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RÚMÍ’S VIEW OF THE IMAM ḤUSAYN

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The martyrdom of the Imam Ḥusayn can hardly be called a major theme of Rúmí’s works; in over 50,000 couplets he refers to it less than twenty times. Nevertheless, these few lines are sufficient to suggest how the events of Karbala’ were viewed not only by Rúmí, this great representative of the Sūfī tradition, but also by his listeners, who constituted a pious cross-section of Islamic society.

The first thing one notes is that it was sufficient for Rúmí to mention one of three words to conjure up the image of Ḥusayn’s martyrdom for his listeners: Ḥusayn, Karbala’, ‘Āshūrā’ Yazīd and Shimr had a similar evocative power. There was no need for Rúmí to describe the tragedy to a Muslim public, since everyone was already familiar with it; even among Sunnīs, it must have been part of the Islamic lore that was commonly called upon—especially in the context of popular preaching—to drive home points about good and evil, martyrdom, injustice, and similar themes. There is, of course, nothing surprising in this: scholars have often remarked on the indelible imprint left in the Muslim awareness by the Imam Ḥusayn’s martyrdom. What should perhaps be noted is that the name Ḥusayn, along with the other words mentioned above, functioned to call up a whole set of images, just as, for example, it is sufficient for Rúmí to mention the name Abraham for his listeners to think of Nimrod and the fire that turned into a rosegarden; numerous other examples could also be cited.
One might ask about the sources of Rūmī’s information concerning Ḥusayn, but this would be like asking where he learned about Islam. Nevertheless, one can say that among Ṣafī poets that were known to have been read by Rūmī, Sanā’ī (d. 525/1131) employs the terms Ḥusayn and Karbalā’ as poetic images in much the same manner that Rūmī does, while ‘Alī (d. 618/1221) apparently does not refer to him except in the context of panegyrics on the Prophet and the first few caliphs (e.g., in his Mosāmat-nāma).

Sanā’ī invokes the name of the Imam Ḥusayn either to stress the necessity of suffering and tribulation in the practice of one’s religion, or to point out that the saints—the men of God—are those who have experienced the death of their individual selves. In

1 For example:

Until they turn away from happiness,
men of purity will not be able to step onto Mustafā’s carpet.
How should there be joy in religion’s lane when,
for the sake of empire, blood ran down Husayn’s throat
at Karbalā’?

For the sake of a single ‘Yes’
spoken by the spirit in eternity-without-beginning (?: 172).
The men of Yes (bala) must submit themselves to affliction (kalā) until eternity-without-end.

[Diwān, ed. Mudarris Radawi (Tehran, 1341/1962), pp. 40–41]

Once you set out in this way,
your only provision will be annihilation,
even if you are an Abū Dharr or a Salman.
If you are Husayn,
you will see naught of the beauty of the bride’s face
but daggers and arrows.

This world is full of martyrs,
but where is a martyr like Ḥusayn at Karbalā’?

[Diwān, p. 97]

2 For example:

Lift up your head in the garden of Verification,
so that in religion’s lane you may see alive, group by group,
those who have been killed.
In one row you will see those killed with a blade like Husayn,
in another those stricken with poison like Hasan.

Sanā’ī, since you have not been cut off from your own self,
how can you tell tales of Ḥusayn?

[Diwān, p. 485]

One instance he compares Ḥusayn, Yazid, and Shimr to contrary forces working within the souls of men, and here, as in the first two instances, parallels are found in Rūmī’s poetry.

For Rūmī, love for God is the heart and soul of Islam. Certainly the ‘forms’ (ṣūrah) of our acts and religious practices are important, but they are given values by the ‘meanings’ (ma’nā) which animate them. Thus, for example, when asked if anything is more important for Islamic practice than the ritual prayer (ṣalā), Rūmī replies that the animating spirit (jān) of the prayer is better, just as faith (imān) is more excellent. Faith must be continuous, whereas the prayer is performed at five different times during the day. The prayer can be omitted for a valid excuse, but faith can never be omitted. Faith without prayer has certain benefits, whereas prayer without faith is hypocritical and useless. Finally, faith is the same in all religions, while the form of prayer in each is different.

Were Rūmī to be asked this question in more general terms, i.e., ‘Is anything more important than the religion of Islam itself?’, I think he would answer that love for God is so, since all these outward forms of ritual and devotion, all the teachings and practices that make up Islam, exist for the sake of that love. This is not to suggest that the ‘forms’ are without importance—far from it; the ‘meaning’—love—cannot exist without its outward supports. But one must not fall into the error of thinking that the doctrines, practices, and outward forms are their own raison d’etre, for ‘prayer without faith is useless’. As Rūmī remarks:

If the exposition of meanings were sufficient,
the creation of the world would be vain and useless.

3 Religion is your Husayn,
while desires and hopes are pigs and dogs—
yet you kill the first through thirst and feed these two.

How can you keep on cursing the wicked Yazid and Shimr?
You are a Shimr and a Yazid for your own Ḥusayn!

