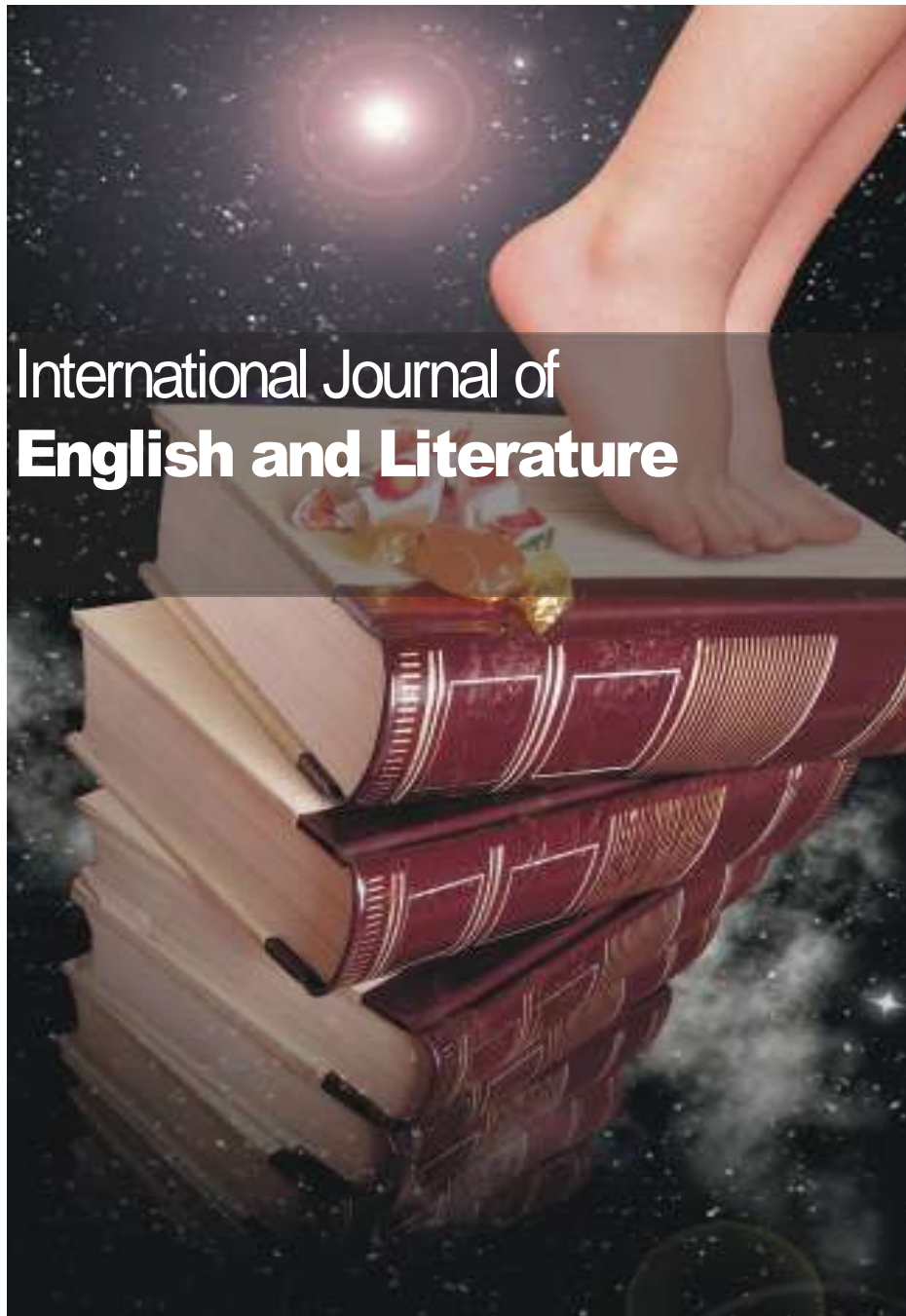


OPEN ACCESS



International Journal of English and Literature

May 2018
ISSN: 2141-2626
DOI: 10.5897/IJEL
www.academicjournals.org

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International Journal of English and Literature

