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Spiritual Concept of 'Death before Death' and the Story of 'The Three Fishes' in Rumi's Mathnawi Manawi

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ABSTRACT

In literature of mysticism, 'death before death' or 'voluntary death' is discussed as the fundamental principle on divine path of Love. The aim of this research paper is to study and analyse this fundamental concept of mysticism through Sufi philosophy of Rumi. Rumi has used many allegories in his magnum opus *Mathnawi Manawi* in order to illustrate and simplify the Sufi teachings. One of such allegory is the story of 'The Three Fishes'. This research paper focuses upon the concept of 'death before death' with reference to the same story.

Keywords: Death before death, voluntary death, 'Fana-fi-Llah', Rumi, The Second Fish, Mathnawi Manawi.



1. Introduction:

Jalaluddin Rumi, the famous Persian Sufi poet was born on 30th September 1207 in a village called Vakhsh in Greater Balkh province (present-day Tajikistan). His father Bahauddin Valad was a theologian, jurist and a mystic. Due to political reasons, the family of Rumi had to leave Balkh. They visited different cities of Greater Khurasan and Anatolia meeting various mystics, poets and writers of the time and finally settled in Konya. The instances of meeting people from different religions and beliefs provided a chance to shape the mystical philosophy that made Rumi a universal figure. Rumi spent remaining years of his life in Konya till his demise in the year of 1273.

Following footsteps of his father, Jalaluddin Rumi also became a theologian and jurist having a number of followers. However, his life underwent a drastic change after his meeting with Shams Tabriz who later became his spiritual mentor. The list of notable works by Rumi includes his *Mathnawi Manawi*, an extended poem composed in about 25000 couplets, *Diwan-e-Shams Tabriz* also known as *Diwan-e-Kebir* and *Fihi Ma Fihi*. Rumi has used a number of fables, parables and anecdotes in *Mathnawi Manawi* in order to teach lessons of Sufi philosophy allegorically. These tales are not merely bed time Stories to amuse the readers but carry deep insight in to his philosophy. The concept of ‘death before death’ on ‘voluntary death’ has been allegorised in many stories of *Mathnawi Manawi*. ‘The Three Fish’, is one such story from Book II.



2. Discussion and Findings:

The divine path or path of love has two fundamental stations: separation which Sufis call 'firaq' and union, known as 'visal' in Sufi terminology. Separation from divine love results into self existence and annihilation of self leads to union with God. 'Salik', the traveller on this divine path needs to undergo the process of purifying the soul through self annihilation. This process is often mentioned as 'death before death' by many Sufi writers. For mentioning this voluntary death, sufi writers use a term 'fana fi Llah' which means annihilation in "God or lost in contemplation of God" (Fana fi Llah n.d.). The concept of this voluntary death is commonly found in Sufi writings however it is not limited to a single religion or faith. This concept has been discussed by many writers and mystics across the borders of beliefs and religion. Eckhart Tolle, a German born Canadian writer discusses at length the 'death before death' in his master piece *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*. The need to leave false created self and the ego is very much required practice for the spiritual journey. In order to reach at a juncture where the life seems 'beyond the myriad form of life', one needs to undergo the cycle of birth and death. Tolle (1997) states: "The secret of life is to "die before you die- and find that there is no death."

Dayer (2018) considers 'death before death' as the seventh rivulet of the seventh river on the spiritual journey of a 'salik'. Dayer quotes a couplet of Sanai of Ghazna to introduce this rivulet.

