

Imam Husayn (as) from Rumi's Perspective

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Abstract

This article investigates the spiritual and gnostic (*'irfani*) status of Imam Husayn (as) and the epic of Karbala within the foundational works of Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi, specifically the *Masnavi-ye Ma'navi* and the *Kulliyat-e Shams-e Tabrizi*. Operating within a structuralist-gnostic framework, the study examines how the sacrifice of the Lord of Martyrs is conceptualised by Rumi not merely as a historical tragedy, but as the supreme existential manifestation of Monotheism (*Tawhid*), loving wayfaring (*seir-e mohebbi*), and absolute annihilation in the Divine Will (*fana fi tawhid al-fi'li*).

Through a close textual analysis of selected *ghazals* from the *Divan* and the narrative of the Shi'ahs of Aleppo in Book Six of the *Masnavi*, this paper maps the intricate network of rhetorical and thematic isotopes—such as the symbolic interplay between the "heart" and Husayn, and the spiritual genealogy illustrated through the allegory of the "ear and the earring". Furthermore, the study contextualises Rumi's discourse within the broader paradigm of "Spiritual Shi'ism" (*tashayyo'-e ma'navi*) and Alid Guardianship (*walayah*), drawing upon contemporary analyses by prominent scholars such as Jalal al-Din Homaei, Henry Corbin, and William Chittick.

The findings demonstrate that in Rumi's mystical cosmos, Imam Husayn (as) stands as the supreme exemplar of the Perfect Human (*Al-Insan al-Kamil*), whose martyrdom represents an ontological transition from the confinement of the material world (*nasut*) to eternal subsistence (*baqa*) within the Divine Presence. Finally, the article highlights Rumi's sharp pathology of superficial mourning, wherein he summons hypocritical pretenders to weep over their own ruined faith rather than the liberated, sovereign soul of the Sultan of Love.

Key Concepts: Imam Husayn, Rumi, Mysticism, Spiritual Shi'ism, Walayah, Masnavi, Kulliyat-e Shams, Annihilation (*Fana*), Perfect Human.

1. Introduction and Theoretical Framework: The Loving Journey and the Epic of the Bloody Ascension

The epic of the loving, bloody ascension of the Lord of Martyrs, Hazrat Abi Abdillah Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) – the pure progeny of the Seal of the Prophets,

Hazrat Muhammad Mustafa (blessings of Allah be upon him and his family) – finds its meaning and conceptualisation within Rumi's works in the context and framework of monotheism (*Tawhid*) and the "loving journey" (*Seir-e Mohebbi*) towards Lordly Monotheism. The Truth (*Hazrat-e Haqq*), May His Glory be Exalted, is the Lord of Husayn, and the "Sultan of Bloody Love" is the vassal of the Beloved.

1.1. The Status of Monotheism and Love in the Masnavi and Divan-e Shams

Rumi's *Masnavi* is the book of "Monotheism" and the loving journey towards Hazrat *Huwal-Awwalu wal-Akhiru wadh-Dhahiru wal-Batin* (Surah Al-Hadid, 57:3), whilst the *Kulliyat-e Shams-e Tabrizi* is Rumi's "Book of Love". "O Companion of him who has no companion", "O He in Whom none desires but Him", "O Best of the Desired" (Supplication of Jawshan al-Kabir). In these two monumental works, Rumi explores the epic of Imam Husayn from a mystical standpoint. In this brief treatise, we investigate Rumi's narrative of Imam Husayn across four ghazals from the *Kulliyat-e Shams* and one narrative from the *Masnavi*.

1.2. Conceptual Network and Key Isotopes of the Status of Sayyid al-Shuhada (as)

The key concepts required to comprehend the sublime and unparalleled status of the Lord of Martyrs, Hazrat Imam Husayn (as), in the *Masnavi* and *Divan-e Shams* comprise: love, loving, martyr, martyrdom, devotee, affliction (*Bala*), death, the devout (*Parsa*), annihilation (*Fana*), subsistence (*Baqa*), the Sovereign of Religion (*Khosrow-e Din*), the Sovereign of the Unseen, union, friend, the pioneers and vanguard of spiritual wayfaring, prison, Ashura, Karbala, Yazid, separation, Shimr, and mourning; alongside the juxtaposition of characters, attributes, and traits.