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**Sacrificing the bull: Conceptualisations of fanā (spiritual death) in Rumi's
Mathnavi**

10

Sepideh Hozhabrossadat

Full Length Research Paper

Sacrificing the bull: Conceptualisations of fanā (spiritual death) in Rumi's Mathnavi

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Received 18 March, 2018; Accepted 2 May, 2018

This study examined conceptualisations of FANĀ, the case of 'the cave' and 'the bull', in Masnavi (complete six books) using the theoretical and analytical frameworks of Cultural Linguistics. The study was motivated by an increasing number of Rumi readers all over the world, and specifically in Western contexts. Furthermore, the dearth of empirical research that addresses conceptual metaphors and their cultural roots in a Sufi literary context added to the significance of such a study. The study investigated the cultural schemas, categories, and metaphors of FANĀ; however, the results suggested the existence of a schema and metaphors. Moreover, the study sought to find out possible external cultural influences on such conceptualisations (e.g. Proto-Indo-Iranian religions). The study was conducted through the compilation of the corpus, identification of the metaphors, and the cultural analysis using Nvivo11 and MAXQDA. The preliminary results of the data analysis suggested both universal and culturally-specific conceptualisations. The study was concluded by listing all symbols and metaphors that are linguistic manifestations of FANĀ.

Key words: Cultural linguistics, corpus linguistics, cultural metaphors, cultural categories, cultural schemas, Rumi, Mathnavi.

INTRODUCTION

Jalal-u-Din Rumi, a 13th century Persian mystic, is known to be one of the most influential poets all over the world (Tompkins, 2002). Mathnavi, which includes six books of poetry and twenty five thousand verses, is a masterpiece by Rumi in Persian and has a wide cultural and geographical range of readership; moreover, it is known to be the bible of the Sufis. This study, following Rumi's recent popularity, investigates cultural conceptualisation of FANĀ in Rumi's Mathnavi using the Cultural Linguistics framework (Sharifian, 2011, 2017). Since the analysis of

this category yields diverse conceptualisations, and is out of the scope of this paper to cover all the conceptualisations, the study will rest on the analysis of two significant conceptualisations which are based on the Mithraism cult of the sacrifice (to be explained subsequently).

Rumi's worldviews emanate from Sufism, an umbrella term for different schools of philosophy, theology, literature, and mystical theophany within the abiding presence of Islam. Sufism and mysticism are the most

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commonly used terms to refer to such religious and philosophical beliefs that espouse the operation of love that distinguishes “true mysticism from mere asceticism” (Schimmel, 1975). The person who embarks on the path of love is called the Sufi, which is sometimes equivalent to ‘pīr’ and ‘sheikh’ as in Persian.

As mentioned previously, there are diverse types of Sufism all over the world among which Persian Sufism (hereafter called Persianate Sufism (Milani, 2014)), the one that is of concern here. Having originated in greater Khurāsān, eastern areas of contemporary Iran, Persianate Sufism promotes the language of love through the works of “intoxicated” scholars, philosophers, and poets such as *Omar ibn al-Farid* (1181-1234), *Mansur al-Hallaj* (858- 922 A. D.), and *Jalal ad-Din Rumi* (1207-1273) (Renard, 2009). This group of Sufis believe that fanā is the annihilation of the Sufi self in the love of the beloved. Zazmanzadeh (2012) explains that “The language of love makes it possible to express the most profoundly esoteric truths without coming into conflict with dogmatic theology”; hence, the presence of heavy metaphorical language in Sufi texts is a necessity for such grand inner mental concepts.

