

Coleman Barks and Rumi's Donkey

by Majid Naficy

Note The following paper is based on two essays in Persian, "Rumi and Coleman Barks" published in "Nameh-ye Kanoon", the literary organ of Iranian Writers' Association in Exile (Vol. 15 July 2002) and "Rumi: Love for God vs Love for a Donkey" included in my book *In Search of Joy: A Critique of Death-Oriented and Male-Dominated Culture in Iran* (Baran Publishers, Sweden, 1990). Please note that some of the language of Rumi in the third part might be offensive. M.N.

I. Coleman Barks and Rumi

During the first half of twentieth century the six volumes of *Rumi's Masnavi* and a selection of his lyrics were translated into English by British scholars Reynold Nicholson and Arthur John Arberry but these works were mostly known to academia. Recently, Coleman Barks's version of Rumi in English, especially *The Essential Rumi*¹ which is the subject of this review, has become popular and a best-seller-book in the US. Barks did not know Rumi until 1976 when the American poet, Robert Bly handed him a copy of A. J. Arberry's translations saying "These poems need to be released from their cages"². Barks who does not know Persian, first rewrites some of the old translations in English. Then, by using an unpublished John Moyne's translation on one hand, and with the blessing of a Sri Lankan sufi saint living in the US, Bowa Muhaiyadden on the other hand, Barks publishes a new English version of Rumi in free verse. No doubt that Coleman Barks's version of Rumi has released these poems from the confines of Departments of Near Eastern Studies but unfortunately, as we will see, he has tied them in the cage of his personal taste.

The essential problem of Coleman Barks lies in the fact that in his version he intentionally changes Rumi, perhaps for the better, but at the expense of distortion and misrepresentation. He approaches Rumi's poetry as sacred texts, which need to be dusted from the passage of times by a touched devotee and prepared for the Post Modern, New Age market in the West. The New Age movement finds a remedy for modern alienation in old recipes, such as horoscope, Extra-Sensory Perception and divination. Coleman Barks himself, in an afterword to the book³, mentions some of his

¹Coleman Barks, *The Essential Rumi* Harper, San Francisco, 1996

Ibid P. 290

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³Ibid P. 290

similar mysterious experiences. For example, in his childhood he becomes miraculously acquainted with the name of Cappadocia, a region related to the city of Konia, where Rumi lived most of his life. Or When Barks meets Bowa Muhaiydeen he realizes that he had seen the saint in his dream the year before!

One can approach Rumi's poetry, or for that matter, all religious and mystical books from two different angles: faith or literature. A person who does not believe in God can read Masnavi, The Bible, Koran, Avesta and Sutra and find "Listen to the Reed!" in Masnavi, the Book of Genesis or Job, Songs of Solomon or the Meccan verses of Koran or the Hymn to Anahita in Avesta both beautiful and deep. One who chooses to approach Rumi's works only as literary texts must, in turn, respect the right of believers who see these texts as words of a saint and looking into them for eternal truths. By the same token, a reader who considers Rumi as a devoted Muslim must tolerate the other readers of Masnavi who read this book either as a free-spirit pantheist text or just as a literary work.

Reynold Nicholson who was the first scholar to publish the first critical edition of Masnavi in Persian as well as the first full translation of this book into English had intellectual honesty. Although his translation is literal but he had no religious or mystical mission and did not change Rumi in order to promote his own agenda.

