

Channelizing the Therapeutic Powers of Sufi Poetry in the Modern World

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Abstract: In the post-9/11 scenario, modern world appears to be rife with wars, suspicion, threats, mistrust, insecurity, arson and inflation. What seems to loom large is the global fear of a third world war. The world searches for channels which can ensure lasting peace and minimize violence in the world. In order to achieve harmony and peace in the world, in addition to other things, promoting literature that preaches universal love may help. We need to channelize therapeutic words from literature that can purge our mind-sets of jingoistic, chauvinistic and xenophobic tendencies and ethno-linguistic conflicts. The therapeutic power of words is channelized in Psychotherapy, bibliotherapy and poetry therapy. Bibliotherapy and poetry therapy have been applied in various rehabilitation centers and hospitals to cure people of their memories of their traumatic experiences. News reports reveal that the poetry of Rumi has risen from the Mediterranean region and entered American culture. Generalizing from such developments, experiments, reports and observations, the paper explores the possibility of large scale, mass poetry therapy involving multicultural and multilingual people of the global village. It tries to figure out poetry that can bridge gaps in the global community. It looks at the capacity and suitability of the classical Muslim Sufi poetry to meet these needs and challenges of the present age of information. Being an embodiment of universal love, peace and humanitarianism, if promoted effectively on media, it may help in minimizing war and violence in the world.

Key words : Sufism, Muslim Sufi poetry, Rumi, Sustainable Peace, Modern Spiritual hunger

Introduction

Words are said to have healing powers. An everyday example of how words can cure is 'apology'. A closer study of 'apology' can tell us how words heal human beings. Lazare (2005) explains that its healing power lies in the fact that 'it restores the damage that was done' (p. 242). By just saying one word 'sorry', a man can restore the psychological damage and injuries done to others. As Engel (2001) observes that apology has 'the ability to disarm the anger of others, to prevent further misunderstandings, and to bridge distances between people (p.12). This healing power of apology tells us that words can heal people not only in miracles but also in everyday life. Psychotherapists channelize this power of words in their 'talk therapy'. According to Collier's Encyclopedia (1994), psychotherapy 'relies primarily on talk between a trained therapist and a person seeking help' (p. 477-78). With effective use of words, a psychotherapist tries to help people solve their psychological problems. According to The New Encyclopedia Britannica (2003), in psychotherapy 'the healing influence is exerted primarily by words and actions' (p. 768). Psychotherapy employs a number of techniques to heal sick people with words. Poetry therapy is one of the techniques employed by psychotherapy.

Poetry Therapy

Poetry has its own power. It can influence our thoughts and feelings. It can create feelings of love, forgiveness, sacrifice, revenge and the like. A lot of research has been conducted on poetry therapy. According to Schiraldi (2000), 'poetry therapy uses the written or spoken media in the healing and growth process' (p. 259). Poetry therapy seems to involve both reading and writing of poetry. 'The function of poetry, like dreams, is to enhance mental health (Prescott, as cited in McCulliss, 2011, p. 93). Those who cannot write poetry may derive hope by reading poems related to their sorrow and grief. This is what Soranus realized as a physician. According to McCulliss (2011), he was the 'the first poetry therapist on record' (p. 94). He further explains that this Roman physician would prescribe the reading of tragedies and comedies for his patients. This is what bibliotherapy is used for. Bibliotherapy has been applied on soldiers during the world wars. It is natural for us to identify ourselves with the characters. Reading tragedies may alleviate our own pain. This is why the Roman physician prescribed tragedies and comedies for patients. The Romantic poets saw an analogy between a physician and a poet. Jackson (2008) observes:

The Romantics drew analogy between a physician's work and that of a poet. When Romantic writers wanted to describe the poet's role and function within society, they often compared their work to that of the physician. Keats's description of the poet as 'a humanist, physician to all men' draws memorably to this trope (p. 133).

Thus, Keats' description of the poet as a 'physician to all men' speaks of the healing power of poetry. There are news reports that this concept of poetry as healer is being translated into practice in the UK.

