



Metaphors in Motion: Animals, Birds, and Nature in *The Book of Rumi*

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17113785>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 18-08-2025

Published: 10-09-2025

Keywords:

Rumi, Masnavi, allegory, fables, animals, birds, nature, Sufism, metaphor, ecology.

ABSTRACT

Rumi's Masnavi offers a treasury of allegorical tales where animals, birds, and elements of nature assume symbolic roles that transcend their literal existence. This paper examines twelve selected fables—The Parrot and the Grocer, Merchant and Parrot, The Lion, the Wolf and the Fox, The King's Falcon, The Sufi Who Lost His Donkey, Friendship with a Bear, Camel and Mouse, Dogs' Shelter in Winter, Three Fish, The Bird's Advice, Ants and Calligraphy, and The Cow on a Green Island. Through these narratives, Rumi reconfigures the everyday presence of animals and natural beings into metaphors that illuminate human folly, moral choice, spiritual aspiration, and divine wisdom. The analysis demonstrates how Rumi's dialectic method, built on contrasts such as wisdom/ignorance, trust/fear, or loyalty/betrayal, is embodied in non-human agents that carry profound ethical and spiritual lessons. This research situates Rumi's ecological and metaphoric imagination within the broader context of Sufi thought, revealing how the fables negotiate between human limitations and the eternal divine order. The paper argues that Rumi's integration of animals and nature into moral dialectics enriches his pedagogy of the soul and offers a proto-ecological consciousness relevant for contemporary ethical reflection.



Introduction

Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-1273), the Persian mystic and poet, remains one of the most influential voices of spiritual literature. His *Masnavi-ye Ma'navi* (commonly *Masnavi*) has long been revered as a “Qur’an in Persian”, weaving stories, parables, and metaphors to guide seekers toward divine truth. Among its most compelling features is Rumi’s frequent use of animals, birds, and natural phenomena as vehicles of moral and spiritual instruction. Unlike simple fables of folklore, Rumi’s stories engage in dialectical reasoning, presenting contradictions, tensions, and resolutions that invite readers to probe the layers of human and divine reality. (Rumi XV)

This paper explores twelve selected fables from *The Book of Rumi* where animals and nature assume a central role. It examines how Rumi deploys them as metaphors in motion—dynamic figures that critique human weaknesses while embodying Sufi values of humility, trust, detachment, and surrender to divine will.

Theoretical framework

An allegory is a story, either in prose or verse, where the characters, events, and sometimes even the setting are deliberately shaped by the author to convey meaning on two levels: a clear, literal or primary level, and a deeper, secondary level of significance that runs alongside it. (Abrams 8) In the Sufi tradition, allegory is not merely an artistic device but a spiritual pedagogy. The Qur’an itself speaks in parables, and Rumi continues this tradition by crafting stories where surface-level entertainment conceals deeper mystical insights.

Rumi uses dialectics while frequently setting opposites into play—ignorance vs. wisdom, greed vs. contentment, loyalty vs. betrayal—to sharpen moral lessons.

Through animal symbolism each creature carries a layered significance in Rumi’s fables. The lion embodies kingship and power; the parrot represents the soul’s longing for freedom; the donkey symbolizes material attachment; ants demonstrate humility before divine artistry. Landscapes, water, and seasons serve as symbolic mirrors for inner states of being, aligning with the Sufi view that the cosmos itself is a book of divine signs.

This framework allows us to interpret Rumi’s fables not as quaint folklore but as sophisticated vehicles for moral dialectics and mystical illumination.



Analysis of the selected fables

Through **The Parrot and the Grocer** (Masnavi I), Rumi presents a parrot who serves as a companion to a grocer. The parrot, accidentally spilling oil, is punished by the grocer and falls into silence. But the grocer repents over the behavioural change of the parrot. “I wish I’d broken my hand!” he lamented. “How could I have struck my sweet-voiced bird like that? How could I have behaved so monstrously?” (Rumi 6). Later, seeing a bald customer, the parrot equates baldness with its own plucked feathers, and the humorous observation delights the grocer. Beyond its comic appeal, this tale emphasizes the paradox of speech and silence. The parrot’s muteness represents enforced wisdom: silence can carry more meaning than constant chatter. Symbolically, the parrot signifies the human soul, caged within the body yet capable of reflecting divine wisdom. The grocer, on the other hand, embodies worldly attachment and the disciplining hand of circumstance.

