

The Heteroglossic Rumi on New Media vis-à-vis Sufism

Gopashis Biswas G.Son¹

Abstract

Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rumi, a thirteenth century Persian Sufi mystic and refugee poet, has become the internet's 'Wiseman' after long 800 years since he had last trodden the earth in minstrel promenades. Many a time, Rumi's quotes in its ambiguous translations inundate the algorithmic social media feeds as it has found global sensation and greater consumerist appeal. As the new media enable its netizens to put voices over voices by re/sharing or exploiting any form of codes (image, text, gif etc.) on social media platforms, constant shifts of purposes and meanings of the codes have become crucial to understand how the new media have been shaping this mode of communication which in this case are translated quotes of Rumi. This paper, thus, leverages netnographic observations and content analysis to shed light on the sum of possibly produced meanings and the essence of Rumi that is understood and consumed globally on social media today. The paper contends that on this modern digital public sphere, i.e., the social media, Rumi's quotes delve into the Bakhtinian heteroglossic tension and Barthesian mythology that helps his poetry become liberated from the centripetal force for meaning (e.g. solitude, retreat, frugality, communion etc.) and provide with divergent netizens manifested voices and interpretations.

Key words

Rumi, new media, heteroglossia, Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtin, Sufism.

Introduction

This age of web 2.0 has seen an unprecedented growth in the active participation of users of social media. It not only enables people to get connected to each other but also enables literatures, contents, information, perceptions, and opinions to be disseminated to a greater audience than ever before. Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rumi (1207-1273) is perhaps the

¹ Lecturer, Department of English, Sheikh Hasina University, Netrokona 2400

most popular Sufi poet on the internet today and he is revered as the internet's 'Wiseman' for his words that have been widely spread through their arguably ambiguous translations. Starting from Rabia Basri (714/717/718-801) to Fariduddin Attar (1145-1221), Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rumi, Shamsuddin Muhammad Hafiiz (1315-1390), Omar Khayyam (1048-1131) - all have written extensively on the theme of love which has monolithically been interpreted as devotional love - a kind of love that is solely meant for God (Ahmed 96). However, it is Rumi's quotes and verses (in translation) that inundate today's algorithmic social media feeds more than the other Sufi poets which might have been initiated by Coleman Barks' interpretive translation of Rumi's poetry *The Essential Rumi* (1995) (Ciabattari <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20140414-america's-best-selling-poet>). On Facebook, different pages sharing contents on and of Rumi have engaged over 400,000 fans while on Twitter, several accounts doing the same have drawn over 300,000 followers (Rumi Quotes; The Rumi; @Rumi Quote). This not only marks Rumi's immense popularity on new media but also unravels a complex situation where the Barthesian *signified* gets refracted through the *signifiers* – which, in this case, are the widely spread Rumi's verses.

While in primary speculation, people can find that many of these verses of Rumi which run on the social media delineate love between two entities - where the nature of the allegories and metaphors involved in the verses make it valid for both *human and human* as lovers and *human and God* as lovers. This duality of senses leads to an ambiguity which gets further convoluted when the verses (sometimes with an image/text added to the post) shared on the social media pages get shared/reshared, tweeted/retweeted by netizens - sometimes with captions (texts and emojis) as per their choice. The process thus provides voices over the given voices and the meanings, i.e., the *signifieds* get mis/dis-placed in the process. Again, based on culture and dialogic relations, the voices (verses) may get applied divergently by the netizens. Thus, a very basic question may strike to the mind of the virtual dwellers - do Rumi's Sufi verses only signify the love between human and God or do they encompass the environ and holistic love experiences of humanity. Do they surpass the frontiers of religion or are they confined? And secondly, do new media

and its netizens somehow contribute to the meaning making/liberating process of the shared verses?

