

Book Review

PREACHING LOVE AT A DIFFICULT TIME

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan

Love: The Joy That Wounds, the Love Poems of Rumi, translated by Jean-Claude Carriere, London: Souvenir Press, pp.96, \$12.99.

Living as we do at a very difficult and challenging time, when the voices of anger, hatred and hostility are increasing by the day, the enduring message of love, mercy and compassion championed by Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi, one of the Muslim world's most influential teachers and sages, and certainly one of the world's bestselling poets, could not be more pertinent than in this day and age. In the *Love: The Joy That Wounds, the Love Poems of Rumi*, it is stated that Rumi was born in 1211. This is not correct. He was born in September 1207 CE (604 AH) at Balkh in the northern Persian province of Khurasan (located in present-day Afghanistan). Rumi's father Sultan al-Ulama Shaykh Baha al-Din Sultan Walad was one of the leading Islamic scholars and thinkers of his generation. Profoundly influenced by the religious ideas and thoughts of Hujjat al-Islam Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, the celebrated Islamic thinker and writer of the eleventh century, Baha al-Din developed a very critical attitude towards philosophy (*falsafah*) and – like al-Ghazali – he found solace in the message and practice of *tasawwuf* (Islamic spirituality).

Young Rumi received his early education at home under the tutelage of his pre-eminent father, but he never really had a normal childhood. Thanks to the socio-political volatility and insecurity of the time, his family was forced to leave their home and travel to Samarqand (Samarkand), Nishapur (Nisabur), Baghdad and Syria

before proceeding to the sacred city of Makkah to perform the pilgrimage (*hajj*). From Makkah, the family moved to Larinda when Rumi was only eighteen years of age. He stayed there for seven years with his family before moving to Konya in 1229, today located in Turkey. Two years later, his father died and suddenly Rumi was expected to shoulder all the family responsibilities.

For a good understanding of Rumi's religious ideas and thoughts, a thorough study of the social, political and intellectual condition of his time is essential. He lived at a time when the Muslim world was experiencing considerable socio-political problems, in addition to the widespread revolt spearheaded by the *ulama* (religious scholars) against the philosophical sciences (*ulum al-aqliyyah*), which sparked off an intellectually damaging conflict between two of the leading scholars of the time, namely Imam Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, author of the celebrated Qur'anic commentary, *Mafatih al-Ghaib*, and Rumi's father, who, unlike the former, became a champion of Ghazalian thought and worldview. Rumi completed his advanced education in traditional Islamic sciences (*ulum al-din*) in difficult circumstances and, in due course, became an eminent Islamic scholar and theologian in his own right. It was during his time as a professor at the college in Konya that he encountered an aged mystic named Muhammad Shams al-Din al-Tabriz who completely transformed his outlook on life.

In Shams, Rumi saw what he did not perceive in others: the luminous light of Divine love, compassion and mercy exemplified at its best. In other words, Shams became a mirror in which Rumi could see his own spiritual weaknesses, moral failings and physical frailties like never before. What he saw truly shocked and horrified Rumi: in his obsession with Islamic law he had overlooked the very substance of Islam. In the life and spiritual teachings of Shams, he thus discovered the true meaning and significance of Divine love; love as taught by the Lover to his beloved who, in turn, experienced Divine love at its highest form, and in so doing he showed us how to experience Love as such. As an eminent theologian and *faqih* (Islamic jurist), Rumi felt his decades of training in the traditional Islamic sciences – without much exposure to the true reality of *tasawwuf* – only helped to narrow his vision of the truth, but his timely encounter with Shams illuminated his heart, enlightened his

intellect and shed fresh light on the Divine message and wisdom exemplified by the Prophet of Islam (peace be on him).

Inspired by his new vision and understanding of the truth, from 1245 when he was in his late thirties, Rumi became immersed in Sufi practices. If his life – prior to his encounter with Shams – was dominated by dry, hair-splitting legalism of the traditional ulama (religious scholars), now it became thoroughly engrossed in love, love for the Lover and His beloved as symbolised in the personality of Shams. Keen to capture the real meaning and essence of love, he began to compose poetry expressing his love for the Beloved. During this period Rumi composed around thirty-five thousand verses which were collected under the title of *Divan-i- Shams-i-Tabriz*. Although a number of Western scholars have questioned whether the *Divan* is actually Rumi's own work, according to Dr Afzal Iqbal, these views do not stand up to serious scrutiny. If Professor Ghulam Dastagir of Nizam College, Hyderabad, is correct then there is no doubt that the *Divan* was indeed composed by Rumi. However, unlike the *Mathnawi*, the *Divan* is not widely known to the students of Rumi despite its size and sublime qualities. The *Divan* was a precursor to his monumental *Mathnawi*, which the celebrated Persian poet, Abd al-Rahman Jami, once famously called 'the Persian Qur'an'. This remarkable work, wrongly referred to as the 'Masnari' in the book under review, was Rumi's *magnum opus*.