The fable critiques human superficiality—judging outward appearances without grasping deeper truths. Baldness becomes a metaphor for spiritual poverty, exposing how people confuse physical traits with inner conditions. Rumi simultaneously praises humour as a means of awakening: even a parrot’s mistake can illuminate human folly. Nature here is not merely background; the bird is a carrier of insight, bridging the human and metaphysical.

This story resonates with the Sufi path, where trials (such as punishment or silence) refine the seeker’s soul. The parrot’s regained voice suggests that speech aligned with divine wisdom can uplift. The fable illustrates that animals and birds in Rumi are not decorative but dialectical: they challenge human assumptions, mirroring the absurdities and aspirations of human life. Through the parrot, Rumi reminds readers that enlightenment often emerges from moments of silence, misfortune, or even comic misunderstanding.

The Merchant and the Parrot (Masnavi I), a widely celebrated tale, features a caged parrot who, before the merchant departs to India, requests that news of its plight be delivered to its free counterparts. On hearing of the captive bird’s sorrow, the wild parrots fall dead to the ground. When the merchant recounts this, his own parrot imitates the gesture, collapsing in apparent death. Believing it lifeless, the merchant sets it free, whereupon the parrot revives and escapes into the sky. Being asked, the parrot says that, “My precious voice was in fact the cause of my servitude! But his action taught me that my freedom would lie in the act of dying in the sense of forsaking my attachment to my worldly talents, which I priced so high” (Rumi 12).



The parrot's feigned death operates as a metaphor for fana (annihilation of the ego), a central Sufi principle. The bird embodies the soul trapped in material existence, while the cage symbolizes the body and worldly attachments. Liberation is achieved not through resistance but through surrender—the symbolic “death” of desire and ego. The merchant, embodying materialism and possession, cannot grasp this spiritual truth; yet he becomes the agent of the parrot's freedom.

The natural imagery—parrots, cages, forests—functions as allegories of spiritual imprisonment and transcendence. The story also critiques the possessive tendencies of humans who enslave nature, ignoring its innate longing for freedom. The parrot's clever imitation of the wild birds' message underscores the transmission of wisdom across beings. Knowledge, Rumi implies, is not restricted to humans but flows across the cosmos.

This fable's enduring charm lies in its dramatic reversal: the bird outwits the merchant through silence and performance. In Sufi epistemology, the parrot represents the disciple who learns from the signs of others, practicing self-effacement until the divine union is attained. Thus, Rumi transforms a simple fable into a profound reflection on spiritual emancipation, where the animal embodies the path toward freedom that humans too must follow.

The fable, **The Lion, the Wolf, and the Fox** (Masnavi I), narrates a power struggle in the animal kingdom, where the lion demands that his companions divide a kill among themselves. The wolf attempts to take a fair share and is punished, while the fox, learning from the wolf's fate, assigns everything to the lion. Rumi writes, “The fox vowed respectfully, swallowing his fear. ‘Your Honour, this fat bull is for your delightful breakfast,’ he said with nervous discomfort. The mountain goat will be appropriate for your lunch and the rabbit will suffice for your delectable supper” (Rumi 20). Being flattered, the lion rewards the fox.

The fable critiques the dynamics of power, authority, and survival. The lion embodies rulers and the arbitrary nature of justice under autocracy. The wolf represents naïve honesty, while the fox symbolizes cunning adaptability. Rumi critiques worldly politics, illustrating how wisdom often disguises itself in pragmatism. On the spiritual plane, the lion signifies divine authority: the disciple must surrender completely, not seek equality with the divine. The wolf's downfall is pride in fairness, while the fox's reward lies in total surrender, albeit cloaked in opportunism.



