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Review Article

# The Place of Alterity in Islamic Sufism: From the Narrowness of the Self to the Broadness of the Other (Jalaluddin Rumi as an Example)

Cherif Benzineb

Yahya Fares University, Médéa, Algeria
*benzineb.cherif@univ-medea.dz*

Sufism is considered a universal human experience. Although practices and goals may differ, it remains a gnostic behavioral approach that connects the human self to God in a vertical path. However, humans do not live in isolation from others, but rather live with them in a horizontal relationship, as if humans draw a triangle through their relationships with God and others, with humans as its right angle. Humans, who bear the honor of having been created by God, must be worthy of this honor by elevating themselves to become complete human beings and using others as a means to achieve this perfection.

**Keywords:** sufism, humans, others, gnosis, alterity

## Introduction

Sufi experience and philosophical reflection are among the most influential practices in human behavior, although we must acknowledge the apparent difference between them at first glance. In short, Sufism is based on thought, while philosophy is based on reason. However, the discerning scholar will recognize the connections between them, where he will find mysticism in philosophy and philosophy in mysticism, or in other words, philosophical mysticism and mystical philosophy. The history of Islamic thought has seen many attempts to combine Sufism and philosophy, and Shihab al-Din Yahya al-Suhrawardi (d. 587 AH) is considered one of the most famous pioneers of Islamic thought working on the unification of Sufism and philosophy, or between Sharia and wisdom, or what has been termed the Sufi path of taste and the philosophical theoretical approach.

There is no doubt that Sufism focuses on the human soul, refining it and reforming its inner self, and this is in accordance with a path other than the rational

approach adopted by philosophers, theologians, and even jurists. The knowledge that Sufism builds is completely different from philosophical or scientific knowledge. For this reason, Sufism relies on revelation, inspiration, inner intuition, and striving, a methodology based on spiritual exercises and struggles that aim to prepare the heart to receive divine knowledge. Sufi knowledge is therefore a taste-based knowledge founded on mutual love between the servant and his Lord. (Sharaf., 1990, p. 181)

Philosophy is the exercise of mental contemplation and the desire to uncover the veil of truth according to a way of thinking that is born out of wonder, a way of thinking that progresses from simple questions to complex ones, and to perceptions and concepts according to the instinct of love in uncovering the truths of things and the essence of existence. Thus, philosophy was the love of wisdom.

In this research paper, we attempt to examine the concept of alterity and the other in the mysticism of Jalaluddin Rumi, the great figure who captivated Westerners before Muslims with his mystical poetry and his Mevlevi method of human development. Through this paper, we seek to answer the fundamental question: What is the place of the other in the thought of Jalaluddin Rumi? Can this alterity be considered a means of reaching the concept of the complete human being? What is the effective mechanism for making the other a source of bliss rather than hell?

To answer these questions, we have adopted an analytical approach by presenting Jalaluddin Rumi's thought and his position on the other, along with the most important foundations of his philosophy in building a mystical system that makes the other an important and essential factor in achieving the perfect human being.

## 1. Sufism: A Humanistic Trend

The purpose of this research paper is not to examine the linguistic derivation of Sufism or its founding references, but rather to identify the humanistic dimension of the Sufi experience and the position of the other in relation to the Sufi, or in other words, the concept of alterity in Islamic Sufi thought.

Much has been said about the linguistic derivation of Sufism, and many works have been written on the subject. Some derive the term from the adjective, others from wool, and still others from purity. It is agreed that Sufism is an educational practice whose purpose is to refine the soul and purify the heart, and this can only be achieved by adhering to the Sharia and following the example of the Messenger who guided us to the straight path. This purification, education, and refinement of the heart can only be achieved through good character, because "Sufism is character, so whoever surpasses you in character surpasses you in Sufism... One of the conditions of being described as a Sufi is to be wise and prudent, and if one is not, then one has no share in this title, for it is all wisdom, it is morals, and it requires complete knowledge, a sound mind, presence of mind, and strong self-control... The Sufi is the one who has established in himself and in his character and morals the establishment of the truth in his book and in his writings... To behave with the

morals of God is Sufism" (al-Hatimi., n.d., pp. 266-267). What is the status of the other in the Sufism of Jalaluddin Rumi?