News reports about Poetry Therapy

In using poems for therapy, a sort of positive 'escapism' or distraction may offer the patients a few moments of respite from pain, worries and stress. This is what Dr Elaine Duncan observes that poetry 'may help to ward off distressing thoughts' (Does poetry have the power to heal? March 31, 2005). As sleep refreshes us by taking us away from our worries for a few hours, poetry also does a similar function, as explained in the paragraphs above. This positive use of escapism is what Mr Lee is trying to introduce in the hospitals of UK, according to the report. He produces quarterly poetry pamphlets which reach 'more than 3,000 GPs' waiting rooms'. These pamphlets include poems which show brighter aspects of life such as 'sewing, harvest, home, arrival'. Dr Gillian Rice observes that anecdotal evidence from patients who have tried it suggests that poetry can be an up-lifting agent (GP backs poems-for-health therapy. May 17, 2005). Dr Robin Philipp conducted a study on '196 people with psychological problems'. He asked people from the general public if reading and writing poetry helped them in mental health problems. The replies were 'full of testimonies about their personal lives and experiences and the way they had found poetry very beneficial'. He 'was taken aback by that'. He found that:

'Three-quarters of patients found writing poems was an emotional release. Two thirds found reading or listening to poetry helped them be able to relax and feel calm. A further 7% said they were able to wean themselves off anti-depressants or tranquillizers using poetry' (Poems could cut NHS drugs bill, October 10, 2002).

Thus, effective use of poetry therapy can save people not only from their worries but also from tranquilizing drugs. Poetry can do well in helping patients get well in the GP's waiting room. Now let us look beyond GP's waiting room. Can poetry therapy help us outside GP's waiting rooms?

Ours is a world torn by wars and conflicts with bleak future looming large on modern man. Afghanistan, Pakistan, Columbia, Mexico, Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Somalia and many other regions of the world are afflicted with wars and conflicts. Global Security records that 'the new millennium began with much of the world consumed in armed conflict'. The organization further reports that in modern conflicts 'most victims are civilians, a feature that distinguishes modern conflicts'. This chaos and corruption of the modern world was hinted at by the intelligentsia and men of letters of modern world long before the 9/11 took place.

The Waste Land by Eliot was published in 1922. It depicts the post-war crisis of the western culture. Its theme is the barrenness of the modern world. Consequently, we see in the poem images of the dead or dying vegetation, deserted lands and rats. The oft-repeated line in the poem, 'HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME' has significant meanings to convey. At

literal level, it is an 'expression used by bartenders in Britain to announce closing of time' (Eliot 2011, p. 69). But at a figurative level it seems to signal warning about certain approaching mass spiritual death. Sir Dr Muhammad Iqbal, the twentieth century German poet Hans Meinke and Robert Bly made references to the spiritual barrenness of the modern world and stressed that the world needed new paradigms of hope. 9/11 appears to have changed the political landscape of the world. The repercussions of 'war on Terror' may continue to haunt Asia and the world for a long time. Thousands of innocent people lost their lives in the wake of the Arab Spring revolution in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria. The Occupy Wall Street movement challenged the socio-economic inequality in the capitalistic countries. These scattered protests and armed conflicts show the world is in search of new paradigms of hope. In this background, peace is the collective dream of humanity that is still a dream.

How to Achieve Sustainable Peace in the World

Armed conflicts seem to eat away the resources of the earth. But the question is, 'How can we bring peace in the world?' Des (2004) is of the view that 'people are the key to achieving world peace, not governments' (p. 15). He explains that 'governments are the places where the rich and powerful gather to expand their power bases' (p. 17). He argues that people should develop peace-friendly consciousness. Ayazi (2010) further explains this point by stressing that 'the attainment of inner peace, therefore, is required if we want to achieve outer peace –or world peace' (p.26). This is what Sufism emphasizes. Muhaiyaddeen (2004), a well-known Sufi master points out that 'man says he wants to bring peace to others, but in order to do that he must find it within his life. How can anyone who has not found peace within himself hope to bring peace to others?' (p. 8). He further explains that in order to bring peace in the world man must stop thinking, 'My family! My wife! My children! I must rule the world! I must advance my position in life! When a man has all these selfish ideas, how can he possibly create peace for others?' (p. 8). Thus, in the light of these observations, an inner change is required if we want to bring peace and harmony in the world. Muhaiyaddeen is not the only Muslim Sufi that has talked in these terms about peace. Peace, brotherhood and universal love are the recurrent themes in Sufi poetry. On account of these and other teachings, Meinke saw in Rumi 'the only hope for the dark times we are living in'. According to Dr Iqbal, the world of today needs a Rumi to create an attitude of hope and to kindle the fire of enthusiasm for life' (as cited in Iqbal 2006). In the modern times the American poet Coleman Barks and many other men of letters have recommended Rumi for modern man. Rogers. (2006) explains Rumi's poetry depict 'the eternal principles of right living, right action and right thinking'. He further explains that the questions discussed by Rumi 'are dilemmas phrased in spiritual terms that are with us always' (Intro) . When we see the popularity of Rumi among the men of letters of the West, a number of questions cross our minds. For instance, 'Can Rumi save us? ', is a question put forward by Curiel (April 1, 2007). In the present study, we try to find answer to this question.

