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## Man or Muse: Affinities in the Inspirational Roles of Rumi's *Shams* and Blake's *Milton*

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### Abstract

The paper examines the characters of Jalal-ud-din Rumi's *Shams* and William Blake's *Milton* with reference to their contribution in the spiritual and poetic development of Rumi and Blake and to find out similarities in their inspirational roles. Zepetnek's approach of inclusion has been followed to make functional comparison of both characters. The paper is focused on discovering affinities in two sections. At first, both characters are judged as spiritual inspiration and secondly, their inspirational function in poetic development of Rumi and Blake. It has been concluded that in spite of belonging to different languages, religious communities, and different historical periods both figures have performed almost identical role in the life of Jalal-ud-din Rumi and William Blake.

**Keywords:** Rumi, Shams, Blake, Milton; spiritual and poetic development

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### Introduction

Jalal-ud-din Rumi and William Blake are poets from two different periods with different languages and cultural backgrounds. One is Persian speaking Sufi and the other an English poet and Christian mystic. As mystical poets their poetic traditions are also different from each other. If their poetry is carefully analysed the

reader can find certain similarities in the inspirational role of 'Shams' in Rumi's poetry, and 'Milton' in Blake's poetry. Through juxtaposing the influence of these figures on the lives and the poetic development of Rumi and Blake the affinities in their inspirational role can be traced and analysed.

For comparative study of these characters (Rumi's *Shams* and Blake's *Milton*) or to provide a platform for both characters to come closer to each other, Zepetnek's theory of comparative literature has been followed. It provides the necessary model to be applied in making comparison of two poets on one concept or literary theme. Comparative Literature according to Zepetnek is "theoretical, methodological as well as ideological and political approach of inclusion" (Zepetnek 17).

Inclusion can be interpreted as a philosophical activity to facilitate two poets or their literary themes or literary characters to come closer to each other on the basis of equality to find affinities existing between them. Thematic inclusion in this way needs to be (1) goal-oriented, organized to achieve particular goals (2) reciprocal, given or shown by each of two sides or individuals to the other, (3) based on equal status of both participants, (4) objective study of both the characters, and (5) both sides retaining their individual characteristics.

On the basis of Zepetnek's theory of thematic inclusion, poetry of Rumi and Blake has been studied to trace affinities in the inspirational role of Shams and Milton on their thought and poetry. The inspirational role of Shams and Milton in the career-development of Rumi and Blake seems to be multi-faceted. To facilitate the study of inspirational role it seems more appropriate to divide it in to two parts i.e., spiritual and poetic inspiration. The latent inspirational similarities between 'Shams' and 'Milton' can be manifested only through their literary comparison.

### **Spiritual Inspiration**

For Rumi *Shams-e-Tabriz* is perhaps one of the most important sources of spiritual inspiration. As soon as Shams enters the life of Jalal-ud-din Rumi, his attitude towards life is radically changed. He is transformed from a traditional cleric to a devotional mystic. Shams-e-Tabriz gives him a new life with spiritual enlightenment to replace the life of an orthodox preacher. To Rumi Shams seems to be the symbol of divine power and guidance that utterly changed the way of his life. Arberry (1994) quotes Nicholson's words:

He comes, a Moon whose like the sky ne'er saw, awake or dreaming,  
 Crowned with eternal flame no flood can lay.  
 Lo, from the flagon of Thy love, O Lord, my soul is swimming,  
 And ruined all my body's house of clay (Arberry 233).

Shams brought about a revolution in Rumi's spiritual life. His journey towards spiritual development on mystical path began with the appearance of Shams and ended with mystical union, the ultimate destination of Islamic Mysticism. Baldock perhaps rightly observes: "The name 'Shams' means 'Sun', and this is what Shams became for Jalaluddin: the dawn rising of a spiritual sun that precipitated an ascent into the higher realms of consciousness" (Baldock 38).

