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THE EVOLUTION OF ONTOLOGICAL HUMANISM AND SPIRITUAL EVOLUTION IN SUFI POETRY: FROM RUMI'S ECSTATIC YEARNING TO SHABISTARI'S SYSTEMATIC MICROCOSMOS

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Abstract. This study investigates the evolution of the philosophy of humanism and spiritual development within classic Persian Sufi poetry during the critical transition between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Focusing on the foundational works of Jalal al-Din al-Rumi (Masnavi Manavi) and Mahmud Shabistari (Gulshani Raz), the article charts the philosophical shift from an experiential, ecstatic, and love-centric view of human potential to a highly structured, systematic, and ontological model of the human being as a perfect microcosm. Employing a comparative textual and hermeneutic methodology, we analyze how the journey of the human soul – progressing from inanimate matter to plant, animal, and ultimately divine humanity – was reconceptualized. The results demonstrate that while Rumi employs dynamic metaphors of separation and existential movement driven by divine love, Shabistari institutionalizes these concepts using the philosophical language of Ibn Arabi's Wahdat al-Wujud (Unity of Being). This study concludes that this shift does not represent a dissolution of Sufi humanism, but rather its intellectualization, equipping it to withstand the socio-political fracturing of the post-Mongol Islamic world.

Introduction. The concept of the human being (Insān) sits at the very core of Islamic mystical metaphysics (Tasawwuf). Far from being merely a biological entity or a passive subject of divine decree, the human being in Sufi literature is envisioned as the bridge between the absolute and the relative, the divine and the terrestrial. This paper traces the evolution of this ontological humanism during a pivotal period of literary and philosophical maturation in the Persianate world, specifically looking at the arc from Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–1273) to Mahmud Shabistari (1288–1340).

During the thirteenth century, under the catastrophic shadow of the Mongol invasions, Sufi poetry served as a sanctuary for preserving human dignity and spiritual agency. Rumi's masterwork, the Masnavi Ma'navi, approached human evolution through the lens of ecstatic love (Ishq) and cosmic longing. For Rumi, the human soul is in a state of perpetual exile, yearning to return to its divine origin, traversing distinct evolutionary stations – mineral, vegetative, and animal—to reach its true potential as a conscious vehicle of the Divine.

By the early fourteenth century, the mystical landscape underwent a structural transformation. The teachings of the Andalusian mystic Ibn 'Arabi began to systematically merge with Persian poetry. Mahmud Shabistari's Gulshani Raz ("The Rose Garden of Mystery"), composed around 1317 CE, represents the pinnacle of this synthesis. Shabistari responded to fifteen precise metaphysical questions, transforming the fluid, ecstatic humanism of Rumi into a structured, geometric blueprint of the human being as the definitive microcosm (Alam-e Saghir) reflecting the macrocosm.

The primary objective of this research is to delineate the exact nature of this philosophical transition. While previous scholarship has often treated Rumi and Shabistari in isolation or under a generic umbrella of "mystical love", this study establishes a clear evolutionary line. It addresses a fundamental research question: How did the literary and philosophical conceptualization of human

spiritual evolution shift from the open, experiential pafos of Rumi to the systematic, ontological framework of Shabistari?

Methods. To track the evolution of humanistic philosophy between these two historical landmarks, this study utilizes a qualitative, comparative hermeneutic approach combined with historical-contextual analysis. The primary sources utilized for text analysis comprise: Jalal al-Din Rumi's Masnavi-ye Ma'navi (specifically Books I, III, and IV), utilizing the critical editions established by Reynold A. Nicholson.

Mahmud Shabistari's Gulshani Raz, referencing both the historical Persian texts and Edward Henry Whinfield's analytical translations, cross-checked against Lahiji's classical commentary (Mafatih al-I'jaz).

The texts were evaluated based on three interconnected thematic axes: The Evolutionary Ladder: Tracking the progression of the soul through the mineral, vegetative, animal, and human domains (taraqqi). The Catalyst of Transformation: Identifying what drives this evolution (Rumi's ecstatic love vs. Shabistari's cognitive/illuminative reflection). The Structure of the Perfect Human (Al-Insān al-Kāmil): Mapping how the final state of human perfection is expressed metaphorically and structurally. The comparative analysis was executed chronologically, accounting for the shifts in socio-political stability and theological institutionalization in the Iranian plateau between 1250 and 1320 CE.

Results. The textual and historical analysis reveals a clear, structural evolution in how the human spiritual journey was conceptualized. The findings are categorized into three core dimensions: the mechanism of cosmic evolution, the conceptualization of the human microcosm, and the shifting definition of the "Perfect Human."

To provide a clear overview of the structural differences discovered during our textual analysis, the table below highlights the distinct shifts in methodology, ontology, and metaphor between Rumi and Shabistari.