Animal imagery in this tale dramatizes the survival of the fittest within both worldly and spiritual orders. Yet Rumi complicates this Darwinian undertone: the fox's wisdom lies not in brute strength but in reading situations and submitting intelligently. Nature, therefore, becomes a theatre of moral lessons.

The fable speaks to the paradox of submission: while worldly flattery may appear self-serving, in the spiritual path, absolute surrender to divine will is rewarded. The lion's wrath represents trials sent to shatter the disciple's illusions of autonomy. The fox's insight echoes the Sufi teaching that annihilation of self is the path to harmony with divine authority. Thus, Rumi weaves political realism and mystical truth into a single parable, using animals as mirrors of human behaviour and spiritual aspiration.

In **The King's Falcon** (Masnavi II), the falcon emerges as more than a royal hunting bird; it becomes a living metaphor for authority, discipline, and the balance between freedom and obedience. Rumi presents the falcon's flight as a mirror to human conduct, illustrating how natural instincts, when guided by wisdom and restraint, can achieve purpose and harmony.

The falcon, trained to soar and strike with precision, symbolizes the virtues of an ideal ruler: vigilance, foresight, and decisive action. Its sharp vision and swift movement echo the clarity and swiftness required in leadership, while its loyalty to the king's glove underscores the necessity of discipline. Though the bird can fly freely, it is bound to return—demonstrating that true mastery, whether of self or society, involves the delicate negotiation between liberty and responsibility.

Rumi extends this metaphor to the human soul. The falcon's desire to soar (Rumi 32) reflects the innate human aspiration for spiritual and moral elevation, whereas its obedience to the king represents the guidance of intellect, ethics, and discipline. Through the interplay of flight and return, the fable dramatizes the dialectic between ambition and restraint, desire and duty, and freedom and submission.

In **The Sufi Who Lost His Donkey** (Masnavi II), Rumi transforms a simple incident into a metaphor for attachment, perception, and spiritual insight. The Sufi's donkey, an ordinary creature, symbolizes worldly possessions, comforts, and distractions that bind humans to transient concerns. His initial distress reflects the natural attachment to what seems essential, while his eventual acceptance highlights the realization that true equanimity arises from detachment and inner clarity.

The loss, rather than a misfortune, becomes an opportunity for reflection. It reveals the Sufi's dependence on external certainties and points toward a deeper understanding of impermanence. Through the narrative, motion—both literal in the search for the donkey (Rumi 37) and metaphorical in the seeker's



spiritual journey—illustrates the dynamics of consciousness. The pursuit of the donkey mirrors the seeker’s quest for truth, requiring observation, patience, and insight.

Rumi’s fable shows that wisdom emerges not through clinging or frantic effort, but through mindful engagement with life’s impermanence. The Sufi’s lost donkey thus becomes a metaphor in motion, portraying the interplay between loss and gain, attachment and freedom, and the subtle, transformative power of awareness in ordinary experiences.

Rumi presents an unusual bond between human and animal as a metaphor for trust, respect, and the balance between strength and vulnerability through **Friendship with a Bear**. The bear, powerful and potentially dangerous, represents both nature’s raw force and the latent challenges within relationships. The human’s choice to approach the bear with care and understanding (Rumi 50) highlights the importance of awareness, humility, and ethical conduct in forming connections.

The fable emphasizes motion—both in the physical interactions and in the evolving relationship. Initial caution gives way to mutual recognition, demonstrating that trust is not imposed but earned through consistent respect. The bear’s eventual cooperation or companionship symbolizes the rewards of patience, empathy, and measured courage. Rumi’s narrative suggests that true friendship requires navigating tensions between fear and affection, strength and gentleness, and self-interest and shared understanding.