Coleman Barks is the exact opposite of Reynold Nicholson. In order to remodel and fix Rumi for the American market Barks follows the path of a New-Age sufi. He tries to disconnect the mystical concepts of Rumi from their historical and social backgrounds and modify them for our contemporary taste. For example let us look at the fundamental concept of Love. As I have discussed in my essay, "Rumi: Love for God vs Love for a Donkey" love for Rumi has two mutually exclusive parts: corporal and spiritual. A male sufi can only reach spiritual love, that is, devotion to God, prophets and sufi masters if he avoids corporal passions. Woman has no room in the traditional houses of Mevlavi dervishes. She represents lust and bestial ego. A male sufi who cannot abstain from sex should get a wife but only for expedience. Sex is not a natural source of joy in life but a necessary evil and women are only the means of its satisfaction. Mathnavi is the product of a patriarchal society and reflects all of its misogynistic prejudices. Of course this dark side does not diminish the importance of Masnavi as a masterpiece in Persian literature. The contemporary reader usually attributes this anti-woman philosophy to the limitations of Rumi's time. The same argument can be made about the literary masterpieces of other nations. For example criticizing anti-Semitism in Shakespeare, such as his money-lending character Shylock in "The Merchant of Venice" who asks for "a pound of flesh" as a bond for his loan and eventually has to renounce Judaism and convert to Christianity, does not lower the role of William Shakespeare in English literature. A translator who wants to render Shakespeare's play into Persian would disservice this author by purifying or obliterating the character of Shylock.

Colman Barks instead of conveying the misogynistic and anti-sexual concept of love in Mathnavi as it is in the Persian text, distorts and misrepresents the letter and spirit of Rumi's work. For instance, at the beginning of chapter 8 entitled "Being a Lover: The Sunrise Ruby" he implies that Rumi's love covers the love between man and woman⁴. At the beginning of chapter 6 entitled "Controlling the Desire-Body: How Did You Kill Your Rooster, Husam?" puts these words in Rumi's mouth that the satisfaction of corporal desires especially sexual satisfaction is considered a part of reaching love of God⁵. In chapter 11 under the title "Union Gnats Inside the Wine" writes that Rumi's love is filled with "great feminine wisdom"⁶. In chapter 16 under the title "Rough Metaphors: More Teaching Stories" regarding the tale of "The Female Slave and the Mistress's Donkey" in which a lady dies because of copulation with a donkey Barks shifts the blame from poet to society for imagining such a brutal and humiliating act toward women⁷. In chapter 17 entitled "Solomon Poems: The Far Mosque" Barks fails to understand that the allegory of King Solomon and Queen Sheba in which the former represents "divine wisdom" and the latter "Bodily soul"⁸ is based on debasement of both "body" and "woman". Here Barks mentions another favorite allegory of Rumi: Jesus and his donkey⁹. According to Matthew 22: 1-10 Jesus entered Jerusalem riding a donkey before his crucifixion. For Rumi, Jesus represents spirit/man and his donkey symbolizes bodily soul/woman, and yet Barks is not troubled by this allegory.

In Persian gender pronoun does not exist but in his version of Rumi Barks frequently has translated the third-person singular pronoun "oo" to "he or she", as if Rumi did not see any difference between men and women, treated them equally and considered both sexes capable of pursuing mystical truth. Of course the Persian pronoun "oo" is neuter and the reader can only guess the gender of the pronoun from the context of the text. Wherever in Masnavi which is written in a patriarchal society Rumi mentions the nouns "salek" or "dervish" that is the follower of a mystical order, he strictly means a male person. As a result when Rumi uses the third-person singular pronoun "oo" for "salek" or "dervish", it should be rendered to "he" and translating it to "he or she" is a major distortion: "only grammatically is the dervish-lover a doer / in reality, with he or she so overcomes / so

