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Rūmī's Reception in the West: From Orientalist Scholarship to Global Spiritual Icon

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ABSTRACT

Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (Persian:جلال‌الدین محمّد رومی), widely known as ***Rūmī*** or ***Mawlana*** in the Persianate world (13 September 1207-17 December 1273),was a 13th-century poet, Hanafi *faqih*(jurist), theologian and Sufi mystic born during Khwarizmian empire, is among the most widely read poets today. His *Mathnavī-yi Maʿnavī* and *Dīwān-i Shams-i Tabrīzī* embody the depth of Sufi mysticism and Persian literary tradition. In the West, however, *Rūmī's* reception has been shaped primarily through translations and adaptations that often detach him from his Islamic and Sufi context. This article explores the history of *Rūmī's* Western reception through the works of six major figures—Reynold A. Nicholson, Arthur J. Arberry, Annemarie Schimmel, Ibrahim Gamard, Coleman Barks, Jawid Mojaddedi and Omid Safi . Each translator or interpreter, situated within his or her cultural moment, presents a different image of Rūmī, ranging from faithful philological renderings to popularized spiritual paraphrases. Through comparative analysis of translated Persian verses, the study highlights the consequences of these interpretive strategies and raises questions about authenticity, Orientalism, decontextualization, and commercialization. Ultimately, it argues for an ethical approach to translation that balances accessibility with fidelity to Rūmī's Islamic

mystical vision.

Introduction

The global fascination with Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī is unprecedented for a medieval Persian poet. His saintly, divine and spiritual legacy has been greatly appreciated by the world in last seven centuries. In other words, his magnitude of popularity surpassed national, ethenic and linguistic restrictions. His poems have been widely translated in various languages of the world and transposed in various formats. In 2007 he was described as the 'most popular poet ' in the United States alone, Rūmī has frequently been described as the "best-selling poet," his verses appearing on greeting cards, social media, and corporate merchandise.[1] While this has contributed to his immense popularity, it has also resulted in alterations, omissions, and reinterpretations of his work. Rūmī as popularized in the West is not the same figure revered in Persian, Turkish, and wider Islamic contexts. Rather, he is mediated through successive waves of translators, editors, and cultural interpreters, each reshaping his mystical voice for different audiences.

This study seeks to explore the following questions:

1. To what extent do Western translations reflect Rūmī's original intent?

2. How have adaptations influenced his reception in literature, spirituality, and popular culture?

3. What are the broader implications of these transformations for literary and cultural studies?

To address these questions, the article examines seven influential figures in chronological order— R.A .Nicholson, A. J. Arberry, Annemarie Schimmel , Ibrahim Gamard, Coleman Barks, Omid Safi and Jawid Mojadded —through close readings of selected Persian verses and their English renderings. This method foregrounds both continuity and rupture in *Rūmī's* Western reception, highlighting the tension between fidelity and accessibility.

Reynold A. Nicholson: The Architect of Philological Fidelity

Reynold Alleyne Nicholson(1968-1945), a Cambridge scholar, produced the first critical edition and English translation of *Rūmī's Mathnavī-yi Maʿnavī* between 1925 and 1940.[2] His work remains foundational, both for its rigorous philological method and its attempt to situate Rūmī within Islamic mysticism. Nicholson's translations often preserve Qurʾānic allusions and Sufi terminology, thereby foregrounding the text's theological depth.

The Reed-Flute Prologue:

[1] Nicholson , Reynold A., *The Mathnawí of Jalálu'ddín Rúmí*, 8 vols. (London: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial, 1925–1940). Nicholson's critical edition remains the basis for all subsequent scholarly work on Rūmī. See also Franklin Lewis, Rumi: Past and Present, East and West (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 305–356.

[2] On Nicholson's editorial principles, see Jawid Mojaddedi, "*Editing the Mathnawī: Nicholson and His Successors*," Journal of Persianate Studies 2, no. 2 (2009): 187–210.

The Mathnavī opens with the celebrated tale of the reed-flute (nay), lamenting its separation from the reed-bed—a symbol of the soul's longing for its divine source.

