

The Reed Laments: Ecology in Muslim Thought

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Listen to the reed-flute, the story it tells!
How it complains of separation

Ever since I was torn from the reed-bed,
My sighs have moved men and women to tears

Only a heart that is ripped apart, pieces-pieces with loss
Can relate, and grasp the depth of desire's pain

Those torn from their Origin
Yearn wistfully for return

Rumi's famous *Masnavi-e-Ma'navi* begins thus with the "Song of the Reed." Perhaps the most quoted, studied and imbibed poetic verses in Muslim tradition, this powerful opening is commonly interpreted as the quintessential mirror of the soul's pain in separation from the beloved, and its desire to return to a state of divine union. Indeed, to guide us to the divine is the main purpose of *The Masnavi*, the reason why it has been studied for centuries as a text of profound moral and religious insight, the reason it has been called the central text of *tasawwuf* or Islamic mystical thought in Sufi worlds.

I begin this paper on ecology and capitalism in Muslim poetics,¹ by reveling in Rumi's opening metaphor for a moment. Here, I am continuing my work on mankahat/poetic

¹ Muslim poetics is an expanding, amorphous terrain, being carved by a series of studies in history, sociology, cultural studies and Islamic humanities on the power of the poetic in Muslim lifeworlds. I use Muslim and Sufi interchangeably in this paper, to escape the orientalizing tendency of thinking Sufi worlds outside Islam and Muslim thought. At the same time, I recognize the vast non-religious domain of the poetic in Muslim societies, i.e. not all Muslim poetics is linked to Islamic belief or Sufi worldviews. There is an immense body of work, including translations of philosophical

knowledge in the Muslim tradition (Ali 2016), where poetic knowledge exceeds the English sense of “poetry,” encompassing a mode of feeling, being and doing in the world centered in the heart-mind. This lived sense of poetic being is at once radical and spiritual, political, and personal. By conversing with the work of first Rumi and later Baba Farid in this paper, I strive to re-read poetic knowledge in Islam and excavate its emancipatory possibilities in relation to ecology and social justice.

My desire is to raise a set of interconnected concerns: What lies beyond the spiritual in Muslim/Sufi poetics? How did Sufi word and practice introduce a radical rethinking of social-ecological relations of production? Is there space to imagine a radical politics that believes, i.e. does not shun the “sacred” as understood through a normative, cynical lens? By articulating and engaging with a poetic-historical understanding of ecology and society within Sufi imaginaries, I wish to shed light on broader concerns within the fields of environmental humanities, political ecology and Muslim poetics.

Sacred Cry, Sacred Grief

In the first thirty lines of *The Masnavi*, Rumi draws attention to the magical sound and effect of the *ney*, the reed-flute. Where is its music coming from and what causes its beauty? He ponders, and suggests that the source is the reed plant. It is the plant’s agony of separation, its deep cry, grief, and lament, that inspires the reed-flute’s charm and power. Yet the pain of the reed plant remains inaudible to the listeners who are busy reveling at a flute performance. As Rumi goes on to state, the power of the *ney* lies in the instrument’s own *aatish-e-ishq*—a “fire of love” hidden in its belly—the reed’s shattering desire for and memory of the reed-field, a

theology or *kalaam*, that I find significant in understanding the overlapping poetic, historical and spiritual discourses in Muslim cultures. See, for example, Schimmel (1982), Bashir (2011) and Ernst (2018).

shattering literally visible in the hole-filled, shredded body of the flute itself. Rumi refers to this fire of desire as the *sirr/asrar* (secrets) of the *ney*, and uses it to explain the soul's hidden existence and cry in the body. He reminds that the *jaan* and *tan*—soul and the body—are as enmeshed together as the reed plant's cry in the flute, both only visible and hearable to those with a discerning eye and ear. Indeed, the body is made of the soul's parting from the absolute, just like the flute is made of the reed's separation from its reed-bed. The real story of our being is symbolized by that of the reed-flute: both long to be with their essence. Indeed, the very sweetness of the flute stems from the fact that the flute is the quintessential lover, its reed embodying, remembering, and crying for its original roots, and this is what bestows in the instrument its power. The ney-flute is in search of like-hearted seekers, lovers like itself, whose bosoms too are torn to bits; lovers who might feel its story, to whom it might narrate its pain, with whom it can grieve, and perhaps together find their way.

