

RUMI AND THE ADVANCEMENT OF MAN AND SOCIETY

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Abstract

This paper picks up on Jalaluddin Rumi as a storyteller about man and the universe in relation to the advancement of man and society. It seeks to reflect on Rumi as a human being, embedded in a history and a geography, and the implications of Rumi's views on today's world. Rumi sees the Universe as organic, intelligent and sacred. Man is that microcosm. It is important not only to intellectually reflect and spiritually imbue those values in our individual self, but also our collective self, community, nation and civilization. We almost always tend to detach the Rumi corpus from our daily self. This paper argues that the thoughts of Rumi can be a significant source for policy and planning on what we call development. Indeed, Rumi 'devolutionist' philosophy brings profound lessons for the construction and advancement of the nation and the nation states in today's world.

Key words: Storyteller, Microcosm, Dichotomy, Consciousness, Development

1. Rumi's Work on Reality, Meaning and Form

Konya in the region of Anatolia, Turkey, holds the shrine of Muhammad. His title is Jalal-al-Din. The world knows him as Rumi. The epithets *Mevlana* (or *Mowlana*), as he is known in Turkey, or *Mevlevi* (in the Indo-Iranian world), is commonly

understood to mean ‘our master’ The name Rumi denotes that he came from Anatolian Rome (Rum). The West calls him Rumi. In the Malay world, and in Malaysia, the consciousness of the master comes as Jalaluddin Rumi. The essence of Rumi is his ‘devolutionist’ worldview.

Rumi himself was a master storyteller and the master certainly has many facets. But there is another story that is common to us. It is the story of the blind men and the elephant. I first encountered the problem of generalizing ‘the whole beast’ from a book published in 1973 with the title *The Rest of the Elephant: Perspectives on the Mass Media*. (Stevens & Porter 1973) ¹ In the parable, Rumi tells us of the impossibility of seeing an elephant in the dark.

Some Hindus put an elephant on show in an unlit room. Many people came to see it, but because it was impossible to see the elephant in the dark, they felt it with the palms of their hands. One put his hand on the elephant’s trunk, and exclaimed, ‘This creature is like a drainpipe.’

Another put her hand on its ear, saying, ‘it’s shaped like a fan.’

A third who felt its leg, commented, ‘It’s like a pillar.’

A fourth placed his hand on its back, and said, ‘Really, this elephant is shaped like a throne.’

In like manner, everyone described the elephant from the part he had touched, and their descriptions differed depending on their particular standpoint, with one describing it as being crooked like an ‘s,’ another straight like an ‘I’. if they had each held a candle, their descriptions would not have differed. Knowledge gained through our senses is comparable to knowledge obtained with the palm of a hand: a palm cannot extend over the whole elephant (*Mathnawi* III: 1259-71)

Rumi also makes many allusions to the ‘Ocean’ using it as a metaphor for Reality. He notes on the limitations of human knowledge. Our view of Rumi is also limited. It is similar to the parable of the elephant. Our view of Rumi will be governed by

whichever aspect of him we have touched, or whichever aspect has touched upon us (Baldock, 2006: 8). Rumi can be many things to many of us – a poet, a mystic, a saint, a sage, a philosopher, a storyteller, a teacher. What ever we think of Rumi, chances are that we see him through the ‘eye of the foam’ rather than ‘the eye of the Ocean.’ Chittick (1983) quintessentially put it as form and meaning. He draws from the wealth of Rumi’s work in explicating what is and what seems to be. The world is a dream, a prison, a trap, foam thrown up from the ocean, dust kicked up by a passing horse, but it is not what it appears to be:

If everything that appears to us were just as it appears, the Prophet, who was endowed with such penetrating vision, both illuminated and illuminating, would never have cried out, ‘Oh Lord, show us things as they are!’ (Fihi Ma Fihi 5/18)

Rumi draws a fundamental distinction between ‘form’ (*surat*) and ‘meaning’ (*ma’na*). Form is a thing’s outward appearance, meaning its inward and unseen reality.

In face of meaning, what is form? Very contemptible. The meaning of the heavens keeps them in place...
The meaning of the wind makes it wander like a millwheel, captive to the water of the stream (*Mathnawi* I 3330, 33).

Know that the outward form passes away, but the World of Meaning remains forever (*Mathnawi* II 1020)

Pass beyond form, escape from names! Flee titles and names toward Meaning! (*Mathnawi* IV 1285).

The dichotomy between meaning and form is a mainstay of Rumi’s teachings. Rumi refers to it in many different contexts and through a vast variety of images and symbols. According to Chittick, Rumi often discusses the meaning-form dichotomy in terms drawn from philosophical usage, even more often in the images and symbols of poetry. A few of the terms he pairs together most commonly are secondary causes (*asbab*), and First Caused (*musabbib*), outward

(zahir) and inward (batin), dust and wind, form and ocean, picture and painter, shadow and light. Chittick lists down some of these as follows:

People look at secondary causes and think that they are the origin of everything that happens. But it has been revealed to the saints that secondary causes are no more than a veil (Fihi Ma Fihi 68/80)

These secondary causes are veils upon the eyes, for not every eye is worthy of seeing His craftsmanship.