⁴Ibid P. 100

⁵Ibid P. 54

⁶Ibid P. 124

⁷Ibid P. 173

⁸Ibid P. 186

⁹Ibid

dissolved into love,/ all qualities of doingness / disappear."¹⁰

The falsification and misrepresentation of Rumi's fundamental concepts is not limited to Love and spreads to other ideas such as "wine", "master" and "Jesus". As I have discussed in my book, *In Search of Joy: A Critique of Death-Oriented and Male-Dominated Culture in Iran* "may-e alast", that is, "primordial wine" of Rumi has a metaphoric and mystical significance and completely differs from the "grape wine" in the poetry of another great classical Persian poet, Hafez of Shiraz. Whereas in chapter 1 "The Tavern: Whoever Brought Me Here Will Have to Take Me Home" this distinction is obliterated and the cup of "unity" is filled with Cabernet wine¹¹. The slavish obedience of sufi to his "morshed", that is, master is a fundamental concept in Rumi's mysticism and the main reason that after 700 years his Mevlevi Order is still run by the hereditary line of the male offsprings of Rumi's son, Sultan Veled in Turkey. But at the beginning of chapter 12 entitled "The Sheik: I have Such a Teacher" this cultish and authoritarian relationship is portrayed as an egalitarian and ideal one¹². To mystify his own portrait Barks writes: "... Colmen to Bawa, Rumi to Shams..."¹³ suggesting an affinity between Rumi's master, Shams of Tabriz and his own unlettered guru Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, a Qadiri sufi sheik who came to the US from Sri Lanka in 1971 and died in Philadelphia in 1986. . In order to increase Rumi's appeal for American market Coleman Barks exaggerates the importance of Jesus for Rumi. In chapter 19 "Jesus Poems: The Population of the World:which is dedicated to the allusion of Rumi to Jesus?" Barks claims that there is a "strong connection" between these two personalities¹⁴. Whereas in Mathnavi there are more allusions to Jewish prophets such as Moses, Solomon and especially Joseph than to Jesus. Nevertheless, these allusions either to Jewish prophets or the Christians do not signify that Rumi has a special interest in any of these two faiths. He refers to these prophets only in accordance with Islamic narrative and Koranic text. For example, Rumi does not believe that Jesus was son of God or that Ibrahim took Isaac to the mount for sacrificial offering. Besides, the ratio of these allusions compare to Rumi's references to Koranic verses and Islamic traditions is very low.

Coleman Barks not only "frees" Rumi from the historical limitations of his time but he also tries to disconnect Rumi from the Islamic society in which he lived and the Persian language in which he wrote his poetry. I have never heard or seen that Barks

¹⁰ Ibid P. 174

¹¹ Ibid P. 1

¹² Ibid P. 132

¹³ Ibid P. 291

¹⁴ Ibid P. 201

in his radio interviews and tv shows refers to cultural roots of Rumi, as if this poet has fallen from the sky and does not belong to any land or culture. The people of England consider Shakespeare a national treasure and the works of this author have increased the appreciation of English literature and culture worldwide. But unfortunately due to the non-literary and commercial goals of Coleman Barks, his popular version of Rumi has not created any interest within the American public in the land where Rumi was raised, the culture in which he had breathed and the language in which he wrote his poetry.

In spite of all these limitations and distortions I enjoy the beauty and simplicity of some of Rumi's poems popularized by Barks. I only wish another Robert Bly will appear on the horizon and ask Barks to release Rumi's poetry from the cage of Coleman Barks and let the American reader approach Rumi untied.

II. Love for God

For almost eight centuries the sound of Rumi's (1207-73) reed of love resonates in our ears. In the past, opinions were not that much divided about the meaning of this love. The elite interpreted it as mystical and the public grew sad when hearing its complaints about separation,

Listen to the reed! It's telling the story
And complaining about the time of separation
Since they cut me from the reed bed
Men and women have moaned through my cry¹⁵

However, today the sound of this reed has found new echoes. A group considers it as an allegory for the unity of the material components of the world and, labels Rumi a Pantheist dialectician. On the contrary, another group finds Rumi's love the voice of hurt and wandering man who passionately looks for other human beings. Thus Rumi is labeled a humanist, the heat of whose love can melt the coldness and toughness of the machine age and its alienation.

Like others, I grow sad while hearing the moans of Rumi's reed and take pleasure reading Mathnavi with its poetical eloquence. Nevertheless, I think that Rumi's love has a mystical and metaphysical meaning and there is a wide gap between it and our contemporary concept of sexual love. In Rumi's canon, love means slavish obedience to master in the house of dervishes, mad resentment toward women at home and at best, ecstasy in the whirling dance of Sama'.