In a majestic, mystical metaphor, Rumi raises the ney-flute quite literally to an instrument of divine truth. Beyond the sheer beauty of this literary aesthetic and spirito-poetic symbolism, the socio-political power of the metaphor is also significant. The place of music in Islamic religious belief has long been disputed in many parts of the Muslim world. Rumi's *Masnavi* could not be clearer in solidifying the centrality and sacredness of music in Muslim thought-practice. Later, he says beautifully that the flute has the lover at one end and the divine on the other, its sound the revealer of truths, its effect moving human hearts precisely because it is made of divine love. The divine aspect of music is reflected by this ability to stir the heart, to inspire and feel pain, to bring our inner emotions to the surface—all necessary for self-knowing. Elsewhere in *The Masnavi*, Rumi suggests that the voice of the reed-flute is the voice of the divine itself speaking to us, reminding us of the truth of our cosmic being. In Rumi's *Masnavi*,

thus, the flute is transformed into the archetypical lover, reimagined as the companion of all those cut off from their beloved, and a lasting metaphor for the cry of the soul in a human body.

Lately, because of my work in ecology, I have begun to see Rumi's opening lines in a different light. Is the cry of the soul also the cry of the earth?

بانسری سے سن کیا بیان کرتی ہے
جدائیوں کی کیا شکایت کرتی ہے

*bansri se sun kia bayaan karti hai
judaiyonn ki kia shikayat karti hai*

Listen to the reed-flute, what story it tells
and how it complains of separation from the reed-bed

The straightforward and remarkably precise meaning is also a brutal one, one that has stunning ecological significance. What is being highlighted is a *shikayat*, a complaint and a grievance of the reed-flute, against its severance from its natural abode. Consider what all is being said in the first few lines. The process of producing the flute from the destruction of the reed plant is being made visible; the “beautiful” sound of the flute is explained as literally the pain of the reed in separation; the trauma of the reed is what produces the heartfelt notes that moves humans to cry; human tears in response to the flute are experienced through, and indeed, originate in the reed's tears; the flute-player is not the agent of music but the reed-plant itself, voicing its own, unheard stories, through the flute and the performer; too consumed by their own consumptive woes, humans still do not feel the anguish of the reed-flute. Rumi goes on in the next few lines to say that the reed's viewpoint is inherent everywhere but it remains hidden, a secret, its grief and longing invisible.

As I have discussed earlier, there can be no mistake that Rumi's use of the reed-flute is a sacred call to heed the hidden cries of the soul veiled within the body. Indeed, the reed-flute's

lament pointedly ends by saying exactly this: the body and the soul are not concealed from each other, yet the soul remains invisible, unacknowledged.

While recognizing the sacred meaning and intent of Rumi, I wish to offer that Sufi poets did not choose metaphors randomly. The metaphors too, have a politics; the political is embedded in the poetic. Sufis drew from ordinary people's experiences, from women's work, from nature, often embodying the voice of women especially in South Asia, the voice of birds and other animals as we see in Attar and Ikhwan-e-Safa, and in Rumi's case, musical instruments and the plants that make them. I want to suggest, playfully today, that we take the metaphorical in Rumi's opening as real. That these most beloved, popular verses of Muslim poetry appear to me as ecologically revolutionary.

To me, Rumi's poem feels more about exploitation than just the tale of love and separation from the divine. It bears profound witness to nature's suffering. In causing the suffering of nature, man himself becomes separated from the beloved/nature, to which he longs to be part of once again. From a contemporary perspective, the poem is quintessential post-humanist political ecology, a form of anti-capitalist critique which makes visible the agency of nature, offering a way to imagine a new (old) environmental humanities.²

In this cosmology of nature, the reed plant and humans are connected with the same life-force and are mutually constituted. Do we hear the reed's lament? Rumi asked this in the twelfth century, and his magnum opus starts with this very inquiry. Hinting at the solution, he seemed to say the reed's lament has to become our own lament.

