

Miscellaneous**The Oriental Culture and its Eternal Fascination****Alina Beatrice Chesca¹**

*Motto: „If you look for us, look for us in joy,
as we are the dwellers of this kingdom of joy.”
(Rumi Mawlana)*

Abstract: In a world which is living more and more only for concrete things, in a chaotic, noisy, pragmatic and frivolous world, looking for sensitiveness, beauty, dreams, stories seems to be a matter of spiritual survival. Human beings are made of soul and body, from diamond and dirt and the harmony between the two of them is vital. In my opinion, the realm where this harmony has been made possible and has even achieved perfection is the Orient. Here, space, reality, dream, love, divinity have different perspectives; here, the spirit has the highest value and POETRY is not just an art, it seems to be part of people's lives, part of their history.

Keywords: poetry; oriental culture; Orient; freedom

As poetry is part of my everyday life, I have chosen to share one of my greatest joys – the spirit of the Orient – as it is mirrored and praised by two of the most brilliant minds and hearts: Rabindranath Tagore and Rumi Mawlana. Men of their times and of all times, they are loved from Cairo to Tanger, from Lahore to Istanbul and highly appreciated even in the Western world. Rumi's memory is worshipped even in the smallest Turkish villages and in Istanbul there is a cemetery where all “those who loved Rumi” want to be buried. The Western orientalist regard him as the greatest mystical poet of all times (Tagore is also seen as “the great mystic from the East” – Amartya Sen, 2005, p. 93), while the Muslim Orient considers his work to be surpassed only by the Koran. At the same time, Tagore is a towering figure and anyone who becomes familiar with his unique work will be impressed by the power of Tagore's presence all over the world. His poetry, as well as his novels, short stories and essays are very widely read and the

¹ Senior Lecturer, PhD, Danubius University of Galati, Romania, Address: 3 Galati Blvd, Galati, Romania, tel: +40372 361 102, fax: +40372 361 290, Corresponding author: alina.chesca@univ-danubius.ro.

songs he composed reverberate around the whole India. His essays ranged over literature, politics, religious beliefs, culture, philosophical analysis, international relations. Besides, as it is known, he was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1913 for *Gitanjali*, a selection of his fascinating poetry.

Although separated by more than 600 years (as Rumi was born in Balkh, in 1207 and died in Konya, in 1273 and Tagore was born in 1861 and died in 1941, in India), their lyrics display in their thought a perfect world belonging to a unique spirituality, full of love, God, passion, music, colour, metaphor. As Rumi said, “the search is done in many ways, but the object of the search is always the same. Don’t you see that the ways leading to Mecca are numerous, one of them coming from Byzantium, another one from Syria, some others crossing the land or sea? The ways are different, the goal is unique... When people go there, all the arguments, disputes and conflicts which came up along the way simply die away.” (Rumi, 1976, p. 23)

William Butler Yeats was right to see a large religious element in Tagore’s writings, as the latter one had fascinating things to say about life and death. The idea of a direct, happy and free relationship with God can be found in many of Tagore’s religious writings, including the poems of *Gitanjali*. It is clear that from India’s diverse religious traditions he took many ideas, both from ancient texts and from popular poetry. The deep humanity comes out more obviously than any complex and intense spirituality:

“Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!/ He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground/ and where the path-maker is breaking stones. He is with them /in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust./Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds /of creation; he is bound with us for ever./ Meet him and stand by him in toil and in sweat of thy brow.” (Tagore, 2008, p. 23)

The same idea is expressed by Rumi; God is the supreme force, the absolute Love, always close to His whole perfect creation, from the smallest beings and things up to the human beings. In a beautiful poem, *Love Is the Master*, Rumi says: “Love is the One who masters all things;/I am mastered totally by Love./God is working everywhere his massive Resurrection;/How can we pretend to act on our own?” (Rumi, 1973, p. 25). And, in another poem: “You are the master alchemist./You light the fire of love/in earth and sky/in heart and soul/of every being/Through your love/existence and nonexistence merge./All opposites unite./All that is

profane/becomes sacred again” (Rumi, 1973, p. 25). As it can be understood, beauty is sacred and its contemplation makes everything sacred.

In many of Tagore’s devotional poems there is an ambiguity about religious experience and thus he makes them appeal to readers irrespective of their beliefs. Some of his poems combine images of human love with poems of full devotion. For instance:

“I have had my invitation to this world’s festival./And thus my life has been blessed. My eyes have seen /And my ears have heard./It was my part at this feast to play upon/My instrument, and I have done all I could./Now, I ask, has the time come at last/When I may go in and see thy face and offer thee/My silent salutation?” (Tagore, 2008, p. 33)

In lyrics of unique beauty, Rumi addresses God with a strong prayer in which the love for divinity does not make way for earthly pleasures:

“Oh, Beloved,/Take me./Liberate my soul./Fill me with your love and/release me from the two worlds./Oh, Beloved,/take away what I want./take away what I do./take away what I need./take away everything/that takes away from you” (Rumi, 1973, p. 91). Abu’l-Hassan Nuri said: “Sufi means giving up all selfish pleasures.” The renunciation can be of two types: formal and essential. If a human being gives up a certain pleasure, but the renunciation itself brings pleasure, we can talk about a formal renunciation; if the pleasure gives itself up, then it is destroyed and we can talk about a real contemplation (*mushahadat*). That is why, giving up pleasure is a human act, but the annihilation of pleasure is the act of God.