Lewisohn (1999) mentions the *Safavid* period, between 13 and 15th century, to be the possible origin of Persianate Sufism. Scholars such as Hodgson (1974) emphasize that the Sufism of this era was heavily influenced by the genius of earlier Persian thought. In the same line, Bausani (1975) contends that Sufism has been greatly transformed through the influence of Pre-Islamic religions in Iran. One such great influence is evident in *Ishraqi* philosophy or “*hikmat mashriqiyya* or Eastern/Aurorial/Illuminative Wisdom” by Suhrawardi (1154-1191), founder of the Iranian school of Illuminationism, an important school in Islamic philosophy (Lewisohn, 1999). This particular philosopher was greatly influenced by Zoroastrianism (one of the world’s oldest religions), and specifically by the “philosophy of Xvarnah of Zoroastrian Persia” (Corbin, 1960).

Zoroastrianism is the oldest existing religion in Iran, which has inherited sacraments, rites, and rituals from its predecessors. The foundation of this religion is based on dualisms of good/bad, light/dark, and Ahura Mazda/Ahriman. According to Zoroaster’s (Zoroastrian prophet) beliefs, existence commences “as a duality and ends in a unity” (Zarrinkoob and Zarrinkoob, 1970). Zoroastrian dualism greatly impacted on Sufism as the Sufis could not consent to “dualism in the ontological sense of the primordial existence of two beings, one good and one evil” (Stepaniants, 2002), but theodicy helped them to accept the existence of good and evil. Rumi, cleverly uses the same concept in the following lines:

چون مراد و حکم یزدان غفور
بود در قدمت تجلی و ظهور
chun murādu ḥuhmi yazdāni qafūr
būd dar qidmat tajalīu zuhūr

Since in eternity it was the will and decree of God, the Forgiver,
to reveal and manifest Himself,
Nothing can be shown without a contrary (Book 6, 2152, p. 135).

دو علم بر ساخت اسپید و سیاه
آن یکی آدم دگر ابلیس راه

Du ‘alam bar sākht ispīdu sīāh
Ān yikī Ādam digar lblīs rāh

and there was no contrary to that incomparable King.

He made two banners, white and black:

one Adam, the other the lblīs of the Way (Book 6, 2155, p. 135).

The myth of creation is one of the most significant aspects of Persian mythology in general, and Zoroastrian mythology in particular. Based on Bundahishn (Zoroastrian cosmogony and cosmology in Pahlavi), the universe was created in seven days (stages) including the creation of sky (āsmān), water, earth, plants, animals, human beings, and fire, which were created in this particular order. In the fifth stage, which is the focus of this study, there is “the Primal Uniquely-created Bull” (Davaran, 2010), which is pictured in Bundahishn as white as the moon.

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Human beings satisfy the pleasure of sophisticated and embellished language by using figurative language and poets are no exception. In fact, the most ornamented type of language is to be found among the works of poet. In this regard, Sufi poets make use of figurative language such as metaphors and similes to make the most difficult abstract notions more tangible for their readers. Rumi is known to use such ornamental language in its grandest form as a result of his comprehensive knowledge of both Sufism and Pre-Islamic religions as well as his years of being a student to such prominent figures and spiritual instructors as Shams Tabrizi (1185-1248).

It was Aristotle (384-322 B.C) who introduced metaphor as an ornamental device in beautifying language (Roberts, 1924). Aristotle considers metaphor as an irregularity in comparison to everyday language (Ricoeur, 1975). However, during the last four decades in the studies of metaphor, such multidisciplinary approaches as Sapir and Crocker (1977), Sacks (1978), Honeck and Hoffman (1980), Johnson (1981), Taylor (1984), Paprotte and Dirven (1985), Danesi (1988), Fernandez (1991), Ankersmit and Mooij (1993), Ortony (1993), and Goossens et al. (1995) shifted the focus of metaphor from only beautifying language to a more cognitive, semantic, functional, and structural aspects.

Metaphors we live by in 1980 (Lakoff and Johnson) was the start of this ground-breaking shift by explicitly expressing the idea that metaphors are not irregularities

or diversion from everyday life; rather, human beings use them in their daily communications and interactions. According to Johnson (1995), “whatever else we are, we humans are metaphorphizing animals”. It is without doubt that metaphors shape human’s thoughts and actions; hence, what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) promoted was called Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT hereafter).

