

Translation of a “Rumi Verse” by Idries Shah

I was asked about the authenticity of a verse that was claimed by Idries Shah to have been composed by Jalaluddin Rumi. In the frontispiece of his book, *Special Illumination* (1977), Shah asserted (without citation of a source) that the following is by Rumi:

“Gar tajalli-i-Khas Khahi surat-i-insan bebin
Dhat-i-Haqqra ashkara andaruni khandan bebin

If you want special illumination, look upon the human face:
See clearly within laughter the Essence of Ultimate Truth”
Jalaluddin Rumi”

Then, he stated: “This important statement was made by Jalaluddin Rumi, one of the greatest of all Sufi masters...” The problem is that this verse is nowhere to be found in the works of Jalaluddin Rumi.

It may be written in Persian more correctly (in accordance with the *ramal* poetic meter below),

گر تجلی خاص خواهی صورتِ انسان ببین

ذاتِ حق را آشکارا اندر آن خندان ببین

XoXX XoXX XoXX XoX

XoXX XoXX XoXX XoX

Shah made some transliteration errors: “Khas should be “khass,” and “andaruni khandan” should be “andarun-i-khandan”-- however, the poetic meter requires, “andar an khandan”

As for his rendering into English, I would argue that, “If you want special illumination” is better translated as, “If you want (to witness) the manifestation of the elect (saint of God)”; that, “look upon the human face” is better translated, “see the form of an (illuminated) human”; that, “the Essence of Ultimate Truth” is better translated as, “the Essence of God”; and that, “within laughter” may also be translated, “in that laughter (of his)”. In Persian Sufism, “Haqq” generally means “God”--but many Westerners seem to prefer it to be translated as “Truth”. And it fits with Shah’s non-religious interpretation of Sufism. In Sufism, the word *tajallī* generally means the self-manifestation or revelation of God; it also may be translated as “splendor,” “glory,” “shining forth,” “illumination,” and “epiphany.”

A verse quite similar to Shah’ verse, and which may be the origin, can be found on the Internet (in a blog named, “Sīmorgh”). Therein it is quoted to exemplify the Sufi interpretation of a saying [*hadīth*] of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh): “Truly, God created Adam upon His own form” [inna ‘llāha khalaqa ādam ‘alā ‘sūrati-hi]. Here is the similar verse:

گر تجلی ذات خواهی صورتِ انسان نگر

قلب ذاتِ خویش کرده صورتِ انسان شده

XoXX XoXX XoXX XoX

XoXX XoXX XoXX XoX

I would translate: “If you want (to see) the manifestation of the (Divine) Essence, see the form of an (illuminated) human; His own Essence has made the heart, (which) has become the form of an (illuminated) human.” Or, reading the second hemistich as ending with, “negar” (“instead of shode--making he verse a rhymed couplet): “If you want (to see) the manifestation of the (Divine) Essence, see the form of an (illuminated) human; the heart has been made (by) His own Essence: see the form of an (illuminated) human”.

Shah’s knowledge of Persian was not very good. Some years ago, I looked at his *Hundred Tales of Wisdom* (based on Aflākī’s *Manāqibu ‘l-‘Ārifīn*) and found that he often fabricated what he did not understand -- and apparently with great confidence (for he was a brilliant and lucid writer).

Here is an example of a verse in Aflākī’s book (p. 76) that was mistranslated by Shah:

همچو تارِ شد دل و جان در شهود

تا سرِ رشته بمن روئی نمود

This was translated by John O’Kane in his complete translation from Persian (*Shams al-Dīn Ahmad al-Aflākī: The Feats of the Knowers of God (Manāqeb al-‘ārefīn)*, p. 57): “Heart and soul became like a thread in witnessing/ So that the tip of the string appeared to me.” He explained in a note: “To find the tip of the string is a metaphor for successfully disentangling some obscure matter. To become ‘a thread’ means to grow extremely thin, here due to passionate gazing at the Beloved” (p. 710)

Now this verse is from the *Masnāvī* (6:2923--as O’Kane noted in an appendix) and was translated by Nicholson:

“My heart and soul have become as (frail as) a thread in contemplation, ever since the end of the string (the prospect of success) showed itself to me.”

<http://www.masnavi.net/1/25/eng/6/2943/>

Shah did not use available translations. This verse is not in Redhouse’s translation of Aflākī’s book (*Legends of the Sufis: Menaqibu ‘l-‘ārifīn*). The verse does occur in Huart’s French translation (*Les Saints des derviches tourneurs*), however it was translated accurately: “My heart and soul in the world of witnessing became like a thread, so that the end of the thread was manifested to me” (translate.google).

So Shah did what he did with the Persian text (*Hundred Tales*, p. 4):

“Verse: My entire being has become like a string of the spiritual lyre since the head of the chord has been touched by the Master’s hand”

Here, Shah misread "del-o jān" (heart and soul) as "my entire being". He misread "tārī" (a thread) as the "string" of a musical instrument. He misread "sar" (tip, end, head) as "the head of the chord". He imagined that the musical string was strummed by a master musician. His interpretation is way off the mark. It is not only a wrong or incompetent translation--I would not even call it a translation--but a type of distorted interpretive version.

In sum, based on his fabricated interpretation of the verse from Aflākī's book, the possibility that Shah himself added the word, "laughter/khandān" to a non-Rumi verse in the *Special Illumination* book should not be discounted. His claim that, "This important statement was made by Jalaluddin Rumi, one of the greatest of all Sufi masters"--without citing any source, is not credible.

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