Curiel (April 1, 2007) himself explains that that the 'life and words of the popular 13th-century Persian poet have special meaning for a 21st-century world torn by war, genocide and hatred'. Rumi's 800th anniversary was celebrated in 2007 and on this occasion UNESCO declared him an advocate of tolerance and love and that 'his work and thought remain universally relevant today' (UNESCO 2006, p. 7-8). Let us see the relevance of his thought with modern times.

Discovering Rumi in Modern Times

Maulana Jalal-ud-Din Balkhi Rumi (1207-1273) or Rumi wrote odes and lyrics in his *Mathnavi* and the *Divan*. As mentioned above that in his poems he advocates tolerance and love. His concept of love is too large to be confined to regional and mental boundaries. Rumi does not seem to own his regional identities :

ندتن باشد نه جان باشد که من از جان جانا نم

مکانم لا مکان باشد نشانه من نشان باشد

'My place is the placeless; my trace is the traceless,

It is neither body nor soul for I belong to the soul of the Beloved' (Iqbal 1978, p. 140).

So the only identity which Rumi owns is his Beloved. His Beloved seems to define all that belongs to Rumi. This divine love taught Rumi the sublimity of human existence. He cannot idolize his regional identities. His poetry appears to connote that man is not born to while away his life for these parochial variations. His love experience seems to have helped him transcend all these diversities. He believes that love is a powerful force which can transform our mundane existence:

عشق دریا بسیت قعرش تا پدید
عشق ساید کوه را مانند دیگ
عشق لرزاند زمین را از گزاف

در گنج عشق در گفتم و شنید
عشق جوشد بحر را مانند دیگ
عشق بشکافت فلک را صد شکاف

'Love is not contained in speech and learning
Love is an ocean whereof the depth is invisible
Love makes the sea boil like kettle;
Love crumbles the mountain like sand.
Love cleaves the sky with a hundred clefts;
Love unconsciously makes the earth to tremble' (Iqbal 1978, p. 245).

Rumi was out there to familiarize people with this force of love. He seems to believe that love is a world apart. He welcomes all to this world of love. In his oft-quoted verses, he says:

'Come, come, whoever you are,
Wanderer, worshipper, seeker of meaning.
Our fellowship is not of despair,
Even though you have broken your vows a hundred times,
Come, come, whoever you are' (as cited in Braybrooke, 2009, p.324).

These above-cited lines seem to show mother-like love of Sufis for humans. You don't need any qualification to embrace Sufism. What you need is a heart. Sufis work on the purification human hearts. When a human heart is purified, he never loses sight of the omnipresence of his Beloved:

عاشقان را ملت و مذہب خداست
ملت عشق از همه دینها جداست

'The religion of love is apart from all religions:
for lovers religion and creed is –God' (Iqbal 1978, p. 217).

Like other Sufis, Rumi's Beloved is God. When all people go to sleep, he is alone with his Beloved:

و من بر خالقم بر کار امشب
بجز الله که خلقتاں جمله خستند

'Thank God! People are fast asleep
And I am busy tonight with my Creator' (Iqbal 1978, p. 167).

In these above-mentioned lines, he seems to invite people of the world to love their Creator. In order get knowledge about the existence of God or Creator, we must get knowledge that reveals the secrets of the universe:

زان پیش که از تو جان بر آید بطلب
علمی که ترا گره گشاید بطلب

'Seek knowledge which unravels mysteries
Before your life comes to a close' (Iqbal 1978, p. 170).