Similarly, 'Milton' seems to be one of the major sources` of spiritual inspiration for Blake. Milton has been a religious figure and well-known poet of English. He provides not only necessary spiritual power to Blake but also instructs him like a master on spiritual journey to union with ultimate or Absolute Being. To Blake, Milton has become a symbol of spiritual enlightenment and perfection of spiritual guidance. Blake puts forward his view that:

The poet had from his earliest days made a strong appeal to his imagination. In the lines (enclosed with a letter to Flaxman dated 12th September, 1800) where he gives a brief summary of the various influences which had entered into his life, he places Milton first in the list of his spiritual instructors: "Now my lot in the heavens is this, Milton lov'd me in childhood and shew'd me his face" (Maclagan and Russell, IX).

Blake emphasizes the importance of Milton as a source of spiritual inspiration for the purification of his soul. He performs the role of a spiritual master who gives everything (necessary for spiritual development) to his disciple out of love, and discloses all secrets of his own spiritual life to him. His teachings (real face of Milton) cannot be communicated or imparted to anyone other than those who are blessed by God. Milton enters Blake's life when it is confirmed that Blake is a traveler of mystical path of spiritual wisdom.

The nature of spiritual change can be compared to the change made by the Sun. Once the light of the Sun enters human body the soul of man begins recognizing that light as a part of his life in this world and cannot afford to live without it anymore. Similarly, the Sun of Tabriz (Rumi's Shams) illuminates the souls and makes the men travellers on the path of spiritual elevation. All men including Rumi

begin to follow the footprints of a person recognized as a man of God. Rumi's heart seems to be captivated by Shams and his power of love:

My heart, when Love's sea of a sudden burst into its viewing,  
Leaped headlong in, with 'Find me now who may!'  
As, the sun moving, clouds behind him run,  
All hearts attend thee, O Tabriz's Sun! (Arberry 1994, 234)

Rumi's Shams is a leader of lovers who inspires them to search for spiritual elevation. He suddenly jumps in to the soul of his followers and asks them to search him so that on the way to find him in their soul they may be able to find themselves. The way the master of Rumi inspires him shows greater power latent in Shams (as a spiritual master) and may be comparable to Sun which may be followed by clouds. As clouds lose their power and identity in the Sun's light the hearts of men (followers of mystical path including Rumi) lose their own existence when Shams appears to them.

Similarly, Blake's Milton is a man with towering personality and greater spiritual enthusiasm. He is able to change the spiritual life of his followers. Milton enters the life of William Blake and turns him to be unable to resist his inspirational power. It helps to infer that all people recognize him as a true representative of Jesus Christ and show great enthusiasm in accepting his words as divine commandments. Like Rumi's Shams he also guides his followers on the way to spiritual ascension. Blake ultimately becomes one of his followers:

Then Milton rose up from the heavens of Albion ardent:  
The whole Assembly wept prophetic, seeing in Milton's face  
And in his lineaments divine the shades of Death and Ulro  
(Maclagan and Russell, 10).

Milton's position as a representative of Jesus Christ may encourage development of fierce intensity of feelings in his followers. They see divine attributes in his face and show extraordinary enthusiasm in following his words. Through following his views they get enough power and ability of correctly predicting the death (physical death) and life in Ulro (Ulro is the wasteland of the spiritual wanderer) and ultimately attaining spiritual life and salvation through Jesus Christ's death on the cross.

The way Shams inspires Rumi seems to be similar to the inspirational role of a spiritual master possessing superior knowledge of spiritualism, dominating the views

of his disciple, and working on his soul to change him utterly. The power of spiritual wisdom seems to be more influential and dominative than the capacity of knowledge through formal education and the wisdom based on it. Once the disciple (Rumi) is invited by the master (Shams) he finds no way other than surrendering himself to his master's will and join him. Expressing his own feelings Rumi says:

شمس تبریز گرت در کنف خویش کشد  
چون زندان برهی باز در آن گرد شوی

If Shams Tabriz draws you to his side,  
When you escape from captivity you will return to that orb  
(Nicholson, 186-87).

Rumi's own words reflect his condition after being attracted by Shams and influenced by his spiritual endeavours. He begins thinking about his master as a symbol of final destination on spiritual way. As soon as his captivity in physical (material) world is over, the spiritual wayfarer may feel himself in a safe position under the peaceful supervision of his master. In this way Rumi claims to accept the authoritative status of his master without questioning the validity of his influence over his life and career as a Sufi.