In Rumi's works, "martyr" and "Husayn" are generally synonymous; indeed, it can be argued that the crimson word "martyr" and the supreme station of martyrdom technically apply foremost to the comprehensive and unique persona of Imam Husayn as the Perfect Man (*Al-Insan al-Kamil*).

2. Mystical Analysis of Ghazals from the Kulliyat-e Shams-e Tabrizi

2.1. Ghazal 230: Simile of the Heart to Husayn (as) and the Existential Juxtaposition with Yazid

From Rumi's viewpoint, out of the burning yearning of his divine heart, Hazrat Sayyid al-Shuhada constantly seeks existential transcendence, and the Hazrat Beloved echoes the call accepting this union. The "heart" is, *per se*, the Throne of the Lord and, like Husayn, is engaged in a journey and ascension towards the Supreme Origin. In Ghazal 230 of the *Divan-e Kabir*, Imam Husayn is the touchstone and criterion against which the heart—as a sublime station upon which all human deeds, spiritual states, and existential stations depend—is compared; it is not that Husayn is compared to the heart.

According to the mystics, within the system of existence, "man" is the compendium of all beings, and the "heart" is the compendium of man (Ibn Bazzaz Ardabili, 1376 Sh/1997, p. 443). The second verse of the aforementioned ghazal amply

demonstrates the ultimate devotion and infatuation of Rumi towards Imam Husayn: *take warning, then, O ye with eyes.*

In contrast to such a sublime rank lies the lowest existence of Yazid, who represents the complete symbol of separation, estrangement, and distance from Hazrat Haqq. The martyrs of the caravan of Karbala are the supreme symbols of the historical martyrs who proudly traversed the stations of the bloody, loving journey in the desert of the supreme divine trial in Karbala. They are dead in appearance, but in reality, they have transcended into the sublime, pure life (*Hayat-e Tayyibah*), which is far superior to the manifest world. Rumi considers the martyrs of Karbala as the prime example of this holy Qur'anic verse regarding martyrs:

{`Think not of those who are slain in Allah's way as dead. Nay, they live, finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord" (Al-Imran, 3:169)}

The noble caravan of the captives of Karbala is deemed captive from the perspective of the enemy—who is veiled and distant from the Presence of the Sultan of Existence. Yet, contrary to the perception of these blind-hearted oppressors, they are the "kings of the station of proximity to the Friend", a station wherein no barrier or impediment exists between them and the Hazrat Beloved.

According to the gnostics, Paradise is of two kinds: general and particular. The general Paradise is the paradise of eating, drinking, and matrimony, reserved for ordinary servants; whereas the particular Paradise is the station of meeting (*Liqā*), union, and witnessing Hazrat Haqq, reserved for the elite servants (Ibn Bazzaz Ardabili, 1376 Sh/1997, pp. 437–438). Rumi deems Imam Husayn and the martyrs of Karbala to be the denizens of the Paradise of Union with the Almighty, who, by shattering the cage of the material world, took an eternal flight to the alley of the Friend. Sayyid al-Shuhada is the radiant sun and the blossomed flower of the assembly of those united with the Beloved, for the root of the tree of his blessed existence has been enriched by the Divine Holy Essence.

{Out of the burning yearning of the heart, a cry arises,
That perchance the affliction of union may arrive from the presence of the Beloved.

The heart is like Husayn and separation is like Yazid;
It has been martyred a hundred times in the desert of Karbala and affliction.

Martyred in appearance, yet alive in the Unseen;
A captive in the eyes of the foe, yet a sovereign in reality.

Residing between Paradise and the Eden of union with the Friend,
Delivered from the narrow prison of hunger, dearness, and scarcity.

If the root of his tree were not firm within the majestic Unseen,
Why has the blossom of his union bloomed so publicly?