Mathnavi's reed complains because it is severed from its original reed bed. Since then, it has accompanied every band but, no one has understood it. If one considers the connection between

¹⁵Rumi Mathnavi Fourth edition, Javidan Publication Tehran 1978
p. 5
The translation is done by me.

a hollow reed and its sound, it will not be hard to understand its secret: the sound of the reed presents the spiritual breath of love which comes from a divine source. Each person is a reed player for himself. However, if the reed player wants the spiritual sound to be heard in his reed, he has to suppress his earthly greed and also follow "the harmonious lips" of a master. Only in this case, the lover elevates spiritually and becomes part of the beloved, the solo melody of the reed joins the harmony of the whole being and, the complaining reed returns to its original bed.

In order to explain the allegory of reed, Rumi writes stories and uses the technique of the oral story-teller. As he says,

O friends! Listen to this story
It reveals our current situation¹⁶

Thus, all six books of Mathnavi, are filled with versed stories. Sometimes, a tale is directly connected to another, and at other times it is interrupted with two or more tales. Mathnavi's stories, are garnished with ethical pieces of advice, philosophical discourses, mystical concepts, religious-historical allusions and finally, proverbs and anecdotes. This style of versed story-telling allows Rumi not only to popularize his mystical concepts but also, escapes religious excommunication.

In order to understand Rumi's love, I have chosen two stories from his Mathnavi: one "The tale of the King and His Woman Slave" which precedes the rest of the stories and the other, "The tale of the Woman Slave and Her Mistress's Donkey" from the fifth book. The first mostly illustrates the divine side of love and the necessity of obedience to the spiritual master and the second presents its earthly side, that is, its misogynistic outlook.

In the first tale, while hunting, a king is hunted on the main road, but not by an animal rather by a female-slave. Love reverses the position of the king and the woman slave. As the poet says,

The soul of the king was enslaved by the female-slave
And the bird of his soul was palpating in its cage¹⁷

Therefore, in the beginning of the story, we encounter two allegories regarding love: On the one hand, love is compared to a relationship between the hunter and the hunted in which the hunter is preyed upon; on the other hand, it is compared to a relationship between the king and the female-slave in which the king has become the male-slave of his servant. In the first, we find killing and, in the second, enslavement, and in both, the lover is the loser. After a short while, the maid becomes ill ,

¹⁶Ibid p. 7

¹⁷Ibid p. 8

and every medicine the physicians use for treatment causes opposite results. The doctors are discredited and, the hopeless king runs bare footed into the mosque. While crying, he falls asleep, and an elder tells him in a dream that the next day he will see a divine physician. The king arises joyfully. He is no longer the former man: "He was a subject to the female-slave, but now has become king again".

Through this spiritual development, the king unties one of the snares in which he had become captured at the outset of the story and frees himself from the yoke of slavery. He wins because he loses faith in medical science and takes refuge in the "science of religion"; he abandons the world, finds God. In this journey, his guide is the divine physician. His description convinces us that we are faced with, if not the prophet, at least someone at his level. Like Muhammad who, according to tradition, during the day always had a patch of cloud overhead. This physician is compared to "a sun in the middle of shade". The king tells him,

You are The Selected, I am like O'mar
And I am forever at your service¹⁸

Then the physician-master replaces the female-slave: "He said you have been my beloved, not her". Here, Rumi interrupts his story, and under a subheading for "adab", which literally means "courtesy", he describes the details of the relationship between a follower and his spiritual master and God. "Adab" presents obedience to God and loyalty to the guru. The punishment for those who are not "courteous" is divine retribution. The people of Israel were ungrateful, thus God became enraged and caused them to wander in the desert. As the poet says,

"The discourteous" not only became evil
But also set fire everywhere¹⁹

Rumi's theory of "adab", in fact, is the old superstitious belief in divine retribution,

If you don't pay your tax for the Poor, the clouds won't appear
And because of adultery, cholera will spread over the land
Whatever grief and injustice occurs to you
All resulted from your disobedience and disloyalty²⁰

¹⁸Ibid p. 10

"The Selected" is one of the titles of Mohammad, the prophet. O'mar is the second caliphate.