Tagore’s life, although sometimes haunted by doubts, was surely offered to God and his work represents a song dedicated to the Father of all worlds, but also to human beings and to the principles of the good. Therefore, his poems are often a promise made for the divinity: “Life of my life, I shall ever try/to keep my body pure, knowing that thy living touch/is upon all my limbs/I shall ever try to drive all evils away from my heart/and keep my love in flower, knowing that thou hast thy seat/in the inmost shrine of my heart.” (Tagore, 2008, p. 9)

Abu’l-Hassan Nuri said: “A Sufi is the one who possesses nothing and who is possessed by nothing.” Rumi also said: “The human being came into this world to achieve a mission; this is one’s real goal; if it is not achieved, one did not even really lived.” And, “the all-mighty God said: I have bought you, your souls, goods and time. If you dedicate and give them to me, their price is the eternal Paradise.

This is the price you have in my eyes” (Rumi, 1976, p. 40). The Koran says that everything is vain besides the Face of God: “This Face is always present, ceaseless and eternal.” By returning to the centre, the soul finds again the skies which are inside it. The place where God works is the heart of the human being: “The heart is nothing else but the Sea of light.../the place of God’s vision” (Rumi, 1925, p. 82). But this is true only for the heart which reached its real dimension.

The same idea of God’s supremacy and of giving up the futile pleasures can be found in Tagore’s following poem:

“In pleasure and in vain I stand not/By the side of men and thus stand by thee./I shrink to give up my life and/Thus do not plunge into the great waters of life” (Tagore, 2008, p. 199). We can see here a triumphant chant of the soul, overflowing with God. Later, he compares the hands of God to the flute of the reed and he, the poet, plays with his breath. It is by His creation, it is through His being that God becomes aware of Himself. Tagore must be the conscience of God, he is the conscience of God, this is the thought which gives life to a perfect poetry:

“Oh, dip my emptied life into that ocean,/plunge it into the deepest fullness. /Let me for once feel that lost sweet touch/in the allness of the universe” (Tagore, 2008, p. 223).

For Rumi, too, the essence of human existence is God; He is the ultimate hope, the ultimate part of our spirit and mind:

“And He is with you/in your search/when you seek Him/look for Him/in your looking/closer to you/than yourself/to yourself” (Rumi, 1973, p. 57). In Rumi’s view, in order to directly contemplate God, the man should first become an ascetic (zahid), as the lack of indifference covers the eyes (Rumi, 1925, p. 78). Talking about his father who had become “the light of God”, as he had overcome the feeling of personal identity so that the “ego” did no longer exist, it had been consumed by Light, Mawlana said: “This light is not like the moon or sun light, under which the things remain themselves. When His light is shining, neither the sky, nor the sun or moon can last; it is only Him, the King, who remains.” (Rumi, 1976, Chapter 3). Neither Mawlana, nor his disciples made any difference between religions and he could feel close to any of their adepts. After the death of his first wife, who left him with two children, Rumi married Kira-Kathun from Konya, a Christian woman converted to Islam. He was loved by the disciples of other religions as well. He even respected the unbelievers’ freedom of speech; he used to say: “The whole world is made up of the components of a single individual,

something which is shown by this tradition coming from the Prophet: « Mighty God! Direct my people as it does not know. » My people means my constituent parts, as, if the unbelievers were not included among these parts, it would not be the whole.” (Aflaki, 1918, p. 126)

Rabindranath Tagore had strong religious beliefs, but he was also interested in many other issues and had various things to say about them. Some of the ideas he expressed were political and they appeared in his letters and lectures. He had clearly expressed views on peace, war, cross-cultural education, nationalism, the need for cultural openness and others. However, Amartya Sen states that: “His admirers in the West were tuned to the more other-worldly themes which had been emphasized by the first Western patrons. People came to his public lectures in Europe and America expecting ruminations on grand, transcendental themes; when they heard instead his views on the way public leaders should behave, there was some resentment.” (Sen, 2005, p. 98)

It is a well-known fact that, for Tagore, the most important thing was people’s freedom, both physical and spiritual. All his attitudes regarding culture and politics, nationalism and internationalism, tradition and modernity can be interpreted and understood in the light of this belief. His convictions made him support the nationalistic movements and he was certainly against the foreign rules which he considered to lack freedom. He also thought that patriotism could limit the freedom of using ideas from outside “domestic walls” and the freedom allowing to support the causes of people in other countries. Tagore’s love for freedom explains his opposition to traditionalism which makes people be prisoners of the past, lost in “the dreary desert sand of dead habit”:

“Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;/ Where knowledge is free;/Where the world has not been broken up into fragments/by narrow domestic walls;/Where words come out from the depth of truth;/Where tireless striving stretches its arms/towards perfection;/Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way/into the dreary desert sand of dead habit/Where the mind is lead forward by thee into ever-widening/thought and action -/ Into that heaven of freedom, my Father,/let my country awake” (Tagore, 2008, p. 35). A marvelous metaphorical expression of what freedom should be...