Consisting of 25,700 verses, dictated to Husam al-Din over a period of twelve years, it is not only considered to be one of the greatest works of poetry ever produced; the *Mathnawi* is also a great treasure trove of spiritual, moral and ethical teachings. Although the under review contains only a small selection of his love poems, in truth, Rumi's worldview revolved around some of the most fundamental questions confronting humanity as a whole, namely what is the true meaning and purpose of life? What is human spirituality? Are Divine love, mercy and compassion necessary? And why do we need individual and collective responsibility? What is the value of love and mercy? How is this to be measured? He wrestled with these and other similar questions for most of his adult life and, in so doing, expounded his message of love, mercy and hope in the form of mystical poetry.

In the words of one of his biographers, “We cannot treat life and consciousness mathematically, scientifically and logically, for how can we depend upon our senses which do not carry us very far? Knowledge is and must remain a vision of reality, a *weltanschauung*, an intuition. Love alone takes us to the Reality. For love, ceaseless effort is necessary...Decadent Sufism had created useless drones and hypocrites. Such passive life is of no use to Rumi. In his world there is no scope for parasites. Rumi’s lover cannot afford to be static and ascetic. He is constantly at war – at war with his own baser self, at war with those elements in the world which hinder or prevent his ascent. It is the very fate of man to struggle...Knowledge is itself a great power – and the ideal man of Rumi, purged of fear and anxiety, enriched by Divine knowledge, hold complete sway over the spiritual and material world. Such is the ‘Man of God’, the perfect man, who assimilates God himself but does not lose his own individuality. Such a man eludes all description”. (Dr Afzal Iqbal, *Life and Work of Muhammad Jalal-ud-Din Rumi*, Delhi: Kitab Bahavan, 1999, pp288-290)

To Rumi, as Jean-Claude Carriere points out, love permeates everything; it leaves nothing untouched nor does it spoil anything, for “love is a grace...it is a fire, it is intoxication, an unceasing turning, a breath from heaven. It is a way for all lost people and a cure for every fever. And love is limitless, for it excludes nothing and no one. Here, lovers are not alone in the world. Quite the opposite; to love is to love the whole world”. And as the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) said, “Love for humanity what you love for yourself”. (*Sahih al-Bukhari*) Since Rumi, like us, lived in an age when greed, anger, hatred and hostility led to considerable chaos, disorder and instability around the world, his message of love is as relevant today as it was during his own lifetime. Indeed, his message of love, mercy and compassion is needed today more than ever before, and for this reason alone, it is worth reading this small but beautifully designed and illustrated book.

Referring to Rumi, late Professor Edward Granville Browne, a renowned scholar of Persian Studies, once remarked, “Without doubt the most eminent Sufi poet whom Persia has produced, while his mystical *Mathnawi* deserves to rank amongst the great poems of all time.” Late Professor Reynold A. Nicholson, who first edited and translated the *Mathnawi* into English, also commented, “Familiarity does not always breed disillusion. Today the words I applied to the author of the *Mathnawi* thirty-five

years ago, ‘the greatest mystical poet of any age,’ seems to me no more than just. Where else shall we find such a panorama of universal existence unrolling itself through Time into Eternity?” Likewise, late Allama Sir Muhammad Iqbal praised and openly acknowledged his debt to Rumi. He wrote, “The world of today needs a Rumi to create an attitude of hope, and to kindle the fire of enthusiasm for life.” In the same way, late Professor A. J. Arberry, the noted British Arabist and translator of the Holy Qur’an into English, once remarked that Rumi had “...enriched humanity with such splendid and massive contributions to literature and thought. Indeed, until the appearance a few years ago of Professor Badi al-Zaman Furuzanfar’s Persian study of Rumi, no such work had been produced in any language.”

Thankfully, there are now many good books available on the life and thoughts of this great Muslim scholar and poet. Those who wish to undertake a detailed study of Rumi’s mystical philosophy and thought, I would recommend Juliet Mabey’s *Rumi: A Spiritual Treasury* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002) and Franklin D. Lewis’s *Rumi – Past and Present, East and West* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000).

M M Khan is an internationally acclaimed author, literary critic and research scholar. He has published more than 150 essays and articles worldwide and is author of the widely acclaimed book, THE MUSLIM 100 (reprinted 2010; Kindle version 2011), and THE MUSLIM HERITAGE OF BENGAL (forthcoming, late summer 2012). He is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, Member of English PEN and also a founder of Bengal Muslim Research Institute.