Beyond the literal story, the bear becomes a metaphor for obstacles, instincts, and inner impulses. Engaging with it reflects the human journey of negotiating fears, desires, and moral choices. In this way, **Friendship with a Bear** becomes a metaphor in motion, illustrating the fluid interplay of challenge and harmony and offering insight into how human relationships—like nature—flourish through mindfulness, respect, and attuned action.

In **The Camel and the Mouse** (Masnavi II), a tiny mouse arrogantly leads a camel across a river, boasting of its control. Midway, the camel kneels, nearly drowning the mouse. Realizing its vulnerability, the mouse pleads for mercy, saying, “I repent, I repent” (Rumi 71). The camel forgives but rebukes its arrogance.

The camel embodies patience, strength, and divine endurance, while the mouse represents human pride, weakness, and ignorance. Rumi stages this encounter to critique the illusion of control. Humans often



overestimate their power, attempting to lead forces far greater than themselves—whether nature, destiny, or God—only to be reminded of their fragility.

The river symbolizes life's trials, where true strength is tested. The mouse's near-drowning highlights the insufficiency of pride and cleverness when confronted with deeper realities. The camel, despite its physical superiority, shows restraint and compassion—qualities Rumi associates with the divine. Thus, the fable emphasizes humility and surrender as antidotes to arrogance.

From a Sufi perspective, the camel also signifies the spiritual guide (pir), who bears the burdens of disciples. The mouse, like an immature disciple, assumes leadership but must eventually acknowledge dependence on the guide's wisdom and endurance. Nature here functions dialectically: size and strength do not guarantee superiority; instead, humility reveals truth.

This tale also critiques hierarchical arrogance in social life: the weak may exploit the strong through trickery, but true power lies in magnanimity. By forgiving the mouse, the camel elevates the moral plane, reminding readers that divine mercy surpasses human pride. In this way, Rumi transforms an amusing mismatch of animals into a meditation on humility, dependence, and the futility of ego.

The fable, **Dogs' Shelter in Winter (Masnavi III)**, presents the plight of animals to explore themes of care, community, and the human responsibility toward nature. The dogs, seeking warmth and safety during harsh winter months (Rumi 100), symbolize vulnerability, need, and the instinct for survival. Their search for shelter mirrors human struggles to find security and comfort amid life's adversities.

The motion of the narrative—the dogs wandering, seeking, and finally finding refuge—functions as a metaphor for the journey toward protection and stability. Rumi emphasizes empathy and attentiveness: those who provide shelter act with compassion and awareness, acknowledging the interdependence of all living beings. The fable suggests that harmony, whether in human society or the natural world, relies on acts of kindness and the recognition of shared vulnerability.

Beyond the literal story, the dogs' experience becomes a metaphor in motion, illustrating the rhythms of care, survival, and moral responsibility. Through their movement and struggle, Rumi conveys that awareness, compassion, and collective support are essential for navigating life's challenges and fostering resilience.



In **Three Fish** (Masnavi 1V), Rumi explores themes of foresight, choice, and the consequences of complacency. The story presents three fish, each responding differently to the threat of fishermen and nets. Initially, all swim together, representing shared existence and collective awareness. However, as danger approaches, their decisions diverge, highlighting the interplay between instinct, wisdom, and inaction. (Rumi 134-35) As a result, the first fish, guided by prudence, escapes, symbolizing the value of foresight and proactive behaviour. Meanwhile, the second fish hesitates, illustrating the peril of indecision. The third fish, oblivious or indifferent, becomes a victim to the net, demonstrating the consequences of ignorance or neglect. Through these contrasting outcomes, Rumi emphasizes that awareness and timely action are essential for survival, both in the natural world and in human life.

The fable uses motion—the swift swimming, sudden dives, and frantic escapes—as a metaphor for the flow of choices and the urgency of response. In this way, Three Fish becomes a metaphor in motion, revealing the dynamic relationship between knowledge, decision-making, and consequence. Ultimately, Rumi's narrative encourages mindfulness, prudence, and the cultivation of insight as tools for navigating uncertainty and danger.