Be silent, and speak from the side of the speaking conscience,
So that the Universal Rational Soul may say to you: "Is it not so?"
(*Rumi, 1386 Sh/2007, Ghazal 230*)

2.2. Ghazal 2102: Annihilation in the Monotheism of Actions and the Yearning for Affliction

In Ghazal 2102 of the *Kulliyat-e Shams*, Rumi offers a brief yet profound allusion to the sublime principle of "annihilation in the monotheism of actions" (*Fana fi Tawhid*

al-Fi'li). He explains the mystery of why remaining or departing was identical to Husayn by stating that Husayn's will and action, through achieving the station of annihilation in the monotheism of actions, were consumed in Monotheism, leaving him entirely surrendered to the Divine will and decree (Safavi, 1385 Sh/2006).

Husayn and his martyred companions became acquainted with the realm of love by distancing themselves from selfish desires and aspirations. He is the devotee of the Beloved, and in this divine courtship, he offers his own blood to the threshold of the Beloved; for him, it is not a question of 'to be or not to be', but rather the principle is loving annihilation (cf. William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*). Husayn and those possessing Husayn-like attributes seek affliction, hardships, and existential trials, whereas the masses and the laggards flee from Divine destiny. In this ghazal, Rumi employs a comparative method to provide a better understanding of Husayn, the lovers of Husayn, and those "left behind" by the epic saga of Karbala.

{What is it to be acquainted with love?
It is naught but to be separated from the desire of the heart.

To become blood, to swallow one's own blood,
And to remain faithful like dogs at the door of fidelity.

He is a devotee, there is no difference to him,
Whether it be death, migration, or remaining here.

Go, O Muslim, be a shield for safety,
And strive to remain devout.

For these martyrs cannot endure without death;
They are in love with being annihilated.

You flee from destiny and affliction;
Their fear is to be without affliction.

Take up the flagon, for on the day of Ashura,
You lack the strength to be present in Karbala.}
(Rumi, 1384 Sh/2005, Ghazal 2102)

2.3. Ghazal 2707: The Flight of the Light-Winged Lovers and Celestial Kings in the Ocean of Existence

Rumi's loftiest and most celebrated ghazal regarding the grandeur and sublimity of the station of Husayn and the martyrs of Karbala is Ghazal 2707 of the *Kulliyat-e Shams*. The opening of the ghazal addresses the divine martyrs and affliction-seeking seekers of the "Karbala courtship", whilst its conclusion features a beautiful reference to the Perfect Man and the Promised Sun, who stands as witness and observer, serving as the ultimate source of the descent of Divine lights into the realm of contingent possibilities. *Take warning, then.*

In this ghazal, martyrs, lovers, and intellect are synonymous. By virtue of their existential detachment, "knowledge" (which is the prelude to love), and the "wings of passion", the martyrs fly higher and further than the birds of the air within the realm of the Friend, embodying: «يُدْبِقُهُمْ وَيُدْبِقُونَهُ» (*He loves them and they love Him*, Al-Ma'idah, 5:54). They are the kings of the realm of the Unseen who have unlocked the gates of hidden worlds through the aid of love. Amongst the secrets of their success in this loving flight is their liberation from the "various layers of the ego". By

undergoing annihilation and subsistence within the "Intellect of the intellect", they reside in the spaceless realm (*Na-Koja-Abad*). The Husayni intellect is an intellect that has conjoined with the Universal Intellect; illumined by the light of the "Light of Lights" (*Nur al-Anwar*), it has become a lordly intellect, unifying both the pragmatic intellect (*Aql-e Ma'ash*) and the eschatological intellect (*Aql-e Ma'ad*) (Safavi, 2007). From the fifth verse of this ghazal, Rumi expounds upon the relationship between the united martyrs and spiritual wayfarers. The liberation of the martyrs has exerted an existential effect on the liberation of other wayfarers, because by shattering the gates of the multi-layered prison of nature and their own egos, they have opened the portal to the treasury of Divine secrets. First negation, then affirmation: *La ilaha illa Allah, La ilaha illa Huwa* (Al-Baqarah, 2:255), *La ilaha illa Anta*. The martyrs—those united with the Beloved—and Husayn, their master and leader, are the melody of the destitute and the dervishes of the Friend's alley.