CMT’s focus is on how and to what extent daily physical experiences give shape to our mental encodings and decodings. In this approach, a distinction is made between linguistic structures which are codes that animate our mental representations and conceptual structures (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Lakoff and Turner, 1989). As an example, “he attacked every weak point of my argument”, the underlying metaphor is ARGUMENT IS WAR. Consequently, the concept of ‘argument’ is externalised in terms of the concept of war, with two domains of ‘argument’ and ‘war’ being activated (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). A further key notion in CMT is the phrase ‘image schema’. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain image schema as structures that arise from daily physical interactions which could be visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, or tactile. However, studies, which are based on CMT, were reductionist in that they only researched a few languages such as English and Chinese; moreover, in these studies, the focus was more on the universal similarities and concepts which are emanated from human’s shared mental representations.

Anthropologists and cognitive linguists noticed such a shortcoming and tried to fill the gaps by paying more attention to cultural differences. The link between language, culture, and cognition has been pointed out and researched previously by such scholars as Sapir (1884-1939), and Whorf (1897-1941). The first scholar, among cognitive linguists, who acknowledged the role of culture in language studies was Langacker (1994), saying that cognitive linguistics recognizes culture. In this case, what is meant by the word ‘culture’ is cultural cognition. Palmer (1996), an anthropologist, suggested the introduction of Cultural Linguistics.

Cultural Linguistics is primarily concerned not with how people talk about some objective reality, but with how they talk about the world that they themselves imagine. However, even this restricted formulation raises the interesting questions of how people frame experiences and abstract meanings from them (Palmer, 1996).

Cultural Linguistics provides a theoretical and analytical framework to uncover cultural conceptualisations that can be specific to a culture as well as shared among many cultures. Conceptualisations are cognitive processes during which human beings categorize or schematize events, actions, states, emotions, etc., as Sharifian (2017) contends.

The study of language itself is of key significance to our understanding of cultural conceptualizations, and ultimately the broader cultural cognitions associated with languages and language varieties.

This cultural cognition, based on Sharifian (2011) is

“more than the sum of its parts (more than the sum of the cognitive systems of the individual members)”. Sharifian (2011) developed a framework under the label of cultural conceptualisations which has three parts: cultural metaphors, cultural categories, and cultural schemas as shown in Figure 1.

Cultural schemas have been previously introduced by such cognitive scientists as Rice (1980), Shore (1996), and Strauss and Quinn (1997) as building blocks of cognition. Cultural schemas, are schema that can be explored in different instantiations of language by delving into the shared underpinning culture of a society. Sharifian (2011) introduced a different perspective into the realm of cultural schemas by referring to its heterogeneous distribution.

Individuals who belong to the same cultural group may share some, but not all, components of a cultural schema. In other words, each person’s internalization of a macro-level cultural schema is to some extent collective and to some extent idiosyncratic.

Furthermore, different types of schema such as event schemas, role schemas, image schemas, proposition schemas, and emotion schemas (Sharifian, 2011) can function on a daily basis. For instance, the schema of ‘funerals and ‘weddings’ could be taken as “subschemas of events” (Mandler, 1984; Schank and Abelson, 1977 Sharifian, 2011). In the same schema of ‘wedding’, for instance, categories of ‘wedding gift’, ‘wedding banquet’ (Sharifian, 2011), and ‘wedding ring’ could be named. According to Sharifian (2017), cultural categories accompany certain behavioural and linguistic norms and expectations.