Persian couplet (*Mathnavī-yiMaʿnavī-yi):*

"بشنو از نی چون حکایت می‌کند

وز جدایی‌ها شکایت می‌کند

Bishnav az nay chūn ḥikāyat mī-konad

vaz judā'ī-hā shikāyat mī-konad

(Transliteration)

Nicholson's Translation:

"*Hearken to this Reed, how it telleth a tale,*

complaining of separations—"

Nicholson's rendering preserves the literal sense but strips the verse of its musical cadence. The Persian's rhythm (*bishnav az nay chun hikāyat mī-konad)* carries a haunting melody that Nicholson flattens in the interest of accuracy. His choice of "**telleth a tale"** reflects an archaic register, lending solemnity but also a stiffness foreign to Rūmī's fluid Persian.

Consider the famous Persian couplets:

"هر کسی کو دور ماند از اصل خویش

باز جوید روزگار وصل خویش

کز نیستان تا مرا ببریده‌اند

از نفیرم مرد و زن نالیده‌اند

Nicholson's Rendering:

"Every man who is far from his own origin

Seeks again the time of union with it."

"Ever since they cut me from the reed-bed,

My wail hath moved men and women to tears."

Nicholson renders ***aṣl*** as "origin" and ***waṣl*** as "union," emphasizing metaphysical return to God. His choice preserves the Sufi cosmology of exile and return, resonating with Qurʾānic motifs of humanity's primordial covenant (Qurʾān 7:172).[3]

Nicholson's Interpretive Lens

Nicholson often explained Rūmī's parables in footnotes with references to Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart or St. John of the Cross.While this opened comparative horizons, it also risked detaching Rūmī from his Qurʾānic and Islamic grounding. For example, Nicholson noted that the reed-flute prologue "recalls the mystic anima separata of Christian Neoplatonism." Such framing reflects Orientalist assumptions, even while Nicholson's philology preserved the integrity of the text.

While Nicholson's translations are often criticized for their Victorian diction, they remain invaluable for their accuracy and contextual integrity. He did not attempt to popularize Rūmī,

but rather to make him available to scholars of Persian and Islamic thought. Nevertheless, without Nicholson's groundwork, subsequent interpreters would lack the textual infrastructure for their own translations.

Arthur J. Arberry : Bridging Scholarship and Aesthetics

Aethur J. Arberry (b.1905) Nicholson's student, also of Cambridge, extended his mentor's project but brought a new sensitivity to style, and sought to bring refinement to Nicholson's work.Arberry was one of the most versatile Orientalists of the mid-twentieth century, played a decisive role in bridging Nicholson's dense philological rigor and the more interpretive currents of later Rūmī scholarship. Arberry, a student of Persian and Arabic literature, was deeply committed to rendering Islamic mystical texts into an accessible but still scholarly English idiom. His "*Mystical Poems of Rumi* (1968)" and "*Discourses of Rumi (1961) "* marked significant moments in the dissemination of Rūmī's thought in the West.[4]

Arberry's translations, though scholarly, adopt a more poetic rhythm, making Rūmī accessible to educated readers outside Orientalist philology. For example, the famous "reed - flute" verse appears in Arberry's rendering:

Arberry's Translation:

"*He who is parted from his source*

Longs all the time to be reunited."

Arberry softens Nicholson's diction, using "source" instead of "origin" and "longs" instead of "seeks," thereby highlighting emotional resonance over metaphysical terminology. This choice reflects his

[3] Nicholson's English rendering of *Mathnavī* I:1–2 demonstrates his close philological approach. Cf. *Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, Mathnavī-yi Maʿnavī*, ed. R.A. Nicholson, vol. 1 (London: Luzac, 1925).

[4] Arthur J. Arberry, *Mystical Poems of Rūmī* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

broader aim: to bridge academic precision with poetic sensibility. Arberry also produced translations of Persian mystical lyric poetry ***(ghazals)***, emphasizing beauty of expression while retaining Islamic references. His work paved the way for a more literary engagement with Rūmī in the English-speaking world.