In taking the metaphor seriously, we arrive at a poetic-ecological cry, a powerful mode of understanding human-nature relations. I could not help but connect Rumi's poem to Marx's

² See Nash (2005) for an illuminating discussion on the notion of agency, history-writing and nature.

poetic rendering of the story of capital. In his powerful treatise on commodity fetishism, Marx writes about how a wooden table, in a market-based society, invisibilizes, erases, and silences the human labor that has actually produced the table, as capitalist society reduces a table to a mere thing, a commodity, an object of exchange through money. Value begins to appear as a natural property of the product, not the producer. Marx describes this process as “metaphysical” and “mysterious,” a process that conceals the real story. Rumi is also talking about such a process of erasure, but he has a different story. He is emphasizing that the wood in itself is value, and the tree/reed-bed from which the wood comes is the source of essential value, a primary existential source. Is Marx treating wood as a thing? Rumi seems to be saying this: What are often reduced to the given, material resources of nature, are also living, breathing sources of value, just like labor. This is not about mutual interdependence, but rather a powerful equivalence, and recognition of how insignificant and insufficient the human story is—labor or capital—without the being of plants, trees, and eco-diversity. In a way, Rumi is highlighting how the natural has been silenced and erased in the making of the social (systems and thought); he is urging us to go back to our origins, and realign with true nature.

While Marx understood well the devastation of nature and the metabolic rift at the level of soil that capitalist society was introducing, Rumi is speaking directly the voice of nature: the reed, the plant-bed, the table and the flute, the soil/soul. I see both how they complement each other and are fundamentally in contrast. My desire is to open up space to recognize this radical potential and eco-pedagogy of Sufi poetics. It is a radical potential that believes, and does not have a cynical approach to the sacred. Rumi is unfathomable without the core teachings of Islam; he is poetry, ecology, and revolutionary truth. Rumi’s language, method, and intent are religio-spiritual but the effects have simultaneous socio-political significance. A spiritual subjectivity

and mystically-grounded epistemology form the essence of his approach. Is that not a key reason why his being and word commands such lasting presence and resonance? Can we engage with it and see it on its own terms, as a poetic mode of being and a lens on truth?

***Faqeeri*: A Poetics of Asceticism**

I now turn my attention to Baba Farid, another revered and revolutionary Muslim medieval saint and a founding figure in Punjabi Sufi poetry. To understand Farid's challenge to capital, I turn first to *faqeeri*.

Nothing threatens capitalism more than *faqeeri*—the willful life of ascetic spirituality, poverty and material rejection. I prefer the term rejection over renunciation, because renouncing is a giving up and rejecting is a going against. In discourses on Sufi devotion, it is often readily assumed that the saints were renouncers who were too busy in their mystical mantras to care about the material world. This way of seeing “spirituality” reduces spirituality to some ethereal, esoteric domain opposed to real life, emptying it of its social, political, material, and ecological significance. This way does not ask: what precisely did *faqeeri* as a mode of living entail, and what was it going against?

Asceticism as a spiritual practice has a long and diverse history in South Asia that cuts across religious and regional divides. What unites these asceticisms is a rejection of worldly power, possession and accumulation—an anti-materialism that directly challenges the logics of self-interest, property, and profit. The ecological significance of this anti-materialism cannot be emphasized enough, as it offered a vision of life that was far more sustainable as well as equitable. In modern terms, *faqeeri* is the very antithesis of development.

From a world-historical perspective on power, inequality and ecology, perhaps no poet captures the political significance of *faqeer* more than Baba Farid Ganj-e-Shakar (1173-1266), a renowned Sufi master of the Chishtia order or *silsila* as well as a revered Sikh *bhagat*. Farid was born in Kothewal, which today falls in the Punjab region of Pakistan, and is located ten kilometers away from the city of Multan. He famously leaves the majestic lure of Delhi and settles in the remote forested area of Ajodhan, now known as Pakpattan in Pakistani Punjab. He is living at a time when Muhammad Ghori is establishing his rule in Multan through military campaigns, the Mongol attacks are ravaging Punjab, and the Delhi Sultanate is emerging as a seat of power in the region. Against this backdrop, Farid is quietly practicing and preaching his message—not in Arabic and Persian with which he is well-versed, but in his mother tongue of Punjabi.