Interestingly, in **The Bird's Advice (Masnavi IV)**, Rumi portrays a simple encounter between a bird and hunter that carries a profound lesson on wisdom, prudence, and the importance of guidance. The fable shows one bird offering counsel to the hunter, like never believing the impossible from others, never regretting the past, and not trusting the strangers (Rumi 138), highlighting that attentive listening and careful consideration can prevent missteps and unforeseen dangers. The birds' motion—soaring, gliding, and changing direction—serves as a metaphor for the dynamic process of learning and applying knowledge in real time. Moreover, the narrative underscores that guidance may come from unexpected sources, teaching humility and openness in the pursuit of understanding. By integrating advice with observation and timely action, the birds exemplify how foresight and discernment lead to successful navigation of challenges. Ultimately, The Bird's Advice becomes a metaphor in motion, illustrating that wisdom is not merely given but enacted, requiring alertness, reflection, and the willingness to act responsibly within the flow of life.

Similarly, in **Ants and Calligraphy** (Masnavi IV), Rumi employs the interplay between small creatures and human artistry to explore diligence, patience, and the transformative power of mindful effort. The story depicts ants meticulously traversing a page of calligraphy, navigating the curves and strokes with unwavering focus. Their tiny movements mirror the precision and discipline required in artistic creation (Rumi 142), while also serving as a metaphor for persistence in the face of challenges.



Just as the previous fable emphasized attentiveness and guidance through the birds' counsel, here the ants demonstrate that success arises not from sudden insight but from continuous, deliberate action. Rumi uses the ants' motion to illustrate that even the smallest participants in the world contribute to harmony and order when their efforts are guided by purpose.

Furthermore, the fable extends beyond literal observation, suggesting that human creativity and natural diligence are intertwined. The ants' patient traversal of the calligraphy embodies the rhythm of learning and the accumulation of skill over time. Their interaction with the written text becomes a metaphor in motion, revealing how concentration, humility, and steady effort yield beauty and meaning. Ultimately, *Ants and Calligraphy* conveys that mindful engagement—whether in art, work, or life—cultivates insight, discipline, and a harmonious connection between human intention and the natural world.

Likewise, in **Peacock** (Masnavi V), Rumi uses the vivid imagery of the bird to explore themes of pride, beauty, and the tension between appearance and inner virtue. The peacock, with its resplendent feathers and graceful movements (Rumi 147), symbolizes the allure of outward splendour and the human tendency to equate value with surface display. As the bird struts and spreads its plumage, Rumi illustrates motion not merely as physical action but as a metaphor for the dynamic interplay between self-perception and societal judgement. However, the fable cautions that beauty alone does not ensure wisdom or moral strength; true worth arises when external elegance is harmonized with inner understanding and ethical conduct. Just as previous fables highlighted lessons through animals' behaviour—like the attentive birds or the diligent ants—the peacock's display becomes a metaphor in motion, representing both the potential and the peril of vanity. Ultimately, Rumi's narrative encourages reflection on the balance between pride and humility, urging the audience to recognize that outward brilliance must be complemented by insight, restraint, and authentic virtue to navigate life's complexities successfully.

Similarly, in **Cow on a Green Island** (Masnavi V), Rumi uses the story of a cow grazing in isolation to explore themes of contentment, security, and the human tendency to misjudge fortune. The green island represents abundance and tranquillity, yet the cow's experience illustrates that true fulfilment is not guaranteed by external circumstances alone. Initially, the cow enjoys the lush grass and open space, symbolizing apparent prosperity, but as challenges arise—such as the threat of isolation or hidden dangers—Rumi emphasizes the importance of vigilance, awareness, and prudent action. The cow's movements across the island—its careful steps, grazing, and exploration (Rumi 158)—serve as a metaphor in motion, demonstrating how living beings navigate opportunities and risks in search of stability.