Sufis argue that it is through this type of knowledge that they are able to find God. But this knowledge does not seem to lie in libraries. In order to get this type of knowledge, Sufis explain, we need to befriend with a friend of God. We have to be in the company of people who have this special knowledge. People with this kind of special knowledge are called friends of God. Rumi's concept of *mard e khuda* (friend of God or man of God) is important when we discuss Rumi's philosophy. According to Rumi, it is through friends of God that people get access to a world of heavenly blessings:

مرد خدا گنج بود در خراب
مرد خدا شاه بود زیر دلق

'Man of God is a king beneath Dervish cloak
Man of God is a treasure in a ruin' (Iqbal 1978, p.290).

Rumi's friend of God is a person with special insights and powers. These spiritual powers make him a real king. He is a king which wins the hearts of people. He is not an ordinary person though he may wear ordinary clothes. He is a highly knowledgeable person. He gets knowledge through truth and not through books.

مرد خدا نیست فقیه از کتاب

مرد خدا عالم از حق بود

'Man of God is made wise by the truth

Man of God does not become learned through books' (Iqbal 1978, p. 290).

Actually, Rumi himself became Rumi when he developed association with a friend of God (Shams Tabrez). Rumi recommends that we should try to find friends of God and befriend with them. In fact, all the great names of Sufism had achieved transformation through friends of God. In Rumi's scheme of things, following a friend of God is more important than philosophical pursuits. According to Rumi, we should follow the footmarks of a friend of God:

جز دل اسپید همچون برف نیست

دفترے صوفے سواد و حرف نیست

زا صوفے چیت آثار قدم

زا دواشمند آثار قلم

'The Sufis book is not composed of ink and letters:

The scholar's provision (consists of) pen marks

What is the Sufis provision? Footmarks' (Iqbal 1978, p. 214).

Following the footmarks of a friend of God is important in achieving the right Sufi wisdom and consciousness. Rumi himself followed the footprints of a great Sufi, Shams Tabrez. Shams Tabrez taught Rumi esoteric knowledge that did not exist in library books. This knowledge freed Rumi from the earthly shackles. These shackles thwart our spiritual growth. This freedom from regional and cultural identifies have made Rumi a universal poet.

Today, Rumi is not only popular in the world of Persian literature but also in English world. Lewis (2003) refers to reports of 'Boston Globe' and New York Times' and observes that Rumi has entered American popular culture. His poems form a part of 'unchurched' spiritual anthologies, morning and evening commutes, spiritual aerobics classes and self-help and personal improvement material as Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (Intro). People develop close association with those writers and poets who speak of their problems. Rumi is such a poet for some Americans. Hanut (2000) explains that with his universal outlook, Rumi has become 'for many Americans, their favorite spiritual friend' (p. 15). Rumi's popularity appears to have increased in the US since 9/11. Ede (2010) points out that 'Rumi's popularity should soar in a post-9-11 world says more. He was born in Afghanistan. . . and his poems are almost exclusively focused on human relationship with God. On the face of it, this should make him almost unseparable, and yes, if anything, his poetry became more popular after the destruction of the Twin Towers (p. 172-73). An instance of how Rumi can influence American mind is the American poet Coleman Barks. In an interview, describing his first experiences of reading Rumi, he remembers that 'the minute I started I felt like I was being freed; I felt the presence of his joy and freedom'. Now, Barks is a well-known interpreter of Rumi. His book on Rumi *the Essential Rumi* has become a best-seller in the USA. He explains that 'Rumi is like a teacher for me. He helps me to know my own identity as something more and vast. My daily work on his poems is like an apprenticeship to a master'. Talking about the reason behind the fame of Rumi in the USA, he points out that Rumi is:

'not a fad. It's filling a need in the Western Psyche that craves nourishment. Robert Bly feels that West has a hunger for ecstatic art. Most of the ecstasies were expunged from the New Testament. This has created a longing in Christian and Western cultures for ecstatic vision. It's an interesting theory, but it's still a real mystery why so many people have been carrying my books around into boardrooms, corporations, airports. (Talking Shop with Coleman Barks, Septmeber / October, 2002. p.24).