Imam Ahmad Zarruq al-Fasi (846-899 AH) says in the fifty-ninth rule of his book Rules of Sufism: "The multiplicity of aspects of beauty necessitates the multiplicity of aspects of approval, and the attainment of beauty by all who are approved of and who incline towards it. The jurist has the Sufism of Ramah ibn al-Hajj in his introduction. The hadith scholar has the Sufism of Ham around him in his lamp. The worshipper has the Sufism of al-Ghazali in his methodology. The patient has the Sufism of al-Qushayri in his treatise. The ascetic has the Sufism of Al-Qut and Al-Ihya. The wise man has the Sufism that Al-Hatimi introduced in his books, and the logician has the Sufism that Ibn Sab'in referred to in his compositions. The naturalist has the Sufism that Al-Buni brought in his secrets. For the fundamentalist, there is the Sufism that Al-Shadhili verified, so each is considered to be in its proper place" (Al-Fasi, 2005, pp. 41-42).

Through this rule presented by Ahmad Zarouq in his book, it becomes clear that Sufism is positioned as a behavior and practice among different individuals, with multiple understandings of this practice.

The religious and mystical experiences are considered the oldest experiences from a philosophical point of view, due to man's need for a spiritual refuge that alleviates the burden of existence and his anxieties. This is what made philosophy emerge later than Sufism, and the latter is considered the womb from which philosophy was born, as Nietzsche sees it, that philosophy came out of the womb of Sufism. This is why we often find that Sufi touch in many philosophies, and even if the philosopher tries to deviate from Sufism, he finds himself leaning on it at the end of his philosophical journey.

## 2. Love: The Ascension of Humanity

Mary Shimmel believes that the driving force behind Rumi's thought is divine love, which is considered to be God Himself revealing Himself in the beauty and majesty of His creatures (Al-Fasi, 2005, p. 27) .

Creatures are made of matter, which is nothing but nothingness. Therefore, what unites creatures is their mortal materiality, which carries the spirit of God Almighty, while at the same time carrying within it the devilish aspect. Jalaluddin Rumi believes that the spiritual peace he established does not abolish this aspect and abandon it altogether. On the contrary, according to Mary Schimmel, Jalaluddin Rumi's Sufi experience employs love as a magical alchemy, transforming the devil of the human soul into Gabriel (Al-Fasi, 2005, p. 27).

Rumi's mystical experience, which influenced Mary Schimmel, is based on the Holy Quran and the absolute divine truth it contains, which he expresses in mystical poetic language that conveys the meanings of love, passion, and transcendence.

Rumi believes that the most important creature expressing this love and adoration is the sun, which occupies a significant place among Sufi poets, referring to

the radiance of the face of the Prophet, peace be upon him. Their reference for this is Surah Ad-Duha, and Jalaluddin Rumi uses the sun as a reference to his beloved, his teacher, and his mentor, Shamsuddin Tabrizi who took him by the hand into the world of Sufism and divine love (Al-Fasi, 2005, p. 27).

Jalaluddin does not limit himself to the image of the sun, but uses many creatures in wonderful poetic images that reveal a Sufi sensibility and divine longing and love. These creatures are, in fact, nothing but manifestations of the greatness of the Creator. The human world and the horizons of humanity remain the greatest world in which Rumi practiced his Sufi philosophy, for man is the basis of creation, and it is for him that all existence came into being. The Holy Qur'an shows us the greatness of this existence, and in the Qur'an we find verses about creation and its amazing stages, as we find in the words of Allah: "O mankind, if you are in doubt about the Resurrection, then [know that] We created you from dust, then from a sperm-drop, then from a clinging clot, and then from a lump of flesh, formed and unformed, that We may show you [Our power]. We keep in the wombs whatever We will for a specified term, then We bring you out as infants, then you reach your maturity. Some of you die young, and some of you live to a ripe old age to the lowest age, so that they know nothing after knowledge. And you see the earth barren, but when We send down rain upon it, it quivers and swells and grows every kind of beautiful vegetation." The metaphorical image associated with music and dance is one of the most important images that Jalaluddin Rumi relies on in his Sufi educational method, based on the symbolism of the flute and the poems of the Mathnawi. Jalaluddin Rumi links this image to the story of the creation of Adam, peace be upon him, in the words of God Almighty: "And I breathed into him from My spirit." In reality, man is nothing but a flute that speaks when touched by the breath of the divine beloved (Schimmel, 2016, p. 32).