This is how Rumi celebrates freedom and the cosmic dance: “The ways to God are numerous, I have chosen the way of dance and music” (Rumi, 1973, p. 44). In a daring, but interesting poem, Rumi says:

“I desire loud music/drunken parties and/wild dance/one hand holding/a cup of wine/one hand caressing your hair/then dancing in orbital circle/that is what I yearn for/I can sing better than any nightingale” (Rumi, 1973, p. 44). This can be considered a unique perspective on faith, happiness (both mystical and human) and celebration of the gifts offered by God. Mawlana also writes: “Love is that flame which, when it rises, devours everything; it is only God who remains” (Rumi, 1973, p. 27). Another Sufi, Mir Sayyid Dharif, states that the cause of creation is the expression of the divine beauty and the first creation is love. For Sufism, love is the soul of the universe. Due to love, the human being tends to go back to one’s origins. Music and dance, the rotation of the stars and the movement of atoms, the ascent of life from stone to plant, from animal to human being, up to the angel and beyond it, everything is determined by love: “No matter where you are, in any circumstance, try to be always in love, passionately in love. As soon as you have won the Love, you will always be in love: in the tomb, in the moment of the Resurrection, in Paradise, always. If you sow the seed, it will grow, it will be like bread in the oven” (Rumi, 1976, Chapter 44).

Rumi Mawlana spent the rest of his life in Konya, creating an important and unique work and offering spiritual learning to many people, friends or disciples. The latter ones would gather within the fraternity (tariqa) founded by Rumi, which always had the mark of his personal features: humanity, harmony, brotherhood, simplicity, tolerance. Every creature is actually a witness (sharid) of the divine beauty.

This poem from the volume entitled “The Gardener” by Tagore speaks about a human love, even carnal, rather than a mystical one:

“I hold her hands and press her to my breast./ I try to fill my arms with her loveliness, /to plunder her sweet smile with kisses, /to drink her dark glances with my eyes” (*The Gardener, Poem 49*).

Rumi also wrote very beautiful love poems, as human love can be an expression of the divine love, a supreme gift that God gave to His children in order to live and understand happiness. Moreover, happiness can make human beings reach the sky and even have mystical experiences. Human love may be considered the first level of mystical love:

“Your fragrant breath/like the morning breeze/has come to the stillness of the garden/You have breathed new life into me/I have become your sunshine/and also your shadow./My soul is screaming in ecstasy/Every fiber of my being/is in love with you.” Or, in another poem: “Once a beloved asked her lover: Friend,/You

have seen many places in the world!/Now-which of all these cities was the best?/He said: The city where my sweetheart lives!” (Rumi, 1973:35)

Rumi Mawlana and Rabindranath Tagore can be considered symbols of the Orient, but also symbols of human soul and spirituality. There should be no boundaries between souls, minds, lands and religions...These two unique poets offer us the past, the present and the future of a world which should be led by God, by joy, by poetry and freedom...

References

- Aflaki, Shams-ol-Din Ahmad (1918). *Manaqib ul-'arifin/Saints of the Whirling Dervishes*, translated by C. Huart, Paris.
- Anghelescu, Nadia (2009). *Identitatea araba/The Arabian identity*. Bucharest: Polirom.
- Ibram, Nuredin (2007). *Islamul pur si simplu/ The Islam plain and simple*. Constanța: Golden.
- Rumi, Djalal-od-Din (1973). *Divan-e Shams-e Tabriz /Mystical Odes*. Paris: Sindbad.
- Rumi, Djalal-od-Din (1976). *Fihi-ma-fihi /The Book of the Inside*. Paris: Sindbad.
- Rumi, Jalaluddin (2002). *Meditatii si parabole /Masnavi – e Manavi/ Meditations and parables*. Bucharest: Kriterion.
- Rumi, Jalaluddin (1925). *Mathnawi*. Leyde, 1925 (translation into English by E.A. Nicholson).
- Sen, Amartya (2005). *The Argumentative Indian*. London: Penguin Books.
- Tagore, Rabindranath (2008). *Gitanjali*. New Delhi: International Print.
- Vitray-Meyerovitch, Eva (2003). *Rumi si sufismul/ Rumi and sufism*. Bucharest: Humanitas.