"If you yearn for eternal life, then o friend, die before you die, for Idris¹ attained paradise before us by dying in this manner." (Dayer, 2018, pp. 111)



Rumi has also mentioned the importance of the voluntary death in all his major works. In fact death is the most common image used by Rumi while commenting about annihilation from the self (Chittick, 1983). He has mentioned anecdotes from the lives of saints and prophets to explain the importance of voluntary death. In *Mathnawi Manawi*, Rumi has made use of many fables and parables to allegorise the same. Rumi states, “When you have died to human attributes, the Ocean of Mysteries will bring you up to a place of elevation.” (Rumi, 1273-2004 pp.155)

2.1. Story of ‘The Three Fishes’:

This interesting story from Book III of *Mathnawi Manawi* is about three fishes and fishermen. In the story itself, Rumi states that the source of the story is *Panchtantra*. Rumi states that the readers might have read this story in *Kalila va Dimna*, the Arabic translation of *Panchtantra*. However Rumi presents ‘the spiritual kernel’ of the story. The three fishes used to live in a lake which was adjoined by a flowing stream. This lake was home for all the three fishes. Once they were spotted by fishermen who passed by the lake and decided to hunt them. They did not carry the net so they went home in order to get the net. The fishes noticed this and became aware. The first fish which is introduced as ‘intellect one’ decided to take difficult journey through the adjoining stream. The remaining two fishes could not bear the idea to depart from their native lake and decided to stay there in any case. Finally, the fishermen approached the lake with the net. The first fish had already taken her journey through the stream. The second fish whom Rumi calls 'half wise' saw the fishermen approaching the lake and felt sorry for her decision. However, she decided to pretend like a dead fish



so that she could not be caught by the fishermen. She pretended to be dead floating like carrion on the surface of the lake. The fishermen did not catch her as they believed her to be dead. The third fish which is called 'foolish' continued to swim widely and finally caught by the fishermen.

From the perspective of the voluntary death or 'death before death', the second fish plays a very important role. She chose to die before actual death in order to get permanent life. The second fish, like the parrot, in the allegory of the 'The Merchant and the Parrot', suggests the importance of self death before the actual death. Her decision to choose the death can be compared with the voluntary death of 'salik' who annihilates the self in order to get united with divine Love. In order to attain unification with God, the soul needs to undergo purification. This purification comes with annihilation from the self. This process is called 'fana' in the Sufi terminology Dying to self, leads to the stage that brings the soul on the higher level on divine path which is quite close to the divine Love. In the present story, the character of second fish carries the symbolic message of self-annihilation. It was her false created self that didn't allow her to leave the lake. But when she saw the fishermen approaching with the net, she realized her mistake. She annihilates from the self through pretending like carrion on the surface of the water.

2.2. 'Death Before Death' is the Fundamental Principle of Mysticism:

As mentioned earlier, voluntary death is a fundamental principle in not only Sufism but also in mysticism across the faiths. Like Christian in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, traveller on divine path has no other way but to pass from 'the Valley of Death' because it is a fundamental principle. Annihilation from the



self and ego is necessary practice to be performed in order to purify the soul. Unless 'salik' annihilates from the false created self, he does not be worthy for the divine Love.

The second fish stuck to her decision not to leave the lake which was her native. However when she saw the fishermen approaching with the net, she underwent the voluntary death. This was not the actual death but 'death before death' which was necessary to save herself from the fishermen. Thus through the character of the second fish, Rumi allegorises 'death before death' as the fundamental principle of mysticism. Rumi states in Book XI of *Mathnawi Manawi*:

"You have suffered much agony, but you are still in veil, because dying to self was the fundamental principle, and you have not fulfilled it." (Rumi, 1273-2004 pp. 298)

2.3. 'Death Before Death' is to be Safe:

When sufferings and agony of life trap 'salik', it is 'the death before death' that provides the safe abode. Rumi comments:

"To die before death is to be safe, O young man: this was the command of Mustafa to us.

He said "Die, all of you, before death comes; otherwise you will die with the certainty of sufferings greatly afterwards." (Rumi, 1273-2004 pp. 397)

While quoting the words of Prophet Muhammad, Rumi asserts upon the importance of choosing death before actual death. It is advisable to follow this



prophetic command to die before death as it is a savior from the sufferings. The second fish seems to be the follower of this message from Rumi. She chose voluntary death in order to save herself from the net of the fishermen. She became safe by choosing to die before the death.