The role of Shams as an inspirer seems to be similar to that of a guide who needs to retain power and influence over his followers to facilitate them to proceed on the way to higher level of spiritual elevation. Whenever a disciple suffers from any difficulty or undergoes something unpleasant or undesirable he acts as a hierophant that interprets and expounds the meaning of obscure and mysterious matters, especially sacred doctrines or mysteries. To Rumi the orb of his master is perhaps the ultimate abode for every mystic.

Supplementing Rumi's opinion about the nature of influence that Shams exercised over him, Arberry (2009) describes the facts collected perhaps through his study of Rumi's biography composed by his son and says: "Sultan Valad (Rumi's son and biographer) likens his father's all-absorbing communion with this 'hidden saint' to the celebrated journey of Moses in company of Khadir (Koran, XVIII 64-80), the sage whom Sufis regard as the supreme hierophant and guide of travelers on the Way to God" (28).

The comparison of Rumi's communion with Shams to spiritual association of Moses with Khadir can be logically adequate analogy to explain the power and influence of extraordinary wisdom on ordinary knowledge and accumulated learning. The role of Shams in Rumi's life has great similarity with Khadir's (also written as Khizar) role in the life of Moses. Both can be regarded as great interpreters of mysteries. Their miraculous personalities and the extraordinary activities in which they take part are almost unexpected to other people. As Moses surrendered to Khadir's superior wisdom Rumi accepted spiritual superiority of Shams and became his follower and disciple.

In a similar way Blake's Milton also performs the role of a master who guides his followers to travel on the path to union with Christ. Milton provides necessary power and motivation to Blake's soul for endeavouring to achieve elevational perfection the ultimate goal of every mystic's life. Like Rumi's Shams, Blake's Milton is also a great leader, a dominating figure, spiritual facilitator, and kind-hearted companion. Blake's spiritual life seems to be based on inspiration from the image of Milton who performs pivotal function in determining his spiritual direction:

He is described by Blake standing before him "as the sculptor silent stands before his forming image," giving life to him who would give death and preparing him for his reunion with the Divine Body.  
(Maclagan and Russell, XII).

Milton's inspirational role as a companion and guiding master becomes more highlighted through Blake's words which represent the function of Milton as sculptor who silently makes the image of Blake full of life and vigour to proceed on the spiritual path to union with the Christ. Blake's views seem to be dominated gradually by Milton's greater wisdom. Ultimately, it leads him to surrender and willingly join Milton's entourage. Blake has found the image of Christ in Milton and follows him without questioning his spiritual authority.

### **Poetic Inspiration**

Rumi and Blake can be regarded as naturally gifted mystical poets composing poetry on philosophical themes. Although their poetic traditions are totally different from each other yet there are certain points manifesting greater affinities between their poetic themes. It is perhaps because of similarities between the persons or characters that provided necessary inspiration for their poetic compositions. At one hand Rumi's Shams and Blake's Milton have changed them

spiritually but on the other hand they contributed in developing their career as mystical poets.

Rumi's Shams and Blake's Milton performed inspirational role in motivating them to be creative and become poets. They have also provided them compositional inspiration through offering their own names for the titles of Rumi and Blake's major works. These titles are Rumi's "Divan-e-Shams-e-Tabriz" and Blake's "Milton". They have also facilitated their poetry to be developed thematically with most popular themes of mystical thought i.e., theme of love that may represent the quest for attaining mystical union with God.

Rumi as a mystic was perhaps a gifted poet but the way he formally became a poet is highly interesting. His physical separation from Shams transformed him from an ordinary maulvi to an ecstatic mystic. He was unable to control his emotions and to express his feelings of discontent he started uttering poetry. His poetry seems to be composed under the influence of Shams, the greatest poetic inspiration for Rumi.

خمش کردم ای جان جان جان تو بگو  
که زره زره ز شوق رخ تو شد گویا

I am silent. Speak thou, O soul of soul of soul,  
From desire of whose face every atom grew articulate.