¹⁹Ibid p. 11

²⁰Ibid p. 11

Therefore, love toward the spiritual master necessitates slavish obedience. Now, the means for undoing the second snare are prepared. The king has to release himself from the female-slave as a hunter, and it is only possible through the spiritual master. He is no longer the slave of the maid yet, he is still her "killed" prey. However, if the physician wants to release the king from the chain, he, first, has to heal the ill female-slave. The earthly doctors did not succeed in this purpose because, "they were unaware of the inner mood". He finds the cause of her illness but, he does not disclose it to the king: "Her body is fine yet her heart is in pain". This, in turn, is love, as Rumi describes it: "Love is the astrolabe of God's secrets". With love there is no need for astronomy, and the lover is aware of the secrets of the whole universe,

If being in love is totally mutual
It will finally lead us to that king
However I describe love in detail
When I reach love, I am tongue-tied
Although description in words clarifies
The love without language is more limpid
Since Pen hurried while writing
When it reached love, it was torn
When speech wanted to describe this mood
Every pen broke and every paper was torn²¹

Love is not only the goal but, it is also the way to reach it. The god of love cannot be recognized through reason because "the leg of rationalists is wooden and does not obey". The lover has to choose seclusion and spiritually purify himself, so that God's secrets are revealed to him,

Failing to explain it, Reason fell in the mud like a donkey
Only Love can fully describe how to fall in love²²

God resembles the sun of which each follower's soul is part.
When the follower polishes his soul, he will immediately be able to join the whole sun,

The sun shines as proof of the existence of the sun
If you look for a guide, don't turn your back on him²³

In order to achieve spiritual purification and reach "the sun of soul and of the universe", the follower needs a master. It is

²¹Ibid p. 12
"Pen" most likely alludes to the koranic Pen while writing "the hidden tablet".

²²Ibid

²³Ibid

interesting that Rumi calls his spiritual master Shams, which in Arabic means "the sun". He met Shams of Tabriz, at the age of thirty-eight. So, Rumi left the pulpit of school and mosque, and became infatuated with love. They did not stay together more than three years. Shams either was killed by the fanatics in the city of Konia, or he disappeared of his own free will. This separation inspired Rumi to write fifty thousand couplets of Ghazal (lyric), before he began to write another twenty-six thousand couplets in the form of Mathnavi.

Not only "the sun of the soul" is part of the sun of God but also, the sun (Shams), of the master belongs to God,

Shams of Tabriz is the absolute light
He is the sun and light of God²⁴

Then Rumi continues with the story of his ecstasy toward the master,

Now that I want to describe the face of Shams al-Din
The sun of the fourth heaven covers its face
Because I mentioned his name, I am obliged
To describe some secret of his blessing
At this moment, the skirt of my soul burns
It has the aroma of Joseph's shirt
For years I was indebted to his friendship
And I should hint to you of those happy days
So that the earth and the heaven become blissful
And reason, soul and vision exceed one hundred times
I said to myself: O departed from your beloved
You look like a patient who needs his physician
Don't burden me, I am in a state of Annihilation
I am in ecstasy and cannot praise him

...

What can I say? Not one of my veins is awake
To describe that friend who has no mate
If I praise him, it is like diminishing his greatness
A proof of my drunkenness which is unlawful
Now, set aside the story of this grief
And this bleeding heart for another time²⁵

While writing these lines, Rumi is torn between two forces fighting each other: One wants to remember Shams without fear of digressing and the other, does not want to break the natural course of the story. What we learn from this conflict is this, Rumi considers himself as part of Shams, the spiritual guide, and

²⁴Ibid p. 13

²⁵Ibid pp. 13-14

When they brought the shirt of Joseph to his father, Jacob, he realized that his son was still alive and his eyesight was restored.

ultimately of Shams, God,

Remove the veil without fear and speak nakedly
There is no room for my beloved and me in one shirt²⁶

Rumi, indeed, through allusion to Shams shows the course of development of the story of "The King and the Woman Slave". The spiritual physician requests of the king that,