In this paper, I disentangle the arrived complex situation of divergent impressions that Rumi's poetry provides dwelling to a netizen as a reader on the internet and consuming online contents that appear algorithmically to him/her. The focus of this essay is to analyze how Rumi's voice gets refracted multiculturally on the social media and excels in the essential theme of religious borders through the process. As contents of the social media pages about Rumi are open for accessing by any netizen regardless of his/her gender, caste, creed or religion, it is needless to say that these platforms democratize the dissemination, motion and intent of the shared verses that we can find on these platforms. It, thus, liberates the verses of Rumi to readers from all religious backgrounds. Even though, these poetry might have been composed keeping in mind only specific audience, i.e., the Muslims that adhere to the beliefs of Sufism; through their continuous refraction and negotiation on the democratic virtual platforms, the verses achieve broader reach, greater appeal and wider array of 'unintended' audience with continuously shifting meanings. The process, thus, paves path for the verses to get liberated from the shackles of author-intended *centripetal force*.

The paper is divided into three parts - in the first part, I analyze the expressions of devotional love and experience that can be found in Rumi's quotes existent on the social media pages; in the second part, I analyze and explore how new media in a Bakhtinian way has liberated the quotes or verses and how the manifold aspects of the *voices of the verses* and *voices over the voices of the verses* are engendered that spatio-temporally resonate with a contextual humane appeal and significance. Finally, I argue that the essence of Rumi's verses, even in its ambiguous translations, when projected on social media platforms, are perceived, interpreted and negotiated simultaneously that it evades any monolithic *centripetal* meaning and becomes immensely universal in the process.

Theoretical Framework

In his 1935 essay titled "Discourse in the novel," Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) introduced the concepts of dialogic relation, polyphony, and

heteroglossia. Here he differentiates between epic and novel and defines the genre of novel which incorporates multiple, distinctive forms of language and dialects within its artistic parameter. Bakhtin comes up with his idea of polyphon and heteroglossia by posing a stark difference between novel and its predecessor genre epic that is able to incorporate only one voice or linguistic form. From the divergence of unitary voice and its multiplicity under different contexts, Bakhtin contends novel as a democratic form where the characters of the novel are able to participate in dialogues and, therefore, a dialogic tension is seen to prevail throughout this form. For such, it sets up a platform – a mass culture where manifold voices along with the marginalized ones can be heard with their dominant ones. Similarly, when contents such as, texts, images, gifs etc. are shared on the social media platforms, it too acts as a space that enables divergent and sidelined voices to be heard in the presence of the stronger one namely, the *centripetal force* in Bakhtinian diction.

The initial notion of this paper comes from the Bakhtinian theory of heteroglossia and Barthesian idea of *mythology*. Heteroglossia can be defined as the concurrent coexistence of different variations of ‘languages’ within a single ‘language.’ Here this different variations of languages is different from the general conception of languages; such as, English, Spanish, or Bengali. According to Bakhtin, the ‘language’ gets reoriented whenever people change their way, mode, or nature of speech due to their socio-cultural circumstances. As a result, divergent languages are manifested from just a single one. To unravel the notion of heteroglossia, it can be said that it occurs in under multiple terms and shifts the voice correspondingly. For instance, when a voice is uttered by a character which is originally the voice of the author of the text, the voice gets refracted. Due to the refractions, the meanings too get shifted continuously. Moreover, the voices or the languages of the characters become different based on their socio-cultural contexts. As a result, the voices or languages fall under the Bakhtinian dialogic tension and the same language or voice also provides multiple voices simultaneously in the process. As per Bakhtin, any language (or voice) may get diverged into many languages or voices based on

social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions” (262-63). In his words, heteroglossia is “another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way (263).

In his 1957 book *Mythologies*, the French theorist Roland Barthes observes the shift of the meanings in language. He inspects the socio-cultural importance in order to construct modern *myth*, also known as Barthesian *myth*. Making advancement to Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1857-1913) system of sign, Barthes develops a secondary layer on top of the idea of sign that the other Frenchmen, linguists and precursors of semiotics had come up with. Hence, the modern academia landed on the notion of Barthesian myth.

1. <i>signifier</i>	2. <i>signified</i>		
3. <i>sign</i> I SIGNIFIER		II SIGNIFIED	langue
III SIGN			myth

Figure 1: Semiological model of myth in Barthes’s *Mythologies* adapted from: Barthes, Ronald. *Mythologies*. Hill and Wang, 1972.