Love has a noble mission, which is to gather the scattered fragments of the human soul, a soul exhausted by the trivialities of worldly life, such as hatred, selfishness, and self-love. This love is a false love that exhausts the human soul and, even more than that, isolates it and prevents it from opening up to others. These others are an extension of my existence, through whom I reach God through the highest love, which is divine love. This is why Jalaluddin is astonished by this fragmentation and division among human beings, for this is not why they were created. In this way, they have not attained the truth of their existence and the purpose of their creation. This is why he says: "The human soul is a place of doubt and confusion. It is impossible to remove the ambiguity and confusion from it in any way except through love. After that, there remains no ambiguity or confusion, for your love for something means and defines it" (al-Rumi, 2002, p. 13).

Through love, the soul is freed from self-love, intolerance, and even stubbornness and arrogance. Love is considered the primary driving force for the human self to break free from the clutches of the evil soul and move towards the divine presence. Through love, the soul can burn these impure desires and ascend to the

divine presence, just as wood does not become embers until it is rid of smoke.

Love is the driving force of humanity, through which it ascends to reach its Creator. This is why Jalaluddin Rumi says: "The pursuit of love changes us. No one pursues love without maturing during their journey. As soon as you begin the journey of searching for love, you begin to change from the inside and outside" (al-Aqsari, 2018, p. 48).

## 3. From the most specific human being to the most general human being

In behavioral Sufism, man is seen as the cornerstone of this mystical experience, where he travels within the world of states and stations in order to reach the highest goal known as the perfect man, or the universal man. This concept is considered the common denominator among all Sufis, regardless of their Sufi schools. In his sublimity and weakness, his elevation and fall, his purity and impurity, his turning to the highest realm, the vast and spacious field around which the Sufi experience revolves (al-Rumi., n.d, p. 3).

Man is the cornerstone of Sufi practice, coming between angels and animals, as he is the sum of reason and passion. For this reason, Sufi practice came about as a subjective experience that nurtures him spiritually and purifies him morally through love and affection that transcends all worldly goals.

Man is considered the highest manifestation of divine creative power, and the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, is the model of the perfect human being, as honored and proclaimed by God in His words: "And We have not sent you except as a mercy to the worlds." The personality of Muhammad, peace be upon him, is the model to be emulated, for he is in the heart of every believing Muslim. The Noble Messenger is also considered the guiding light that Sufis follow in their ascent to attain divine presence, an ascent based on the dialectic of destruction and construction, and the principle of death, the destruction of the human self that is attached to the mud of mortality and worldly desires, in order to build a self-based on love and adoration. Sufism puts the love of God above the love of man (Schimmel, 2016, p. 33).

Despite his weakness, man contains within himself the whole world. Rumi says: "So you are the smaller world in form, and you are the greater world in meaning. Outwardly, that branch is the origin of the fruit, but in reality, the branch is for the fruit. If there were no inclination toward the fruit and no hope for it, when would the gardener plant the roots of the tree? Therefore, that tree was born from the fruit in meaning, even if the fruit was born from it in form." (al-Rumi., n.d, p. 83).

Man is still the greatest of creatures, and indeed the most noble, for God Almighty created him with His own hands because of his value and uniqueness, for he is an honor above all others. This is why Sufi thought attaches great importance to him, and why "God created man to make him the greatest manifestation of His majesty in terms of His essence and attributes, and to deposit in him the secrets of gnosis and divine lights, unlike other beings, which have no share in those lights

or secrets. Rather, God created them to manifest His power and might alone. The manifestation of God in man does not mean incarnation, mixture, or union in the sensual sense, but rather that God manifests His attributes in man while remaining completely distinct from man" (al-Taftazani., 1958, pp. 247-248).