He said: O king, empty the house
Drive off both relative and stranger²⁷

Apparently, the physician wants to find the cause of the female-slave's illness but, in reality, he wishes the king to purify his soul through meditation and abstinence. If the king can "kill" his ego, he will no longer be a "killed" prey of the female-slave. However, this can only be done with the guidance of the master, just as removing a thorn from a foot or a heart is only possible by a "thorn-removing" physician,

When a thorn pierces your foot, it is painful
Now imagine when a thorn pierces your heart!
If any riffraff could see the heart's thorn
How should one find a proper person?²⁸

But the female-slave's heart thorn is, indeed, her love for a goldsmith from the city of Samarqand after their separation. A merchant sells the female-slave to a goldsmith in that city. The master, after six months, against his female-slave's will, and perhaps on the same main road by which the king travels, auctions her. Goldsmithing is a luxurious occupation. So, the love of the female-slave for the goldsmith presents her love of earthly wealth. Only by breaking from this superficial love, is the female-slave able to prepare her heart for receiving the king. The physician asks the maid not to disclose the secret of her heart to the king. Keeping secrets is one of the basic principles of mystical cults, and Rumi mentions it here,

If the secrets are kept inside the heart
You will reach your goal in a short time
The prophet said whoever hides a secret
Will very soon fulfill his wish
When a seed hides inside the earth
Its secret will rejuvenate the garden
If gold and silver were not buried
How could they develop inside the mine?²⁹

²⁶Ibid p. 14

²⁷Ibid

²⁸Ibid

Loyalty to the master and being faithful to the group secrets, remind us of master-apprentice relations and guild confidentiality of the artisans in the middle ages. The apprentice has to put his body and soul at the disposal of his master, and keep the techniques and secrets of the guild confidential, because the life of the guild depends upon it. Whoever disobeys this command, will be severely punished. Many stories of Mathnavi, including our second tale, are filled with the scents of workshops and stores. In fact, Rumi's mysticism grew out of the same psychological and economic background.

As the physician advised, the king calls the goldsmith to the court. The goldsmith is concerned with worldly goals and, he mistakes "the price of his blood" as a "gift" from the king and is trapped. The female-slave is given to the goldsmith, so that his "water of union", extinguishes her "fire of lust". The result is positive. After six months, the female-slave is cured. Now it is the physician's turn. He against the Hippocratic Oath prescribes a poisonous drug to the goldsmith, so that through illness he loses his beauty therefore her love gradually dies. This is the outcome of all loves which do not have a divine origin,

Those loves which are for lust or wealth
Are not love, they end up in shame³⁰

The beautiful face of the earthly beloved leads to his or her destruction,

...
His face appeared as the enemy of his soul
Just as the peacock whose enemy is his feather
So many kings who perished because of pomposity

...
This world is a mountain and our actions like shouting
The echoes of our shouts come back toward us³¹

Contrary to appearances, loving life means loving the dead,
and God is the only living love,

Because loving the dead is not lasting
And the dead are not coming back to us
Living love in soul and vision
In every moment is more fresh than a flower-bud
Choose love toward that Being who is immortal
He is the cup-bearer of your rejuvenating wine
Choose love for that Being through whom all prophets

²⁹ Ibid p. 16

³⁰ Ibid p. 18

³¹ Ibid

Found from His love, position and majesty³²

Murder of the goldsmith, according to the poet is "a seemingly evil good" because it causes someone to perish yet, it leads to the survival of the right person. The woman slave kills her materialistic ego, and prepares the house of her heart for receiving the king.