In the Saussurean semiotic structure of sign-signifier-signified, the sign refers to the object assigned with a meaning of some sort. The meaning which it homes might have landed there in a most arbitrary way but will obviously denote a meaning that has an acceptance for at least a certain group or platform. Thus, we get meaningful signs that derive from the unison of signifier and signified. Signifier refers to the word or image or icon that gives the meaning that gives a physical shape to the mental concept which as per the Sassurean framework is noted as the signified.

Barthes decided to add one more layer to this seminal framework by Saussure which indicts that the sign in the first layer can turn into a signifier in a second layer. This next layer of meaning is evolved in a societal context. In the present paper's case, this second layer proves out to be intensely interesting and critically crucial due to the continuous interactions of those in the social media homes each second. The netizens constantly engage with signifiers that stand for certain signs which also get interpreted and dyed with newer meanings continuously and distinct connotations are engendered within this cycle. It can be compared to the classroom fun game called the *telephone game* where the same codes or messages are being passed from one student to another told by hushing to the ears. Each time it passes one student a newer understanding, a newer perspective is gained, understood and interpreted. As the social media allow us to add images, texts, emojis as per our choices and feelings towards any authored signifiers circulating on the algorithmic feeds, it provides the next person to interpret the signifiers in a distinctive manner (G. Son, Migration Memes & Social Gaze).

Methodology

Focusing on the active communication process that takes place on the new media, this paper aims to investigate the shift of perceptions, meanings, and purposes of Rumi's Sufi verses on the online platforms while providing a range of semiotic escape from the monolithic *centripetal* value that it is primarily believed to have. With a view to comprehending and interpreting how these verses become Barthesian myths and fall under heteroglossic tension, the primary data, i.e., the select verses as online contents are gleaned from Facebook and Twitter - two of the most popular social media platforms on the internet today. This paper takes two sample quotes from the two most liked pages on Facebook titled "Rumi" (406k+ followers), "Rumi Quotes" (420k+ followers) sharing quotes, verses and contents on/of Rumi. Adding to these, this paper also analyzes a meme on the monolithic perception of certain community that has been viral in recent times. The meme has been shared from multiple pages but for this study, it considers the meme as a posted content of the Twitter account named "@saadabdulhai." As the meme shared from this account has received a huge public engagement, this is more feasible for the argument

of the paper. Through a short netnography, I choose 3 trending contents from the abovementioned Facebook and Twitter pages and provide both textual and content analysis of them. To understand the implications of netnography, we must look at Robert V. Kozinet's seminal work titled *Netnography: Redefined* (2015). As "online communities form or manifest cultures, the learned beliefs, values and custom that serve to order, guide and direct the behavior of a particular society or group" this methodology is significant for this paper in order to explore the dynamics and reception of the verses of Rumi (in translation) (Kozinet 19). It helps us to understand "technologically mediated interactions" of the netizens towards these contents (Kozinet 24).

By incorporating the methodology of content analysis, this paper seeks to explore the entanglements of liberated multiplicity of meanings and an existing heteroglossic tension within the contextual parameters of these contents. With the help of the theoretical frameworks of Barthesian *mythology* and Bakhtinian heteroglossia, this paper executes the content analysis.

Exploration of Love in Rumi's "The King and the Handmaiden and the Doctor"

In Rumi's significant book *Mathnawi* (trans.), we find an ecstatic poem titled "The King and the Handmaiden and the Doctor" (trans.) that delineates how the prevailing and colossal fell in love with a beautiful handmaiden and by vigor made her his own. But sadly, this handmaiden was in love with a goldsmith. Thus when taken to his palace, the maiden fell sick. The king called doctors and asks, "You have both our lives in your hands. Her life is my life. Whoever heals her will receive the finest treasure I have, the coral inlaid with pearls—anything" (Rumi). Each doctor who claimed their profound knowledge to successfully cure the maiden ignoring the Power of God's will, utterly failed. With each attempt, the situation of the maiden got nothing but worse and pale. Upon the letdown of all the proud physicians, the king pleaded for a divine interference. God then granted him with a mystical healer. The healer identified that the maiden had been suffering from the ailment of soul, i.e., the sickness of love. The king then commanded to execute the goldsmith

in order to make the maiden realize that her love was indeed superficial. There is a part of this long poem where the mystical healer came up with a potion which is compared to the divine order given to Abraham to sacrifice his son to the Lord. These affairs are not to be understood on the surface but to be realized deeply in the light of the divine unity.