Annemarie Schimmel : Symbolism & Mystical Universe

Annemarie Schimmel, a German scholar of Islamic mysticism, offered a new interpretive horizon, and represents a unique voice in Rūmī studies. Unlike Nicholson and Arberry, she was not primarily a translator of the Mathnavī, but an interpreter of Rūmī's cultural and spiritual universe. Her works, such as "*The Triumphal Sun : A Study of the Works of Jalāloddin Rumī* "(1978; rev.1993) remains one of the most comprehensive studies of Rūmī in any Western language.[5] It situates Rūmī within Persianate Sufism and highlights the universality of his message without erasing its Islamic foundations. She frequently cites verses in Persian and offers interpretive paraphrases rather than strict translations. On the above couplet, Schimmel explains:

Schimmel's Interpretation:

"For Rūmī, every human being feels the pain of separation from the eternal home and strives for reunion with the divine."

Her approach foregrounds experiential mysticism, drawing connections between Rūmī's metaphors and universal spiritual yearnings. Schimmel emphasized that Rūmī's thought cannot be divorced from Islam, even while she engaged Western readers through comparative mysticism. Schimmel highlighted recurring symbols—light, sun, wine, fire, union—as interpretive keys. For example, Rūmī's verses on love:

Persian couplet:

"عشق آید و عشق آید و عشق آید

هر چه جز عشقست بیزاید بیزاید

Translation (Schimmel's paraphrase):

"*Love arrives, love arrives, love arrives—*

Whatever is not love perishes, perishes."

Here Schimmel underscores the ontological status of love as **"the blood of the universe**." Unlike Nicholson's textual fidelity or Arberry's lyricism, Schimmel's method was symbolic hermeneutics: she

[5] Shimmel ,Annemarie, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalāloddin Rumi* (London: East-West Publications, 1978). For a biographical context, see Schimmel's memoir, Meine Seele ist eine Frau: Das Weibliche im Islam (Munich: Kösel, 1995).

wove Rūmī into comparative mysticism, drawing parallels with Meister Eckhart, Goethe, and Islamic metaphysics.[6]

Coleman Barks : Popular Adaptations and the Universal Rūmī

Coleman Barks(b.1937), an American poet with no knowledge of Persian, has arguably been the most influential figure in shaping Rūmī's global popularity. His *The Essential Rumi* (1995) became a bestseller, introducing millions to Rūmī through free-verse paraphrases.[7] Barks does not read Persian; instead, he reworked earlier scholarly translations—primarily those of Arberry—into free-verse adaptations.

Persian couplet:

"هر کسی کو دور ماند از اصل خویش

باز جوید روزگار وصل خویش

Barks' Adaptation:

"*When the soul is lost, it longs to return home."*

Here, references to ***aṣl*** (origin) and ***waṣl*** (union) are replaced with "soul" and "home." While emotionally powerful, this version erases the Qurʾānic undertones of exile and reunion with God, reframing the poem as a universal spiritual metaphor.

Persian couplet :

بیا بیا هر آنچه هستی بیا

گر کافر و گبر و بت‌پرستی بیا

Nicholson's translation (literal):

"*Come, come, whoever you are,*

Even if you are an unbeliever, a fire-worshipper, or an idol-worshipper, still come."

Barks' version (universalized):

"*Come, come, whoever you are.*

This is not a caravan of despair."

[6] For Schimmel's contribution to comparative mysticism, see Carl W. Ernst, "*Schimmel and the Comparative Study of Mysticism, in Mystical Dimensions of Islam* Revisited, ed. Scott Kugle (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 223–245.

[7] Bark . Coleman , *The Essential Rumi*, trans. with John Moyne (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995). For critiques of Barks, see Omid Safi, "*The Politics of Rumi's Reception," in Radical Love: Teachings from the Islamic Mystical Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 15–28.

Barks' adaptations often omit references to Allah, the Prophet, or Islamic practices. His method has been both praised—for popularizing Rūmī in the West—and criticized—for decontextualizing him from Islam. Scholars like Jawid Mojaddedi argue that Barks' work, though poetic, constitutes cultural appropriation.

Barks reimagined Rūmī as a global poet of the heart, resonant with **New Age spirituality**, psychotherapy, and interreligious dialogue. Yet the very qualities that made his versions successful—clarity, brevity, universality—have also been criticized for uprooting Rūmī from his Islamic soil.