[Diwān, p. 655]


If love for God were only thought and meaning, the form of fasting and prayer would not exist. The gifts that lovers exchange are naught in relation to love except forms, so that the gifts may give witness to the love hidden within. The forms of religion, then, are the necessary concomitants of the meaning of religion, which, for Rūmī, is love:

My religion is to live through love—life through this spirit and body is my shame. The distinguishing feature of Rūmī’s ‘Religion of Love’ is that it negates the reality of ‘everything other than God’ (aghāyār) with the sword of the shahāda: ‘There is no god but God.’

The joy and heartache of the lovers is He, the wages and salary for their service He. Were aught to be contemplated other than the Beloved, how would that be Love? That would be idle infatuation. Love is that flame which, when it blazes up, burns away everything except the Beloved. It drives home the sword of ‘no god’ in order to slay other than God. Consider carefully: after ‘no god’, what remains? There remains ‘but God’; the rest has gone. Bravo, oh great, idol-burning Love!

The chief ‘idol’ or ‘other’ that must be negated on the Path of Love is the seeker’s own self: ‘The mother of all idols is your own ego.’

You are God’s lover, and God is such that when He comes, not a single hair of you will remain. Before His glance a hundred like you are annihilated. Is it that you are in love with your own negation, sir?

The first attribute of the true lover, then, is that he must be ready to sacrifice himself for God.

O Love, pass the bitter judgement! Cut me off from other than Thyself! O torrent, you are roaring. Roar! You take me to the Ocean. But most men fear the torrent and flee the sword. They refuse to enter into the way of self-sacrifice, even though they are promised every manner of joy and felicity. Their faith is not strong enough to allow them to surrender their own wills and existences to God. Total readiness for martyrdom is the first quality of God’s lover.

What does it mean to be Love’s familiar? Only to separate oneself from the heart’s desire, to become blood, to swallow down one’s own blood, and to wait at fidelity’s door with the dogs. The lover sacrifices himself— for him death and removal are no different from staying.

On your way, 0 Moslem! Be shielded by safety and strive at your piety, For these martyrs have no patience without death—they are in love with their own annihilation. Flee if you want from affliction and fate—their fear is to be without affliction.

Perform the fast on the recommended days and on ‘Ashūrā’—you cannot go to Karbala’!

To be a human being in the true sense means to undertake the struggle against one’s own ego.

The prophets and saints do not avoid spiritual combat. The first spiritual combat they undertake in their quest is the killing of the ego and the others.

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Mathnawi, VI, 4059.


Idem, I, 772.
abandonment of personal wishes and sensual desires. This is the Greater Holy War (jihād-i akbar).

If Husayn is a model worthy to be emulated, it is not because he was killed by villains—this goes without saying. What is truly noteworthy about his life was his victory in the Greater Holy War; only by virtue of his spiritual greatness do the events that led to his physical martyrdom have meaning. The emulation of him that is encumbent upon his followers is then engagement in the Greater Holy War.

Why do you sit there with your own thoughts?
If you are a man, go to the Beloved!
Do not say, ‘Perhaps He does not want me.’
What business has a thirsty man with such words?
Does the moth think about the flames?
For Love’s spirit, thinking is a disgrace.
When the warrior hears the sound of the drum,
at once he is worth ten thousand men!
You have heard the drum, so draw your sword without delay!
Your spirit is the sheath of the all-conquering Dhu’l-Faqār!
You are Husayn at Karbala’, think not of water!
The only ‘water’ you will see today is a sword of the first water!

But in order to attain the Kingdom of Love a man must first suffer the pain of separation from his Beloved. For the more he understands the nature of his goal, the more he will understand the depth of his own inadequacy.

Whoever is more awake has greater pain,
whoever is more aware has a yellower face.

Nevertheless, the pain that the lover suffers always attracts him toward the object of his love.

Every heartache and suffering that enters your body and heart pulls you by the ear to the Promised Abode.

The reason for this is clear:
Your inward nature is full of dust from the veil of ‘I-ness’,
and that dust will not leave you all at once.

With every cruelty and every blow,
it departs little by little from the heart’s face,
sometimes in sleep and sometimes in wakefulness.

Eventually the pain and suffering of love will lead to the death of the ego and rebirth in God.

Night died and came to life, for there is life after death:
O heartache, kill me! For I am Husayn, you are Yazīd.

Or again,

O Murtaḍā of Love! Shams al-Dīn of Tabrīz—look at me!
I am like Husayn, sitting in my own blood,
or like Ḥasan, drinking down poison.

Again:

Whoever has my fire wears my robe—
he has a wound like Husayn, a cup like Ḥasan.