Jalaluddin Rumi views humans as a world through which the greatness of God Almighty is manifested. Moreover, the secrets of the universe are embedded in humans, who need only understand themselves and uncover those secrets. Rumi therefore believes that "human beings are God's greatest creatures, and the higher the individuals of the human race ascend in the spiritual ladder, the higher their status and rank with God. Prophets and Sufis are the elite of humanity, because they are the closest to the true essence of humanity and its pure, unadulterated nature" (Kaffafi, 1971)

A great creature whom God Almighty honored by creating him with His own hands and breathing His spirit into him, yet he remains stubborn and obstinate in his search for the heights of connection to this great Creator, an obstinacy that has caused man to sink into the mire of vices and hostility towards his fellow man. For this reason, Jalaluddin Rumi addresses that raw side of man, the side that remains moist and sticky, trying to bring man out of the narrowness of the ego to the spaciousness of the other, or rather the spaciousness of humanity, where man is the brother of man, as Rumi says: "Oh, if only you could see your beauty! You would realize that you are more beautiful than the sun, so why do you waste away and decay in this prison of strangers? Why not be fresh and vibrant from the overflowing spring of the heart? Why not smile like a flower? Why not be like amber? Why do you remain imprisoned in this world and not rise like wine until your emotions elevate you above this universe? Contemplate your beauty, O ignorant one, for it is from the age of the soul's pegs, for the believer is the mirror of the believer in times of loneliness" (Rumi, 2009, p. 255).

Jalaluddin Rumi depicts man as being in constant danger, the danger of attachment to the world and the danger of Satan and the lustful soul. For this reason, he constantly reminds us of man's true status and the purpose for which he was created, saying:

> We were in the universe, companions of the king.
> Let us all go there again, for that is our city (Schimmel, 2016, p. 413).

In addition to the divine companionship that man experienced at his first creation through his presence in the upper kingdom, and in addition to his being honored with the breath of God's spirit, there is another mercy no less than its predecessors, which is teaching him the names, a mercy that reached a high place, and thus this man came into possession of thousands of sciences in every field (Schimmel, 2016, p. 414).

The poems of Jalaluddin Rumi are, in fact, a discourse on the greatness of God as manifested in various forms, foremost among which is man, that unique being

in existence and purpose, mysterious in himself, for God is the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsisting, and not the first cause (Schimmel, 2016, p. 379).

This is why Jalaluddin Rumi says, drawing from the Holy Quran:

> If all the seas became ink,
> There would be no end to the words of God.
> And if all the orchards and forests became pens,
> There would never be a shortage of these words.
> All that ink and all those pens would be exhausted,
> But these countless words would remain.

The divine message in Islam is addressed specifically to human beings in all times and places, and in this way, it corresponds to the moral sensibility of rational beings in a way that is unmatched by other religions (al-Rahman, 2008, pp. 242-252).

Anna Marie Schimmel, who devoted her life to the study of Islam, insisted before her death on the need for her students and colleagues to establish a cultural and religious dialogue forum with the aim of building bridges of understanding, interaction, and friendship between the European and Islamic worlds, achieving coexistence between nations, and spreading the values of tolerance and acceptance of others.

Jalaluddin Rumi focuses on the concept of love and humanity in his Sufism, for God did not create human beings to be at odds with one another. They were created from the same soul and walk toward the same goal, so they have no choice but to love one another. For this reason, we find Jalaluddin Rumi focusing on the concept of the common human identity of all human beings, based on the prophetic saying: "People are the children of Adam, and Adam was created from dust." This is the origin of the one creation, so why the differences, fighting, quarreling, and discord?