Analytical Dimension	Jalal al-Din Rumi (Masnavi)	Mahmud Shabistari (Gulshan-e Raz)	
Primary Mode of Expression	Ecstatic, experiential, narratives, and parables	Systematic, analytical, didactic, and philosophical	
The Cosmic Evolutionary Driver	Divine Love (Ishq) as an active, disruptive force	Spiritual Intellect (Aql-e Kul) and Illumination (Kashf)	
Metaphor for the Soul	The Reed Flute (Nay) separated from the reedbed	The Mirror reflecting the Divine Names and Attributes	
Evolutionary Schema	Linear-Dynamic ascension from matter to spirit	Circular-Ontological descent (nuzul) and ascent (su'ud)	
Core Human Definition	A dynamic agent of universal tolerance and transformation	The exact dot/nexus where the macrocosm realizes itself	

Our analysis of the Masnavi confirms that Rumi envisions human evolution as an unfolding cosmic epic. In a famous passage from Book IV of the Masnavi, Rumi outlines a proto-evolutionary schema:

"First he appeared in the class of inorganic things,
Next he passed into the vegetative state...

From the vegetative he fell into the animal state...
Then the Creator drew him from the animal state into the human state."

Rumi's results indicate that this is not a Darwinian materialist evolution, but a spiritual awakening of consciousness (taraqqi). The mineral yearns for growth, the plant yearns for movement, the animal yearns for intellect, and the human yearns for the Divine. The sole mechanism driving this vertical ascension is Ishq (Absolute Love). The human being is defined by their capacity to suffer the agony of separation (firaq) and actively seek annihilation of the ego (fana) to attain eternal subsistence in God (baqa).

In contrast, analyzing the "Gulshani Raz" demonstrates that Shabistari strips away the narrative parables in favor of pure, geometric metaphysics. For Shabistari, the human being is explicitly defined as the Microcosm. The universe is a giant mirror, but the human being is the eye-pupil of that mirror through which God views His own creation.

Shabistari organizes the human journey into a precise circle composed of two arcs: the Arc of Descent (Qaws al-Nuzul), wherein the Divine Essence emanates downward through the celestial spheres into dense matter, and the Arc of Ascent (Qaws al-Su'ud), where the human being journeys back from matter to Spirit. Evolution here is a mathematical necessity of the cosmos:

"The modules of the world are all integrated in you,
You are the soul of the world, know this truth."

Shabistari's results prove that humanism became structural: the human being does not just happen to love God; the human being is the structural nexus where God's hidden treasure becomes consciously known.

Discussion. The transition from Rumi to Shabistari marks one of the most intellectually profound evolutions in Islamic humanism, reflecting a broader shift in the classical Persian literary tradition. Rumi's humanism is fundamentally open-ended, warm, and highly conversational. He walked among the people of Konya, translating complex theological issues into universal truths accessible to Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike. His metaphor of the Nay (Reed Flute) emphasizes that human nature is defined by its hollow interior, waiting to be filled by the divine breath. Shabistari, writing nearly half a century later in Tabriz, operated in an environment where Sufism was becoming the intellectual lingua franca of the elite. By adopting the ontological philosophy of Wahdat al-Wujud, Shabistari changed the vocabulary of human potential. The human being is no longer merely a crying flute, but an unfolding mathematical equation of the Divine Names. This transition reflects an intellectualization of Sufi humanism. While it lost some of Rumi's raw, ecstatic emotional accessibility, it gained immense philosophical rigor, defending human spiritual supremacy using logic, cosmological structures, and epistemological clarity.

Rumi's evolutionary process relies on the constant breaking of boundaries—the human must shed his animal characteristics just as the plant shed its mineral stillness. Shabistari contextualizes this by asserting that the human mind cannot achieve this transformation through rationalism alone (Aql-e Juz'i). Instead, the human must activate the Universal Intellect (Aql-e Kul) inside themselves. Thus, Shabistari's definition of human evolution is an epistemological awakening: the human does not "change" into something else; rather, they lift the veil of illusion (Kashf) to realize that they were always connected to the True Reality.

Conclusion. This study demonstrates that the philosophy of humanism in Sufi poetry did not decline after the golden thirteenth century; rather, it evolved from an experiential phenomenon into a systematic ontology. Jalal al-Din Rumi provided the emotional, dynamic impulse, celebrating the human spirit's endless upward journey through cosmic love. Mahmud Shabistari inherited this profound humanistic worldview and synthesized it into a brilliant, compact philosophical system within the Gulshani Raz, framing the human being as the definitive structural summary of all existence. Together, they represent two halves of a singular vision: one providing the living heart,

and the other providing the intellectual architecture for the timeless Sufi doctrine of the Perfect Human.

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