Many diverse studies (Yu, 2007, 2009a, b; Sharifian, 2005, 2008, 2010; Sharifian and Jamarani, 2015) utilized the Cultural Linguistics framework to investigate the inherent conceptualisations in a specific culture. Moreover, such scholars as Quinn (1987), Kövecses (2005, 2009), Musolff (2004), Musolff and Zinken (2009) investigated the influence of culture and context on the variation in metaphor meanings. Quinn (1987), in particular, investigated how individuals draw on different domains to express different conceptualisations; hence, the use of different contexts. Focusing extensively on the concept of marriage, Quinn (1987) enumerates such metaphors as marriage is a durable bond between two people, a spouse is a fitting part, or marriage is an investment in American context. Quinn (1987) believes that, because our cultural knowledge is organized in this hierarchical way..., models nested within models, we must follow the explanatory trail left in discourse, which led us from understanding about marriage to understanding about need fulfilment, for example.

Following this brief development in the studies of metaphor and cultural cognition, the study follows with the explanations of the methodology and the introduction of the corpus. The methodology in this study has three main stages: (1) data collection, (2) data analysis, and (3) cultural analysis. The corpus consists of the complete six

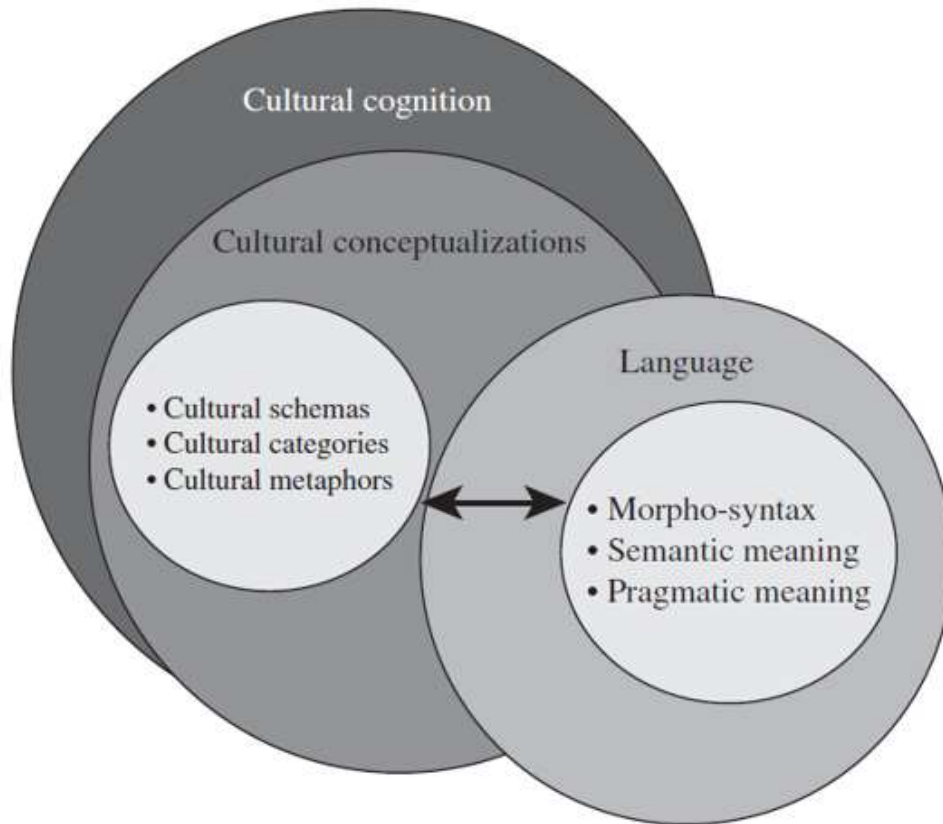


Figure 1. Model of cultural cognition (Sharifian, 2011).

books of Mathnavi in both Persian and English which include the edited versions by Nicholson (2011, 2013). For the purpose of objective analysis, MAXQDA 18 was chosen for the purpose of coding queries, text searches, and word frequency searches, annotation, creating word clouds, word trees, and drawing diagrams. MAXQDA 18 is chosen for the purpose of qualitative data analysis. The advantage of this tool over others is that it supports Persian, which is the language of this study's context.

Figure 2 shows the three steps in implementing the methodology. What follows afterwards is the analysis of the found data on the conceptualisations of *fanā* in the categories of animals and objects, the bull and the cave.