(Nicholson, 06 & 07)

Rumi's couplet points at "desire for Shams's face" as one of the major reasons or motivating forces behind creation or composition of mystical poetry. The intensity of longing for the Master's presence makes him able to express his thoughts, purified ideas, and powerful feelings coherently. In such situations Rumi appears to be silent, obedient, and subservient excessively. The Master's words appear to be a necessary part of spiritual development which helps to create poetry full of excitement. Arberry (2009) describes actual situation in which Rumi began to compose poetry:

Night was turned in to day in the long mystical orgy, and from time to time under the impact of the passionate moment Jalal al-Din uttered extempore brief quatrains or extended lyrics, which his disciples hastily transcribed and committed to memory. To confess the human source of his inspiration, he very often introduced into his lyrics the name of Shams al-Din (28).

Arberry's words represent Rumi's inner condition or spiritual state. Rumi was internally prepared to utter mystical poetry. His inner mystical state required poetry to externalize it. He was in need of stronger provocation which could be provided only by a person with great motivation to exert on mystical path to attain higher level of spiritual elevation. In the figure of Shams he could find the right person and appropriate level of inspiration for developing his skill to produce sublime poetry.

Similarly, William Blake also possessed perhaps the talent or necessary ability required for any man to be a poet before he began to study Milton. He found in Milton the image of Jesus Christ who may lead the world on the way to spiritual elevation. It was perhaps the soul of Milton which mostly contributed to enliven Blake's creativity to compose poetry of his own type. If one of Blake's prophetic poems titled with the name of Milton is carefully examined the overall perception developed by Blake about Milton as an inspiring figure and the nature of Milton's inspirational role in William Blake's overall poetic development can be analysed:

I am Inspired! I know it is Truth! for I Sing  
According to the inspiration of the Poetic Genius,  
Who is the eternal all protecting Divine Humanity,  
To whom be Glory & Power & Dominion Evermore. Amen.

(Maclagan and Russell, 10)

Blake's categorical acknowledgment of Milton's inspirational role in the development of his poetry shows his indebtedness to Milton. He pays his tribute to Milton through appreciating him as a poetic genius but at the same time through calling him Divine Humanity, he gives him symbolically the status of Jesus Christ's true representative. In this way, the poet professes that 'Milton' has not provided him only a source of poetic creation but also performed as a guide to let him compose poetry on prophetic themes.

Like Rumi's poetic development through encounter with his spiritual master Blake's spiritual encounter with Milton seems to provide a similarly greater opportunity for an ordinary painter to be the poet representing mystics and the lovers of God. Blake's poem on Milton also provides necessary information about the power of imagination and Blake's poetic inspiration through it. Blake did not come physically in contact with Milton but his works made him a Blakean symbol of spiritual perfection and Jesus Christ's possible alter ego. Blake's passionate interest in Milton makes him not only a great poet but also a man who



acknowledges the contribution of other people in promoting his thought. About his poem 'Milton' it is said:

That work provides an explicit statement of Blake's encounter with Milton as an experience of pervasive influence as well as intense creative struggle. The poem is testimony to Blake's deep admiration of his predecessor, whom he honours with the imagery prophecy and the title of "Awakener" (Werner, 15)

Blake's poetic inspiration from Milton seems to be based on his love for poetic themes in Milton's poetic works. The word 'awakener' for Milton shows Blake's greater love and admiration for his poetic ancestor. It shows that there may be no one other than Milton who could directly provide necessary guidance as a part of Blake's literary tradition and inspiration of higher magnitude for the development of William Blake's career as a poet, thinker, seer, and a traveller on mystical path.

Rumi's indebtedness to Shams in the development of his poetic skills can also be evaluated from the fact that the title to his long poem *Divan-e-Shams-e-Tabriz* has been derived from the name of 'Shams' who seems to perform the role of Muse (goddess of art), particularly Erato (love poetry), Euterpe (lyric poetry). Shams, in this way simultaneously provided theme for Rumi's poetry and the title to represent it. Baldock observes: "Ample evidence for the transformation brought about by Rumi's separation from Shams is provided by the outpouring of poetry in the *Divan-i-Shams-I Tabrizi*, for the sober religious teacher and spiritual guide became love's ecstatic poet" (40).

Similarly, the spiritual master of William Blake also seems to perform the role of inspirational figure for poetic creation at one side and gives his name for the title of Blake's one of the major prophetic poems 'Milton'. While responding to Milton's poetry, it has been perhaps the highest level of seriousness on Blake's part that he could show great fervour and poetic enthusiasm. "Throughout his career, Blake continually returned to Milton, from his critical attack in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* to his usurpation of the Miltonic sublime in *Milton* and the other prophetic writings" (Ferguson, 257).