One must have an eye which cuts through secondary causes and tears aside all veils,

To the end that it may see the First Cause in No-place and know that exertion, earnings, and shops are nonsense.

Every good and evil arrives from the First Cause. Oh father, secondary causes and means are naught

But a phantom materialized upon the highway, so that the period of heedlessness may endure sometime longer (*Mathnawi V* 1551-55).

2. Rumi's Concept of Development

In the epigram in Merican (2005) Rumi was cited as saying "Every one who is left far from source wishes back the time when he was united with it" This is indicative of Rumi's devolutionist thinking. We live and in turn create both the tangible and the intangible environments. We create words and structures. We allow our epistemological and cultural space to be invaded. Subconsciously we extend that knowledge in our lives. We trust it.

Rumi calls for a distrust of the knowledge that have come to us, and that we have extended to our environments which in turn becomes the environment itself. It is like building skyscrapers until it surrounds and overwhelms us, blocking the light from the sun. We are cloistered in the shadows. We are obliterated from our source.

Knowledge comes from God and to Him it returns. To reflect on the ever existing process of returning, in extending Rumi's philosophy, we examine the etymology of the term. We begin our definition by asking "If to *velope*, as explained in *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary: Complete Text Reproduced Micrographically* (1981, 897) is "to wrap up" as in a garment or outer covering, therefore, to *de-velope* (OED, 651) is to unwrap, to open, to expose what is wrapped inside. And something is usually wrapped up not for hiding but for care, for protection.

Thus, this process of *development*, this process of *de-wrapping* is either to expose the seed within the clime and season of growth, or to expose the pearl, the diamond, the beauty within, to light to let shine, sparkle, and dazzle. Another definition explains *develop* as "to unfold, unroll (anything folded or rolled up); to unfurl (a banner) to open out of its un folding cover." The same dictionary explains *development* as such:

1. A gradual unfolding, a bringing into fuller view.
2. Evolution or bringing out from a latent or elementary condition.
3. The growth and unfolding of what is in the germ.
4. Gradual advancement through progressive stages, growth from within.
5. A developed or well-grown condition; a state in which anything is in vigorous life or action.
6. The development result of or product; a developed form of some earlier and more rudimentary organism, structure, or system.

The analogy for the process of 'development' is that of a tiny seed, when exposed to the proper clime and condition, will grow, and grow in peace and security into a huge, healthy and magnificent tree, grateful and glorious in the light of the sun. Since man is the apex of God's creation, there is in man the seed, valuable beyond measure, carefully and lovingly wrapped – 'veloped' – and always eager and ever-ready, awaiting the *de-wrapping* process, awaiting 'de-velopment.'

This spiritual dimension is embedded in the spiritual seed. The ‘seed’ as being mysterious and ‘unknown.’ ‘To know’ is to understand the Laws intrinsic, embedded in the very nature of the thing. And as such inherent is our *submission to God* - to devolve oneself to the center.

The ultimate aim of development in this context is the devolution of man to his primordial state of being.

We are nothing but thought but our destiny is dependent on our consciousness. Devolution brings us toward remembrance from forgetfulness.

3. Rumi’s Work on Social and Human Sciences

What is important in Rumi are human limitations and the limits to thought and expression. On the limitations of human speech, Rumi advised:

Words are like seeing something moving in the distance: you run toward it to see what it is that is moving, not so that you can see the thing through its movement. Inwardly, human speech is the same. It stimulates you into searching for the meaning, even though you cannot see it in reality (Fihi Mafihi).

Subsequently, his light in our hearts calls us to
Be like flowing water in generosity and aid
Be like the sun in compassion and mercy
Be like the night in covering over the faults of others
Be like the dead in anger and nervous irritation
Be like the earth in modesty and humility
Be like the sea in tolerance
Either be seen as you are or be as you are seen
(*Majalis-i-Sab’a*).

Surely Rumi has a place in the social and human sciences. A humanities from an Islamic perspective may be embedded in Rumi. A social science from a non-Occidental context may find Rumi as a fundamental source for the study of human behavior. We

suggest that Rumi and his works be taught in our education system through courses on philosophy, logic, sociology and journalism. The study of literature in Malaysian universities would benefit, going through a process of its redefinition. A course on the philosophy and thoughts of Rumi may well be introduced. Rumi would have to be structured in the humanities and the social science university curriculum in Malaysia. The *ma'na* of our man's story on his advancement must return to its *fitrah*.

Footnote

¹ The author was studying journalism in the later 1970s through the early 1980s. Then it was not known to the author that the rest of the elephant parable originates from the *Mathnawi* III (1259-71). The author cited this in his earlier article "Rumi and the Rest of the Elephant Parable," *New Sunday Times/Learning Curve*, August 28, 2011, p.H5.

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