Jalaluddin Rumi emphasizes the idea of social cohesion and interconnectedness, which is achieved first and foremost through love, and by viewing others as part of oneself, complementing and completing oneself, strengthening one's limbs and theirs. This is like water mixing with clay, becoming more solid as a result. In this regard, Rumi says:

> Be a friend until you see countless friends, for those who have no friends remain without support.
> The devil is like a wolf, and you are Joseph, so do not leave Jacob's side, O pure one.
> The wolf often takes the sheep that strays from the flock and walks alone.
> And he who leaves the Sunnah with the community, does he not shed his blood in this place full of wolves?
> The Sunnah is the path, and the group is the companion, and you fall into the abyss without a path and without a companion (al-Rumi, n.d., p. 499; Schimmel, 2016).

When Rumi focuses on humanity in his Sufi approach and practice, he starts from the premise that humanity was created first, that humans are God's vicegerents on earth. That is why Rumi emphasizes the value of feeling that others complement

our existence, and that we complement theirs. This complementarity can only exist through love, the love that makes us see the other as part of ourselves, even if they are different from us.

With this statement, Rumi refers us to the hadith of the Messenger of God, peace be upon him, "The wolf only eats from the sheep that stray from the flock." This hadith draws that social map, or rather, that horizontal relationship between man and his society, in terms of interaction and the necessity of community, for man is not alone, but with others.

## 4. The values of tolerance and coexistence in Jalaluddin Rumi

Sufism is known to be based on love and acceptance of others, even if they are different, because difference is inherent in the human soul, which has one origin but branches out. However, this branching does not corrupt the origin of the human soul. These values, which Sufism believes in, cannot remain theoretical but must be put into practice and become effective. We look at actions more than words, and as is well known, humans are creatures who tend toward religious practice, even if concepts and practices differ. For this reason, misunderstanding of religious teachings often leads to religious intolerance. Humans must understand the true purpose of their creation, for humans are different from animals. This is why the great Sheikh Ibn Arabi said: "We do not want humans to be merely humans/animals, but rather humans and caliphs. With humanity and caliphate, the image of perfection is achieved. Not every human is a caliph, for humans who are animals are not caliphs in our view. Nor is it specific to masculinity alone. We are therefore speaking of the image of the perfect human being, both men and women. Humanity brings together the male and the female. Masculinity and femininity are merely appearances that are not part of the essence of humanity, as animals also share in them. The Messenger of God, peace be upon him, attested to the perfection of women as he did for men" (Arabi, 2001, p. 46).

The origin is one, so why the difference? For Ibn Arabi, the difference lies in resorting to animality, for the animalistic human is not worthy of succession.

Jalaluddin Rumi is no different from other Sufi masters who called for tolerance and acceptance of others, viewing them as part of oneself, a part that completes oneself and is completed by oneself. For this reason, Rumi does not differentiate between one religion and another, saying:

> Where are the Muslims... What is the plan... I myself know myself...!
> I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Magus, nor Muslim...!! ... I am not a descendant of Adam, nor am I a descendant of Eve, nor am I one of the people of Paradise, nor am I one of the people of the Garden of Ridwan...!!
> Rather, my place is where there is no place, and my proof is where there is no proof... For it is not a body... Nor is it a soul... because I am in fact from the soul of the soul (the Beloved)" (Ghalib, 1982, pp. 25-26).

Jalaluddin, through this statement, affirms that there is one source, which is

the source of humanity. Therefore, he denies all differences and affirms the unity of humanity, its transcendent human values, and its unity.

Jalaluddin Rumi views the other who is different as a manifestation of himself, and he is manifested in him. It is inhuman to look at others with one eye; rather, one must penetrate to their essence, for it is the origin that one shares with them. As for appearance, it is deceptive to the eye, so he says: "If you see a flaw in your brother, that flaw you see is in you. The world is a mirror in which you see your own image" (al-Rum, 2002, p. 35).

In reality, others are nothing but a reflection of our own images, whatever they may be. It is unreasonable to seek perfection without this other. It is through others that I set out to reach myself, and from myself that I set out to reach them. The project of world peace is based on this principle of loving others and not viewing them as hell, as Sartre put it.