The Husayni martyrs dwell within the infinite ocean of existence of Hazrat Obligatory Being (*Wajib al-Wujud*), of Whose names and attributes this world is a manifestation: «هُوَ اللَّهُ الْخَالِقُ الْبَارِئُ الْمُصَوِّرُ لَهُ الْأَسْمَاءُ الْحُسْنَى» (*He is Allah, the Creator, the Inventor, the Shaper. To Him belong the most beautiful names...*, Al-Hashr, 59:24). They have been acquainted with Him since the Day of Alast: «أَلَسْتُ بِرَبِّكُمْ» قَالَوا بَلَىٰ (Am I not your Lord? They said, "Yes", Al-A'raf, 7:172). In the eighth verse, by referencing a principle of theoretical gnosticism—which deems the various worlds of the human realm (*Nasut*) to be naught within naught, hollow, fleeting, and mortal—Rumi summons humanity towards practical gnosticism. Then, as if conveying the message of Imam Husayn (as) himself, he proclaims: O pretenders, if you belong to our tribe and are of Karbala, become people of purity (*Safa*) and illuminate your hearts with the Divine light.

(Where are you, O divine martyrs?
O affliction-seekers of the plain of Karbala!

Where are you, O light-winged lovers,
Flying higher than the birds of the air?

Where are you, O celestial sovereigns,
Who know how to open the gates of heaven?

Where are you, O you who have escaped soul and place?
Who can ask the intellect: "Where are you?"

Where are you, O you who have broken the prison gates,
And granted deliverance to the debtors?

Where are you, O you who have opened the treasury door?
Where are you, O melody of the melodyless?

You are in that ocean of which this world is but the foam;
For a moment more, maintain your acquaintance.

The forms of the world are but the foam of the sea;
Pass beyond the foam if you are people of purity.

My heart foamed up as this text took shape;
Leave the form and advance to the heart, if you are of us.

Arise, O Shams-e Tabrizi, from the East,
For you are the source, the source, the source of every light.}
(Rumi, 1384 Sh/2005, Ghazal 2707)

3. Structural and Semantic Analysis of the Sixth Book of the Masnavi-ye Ma'navi

3.1. The Narrative of the Shi'ahs of Aleppo: Spiritual Genealogy and the Allegory of the "Ear and the Earring"

In the narrative of the Shi'ahs of Aleppo in the Sixth Book of the *Masnavi* (verses 777–805), Rumi delineates the spiritual grandeur, sublime lineage, and outstanding traits of Imam Husayn. He addresses the pathology of certain mourners of Husayn, maintaining that the sorrow and grief over the tragic event of Ashura and the martyrdom of Husayn are monumental for the true followers of the path of Truth and the Messenger of God, Hazrat Mustafa. For whosoever loves Hazrat Muhammad (pbuh) must also love Imam Husayn, as the Prophet stated: "*Husayn is from me and I am from Husayn.*" "The measure of the ear's love is the love for the earring"; he who loves the ear also loves the earring. Here, the "ear" is an allegory for Hazrat Muhammad (pbuh) and the "earring" is an allegory for Imam Husayn (as). According to believers, mourning and venerating the rituals of the "pure soul" of the Lord of Martyrs is more renowned than a hundred floods of Noah.

3.2. Pathology of Mourning and the Summons to Lament over the "Ruined Heart and Religion"

In verses 791 and 792, by emphasising the term "believer" (*Mu'min*) and the quality of its relationship with Husayn, Rumi introduces devotion (*Tawalla*) to Husayn and dissociation (*Tabarra*) from his enemies as signs of faith. He seems to have evaluated this phrase from Ziyarat Ashura: "*O Aba Abdillah, sublime is the sorrow and grand and great is the misfortune of your tragedy upon us and upon all the people of Islam.*" In these verses, the Imam is remembered by the terms "Royal Soul" (*Ruh-e Sultani*) and "Emperor" (*Shahan-e Shah*), which—considering Rumi's other poems and the context of the third discourse of the Sixth Book, of which this story is a part—denotes the "Sultan of Love" (Safavi, 1386 Sh/2007).