Moreover, the fable conveys a moral lesson about perception and gratitude. Just as previous fables, like the birds' advice or the ants' diligence, reveal insights through attentive observation, the cow's experience encourages reflection on how individuals engage with abundance, make choices, and respond to uncertainty. Ultimately, Cow on a Green Island becomes a metaphor in motion, illustrating that contentment arises from mindfulness, discernment, and a harmonious balance between enjoying present blessings and remaining aware of potential challenges in life.

Across these fables, Rumi employs dialectics to sharpen spiritual insight, using animals, birds, and elements of nature as dynamic participants in moral and ethical exploration. In stories such as The King's Falcon, The Sufi Who Lost His Donkey, Friendship with a Bear, Camel and Mouse, Dogs' Shelter in Winter, Three Fish, The Bird's Advice, Ants and Calligraphy, and The Cow on a Green Island, opposing forces—freedom and restraint, pride and humility, attachment and detachment, strength and subtlety—interact and create tension, guiding readers toward reflection and understanding. The characters' motions—soaring, fleeing, grazing, or searching—function as metaphors in motion, dramatizing the interplay of instinct, reason, and ethical choice. Through these fables, Rumi's dialectical method illustrates that spiritual and moral wisdom emerges not from static truths but from observing, negotiating, and harmonizing opposing forces. Collectively, these narratives demonstrate how motion, conflict, and resolution serve as vehicles for ethical contemplation, revealing the dynamic and relational nature of human experience and spiritual growth.

Ecological consciousness

Rumi's fables, though primarily moral and spiritual in orientation, reveal an intrinsic ecological consciousness that resonates profoundly with contemporary environmental concerns. In these narratives, animals, birds, and natural elements are depicted not as passive symbols but as active participants in a delicate web of life. For instance, in Dogs' Shelter in Winter, the search for warmth and safety highlights the vulnerability of living beings and underscores the responsibility of humans to protect and coexist with other creatures. Similarly, Three Fish emphasizes awareness and prudent action within a shared ecosystem, illustrating how neglect or inattention can have dire consequences. Even in fables like Ants and Calligraphy or The King's Falcon, the behaviours of creatures are meticulously observed, showing the intricate interdependence between beings and their environment. Through these depictions, Rumi encourages an ethic of care, attentiveness, and harmony with the natural world, offering lessons that remain strikingly relevant amid today's challenges of climate change, habitat loss, and ecological imbalance.



Contemporary relevance

Contemporarily, these fables extend beyond environmental awareness to social, ethical, and personal guidance. The dialectical interactions—freedom versus restraint, pride versus humility, attachment versus detachment—mirror challenges in leadership, governance, interpersonal relationships, and community life. The Sufi Who Lost His Donkey and Friendship with a Bear illustrates the value of patience, empathy, and measured action, while Camel and Mouse and The Bird’s Advice teach vigilance, foresight, and the importance of listening. These lessons resonate in contemporary contexts where ethical decision-making, sustainable living, and moral responsibility are increasingly critical. The fables demonstrate that insight emerges from active engagement with both human and non-human worlds, fostering an understanding of interconnectedness that is as relevant today as it was in Rumi’s time.

Conclusion

Collectively, these twelve fables—ranging from The Parrot and the Grocer to The Cow on a Green Island—showcase Rumi’s masterful integration of spiritual, ethical, and ecological insight within a dynamic narrative framework. By employing animals, birds, and natural phenomena as metaphors in motion, Rumi highlights the dialectical interplay of opposing forces—instinct and reason, freedom and restraint, desire and discipline—which guide readers toward moral, spiritual, and ecological awareness. These fables underscore that wisdom is not static but emerges from reflection, attentiveness, and ethical action in a complex, interconnected world. Furthermore, by illustrating the interdependence between beings and their environment, Rumi’s narratives anticipate contemporary concerns about sustainability, empathy, and social responsibility. Ultimately, the fables affirm that mindful observation, ethical conduct, and respect for the natural world are timeless principles that continue to inspire and guide humanity, offering a framework for navigating both spiritual and practical challenges in modern life.

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