THE ANALYSIS

Fanā, the annihilation of the ego in the beloved, is the ultimate goal of a Sufi. This state involves spiritual purification, detachment from materialistic possessions, and self-negation. Rumi believes that *fanā* comprises two main stages that are the annihilation of ego (human attributes) and existence through the beloved. Rumi draws on different categories such as animals, plants, objects, states, etc., to conceptualise *fanā*. One special significant use of categories is in regard to the category

of 'places/directions where *fanā* is made possible in *ghār* (cave) in Mathnavi. The significance of this place needs to be clarified by first explaining a practice in Sufism. Sufis, before reaching *fanā*, undergo a series of ordeals and practices in preparation for the final stage. These ordeals range from physical ordeals such as fasting to spiritual endeavours such as abstention, generosity, different sorts of sacrifices, and many more. The link between Sufism's ordeals and the image of *ghār* (cave) rests in what is associated with the activities that happen in the cave.

The symbol of a cave with its association with rebirth and initiating rituals originated in Mithraism (Olson, 2011). The belief suggests that only a true believer can understand the secrets of the universe and the creation in this symbolic cave (Beck, 2006). Wynne-Tyson (1972) explains that Mithras (god of light and sanctity of oaths (Oxford Dictionary, 2014)) is the only true slayer of the primal bull in ancient Persian mythology.

Mithras is described as having thousand ears and eyes and always being awake (Thieme, 1978); moreover, Mithras is a life-giver, generous, and fertilizing (Gershevitch, 1967). There are three crucial pillars in the Mithraism cult which are held strictly by its followers. These three significant aspects are Mithra temples, the slaying of the bull symbolism, and the seven staged

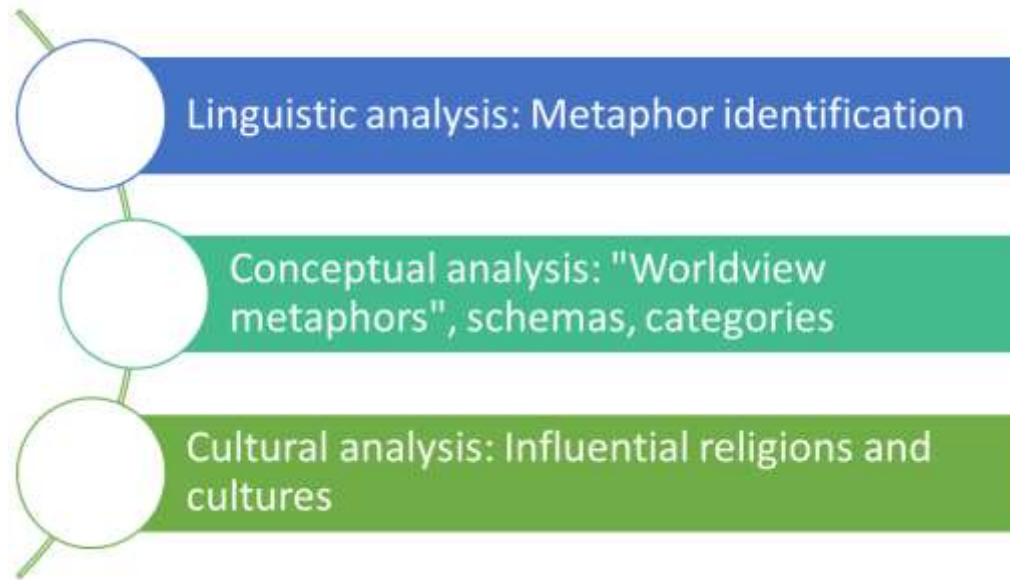


Figure 2. Cultural Linguistics paradigm.

organization, among which the slaying of the bull and the Mithras temple is of interest here.

Mithras temples are natural caves, or artificially made structures based on the design of caves. Beck (2006) suggests that the prophet Zoroaster was the first to pray to Mithras in a cave. Olson (2011) explains that the choice of the cave as a place of initiation and sacramental acts is because of the symbolic rebirth notion.