In another verse, the Imam is addressed as the "Sovereign of Religion" (*Khosrow-e Din*); Rumi has not addressed any of the companions or caliphs with this title. In his presentation, Imam Husayn is the supreme exemplar of the truthful, united lover. He is the "Sovereign of Religion" and the "Emperor of Lovers" who, by escaping the prison of the world, has found his way into the realm of the Unseen. Following this, Rumi summons certain mourners—who are leagues away from Husayni values—to weep over their own selves instead: do not weep for Husayn; rather, lament over your own ruined heart and faith that remain tethered to this base world. By enumerating the signs of religiosity—trust in God, self-sacrifice, detachment, spiritual prosperity, and spiritual generosity—Rumi responds to the false pretenders of religion whose existence lacks these traits: if you are Husayni and have imbibed the wine of divine love, why is there no trace of it observed in your actions and behaviour?

{Do you not know that the day of Ashura
Is a mourning for a soul that is better than an epoch?

How can this grief be minor to a believer?
The measure of the ear's love is the love for the earring.

To a believer, the mourning for that pure soul
Is more renowned than a hundred floods of Noah.}
(Rumi, Book Six, verses 790–793)

{Therefore, lament over yourselves, O ye sleepers,
For this heavy sleep is a wretched death.

The royal soul has escaped from a prison;
Why should we tear our garments and bite our hands?

Since they were the sovereigns of religion,
It is a time of joy when they broke their bonds.

They galloped towards the pavilion of good fortune,
And cast away the fetters and chains.

It is a day of sovereignty, joy, and emperorship,
If you possess an atom of awareness regarding them.

And if you are unaware, go and weep over yourself,
For you are in denial of the transition and the Resurrection.

Lament over your own ruined heart and faith,
Which beholds naught but this ancient dust.

If it beholds reality, why is it not brave,
Supportive, self-sacrificing, and satisfied of eye?

Where is the prosperity of the wine of religion in your face?
If you have beheld the Ocean, where is the generous hand?

He who has seen the stream does not begrudge water,
Especially he who has beheld that Ocean and the rain-cloud.}
(Rumi, Book Six, verses 795–805)

3.3. Ghazal 436 (181): Wayfaring Signs and Steadfastness in the Alley of Love

In Ghazal 436 of the Forouzanfar edition (corresponding to Ghazal 181 of Dr Towfiq Sobhani's edition), Rumi expresses other signs of true lovers: "eternal effervescence, tears of yearning, separation and union, vigilance (*Muraqabah*), inhaling the fragrance of the divine chalice, fidelity and assistance, seeking divine grace, asceticism, piety, and steadfastness". *May Allah grant us this sustenance.*

(He said: "Who is at the door?" I said: "Your humble servant."
He said: "What business have you?" I said: "O Moon, to greet you."

He said: "How long will you drive?" I said: "Until You call."
He said: "How long will you boil?" I said: "Until Resurrection."

I laid claim to love and swore oaths,
That for love, I have cast away kingdom and majesty.

He said: "For a claim, the judge demands a witness."
I said: "My tears are my witness, the paleness of my face the sign."

He said: "The witness is flawed, for your eye is moist."
I said: "By the splendour of Your justice, they are just and without fault."

He said: "Who was your companion?" I said: "Your phantom, O King."
He said: "Who summoned you hither?" I said: "The fragrance of Your chalice."

He said: "What is your resolve?" I said: "Fidelity and assistance."
He said: "What do you desire from me?" I said: "Your universal grace."

He said: "Where is it most pleasant?" I said: "The palace of Caesar."
He said: "What did you behold there?" I said: "A hundred miracles."