At the outset of the story, the king's love was compared to a relationship in which the king is the prey and not the hunter, and a slave not free. However, the earthly love in the course of the story develops into a spiritual love, without any shift in the hunting or slavish nature of the love. What have changed are the position and character of the two parties and not the relationship itself. In the earthly love, a man falls in love with a woman slave, whereas in the spiritual love, he is transformed into the slave of the spiritual master. On the other hand, in the earthly love, the king is allegorically "killed" by the earthly beloved, whereas in the heavenly love, he by his own hand and with the guidance of his mentor kills his materialistic ego. The king is released from the woman slave's love and changes to the killer of the goldsmith and his own corporal ego. Therefore, from Rumi's point of view, love either in its earthly or spiritual forms does not have a free and equal nature. On the contrary, one party always should enslave and win over the other party, so that it leads to the destruction of that person. Furthermore, reaching spiritual love is only possible through the suppression of earthly love and, these two kinds of love are mutually exclusive. The mystical slogan of "annihilation in God", like the Buddhist nirvana, fully clarifies the two above-mentioned concepts. Woman represents the world and the "shameful" love. The king has to break from the woman slave in order to love the divine mentor. Additionally, the woman slave's love for the goldsmith is lustful and fleeting. Worst of all, the woman slave, contrary to the king, is not able to achieve spiritual development. After breaking from the goldsmith, she still remains in the slavery of the king. In the Rumi's male-oriented house of dervishes, there is no room for women. Because women represent the world and the "shameful" love.

III. Love for a Donkey

In the story of "The Woman Slave and Her Mistress's Donkey", Rumi focuses on worldly love. He uses his creative talent to illustrate the decadence and baseness of this kind of relationship. In the first story, while discussing worldly love, it was mostly based on the emotional side of this relationship and there was almost no mention of sexual intercourse. On the contrary, in this story, the focal point is sex, although, it is not portrayed in its common form but in a nasty and extraordinary fashion. Among men, sexual satisfaction with donkeys and horses

³²Ibid p.19

is seen. However, in this tale, Rumi attributes this act to women,

A woman slave threw a donkey on herself
Because of lust and extremity of desire
That jackass had learned it free of charge
And he knew how to have sex with people³³

For Rumi, woman represents lust. So, it is not surprising that he creates his main character as a woman. Furthermore, the sexual act for him is only animal, and as a result, the male partner could become a jackass,

That trickster woman had a gourd
She put it on the penis for protection
When fucking, that hack used the gourd
So only half of the penis got in, no more
If his whole thing went through her
It would have torn both her intestines and womb³⁴

Here, Rumi mixes hatred toward women with class resentment. Expertise in dirty works is only possible among slaves and not their owners,

The donkey grew thinner, and his mistress
Was surprised that he became so lean³⁵

Ultimately, the lady understands the event, and she decides to use the donkey herself,

She was intoxicated by the joy of lust
She shut the door and said on the spot:
I'm all alone! I'll thank God loudly
I am free from any kind of obligation

...
Sexual drive makes the soul deaf and blind
So that Joseph's wolf, presents salt as honey³⁶

Lust is the worst obstacle on the path to love,
Greed presents evil as good
Lust is the worst plague on the path

³³Ibid p. 878

³⁴Ibid

³⁵Ibid

³⁶Ibid p. 888

After his brothers threw Joseph in a well, they mixed his shirt with blood and told their father that he was torn by a wolf.

It has shamed many good names
And has stupefied many sagacious people ³⁷

A sufi can get rid of lust in two ways: either he has to be abstinent and avoid eating as much as possible (because food adds to the sexual drive), or he has to marry a woman and use her as a means of overcoming his lust, so that satanic and lustful thoughts do not hinder his meditation and spiritual purification,

If you crave for food, take a woman soon
Otherwise the cat will come and grab the fat ³⁸

It is natural that under these conditions, sex for Rumi becomes a bloody rape, in which the rapist is not guilty. Because he is a victim of the agitator and the seducer, that is the woman,

The lady shut the door and grabbed the donkey
In ecstasy, therefore she received a punishment
She dragged the donkey into the middle of the house
And on the spot lay down under the donkey
On the same bench, over which she saw the slave
When the bitch joyfully satisfies herself,
She opened her legs and the donkey fucked her
A fire was set inside her from the donkey's penis
The trained donkey pressed hard into her mistress
Up to his testicles, so that the lady died on the spot
The liver torn from the penis of the donkey
And all of her intestines were pulled apart
The bench fell to one side, the woman to the other
She gave her soul quietly at that moment ³⁹