The most challenging and significant mission of Mithras is to kill the primal bull (Wynne-Tyson, 1972). This sacrificial act is accomplished in a cave (as seen in Figure 3.). The dying bull is transformed into a wheat plant (Beck, 2002), which leads to a rebirth in the world. The cave symbolism is closely linked to a place where secrets are revealed, which in Sufism is known to be the heart (dil).

Milani (2014) names two significant “junctions” in a Sufi’s journey toward fanā. There is the beginning of the journey and its end which are “the symbolic significance of “the cave” in later Mithraism, and the end which is associated with “the ritual meal” (Milani, 2014).

According to Milani (2014), the symbol of cave touches on the “innermost part of the self” as idealized by the realm of the heart in Sufism” and is the closely linked to contemporary Sufis’ “khanegah (Sufi house of worship” and articulated in Sufi poetry in terms of “goblet, cup, or grail that hold the wine of divine unity”.

Rumi’s use of the same concept is prevalent all over the Mathnavi by such conceptualisations as fanā is entering/exiting/remaining in the cave and fanā is becoming the cave. Rumi pictures a true Sufi, a true believer, as the one who unites with the beloved through taking a shelter in the cave (the heart).

Example 1

غار با او یار با او در سرود

Ghār bā ū yār bā ū dar sorūd

The Cave is with him, the Friend is in converse with him (Book 1, 406, p.26).

Example 2

کو خلیلی که برون آمد ز غار

Kū khalīlī ki borūn āmad zi ghār

Where is the Friend, who came forth from the c[C]ave (Book 2, 3077, p. 187).

Example 3

مصلحت در دین عیسی غار و کوه

maṣlahat dar dīni .īsā ghāru kūh

In the religion of Jesus the right thing is cave and mountain (Book 6, p. 32, 494).

Example 4

تا برون نایی بنگشاید دلت

Tā burūn nāyī nagushāyad dilat Your heart does not expand till you come out (Book 3, 3547, p. 223). The recurrent symbol of *gāv* (bull) as representing *nafs* (the ego) that needs to be sacrificed to be resurrected in the beloved recurs in Mathnavi. The sacrificial killing of the bull, as was mentioned before, is taken from Persian mythology and Mithraism in particular. The first animal



Figure 3. Mithra slaying the bull, bas-relief, 2nd century AD; in the Städtisches Museum, Wiesbaden, Germany taken from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mithraism>.

that was created by Mazda was the bull and later killed by Ahriman, the evil being and the enemy of Ahura Mazda, during the primal attack (Mazdapur et al., 2017). Mazda created other animals out of the remainders of the bull (Mazdapur et al., 2017). Being the most sacred and useful animal in ancient Persia, the bull has a significant role in much of the Iranian folklore and mythology.

The sacrifice of the bull by Mithras, contrary to the act of Ahriman, represents the cycle of life. Mithras killed the bull to give another chance to the world. Likewise, Rumi encourages the sacrifice of the bull (the ego) to allow rebirth. Interestingly, in Pahlavi (Middle Persian spoken during Zoroastrianism) the word for the bull/cow is *gau* from the root of <ga.va> which means life and existence and is often collocated with the *ispandī muqadas* (the holy ispad, the god of fertility), traces of which is found in the word *gūsfand* (sheep) (Yarshater, 1982, pp. 3-81; 4, PP. 8-27). What is shared in both Rumi's Mathnavi and the Mithraic custom of slaying the bull is that *nafs* (the