In short, it is only through the suffering and tribulation of the spiritual journey as exemplified in the outward world by the trials of the Imam ʿUsayn and his family that man can attain the perfection for which he was created. Then, however, he has every right to speak of the joy and felicity of union with God. If Rūmī, in one passage of the Mathnawi (VI 777–805), is able to poke fun at the Shī‘a of Aleppo for their celebration of ‘Ashūrā’, it is precisely

13 Fīhi mā fīhi, p. 130; Discourses, pp. 140–41.
14 Kulliyāt, vs. 3656–62.
15 Mathnawi, I, 629.
16 Kulliyāt, vs. 35487.
17 Idem, vs. 12078–79.
18 Idem, vs. 9206.
19 Idem, vs. 20517.
20 Idem, vs. 6358.
21 On the day of ‘Ashūrā’ all the people of Aleppo gather at the Antioch gate until nightfall.
Men and women—a great congregation—mourn the family of the Prophet.
On ‘Ashūrā’ the Shī‘a wail and lament with tears for Karbala’...
because here he is looking at the good news of joy and union which are announced by the Imam’s spiritual victory and which are the meaning beyond the form of his outward suffering:

The spirit of a sultan has escaped from a prison.
Why should we tear our clothes and bite our fingers?
Since he was the king of religion,
his breaking of the bonds was a time of joy,
For he sped toward the pavilions of good fortune
and threw off his fetters and chains.\(^2\)

In conclusion, let me quote two more of Rumi’s ghazals, which can serve to summarize the Imam Husayn’s significance as pictured in Rumi’s works:

Where are you, martyrs of God,
you who have sought affliction
on the plain of Karbalā’?  

A stranger, a poet,
arrived at Aleppo on the day of ʿAshūrā’
and heard all that lamentation. . . .
He went along asking questions in his search:
‘What is this sorrow?
For whom are you mourning? . . .’
Someone said to him,
‘Hey, are you mad? Are you not a Shi’ite?
Are you an enemy of the Family?
‘Don’t you know that it is the day of ʿAshūrā’,
a day of mourning
for a soul who was greater than a generation? . . .’
The poet replied,
‘True, but where are the days of Yazīd?
When did this tragedy occur!
How long the news has taken to reach you here!
The eyes of the blind have seen that loss!
The ears of the deaf have heard that story!
Have you been asleep until now
that you have just begun to tear your clothes in mourning?
Then mourn for yourselves, oh sleepers,
for this heavy sleep of yours is a terrible death!
The spirit of a sultan . . .’

Where are you, light-spirited lovers,
you who fly better
than the birds in the sky?

Where are you, kings of the heavens,
you who have found the door
that leads outside the circling spheres?

Where are you,
you who have been delivered from spirit and place?
Indeed, does anyone ask of the intellect, ‘Where are you?’

Where are you,
you who have broken the door of the prison
and given freedom to the debtors?

Where are you,
you who have opened the door to the treasury,
you who possess the wealth of poverty?

For some time now all of you have been swimming
in that Ocean of which this world is but the foam.
The forms of the universe are but the Ocean’s foam—
if you, oh listener, are a man of purity,
pass beyond these bubbles!

These words are but the picture of my heart’s bubbling—
if you are one of us,
leave aside the picture and go to the heart.

Rise from the east, O Sun of Tabriz,
for you are the root
of the root
of the root of every radiance.\(^2\)

In the fire of its yearning, my heart keeps up its cries,
hoping that a welcoming call will come to it
from the direction of union.

My heart is Husayn and separation Yazīd—
my heart has been martyred two hundred times
in the desert of torment and affliction (karb-o-balā). 

\(^2\) Mathnawi, VI, 797–99.
W. C. CHITTICK

Outwardly made a martyr, in the unseen world it has gained life—
in the eyes of the enemy it is a prisoner,
in the Void, a king.

Dwelling in the paradise of union with the Friend,
it has been delivered from the depths of hunger's prison
and freed from the cheap and the dear.

Were the root of its tree not well nourished in the Unseen,
why are the blossoms of its union open for all to see?

Silence! Speak from the direction of your awareness.
For the Universal Intellect is asking you,
"Will you not understand?" (2: 44, etc.).

I propose to give here an account neither of the development, nor
of the themes, of the elegy on  Hussein—in Arabic or Persian—nor
of the outstanding poets of elegy—the literature in both these
languages is too vast for that, and spread out over too great a
period. Rather, I would like to give some idea of the place of these
marthiya in literary and religious tradition, while giving in
translation some examples of elegy on  Hussein which should serve
for those unfamiliar with these languages to form an idea of the
beauty and effectiveness of this type of poetry.

I should warn English-speakers that my translations, in one
essential respect, do not bear much resemblance to the originals.
The Arabic and Persian poetical traditions, at least until very
recently (only a few decades ago), required adherence to strict
rhyme patterns—often monorhyme—and strict quantitative metre.
These things are not only nearly impossible to reproduce in our
English language, but also undesirable. It is necessary to imagine
that the examples I give had in their original a very regular rhythm,
a rhythm which could also be important for ritual purposes, for
instance, in religious processions. If the conceits used are sometimes
also a little difficult for us to understand immediately, the ideas
expressed, and the effect, are, I think, universal.

The tradition of elegiac poetry known in Arabic as marthiya had
its roots, as regards themes as well as form, in pre-Islamic times.

24 idem, ghazal no. 230.