Ibrahim Gamard : Restoring Rūmī's Sufi and Islamic Context

Ibrahim Gamard(b.1947) , an American Sufi and translator, has devoted his career to preserving the Islamic and Sufi integrity of Rūmī. His annotated translations, such as *"Rumi and Islam"* (2004), directly address the de-Islamization of Rūmī in popular culture.[8] Gamard's work is polemical in its insistence that popularized versions of Rūmī, especially those by Coleman Barks, distort the poet by erasing Qurʾānic references, Islamic terminology, and Sufi metaphysics. For Gamard, the very soul of Rūmī's poetry is inseparable from its Islamic framework.

Consider the following couplet from the Mathnavī (Book I):

Persian Original:

هر کسی کو دور ماند از اصل خویش

باز جوید روزگار وصل خویش

Gamard translates with fidelity:

"*Whoever remains far from his own root*

seeks again the day of his union with it."

He adds commentary linking ***aṣl*** (root) to the Qurʾānic idea of humanity's primordial covenant with God (Q 7:172). Gamard's emphasis is not only linguistic but theological, restoring the Qurʾānic backdrop that many popular translators neglect.

By contrast, Barks' version reads:

"When the soul is lost, it longs to return home."

While Barks captures the sentiment of yearning, he strips away the metaphysical resonance of aṣl and its Qurʾānic allusions. Gamard critiques this as symptomatic of a wider trend: the transformation of Rūmī from a Sufi theologian into a vague **New Age mystic**. Thus, Gamard's outcome is corrective. He positions himself as a custodian of authenticity, urging readers to encounter Rūmī as he was: a Muslim mystic whose poetry cannot be understood without the Qurʾān and Sufi tradition.

[8] Gamard, Ibrahim. *The Spiritual Heritage of Rumi: Annotated Translation of Selected Passages from the Mathnawi.* Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2007.

On the same verse, Gamard renders:

Gamard's Translation:

"*Whoever is kept far from his Source*

Still searches for the time of returning to Union with Him."

Gamard insists on capitalizing "**Source**" and "**Him**," making explicit the Qurʾānic grounding of Rūmī's imagery. His translations are often accompanied by detailed notes linking Rūmī's verses to Islamic theology and Sufi practice. Gamard's contribution lies in reclaiming Rūmī for Muslims and resisting his commodification as a "New Age" poet. He critiques Western adaptations that obscure Rūmī's references to the Qurʾān, the Prophet Muḥammad, and Sufi rituals.

Omid Safi: The Contemporary Hermeneutics of Rūmī: Reclaiming Rūmī through Ethics and Spirituality

In the contemporary landscape of Rūmī studies, Omid Safi (1966) occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of academic scholarship, spirituality, and accessible translation. Unlike Reynold Nicholson's critical edition of the *Mathnavī* (1925–40), which sought philological rigor, or A. J. Arberry's literary renderings (1949–67) that emphasized poetic cadence, Safi's project is primarily interpretive, intended to bring the ethical and spiritual dimensions of Rūmī to a modern, globally diverse audience.

His *Radical Love: Teachings from the Islamic Mystical Tradition* (2018)[9] , offers translations not only of Rūmī but also of other Sufi masters such as ʿAṭṭār, Ḥāfeẓ, and Bāyazīd Basṭāmī. In this anthology, Safi avoids both the hyper-literalism of Nicholson and the literary liberties of Coleman Barks, instead attempting to preserve the theological and ethical density of Rūmī's Persian while using clear, resonant English. For example, in rendering the famous lines:

Persian couplet (Mathnavī I):

بشنو این نی چون شکایت می‌کند

از جدایی‌ها حکایت می‌کند

Nicholson's Translation (1926):

"*Hearken to the reed-flute, how it complains,*

Lamenting its banishment from its home."

Barks' Version (1995):

"*Listen to the reed.*

It's telling a story of separation."

[9] Safi, Omid. *Radical Love: Teachings from the Islamic Mystical Tradition*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

Safi's Rendering (2018)**:**

"*Listen to the reed flute, it tells the tale of being torn from the reedbed,*

its song is the cry of separation."