ego) has the role of a victim and not an enemy. In effect, *fanā* and ego-effacement are the result of "the meditation of the master of the path or the intervention of the sage analogous to Mithras's freeing of new life" (Milani, 2014). Rumi uses the concept of the bull to refer to human's ego (*nafs*) by implicitly referring to an archaic belief among Persians, which holds the bull as the last animal to be sacrificed so that humans can live on; moreover, ancient Persians considered the act of sacrificing the bull to be the key to a human's immortality (Hinnells, 2006). There is another myth around the concept of sacrificing a bull which is related to the *hadūsh* bull, which is going to be killed by the judgment day's saviour, *Sushīāns* to provide the immortality of food for all people (Afifi, 1996). The bull epitomizes the animal features of human beings, or the animal-I. Mithras wins over the bull as a Sufi wins over his/her ego. *Fanā* is killing the animal-I is a metaphor which is used by Rumi all through Mathnavi to refer to this sacrificial act of freeing the human spirit from the

entanglements of the ego.

Example 5

گاو کشتن هست از شرط طریق
تا شود از زخم دمش جان مفیق
گاو نفس خویش را زوتر بکش
تا شود روح خفی زنده و بهش

Gāv kushtan hast az sharti ṭarīq
Tā shaved az zakhmi dumash jān mafīq
Gāvi nafsi khīsh rā zūdtar bukush
Tā shaved rūhi khafī zindiu bihush

To kill the cow is the stipulation of the Path, in order that the spirit may be restored to consciousness by the stroke of her tail.

Kill most quickly the cow, your nafs, so that the hidden spirit may become alive and conscious (Book 2, 1445-1446, p. 87).

Example 6

مدعی گاو نفس تست هین
خویشتن را خواجه کرده ست و مهین
آن کشندھی گاو عقل تست رو
بر کشندھی گاو تن منکر مشو

muda ī gāvi nafsi tust hīn
khīshstan rā khāji kardastu mahīn
ān kushandiyi gāv aqli tust ru
bar kushandiyi gāvi tan munkir nashu

Listen! Your fleshly soul is the claimant for the cow: it has made itself a master and thief.

The slayer of the cow is your intellect: go, do not be offended with the slayer of the cow, your body. (Book 3, 2505-2506, p. 158).

Example 7

گویم افکندم به پیشت جان خویش
زنده کن یا سر ببر ما را چو میش

Gūyam afkandam bi pīshat jāni khīsh
Zindi kun yā sar bibur mārā chu mīsh

I will say, 'I throw myself before you: revive or cut off my head, like a sheep! (Book 2, 3798, p. 239).

Example 8

من که گاو را ز هم بدریده ام

Man ki gāvān rā zi ham bidarīdiam
I who have torn oxen limb from limb (Book 1, p. 75, 1154).

Example 9

زنده شد کشته ز زخم دم گاو

Zindi shud kushti zi zakhmi dumi gāv
The murdered man was revived by the stroke of the cow's tail (Book 2, p. 86, 1439).

Example 10

یا کرامی ادبخوا هذا البقر

Yā karāmī udhbuḥū hāzalbaqar

O my noble friends, slaughter this cow (Book 3, 3900, p. 246).

Conclusion

According to Persian mythology, the death of the primal bull led to resurrection in the world. Mithras dragged the bull into the cave to sacrifice the animal for a greater cause. The cave and bull symbolism are used as an inspiration for many Iranian philosophers and poets, among whom Rumi is one of the best examples. Rumi transfers the image of the cave and the bull from the world of mythology to the arena of Sufism by referring to the bull as a human's ego that needs to be sacrificed figuratively for the attainment of *fanā*. Furthermore, the cave is replaced by the Sufi's heart, in which all Divine revelations occur. The message is that a true Sufi, and every human being as far as Rumi is concerned, should gaze inside his/her heart and sacrifice whatever is a barrier on his/her way toward the beloved. Rumi uses *fanā* is entering/exiting/remaining in the cave and *fanā* is becoming the cave to map the concept of the heart to the concrete image of the cave. Another metaphor introduced by Rumi is *fanā* is killing the animal-I to beautifully picture a long-held story among the Persian archaic mythology as a reference to reaching *fanā*. These linguistic manifestations refer to a culturally specific notion of sacrifice (*fanā*) with its source in Persian mythology, and specifically in the Mithraism cult.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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