He says:

*Fareeda iknaan aata aglaa, iknaan nahen laon
agi ga-ay sinjaapsan, choTaan khaasee ka-on*

O Fareed, some have lots of flour, while others do not even have salt
When they go beyond this world, it shall be seen, who will be injured

And again:

*Roti meri kaṭh di, lawan meri bhukh
Jina khadi chopadi, ghane sehenge dukh*

My bread is of wood, which is enough to quench my hunger,
But the one who feasts on buttered breads, will eventually suffer

Farid's critique of inequality here is sharp and damning. He allies himself with the poor, with the common people who barely have enough to eat instead of those who indulge in lavish feasts. Farid's favoring of *faqr/faqeer* (poverty) is consistent with the Sufi teachings of the time. Yet, instead of merely reflecting a seeker's individual orientation in the quest for God, in Farid's

poetry the strong rejection of grandiose living and the emphasis on simplicity becomes a trenchant call for egalitarianism. Fareed exhorts, in his characteristic style of speaking to his own self:

*Fareeda mandap maal nah laa-ay, marag sataanee chit dhar
saa ee jaa-ay samhaal, jithai hee ta-o vanjaa*

O Fareed, do not focus on mansions and wealth;
Center your consciousness on death, your powerful enemy.
Remember the place where you must go.³

The reminder of death and the eternal—a motif of all spiritual thought—is decisively linked in Farid with a life against greed and exhibitionism. This ascetic life is not just an idea that Farid rhetorically propounds in his poetry. Rather, his practice of life is an embodiment of his word, making his speech and action as one. Like Rumi, Farid’s poetic oeuvre is filled with the pathos of separation. But while a call to love and piety were no doubt central in spiritual attainment and formed subjects of his poetry, for Farid it mattered equally how one materially lives life in the social context.

From what is known and remembered of the life of Baba Farid, we learn that he was a person of few possessions, that he slept on the floor and so did his visitors, and that he ate the same simple fare that was offered at his langar—a shared, open kitchen serving free food for the needy and all guests irrespective of faith. The tradition of langar is found across Sufi dargahs and later Sikh gurdwaras in South Asia, but is often traced to the Chishtia saints in particular and especially to Baba Farid. In the caste-ridden context of 12th century India where even the mere shadow of a Dalit was seen as polluting upper castes, the institutionalized practice of sitting together and sharing the same meal was a revolutionary act. It challenged untouchability, the

³ Poetic text and translations from Maqsood and Faiza (2005).

strongest taboo and form of oppression that was central to the orthodox Hindu-Brahminical order, creating instead a new collective and community-space—*jamaat khana*—based on equal human dignity, service and solidarity.

Alongside the sharing of food in this *jamaat khana*, it is also remembered that everything that Farid received from his followers in terms of offerings or gifts was distributed immediately, and nothing was kept for the following day. As Maqsood and Faiza highlight in their introduction to *Hymns of Baba Fareed Shakar Ganj* (2005), the ethos of this Faridian community was on wealth distribution and not wealth accumulation. We need to pause and ponder about the radical import of this ascetic practice. It is not that capitalism as we know and theorize existed in the twelfth century. But the social differences of class and caste did, as did a rising economy centered on money.

By embracing shared poverty, equality and anti-accumulation as the very essence of religion, Farid's poetry and practice of asceticism was countering the ideals of hierarchy, ownership and commercialism. Today, I would say that it was also offering a profound vision for a just and sustainable development, one that is respectful of the earth as habitat of multiple species. It thus represented a political intervention, and an early fight against a destructive capitalism built on notions of "progress." Saints and seers like Farid were reconfiguring society to address both the forms of discrimination that already existed, and the systems of possession that were beginning to emerge. Indeed, in his action, Farid exemplified and even exceeded what he advocated in his poetic word—and therein lies the reason for his immortality.

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