In order to gain divine Love, the soul needs to annihilate itself from false created self, and the ego. The self created self and ego invite suffering and unrest that make the life troublesomse. In this manner, 'the death before death' is the process of getting rid from this false created self and ego. In this manner it makes 'salik' safe from all these troubles.

2.4. Death before Death Unveils the Reality:

Rumi states,

“O you who possess sincerity, if you want that Reality unveiled, chose death and tear off the veil,

Not such a death that you will go in to a grave, but a death consisting of spiritual transformation, so that you will go into a Light.” (Rumi, 1273-2004 pp. 299)

There is a veil between the divine Love and 'salik' and the voluntary death is the only way to unveil it. As Rumi himself defines here, 'death before death' is not the actual death that takes the person into the grave but it is a spiritual transformation. When the soul is trapped by the false created self and ego, it is not possible to see the divine Love. However annihilation from the self unveils this curtain making the divine truth visible for 'salik'. In this manner in 'rahe



suluk', the divine path, annihilation from the self is required to perceive the eternal Truth. The second fish did not choose the option to leave the lake and take up the difficult journey like the first fish as she was unaware about the actual truth. However her decision to choose voluntary death opens the window to visualize this truth.

2.5. Death Before Death is a Gate Way to Eternal Life:

Like Christian in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, 'salik' needs to undergo the voluntary death. Christian and Hopeful had no other way but to pass through 'The Valley of Death' before the gates of Celestial City. No one can enter this city without entering the Valley of Death. 'Death before death' is similar to 'the Valley of Death'. When one accepts the voluntary death, he proceeds towards eternal life. The second fish had no other way to escape when the fishermen arrived with the net. She chose to die in eyes of fishermen so that she could get life after the pretending death. Her decision to pretend like a carrion floating on the surface of the water ultimately saved herself from the fishermen. This is how she managed to escape from the fishermen.

Self annihilation purifies the soul from false created self and ego. This process of annihilation enables the soul to be worthy for the divine Love. The transformation of soul after annihilation from self bridges the gap between the soul and the divine Love. The process of annihilation gives eternal life to the soul through establishing unification with the divine Love. Rumi states: "He becomes wholly dead in (devotion to) the man of intelligence, that he may ascend from his own low place to the (lofty) roof." (Rumi, 1273-2004 pp. 393)



2.6. Death before Death is Libration from Agony:

Until 'salik' chooses voluntary death, he remains subjected to agony and sufferings. Rumi opines that these sufferings and agony do not last until one chooses 'death before death'. The reason for these sufferings is the ignorance from the voluntary death. The false created self and ego invites a number of sufferings and agony. The only way to get rid of these sufferings is to annihilate the self. Unless 'salik' undergoes this process of purification, he continued to suffer from this agony. If he chooses 'death before death', it liberates him from these sufferings and agony. Rumi states:

“Your agony is not finished until you die: you cannot reach the roof without completing the ladder.”. (Rumi, 1273-2004 pp. 299)

Here roof symbolizes the divine Love and ladder is the process of annihilating the self. Unless one takes the journey of annihilating self, he cannot reach the roof. Until he uses the ladder he keeps on suffering by agony of life.

The second fish lamented over not choosing the way to escape like the first fish. The appearance of fishermen with net brings agony for the second fish. She was in terror of getting trapped in the net of the fishermen. As soon as she chose voluntary death, she got liberation from the agony of her thought. However the agony prolonged for the third fish that did not choose the voluntary death. She kept on swimming and thus caught by the fishermen. Rumi States, “Since you have not did, your agony has been prolonged: be extinguished in the dawn, O candle of Tiraz!” (Rumi, 1273-2004 pp. 299)



3. Conclusion:

As it is a fundamental principle of mysticism, 'to die before death' is very much necessary for unification with divine Love. With the story of 'The Three Fishes', Rumi has beautifully allegorized this fundamental concept of mysticism. The character of the second fish appears as the spoke person of this fundamental principle of mysticism. All the aspects pertaining to the concept of 'death before death' have been symbolically presented in the discussed story. Rumi emphasizes upon the practice of purifying the self created self and ego with the help of this beautiful parable.



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