Here, Safi preserves the metaphysical pain of exile (جدایی / "separation") while also foregrounding the ethical implications of longing and belonging. Safi retains both the metaphysical anguish and the narrative imagery of the reed's exile, while avoiding archaic English or overly modern idiom. His approach reflects his commitment to present Rūmī as a *Muslim mystic* deeply rooted in Qur'anic cosmology and prophetic tradition, rather than as a deracinated universal poet — a tendency often reinforced by Barks' adaptations. Safi thus represents a post-9/11 trend in Rūmī studies: scholars reclaiming Rūmī's Muslim identity and contextual depth, while resisting the de-Islamicized universalism that characterizes some popular adaptations.

In contrast with Annemarie Schimmel's interpretive works, such as *The Triumphal Sun* (1978), which placed Rūmī in dialogue with broader Islamic mystical symbolism, Safi brings an ethical lens to Rūmī's writings, foregrounding themes of love, justice, and inclusivity. His forthcoming *Biography of Rūmī* **(**Princeton University Press, in progress) is expected to deepen this trajectory by weaving together historical contextualization, original translation, and contemporary relevance. Placed chronologically, Safi belongs to the twenty-first-century wave of Rūmī interpreters—following Nicholson, Arberry, Schimmel, and Mojaddedi, and writing alongside Gamard and Barks. His contribution lies not in critical editions but in offering a theologically sensitive, socially conscious voice that reclaims Rūmī as both a universal figure of love and a Muslim thinker deeply engaged with Qur'anic revelation.

Jawid Mojaddedi (b. 1967): Bridging Scholarship and Readability

Professor Jawid Mojaddedi, an Afghan- American scholar represents a corrective to Bark's Popularization, Initially focused on early Sufi historiography, culminating in The *Biographical Tradition in Sufism: The Tabaqat Genre from al-Sulami to Jami* **(**Routledge, 2001). He is now best known for his ongoing verse translations of **Rumi's Masnavi,** beginning with **Book One (**Oxford World's Classics, 2005), combining literary readability with philological accuracy, which also won him the Lois Roth Prize.[10] He is currently translating all six books of the Masnavi, with Books Two to Five published and Book Six expected in 2025. His work has been supported by fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (2015) and the Humanities (2020). Mojaddedi's translations occupy a middle ground between Nicholson's scholarly literalism and Barks's creative universalism, offering accurate yet accessible and modern English renderings of Rūmī's Persian poetry.

Comparative Translation Analysis

چو گل هر کسی به خود ببالد و خود را نشناسد

[10] Jawid. Mojaddedi, *The Masnavi, Book One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Mojaddedi's translations continue Nicholson's textual fidelity while using contemporary English idioms.

تا آرد بهاری که برآید ز خاک خویش

Mathnavī, Book I, verse 287

Nicholson' translation (1925–1940):

"*Like a flower, every man exalts himself without knowing himself; until the spring arrives that raises him from his own dust."*

Nicholson preserves the metaphysical and Sufi symbolism, using formal, slightly archaic English. His style emphasizes philological fidelity but can feel distant to general readers.

Coleman Barks' rendering(1995):

"*We all bloom like flowers, unaware of who we are, waiting for a spring to lift us up."*

Barks simplifies and universalizes the imagery, removing Islamic and mystical undertones. While poetically appealing, the Sufi metaphysical depth is softened, and the focus shifts toward self-help style inspiration.

Jawid Mojaddedi' translation (2005–present):

"*Like a flower, each person may boast of themselves without knowing their own essence, until the spring arrives to lift them from their own soil."*

Mojaddedi retains Sufi symbolism (flower, spring, soil) while employing modern, readable English idioms. His translation preserves both the theological context and the literary flow, balancing fidelity with accessibility. Footnotes clarify terms like "soil" as the human origin, maintaining the spiritual resonance without over-simplification. Mojaddedi retains Sufi symbolism (flower, spring, soil) while employing modern, readable English idioms. His translation preserves both the theological context and the literary flow, balancing fidelity with accessibility. Footnotes clarify terms like "soil" as the human origin, maintaining the spiritual resonance without over-simplification. His style is literal yet readable, avoiding both Nicholson's archaism and Barks's free adaptation. Unlike Nicholson, Mojaddedi employs modern English; unlike Barks, he translates directly from Persian manuscripts. His work appeals both to academic and lay audiences, positioning itself as a twenty-first-century standard for Rūmī studies.