This ecstatic vision which has made Rumi popular in the USA, can be found in the poetry of other Sufi poets across the globe, as we see in the following lines by the great Punjabi Sufi poet Mian Muhammad Baksh :

'Do not rejoice at the death of your enemy,

Because your friends too have to die.

The afternoon sun is soon going to set' (Ahmad 2003, p. 2003).

Lines with similar themes abound in his famous book *Saiful Malūk*. The following couplets of Baba Farid which form part of the Holy Granth of the Sikhs, give a message that grief is common to all:

*'Farid! I thought, I am in pain,
But, in fact, all are so
I climbed a height to find below,
All homes with grief aglow' (Elahi, 1967. P. 56).*

With knowledge and transcendental love, a Sufi is able to rise above his own being. When he rises above his own likes and dislikes, he realizes the problems of other people. Sufis, whichever part of the world they belong to, appear to have similar teachings. Their themes are universal and seem to transcend man made boundaries. One of the themes that run through Sufi poetry of various Sufi poets is their 'fruit for stone' message of forgiveness.

'Fruit for Stone' Message of Sufi Poetry

This 'fruit for stone' message seems to be unique to the teachings of Sufi masters all around the globe. Thus, Baba Farid draws an analogy between a Sufi and a tree rewarding fruit for stone:

*'Farid! Obey and serve the Lord
Shedding all misgivings,
And be like trees beneficent
Rewarding fruit for stone' (Elahi, 1967. P. 42).*

This theme of being like a tree rewarding fruit for stone is common in Sufi poetry. Abdal-Qadir Malik, an unsung Sufi master and poet of *Naqshbandia Fazlia* order of Sufis also draws our attention to the desired 'fruit for stone' behavior of Sufis. In one of his well-known Sufi poem, he stresses that a Sufi should be like an Indian jujube tree:

تو بن مثل اک بیر دا بوٹا لو کی چڑھ چڑھ دیون جھوٹا
اٹاں روڑے مارن سوٹے تو پھل دے اُلٹا فقیرا

*Be like Indian jujube (Ziziphus mauritiana) tree. People climb on it and shake its branches
(to get its berry-like fruit).
They may strike with sticks, stones and bricks but O dervish!
in return you gives them fruit.*

Sufis not only offer fruit for stone, but they also claim to have the panacea for all human problems and that single panacea for all human problems is *zikar* (remembrance of God). Offering this panacea, Shaykh Hazrat Hafiz Muhammad Nasiruddin Khan Khakwani, a Sufi master of *Naqshbandia, Fazlia, Allaiya* order of Sufis versifies:

ہے غموں کی دوری کے واسطے مرے پاس نسخہء کیمیا
وہ جو سنتا سب کی ہے آن میں اُسے صبح شام پکار دو

*For all your sorrows I have the time-honored panacea.
Remember Him day and night Who listens to all at once (Khakwani, 2006, p. 408)*

God's remembrance is time-honoured panacea for all sorrows in the sense that this panacea can be found in the religious books of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Since man's psychological and spiritual problems appear to be the same all over the world, this panacea may help people of the whole world. There is a need to preserve and promote this spiritual and intellectual heritage of humanity.

Though Sufi poetry has been used by a number of writers, artists, singers and film producers, there is a need that international organizations working for peace air it for peace purposes. Incorporating Sufi poetry into school text books is one of the measures that may help us in this respect. We may sow seeds of love in their young minds, by giving them exposure to Sufi poetry of universal love. It may help in the long run in minimize hatred and violence in the world. In order to benefit from the therapeutic powers of Sufi poetry, we should not only use the electronic and print media but also make

sure that we get exposure to the company of great Sufi masters because it is their company, which according to Rumi, transforms our existence. In order to get a Rumi for modern times, we need to find a Shams Tabrez of modern times.

Conclusion

In the light of the discussion based on the observations and reports, we can say that we should promote literature that minimizes boundaries and promotes universal love and peace in the world. Literature, poems and words containing hope are what modern man stands in need of. In the light of the observations and reports discussed in the study, we may conclude the Sufi poetry, with its recurrent themes of universal love, self-negation and 'fruit for stone', appears to be the literature that may help in promoting harmony, universal love and tolerance in the world. It appears to have the capacity to erode away the divisions of borders and boundaries from the world. If Sufi poetry is promoted effectively on media, it may help in minimizing war and violence in the world.

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