He said: "Why is it empty?" I said: "From fear of the highwayman."
He said: "Who is the highwayman?" I said: "This reproach."

He said: "Where is safety?" I said: "In asceticism and piety."
He said: "What is asceticism?" I said: "The path of safety."

He said: "Where is affliction?" I said: "In the alley of Your love."
He said: "How are you there?" I said: "In steadfastness."

Be silent, for if I were to utter His subtle points,
You would depart from yourself, leaving neither door nor roof.)
(Rumi, 1384 Sh/2005, Ghazal 436)

4. Spiritual Shi'ism and Alid Walayah in the Mirror of Contemporary Research

Amongst recent scholars, Ayatollah Jalal al-Din Homaei, in his *Mowlavi-Nameh*, emphasises Rumi's Shi'ism and his love for the Ahl al-Bayt:

"In the depth of Rumi's thoughts, beliefs, and utterances in the *Masnavi*, I have discerned an aspect of affection and support for Ali, the family of Ali, and the household of the Holy Prophet (blessings of Allah be upon them all) that can be aligned with the foundation and primary basis of Shi'ism in the general sense of the word. Throughout his discourse, he refers to the station of the Absolute Divine Guardianship (*Walayah*) of Hazrat Amir al-Mu'minin Ali (peace be upon him), and in the First Book of the *Masnavi*, he calls the 'Sabtayn'—meaning Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn (peace be upon them both)—the earrings of the Divine Throne" (Homaei, 1374 Sh/1995, pp. 51–58).

{Since Morthada shed pearls from his face,
He became the Lion of God in the meadow of the soul.

Since the Sabtayn were aware of his secret,
They became the earrings of the Lordly Throne.}

4.1. The Approach of Renowned Western Rumi Scholars regarding Imamatus and the Perfect Human

Professor William Chittick, the renowned Rumi scholar and student of Sayyid Jalal al-Din Ashtiani, has likewise elucidated Rumi's devotion to Imam Husayn in an article entitled "Rumi's View of the Imam Husayn" (Chittick, 2008).

Dr Shahram Pazouki, an eminent professor of Islamic philosophy and mysticism, has demonstratively proven Rumi's adherence to Alid *Walayah* and Spiritual Shi'ism in two independent articles; the first in the *Transcendent Philosophy Journal* in London (Pazouki, 2003) and the second presented at the International Rumi Conference in Tehran (November 2007).

Dr Tabandeh and Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr have also contributed papers on the foundational interconnection between mysticism and Shi'ism, published in the volume *Rumi Spiritual Shi'ism*. Furthermore, Professor Henry Corbin argues that mysticism is fundamentally a Shi'ite path, because it is predicated upon the theory of the Perfect Man, and the Perfect Man is identical to the principle of the Imam in Shi'ism.

5. Summary and Research Findings

From Rumi's perspective, martyrs are lovers, and Imam Husayn (as) is the master, leader, and king of martyrs. By trampling upon the commanding self (*Nafs al-Ammarah*), the martyrs liberated themselves from selfishness and worldly desires, became annihilated in Hazrat Haqq, and attained the station of subsistence.

The key concepts outlined at the beginning of this article delineate the intellectual geography, epistemological geometry, and existential galaxy of Imam Husayn in the view of Mawlana Jalal al-Din Balkhi Khurasani; *take warning, then, O ye with eyes.*

{Inwardly like the Universal Intellect, outwardly like a basket of roses;

At one moment the inspiration of the command "Say", at another the honour of "We gave thee".}

(Rumi, 1384 Sh/2005, from Ghazal 54)

{Maimed (*Abtar*) is his enemy, and his office shall not remain;

How can a mote remain in the eye if it falls therein?}

(Rumi, 1384 Sh/2005, from Ghazal 1211)

O Allah, grant me the intercession of Husayn on the Day of Entrance, and make firm for me a truthful foothold with Thee alongside Husayn and the companions of Husayn—those who sacrificed their lifeforce for the sake of Husayn, peace be upon him.

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