The well-known Persian idiom, undoubtedly is taken from this story,

O father, have you heard of such a shameful death?
Have you seen "a martyr of a donkey's penis"? ⁴⁰

Worldly love originates from beastly ego. One should kill it, otherwise one will be killed by it,

You should know that the animal ego is that jackass
Lying down under it is more shameful than what you heard
If you die for your ego in lustful passion
Know that in truth, you are less than that woman

³⁷Ibid pp. 888-9

Ibid p. 889 ³⁸

³⁹Ibid

⁴⁰Ibid

It gives the human ego a donkey form
Because forms are modified by their contents
This is the revelation of a secret at the Resurrection
O God, save us from a body like a donkey⁴¹

Here, Rumi takes the opportunity to preach about the importance of having a mentor, even in such a non-spiritual situation,

That little woman slave came and said: ah
You took such a wrong path, mistress
Having a job done without a mentor
leads to loosing one's life stupidly
O you stole unfinished knowledge from me!
Were you embarrassed to ask me about the beast?
You saw the appearance but not its secret
Before becoming a master you opened your shop
You saw the penis, honey and waffle
O greedy! Why didn't you see that gourd? ⁴²

The world resembles the organ of a donkey, from which if sufi wants to benefit he must use "the protective gourd" of a spiritual master. Otherwise, he will become "a martyr of a donkey's penis".

In modern sexual love, emotional attachment between two persons is intertwined with sexual relationship, and these two parts become mutually inclusive. Of course, emotional attachment does not always necessarily lead to sexual relationship, as can be seen in many friendships. Likewise, it happens that sex does not come with a passionate love, as one finds in prostitution or empty marriages. In Rumi's cannon, however, emotional attachment and sexual relationship are mutually exclusive, and the existence of one side negates that of the other. For example, for Rumi, the passionate love of the woman slave for the goldsmith is "shameful", and upon the watering of the goldsmith's union, the fire of her lust is extinguished. The above-mentioned contradiction even goes beyond this. One can respect the motivation of friendship in man only when it is directed toward God, divine leaders and the spiritual masters. In turn, the sexual drive in man belongs to his animal ego. One must kill this beast inside, either by abstinence or marriage. Therefore, according to Rumi, human nature consists of two contradictory divine and animal components. A sufi is ordained to kill the beastly ego in order to pave the way for the complete triumph of the divine soul.

In fact, Rumi's theory of love, is a mystical reflection of the contradiction inherent in his society. Love of God is controlled by a group of masculine experts who, in accordance with the culture of the epoch, sometimes are called prophets, imams or

⁴¹Ibid P. 890

⁴²Ibid

religious leaders (mojtahed), and sometimes, sufi's "morshed", Ismaaili's "hojat" and Khomeini's "vali". The rest of men and almost the whole "race" of women must take the responsibility of doing the "animal tasks" of the society, including preparation of food and clothing, supervision of the house, raising children, giving sexual pleasure and taking care of other personal affairs. In the two above-quoted tales from Mathnavi, one can fully see the inherent class and sexual contradictions within the society. Rumi, of course, is not a neutral observer, but he admires spiritual mentors, religious leaders and imams, and despises women and manual workers. Rumi grants kings the title of "khas ol-lah" (the God's elite) and to the sufi' leaders, the title of "vali ol-ah" (the God's supervisor). However, he labels a woman slave, who is at the same time both the sexual and manual worker of her master, "seducer" and paradoxically, "a trembling penis jackass".

Contrary to its appearance, Rumi's love for the God's supervisors is not divine. But it reflects the relationship between master and apprentice inside the artisan's workshops. Rumi's house of dervishes is, indeed, similar, with its master's stick and its rules for guild confidentiality. Nevertheless, it differs to the extent that it produces dervishes and sufis, instead of hats and shoes. Undoubtedly, Mathnavi, in turn, has helped to spread the culture of master-apprentice and misogynistic attitudes in our society.

One cannot repair Rumi's theory of love. His God and donkey should be left as they are. What remains is a human love which could be achieved through emotional attachment and sexual passion.