! How great is my rank!' the saying of Abu Yazid Bistami. And the criticism of (his) disciples. And the answer to this (which he gave) to them not by way of the tongue's speech but by way of (direct) seeing.

2102 Bayazid, the great dervish, came to (his) disciples (and) said, 'Look! I am God!'

That master of the (mystical) branches of knowledge spoke like a drunkard, (saying), 'There is no divinity except me, so worship me!'

When that ecstatic state was over with, they said to him at dawn, 'You spoke such (words) as these, and it isn't right!'

2105 (Bayazid) said, 'This time, if I am involved (in such talk), strike at me (with your) knives at that (very) moment.'

'(For) God (is) pure and free from (having) a body, but I have a body. (So) if I speak like this (again), (then) killing me is necessary.'

When that (spiritually) freed man made the command, each disciple equipped (himself with) a knife.

(Bayazid) became (spiritually) drunk (once) again from that full (wine) jug, (and) those commands of his went (far) from (his) mind.

...

The flash flood of (mystical) bewilderment seized (his) intellect, (so that) he spoke more forcefully than he had in the beginning.

2125 (He said), 'There is nothing in my robe except God, (so) how much (longer) will you search on the earth and upon the heavens?'

The disciples became completely crazed (and) were thrusting (their) knives into his holy body.

Each one was tirelessly stabbing his spiritual master, like the

## *Buddha of Suburbia*

heretics of Gerdakuh.

Anyone who (tried to) puncture the Master with a knife was, in the opposite manner, tearing open his own body.

(There) was not a single mark on the body of that master of (mystical) sciences, yet those disciples (were) wounded and drowned in a whirlpool of blood.

2130 Any who brought a blow toward the (Master's) throat saw his own throat cut and died groaning.

And the one who struck a blow into the (Master's) chest, his own chest was split open and he became forever dead.

But the one who was aware of that master of intimacy, (and his) heart did not give him (permission) to strike a heavy blow,

(His) half-knowledge bound his hand (and) he won (back his) life, except that he wounded himself.

It became daylight, and (the number of) those disciples was decreased. (Many) wails (of grief) arose from their homes.

2135 Thousands of men and women came before him, saying, 'O you, within whose robe this world and the next are wrapped!'

'If this body of yours were the body of a human, it would have been lost (to you) because of the daggers, like an (ordinary) human body.'

Someone with a self-fought against someone without a self, (but) the one with a self thrust a thorn into his own eye.

O you (who) strike against the selfless ones with (your) sword, be aware! (For) you will strike that (blow) against your own body.

Because the selfless one is annihilated (and) he is safe; he is in (a state of) permanent safety.

2140 (For) his form (has) vanished and he has become a mirror. In that place, (there is) nothing besides the image of another face.

If you spit (at it), you do (that) toward your own face, and if you beat against the mirror, you beat against yourself.

## *The Value of Sufi Inheritance*

And if you see an ugly face (there), you are also that. And if you see (the image of) Jesus or Mary, you are (that).

(The spiritual master) is not this or that; he is simple. He has put your own image in front of you.

When (this) speech reached this place, it shut (its) lips. (And) when the pen reached this place, it shattered against itself.

2145 Close (your) lips. Even though eloquence has given (you) help, don't breathe (a word). And God is the best knower of the right path.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> *Mathnawi IV*: op cit, 2102-2153.