His project emphasizes accessibility while preserving theological context, providing footnotes where necessary. Mojaddedi's work bridges the gap between classical Persian scholarship and contemporary English-speaking audiences. He provides faithful, annotated translations that preserve Rūmī's Sufi and Islamic context while making the text comprehensible for modern readers. His approach is both philologically precise and interpretively accessible, mediating between the original tradition and a global readership. He critiques Barks explicitly for stripping Rūmī of Islam, arguing that accurate translation need not sacrifice beauty. His work exemplifies a middle path between academic rigor and popular appeal.

Rūmī in Popular Culture and Commercialization

Rumi's influence extends beyond academia. His poetry appears in **films, music, self-help books, and social media,** often detached from its Islamic and mystical roots. Popularization and commercialization raise ethical questions about cultural appropriation, decontextualization, and misrepresentation.[11]

Example: The widely circulated quote:

"*Be like a tree and let the dead leaves drop*,"

is not found in any Rumi manuscript but demonstrates the phenomenon of misattribution.

Comparative Synthesis

Placed in chronological order, these six figures illustrate the evolution of Rūmī's Western reception:

1. R.A. Nicholson (1868–1945) – Early 20th century; critical philological translation of the Mathnavī.

2. A.J. Arberry (1905–1969) – Mid-20th century; literary translations and commentary refining Nicholson.

3. Annemarie Schimmel (1922–2003) – Mid to late 20th century; symbolic and mystical interpretation with cultural context.

4. Coleman Barks (b. 1937) – Late 20th century onward; popular, creative adaptations emphasizing universal spirituality.

5. Ibrahim Gamard (b. 1951) – Late 20th century onward; devotional, annotated translations, bridging scholarship and spirituality.

6. Omid Safi (b. 1966) – Early 21st century; ethically grounded, contemporary interpretive translations emphasizing Islamic and spiritual context.

7. Jawid Mojaddedi (b. 1968) – Early 21st century; precise, literal, annotated translation preserving Sufi and Islamic depth.

This trajectory reflects the shift of Rūmī from Sufi theologian to global icon.[12] Through these trajectories, Rūmī has been shifted from a Sufi poet-theologian to a global spiritual icon. This transformation raises critical questions about Orientalism, translation ethics, and the commodification of mysticism.

Conclusion

The journey of Rūmī's poetry from Konya to California illustrates both the power and peril of translation. Each translator or interpreter, whether Nicholson with his Victorian philology or Barks with his New Age free verse, has reshaped Rūmī for different audiences. While such adaptations have introduced millions to

[11] On *Orientalism and Sufi studies*, see Said .Edward , Orientalism (New York: Vintage, 1978); Alexander Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

[12] Chittick.William C, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi (*Albany: SUNY Press, 1983). Chittick's translations emphasize the metaphysical and devotional aspects of Rūmī's thought.

his poetry, they have also distorted its theological depth. Future translations must adopt an ethical approach: retaining Rūmī's Islamic references while providing explanatory notes, resisting misattribution and commercialization, and fostering intercultural dialogue.[13] Rūmī's legacy is too profound to be reduced to slogans. To honor him, translators must engage with the same sincerity and reverence that he demanded of seekers on the Sufi path. Rūmī himself gestures toward this balance in the Mathnavī:

Persian couplet :

این سخن شیر است در پستان جان

بی‌مکیدن کی شود او آشکار؟

Translation (Nicholson):

"*This word is milk in the breast of the soul; without sucking, how should it become manifest?"*[14]

The milk of Rūmī's poetry requires both faithful preservation and imaginative translation. The Orientalists and interpreters surveyed here show us the range of possibilities—and the ongoing responsibility—of engaging Rūmī in a global age.

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