There are some overlapping themes that often have been encountered by the readers or consumers while interpreting Rumi's poetry. It is quite usual to find an ambiguous and sometimes even controversial nature of love in his poetry; such as, "love between unconventional partners, contravening the societal norms, religious norms, traditions, cultures and code of conduct" (Mizan 150). Among the themes based on love, the distant love, the excruciating pain of the lover are commonly communicated. While talking about love, Rumi hardly makes direct reference to God which makes Rumi's language subtly ambiguous which can get interpreted and refracted in the manifold of meanings. This characteristic, thus, enables Rumi's verses and quotes easily to become the Barthesian modern *myth*. Upon the dissemination of the verses on the social media platforms, the *signifieds* engages in a constant shift and modification and unravels distinctive notion to each individual on the internet who engages with that particular content.

The Heteroglossic Rumi on New Media

Originally coined as 'ranorechie' in Russian by Mikhail Bakhtin, the translated term heteroglossia refers to the simultaneous presence of multiple voices or viewpoints in a single discourse or language or code, as it becomes "another's speech in another's language" (Bakhtin 276). He contends that the living utterances are unable to evade the "brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness" that transforms it into "an active participant in social dialogue" (276-77).

Jannis Androutsopoulos (1967-), a modern linguist further develops this notion of heteroglossia by including the concept of "social actors who have woven voices of society into their discourses" that "contrast[s] these voices and social viewpoints they stand for" in the former place (Androutsopoulos 282). He puts emphasis on the concurrent deviating

ideas that are channeled by the language of the speech or voice, and the social reactors that it is complemented with. Androutsopoulos explicates that “heteroglossia invites us to examine contemporary new media environments as sites of tension and contrast between linguistic resources, social identities, and ideologies” (Androutsopoulos 283).

Now firstly, I would like to present the internet meme that led to this research. Shared on Twitter on August 7, 2020, the meme has already got 3.4K retweets, 241 Quote tweets and 7.4K likes.



Figure 2: The viral internet meme posing a monolithic attitude towards Rumi’s poetry from: @saadabdulhai (Haram Police). “My poetry is about Allah.” *Twitter*. 7 Aug. 2020, 7.04 p.m., <https://twitter.com/saadabdulhai/status/1291721932816121857/photo/1>. Accessed 14 November 2020.

Ceasar in her 2020 essay “From Meme to ‘Myth’: A Journey Through Heteroglossic Tension” shows how internet meme has become a prevailing medium to express one’s opinion while evading the modern panopticons. Perhaps the monolithic application of Rumi’s poetry, i.e., his

poetry is written solely to express devotional love in a religious way obstructs any sort of literary interpretations. But when they become contents on the algorithmic social media platforms they are read and interpreted in manifold ways which as they become Barthesian myths. Added to it, the content also pursues a journey within the heteroglossic tension where it has got the centripetal force that is the authorial monolithic fixed meaning while the refracted voices when the content is reshared or retweeted becomes the centrifugal forces. Apart from 3.4K retweets, the content has got 241 quote tweets where the refracted voice gets further modified with added discourse and attitude and when it reaches the third person, the third person receives a different language from it. Thus a series of negotiation is ongoing even in this case. While surveying the reshared contents, many of the added discourses adhere the notion and some ridicule it while others made different purposes of the notion. But it is a common phenomenon that Rumi's quotes in their ambiguous translations are often applied in common life, humane love and affairs. This meme, thus, centripetally ridicules those applications. Stemming my working thesis from this meme, I have studied more contents and come up with the notion of universal application of the Rumi's verses in their ambiguous translations. Two of the case studies and their content analysis will help us to comprehend the argument that this paper makes.