Jalaluddin Rumi believes that religions have one source, even if they are many, and that diversity and difference are only temporary due to historical circumstances. In reality, they all stem from the same source. Therefore, Sufism, in his view, "is not based on gender, race, or religious and ideological differences. Therefore, we find the ruler and the ruled, the rich and the poor, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, coming together in one place without the slightest bigotry. Therefore, it must be said that the most important factors for establishing peace are freedom from the constraints of religious and ideological intolerance, as Mawlana believes that these religious differences and colors are the product of human society and are created in the worldly realm (Jaradat, 2018, p. 170).

When we talk about the concept of the other in the Sufi experience, it is that which completes my being, but more than that, it is that missing part that completes my existence. Through this union, the soul ascends to its original home, meeting and uniting with the Beloved (God). This is why Sufis take the principle of the unity of existence as the fundamental driving force of existence. Therefore, "in these spiritual experiences, man is the person who constantly waits for the light coming from the other to complete his existence (his perfection). He is a person seeking enlightenment and striving to spread it in order to combat the violence that prevails among individuals and groups... For this reason, the name Al-Latif has an existential status, because it has a fundamental role represented in the power to transform and change from one state to another, from one position to another, outside of any centralization or affirmation of identity" (Kazi, 2018, p. 154).

## Conclusion

If philosophy took upon itself the task of establishing those visions and ideas that call for the exaltation of human sanctity and consider it the center of existence, then Sufism, through its spiritual experiences, did not fall short in this matter. Rather, it was and still is one of the most insightful human experiences of human existence, seeing that the commonality of humanity is the pure spiritual dimension, with

one source and one destination, from God and to God. For this reason, Jalaluddin Rumi emphasizes that the other who is different is not an enemy to be wary of, but rather the missing part of my being. We are in a complementary relationship, I/ is, and this complementarity can only be achieved through love and a return to the origin of humanity, when our souls were one, created by one, and multiplicity and difference are nothing but a forgetting of this original origin.

Therefore, Jalaluddin Rumi seeks to embody the Islamic values of Muhammad through Sufi practice, which is the most appropriate spiritual practice to respond to the growing evil in the world. Evil is foreign to the world, and it grows through the elevation of the narrow ego at the expense of the generous other. The world is big enough for everyone, we just need to stop seeing the faults of others through our own faults.

Rumi also emphasized love as a central value in life, seeing it as the powerful bond that connects humans to the Creator and to creation. Love is the essence of existence. He also emphasized tolerance and openness to other religions and cultures, believing that external differences are irrelevant, as what unites people is spiritual unity. He encouraged deep human communication, believing that dialogue and sharing with others is the path to self-understanding and truth. Man is a mirror of the other.

Rumi made inner peace the basis for outer peace. A person who lives in peace with himself can live in peace with the world. He also emphasized liberation from the ego and material desires, and reaching a state of union with divine truth. He made compassion the motto for embodying divine love.

We can therefore say that these human values made Jalaluddin Rumi a universal figure, whose teachings continue to inspire millions around the world, regardless of their religion or cultural background.

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# Mjesto Drugosti islamskom sufizmu: Od uskosti sopstva do širine Drugog (Džalaludin Rumi kao primjer)

**Šerif Benzineb**

Univerzitet Yahya Fares, Medeja, Alžir

Sufizam se smatra univerzalnim ljudskim iskustvom. Iako se prakse i ciljevi mogu razlikovati, on ostaje gnostički biheviorалni pristup koji povezuje ljudsko sopstvo sa Bogom vertikalnim putem. Međutim, ljudi ne žive izolovano od drugih, već žive sa njima u horizontalnom odnosu, kao da ljudi crtaju trougao kroz svoje odnose sa Bogom i drugima, sa ljudima kao njegovim pravim uglom. Ljudi, koji nose čast da ih je stvorio Bog, moraju biti dostojni ove časti uzdižući se da postanu potpuna ljudska bića i koristeći druge kao sredstvo za postizanje ovog savršenstva.

**Ključne riječi:** sufizam, ljudi, drugi, gnoza, Drugost