As far as thematic aspects of poetry composed by Rumi and Blake are concerned the role of Shams and Milton seems to be equally important in developing mystical themes including the concept of love (a motivating power for all mystics). In the poetry of Rumi theme of love seems to be developed with greater intensity through

the process of Rumi's separation for two years from whirling dervish 'Shams' who was traced by Rumi's friends in later stage. During this period Rumi composed poetry replete with love as its major theme.

In this way, separation from Shams can be regarded as one of the major sources of Rumi's poetic inspiration with love as its main concern. As time passed, the intensity of Rumi's longing for his spiritual master increased, and intensified the condition of Rumi's restlessness. It ultimately gave an outlet to Rumi's emotions in the form of poetry. The poetry composed in such a condition has also been used as a part of 'Sama' (a Sufi practice of meditation through music and dance) by Rumi's followers as a part of their practice on the way to spiritual elevation. Nicholson (1994) observes:

He was passionately regretted by Jalal, who bade the musicians chant songs of love and engaged, day and night, in the sama. Most of his ghazals were composed during this period of separation. Here the course of events becomes obscure. (xxii)

Rumi's creation of ecstatic poetry under the influence of his love for Shams makes his poetry a great piece of literary composition. The lyrical form of poetry seems to represent the overflow of emotional feelings. It also shows divine nature of love discussed in Rumi's couplets. With the passage of time it vividly appears to the reader of Rumi's poetry that the figure of Shams is gradually transformed in to symbolic object of human quest which represents the celestial world. Rumi's quest for him seems to be gradually changed and ultimately attains the form of human love for God.

Similarly, love appears to be a poetic theme and motivating force for poetic creation in Blake's prophetic poetry which perhaps is due to his spiritual affiliation with Milton. Like Rumi's 'Shams' the development of love in Blake's soul seems to be based on his inspiration from Milton whose influence in purifying and preparing the poet's heart as a land for generating poetry with higher degree of devotional love cannot be overlooked. Wright rightly observes: "Blake had loved Milton so long, and had read and pondered him so often, that in moments of sur-excitation the two become one"(4).

It is however worthy to be noted that there are some contrasts between the characters of *Shams* and *Milton* with reference to their relationship with Rumi and

Blake. Both are historical characters selected for literary purposes. Dissimilarities between them can be obviously noticed through looking into personal and biographical details of Rumi and Blake. Rumi and Shams are more or less contemporary. On the other hand Blake and Milton are not of the same era. Rumi's inspiration by Shams was the outcome of his direct contact with Shams while on the other side Blake's inspiration was based on indirect contact through spiritual and poetic imagination.

On the basis of above mentioned facts it can be stated that Rumi's *Shams* and Blake's *Milton* are great sources of power for both poets. They have spiritually changed them like a prophet who infuses his own spirit in his followers in the form of fire, which melts their existing body, and transforms them in to a new existence. They have changed the hearts of Rumi and Blake with their presence in them. Both have equally inspired like a leader, saint, or master. Their followers (Rumi and Blake) find in their body the presence of divine existence. Both appear to their disciples as guide on spiritual path of love which may lead them to ultimate destination of mystical journey.

Rumi and Blake attain required power through *Sham* and *Milton* and treat them like their teachers and promoters of their poetic skills. Both act as awakeners to their inactive poetic ability. They are the only human characters who successfully perform the role of Muse in literary development of both poets. Their names equally facilitate the poets to select the titles and almost similar subject matter (longing for spiritual elevation) to compose it in the form of mystical poetry. Shams and Milton have equally influenced the poetic design of both poets. The personal attachment of Rumi and Blake to their masters makes their poetry subjective and lyrical in form and style.

They have equal contribution in developing 'love' as a central theme of Rumi and Blake's poetry. It was the memory of Shams (after dissociation of Rumi from Shams) which motivated Rumi to create ecstatic poetry and similarly Blake's memories of Milton helped to create poetry like that of Rumi. It can be safely concluded that in spite of religious and cultural differences there are greater similarities in the inspirational role of Rumi's *Shams* and Blake's *Milton* in developing their careers as devotional mystics and poets.

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