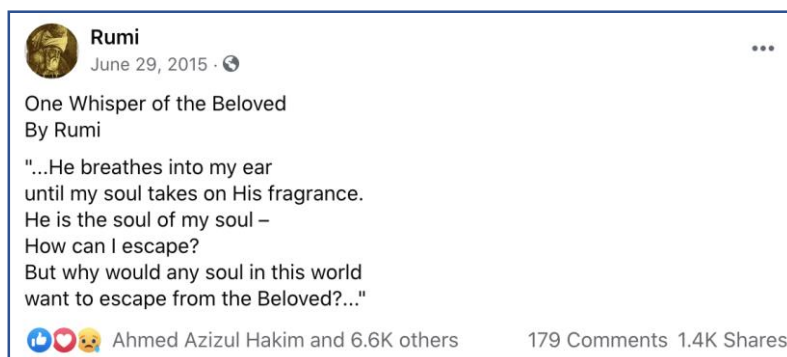


Figure 3 & 4: Rumi's verses from "The King and the Handmaiden and the Doctor" (trans.) from: Rumi Quotes. "Love sickness is different." *Facebook*. 22 Sep. 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/rumiquotesofficial/photos/a.1671611759530847/4846213498737308>. Accessed 21 Nov. 2020; "One Whisper of the Beloved" (trans.) from: Rumi. "One Whisper of the Beloved." *Facebook*. 29 Jun. 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/rumiworld/posts/10153053332118877>. Accessed 21 Nov. 2020.

When these contents are shared on the social media platforms, primarily, two sites of struggle in the meaning making process can be noticed. We can either consider Rumi as the author (the original author of the verses) or the page-holder as the author (creator of the post on the page) of the verse. In case of the first scenario, the voices (verses of Rumi) get refracted when the page-holder puts it as an online content. Then, this refraction can again be refracted when a netizen reshapes the content from that page to his/her contextual parameter. In the second scenario, by considering the content creator as the author of the content (not the text), when netizen shares to disseminate it to his/her contextual parameter, then it gets refracted. Thus, a continuous multiplicity of voices are present in the single language, i.e., in this case the verses of Rumi. Now, each of the refracted voices shifts based on the social, cultural, political and ideological conditions and preferences of the sharer. Whenever the contextual parameters consist of humane affair, love, religiosity, literary criticism or anything else, the verses provide an umbrella for each purpose

accordingly and become a site of dialogic tension. Thus, based on the contextual parameter, i.e., the sharers' and viewers' socio-cultural and ideological contexts, the singular code (verses) gets manifold manifestations of meanings and can evade any intended fixed state or purpose of the codes. The intended purpose which is the devotional love in this case is the centripetal force and any other application of this love then becomes the centrifugal force.

Again under Barthesian conception, under distinctive circumstances, the sign gets openly interpreted based on the choice or experience of the individual. Thus, a form of devotional love can be interpreted by a netizen reader and further applied as either of any 8 types of love: *philia*, *storage*, *ludus*, *mania*, *pragma*, *eros*, *philautia*, *agape*. To triangulate this, the netnographic analysis shows the refracted usage of the verses (83 and 1.4k shares in Fig. 2 & 3). It shows that the netizen has shared the post considering their own parameter and further engages in a dialogic configuration with the other netizens. Sometimes, the verses are shared adding personal feelings, emotions and emojis based on their choice of mind. The verses are also applied in a manifold circumstance within different social/contextual relations. Although Rumi's love verses or even *Mathnawi* are fundamentally commentaries on the esoteric meanings of the Holy Quran, it is possible for a netizen to re/read it without keeping in mind its centripetal intentions.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of Sufi literature was to aid the spread of Islam, to help the Muslims restore or find their faith, to aid the comprehension of the Quran ("Sufi Literature" <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sufism/Sufi-literature>. Accessed 24 April 2021.). But Rumi's verses in translation carry the essence of ambiguity and universality. Being such when these verses are unfolded on the complex communication system of the new media they essentially become liberated from their monolithic intents. Thus Rumi's verses become literature of love regardless of gender, caste, creed, sects, or any form of distinctive identity and beyond. Through the Barthesian-Bakhtinian spectacles, the paper indicts that the verses of Rumi have their own nature and power that entitles them to going beyond their

fixed native narratives of the religio-spiritual confinements when projected on the surface of internet. Even though stemming from and being purely Islamic, the ambiguity of the Rumi's Sufi quintessence makes it universal and secular, therefore, a heteroglossic Rumi roams around on the new media.

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