

LIFE OF JAMI AND HIS ASSOCIATION WITH THE NAQSHBANDI SUFI ORDER

MUSHTAQ AHMAD

CPCAS, SLL&CS, JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY, NEW DELHI, INDIA

ABSTRACT:

Abd al- Rahman Jami (1417-1492), one of the most prolific writers in Persian literature, enjoyed fame and prestige during his lifetime unlike any other Persian poet. The purpose of this research paper is to provide an overview of the life and work of 'Abd al-Rahman Jami, the so called "the last great classical Persian poet" whose work has been largely neglected or overlooked by scholars in Iran and the West. The era of the Timurids, the dynasty that ruled Transoxiana, Iran¹, and Afghanistan from 1370 to 1506 had a profound cultural and artistic impact on the history of Central Asia, the Ottoman Empire, and Mughal India in the early modern era. While Timurid fine art such as miniature painting has been extensively studied, the literary production of the era has not been fully explored. Abd al-Rahman Jami (817/1414 898/1492), the most renowned poet of the Timurids, is among those Timurid poets who have not been methodically studied. Jami spent most of his life in Herat, the main centre for artistic ability and aptitude in the fifteenth century; the city where Jami grew up, studied, flourished and produced a variety of prose and poetry. Living in a vortex of political, cultural, and social settings, Jami became the poet laureate of the era.

KEYWORDS: *Abdurahman Jami, Sufism, Naqshbandi sufi order, Islam, Persian literature*

Abd al- Rahman Jami (1417-1492), one of the most prolific writers in Persian literature, enjoyed fame and prestige during his lifetime unlike any other Persian poet. Jami adopted the ideas of Sufism as far back as he settled in Herat, and continued to frequent the society of its followers in Samarkand. The teachings of the Naqshbandi Order advocated voluntary poverty, but it does not require its followers to go away from the world, seeking a way to understand God. On the contrary, they followed the principle of *khalvat dar anjuman* – "a state of spiritual seclusion in the midst of company". That means to surrender all thoughts to God, living amongst society and communicating with people. Everyone, as a rule, had a profession: many of them were craftsmen, and all of them earned a living by working at their jobs. They led a modest life and donated all excess to charity or to help their brethren. Religion during the Timurid era obviously left a profound mark on Jami, especially through the Naqshbandis who formed the most influential Sufi order of the realm in the fifteenth century.

In addition to Jami's prestige and reputation as a poet, his affiliation with the order not only attracted nobles such as Mir Ali-shir Nava'i to join, but also enhanced the status of the Naqshbandis among the other orders. The order had become so well established that it was able to maintain its position in Central Asia, and India, as well

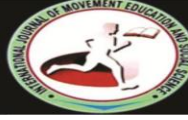


as among the Shaibanids, who later overthrown the Timurids in Herat and Transoxiana. Jami provided systematic explanation of the Naqshbandi doctrine in the fifteenth century and enhanced the status of the order by writing useful, educational works such as, *Ashi'atu'l Lama'at*, *Lawa'ih*, *Lawami'*, *Naqd al- Nusus* (a commentary on the celebrated *Fususul Hikam* of Ibn 'Arabi), and *al-Durrat al Fakhirah*. He attracted the attention of his contemporaries and following generations to the Naqshbandis, and also helped to spread, the Naqshbandi doctrine through his prose and poetry. Some of his work such as *Nafahat al-Uns*, *Silsilat-al- Zahab*, *Tuhfat al-Ahrar*, and *Salaman va Absal* have become references for studying the order's history and doctrines. Overall, Jami's Sufi works heightened the prestige of the Naqshbandis among the other order. Jami had unconditional loyalty to the Naqshbandi order. Jami in "*Nafahat al-Uns*" writes the Naqshbandis are the chiefs of the caravan. It also mentions the influence of *Sabk-i Hindi*, the style of poetry which for almost two centuries was the popular style in Iran and India, where numerous Persian poets had migrated.

At the end of his life he was living in Herat. His epitaph reads:

"When your face is hidden from me, like the moon hidden on a dark night, I shed stars of tears and yet my night remains dark in spite of all those shining stars."

There is a variety of dates regarding his death, but consistently most state it was in November 1492. Although, the actual date of his death is somewhat unknown the year of his death marks an end of both his greater poetry and contribution, but also a pivotal year of political change where Spain was no longer inhabited by the Arabs after 781 years. His funeral was conducted by the prince of Herat and attended by great numbers of people demonstrating his profound impact. In his role as Sufi Shaikh, which began in 1453, Jami expounded a number of teachings regarding following the Sufi path. He created a distinction between two types of Sufi's, now referred to as the "Prophetic" and the "Mystic" spirit. Jami is known for both his extreme piety and mysticism. He remained a staunch Sunni on his path toward Sufism and developed images of earthly love and its employment to depict spiritual passion of the seeker of Allah. He began to take an interest in Sufism at an earlier age when he received a blessing by a principal associate Khwaja Mohammad Parsa who came through town. From there he sought guidance from Sa'd-al-Din Kasgari based on a dream where he was told to take Allah and become his companion. Jami followed Kasgari and the two became tied together upon Jami's marriage to Kasgari's granddaughter. He was known for his commitment to Allah and his desire for separation from the world to become closer to Allah often causing him to forget social normalities. After his re-emergence into the social world he became involved in a broad range of social, intellectual and political activities in the cultural center of Herat. He was engaged in the school of Ibn Arabi, greatly enriching, analysing, and also changing the school of Ibn Arabi. Jami continued to grow in further understanding of Allah through miraculous visions and feats, hoping to achieve a great awareness of Him in the company of one blessed by Him. He believed there were three goals to achieve "permanent presence with Allah" through ceaselessness and silence, being unaware of one's earthly state, and a constant state of a spiritual guide. Jami wrote about his feeling that Allah was everywhere and inherently in everything. He also defined key terms related to Sufism including the meaning of sainthood, the saint, the difference between the Sufi and the one still striving on the path, the seekers of blame,



various levels of Tawhid, and the charismatic feats of the saints. Oftentimes Jami's methodology did not follow the school of Ibn Arabi, like in the issue of mutual dependence between Creator and his creatures. Jami stated

"We and Thou are not separate from each other, but we need Thee,

Whereas Thou doesn't not need us."

Jami created an all-embracing unity emphasised in a unity with the lover, beloved, and the love one, removing the belief, that they are separated. Jami was in many ways influenced by various predecessors and current Sufi's, incorporating their ideas into his "own" and developing them further, creating an entirely new concept. In his view, love for the Prophet Mohammad was the fundamental stepping stone for starting on the spiritual journey. Jami served as a master to several followers and to one student who asked to be his pupil who claimed never to have loved anyone, he said, "Go and love first, then come to me and I will show you the way." For several generations, Jami had a group of followers representing his knowledge and impact. Jami continues to be known for not only his poetry, but his learned and spiritual traditions of the Persian speaking world. In analysing Jami's work greatest contribution may have been his analysis and discussion of Allah's mercy towards man, redefining the way previous texts were interpreted. Jami wrote approximately eighty-seven books and letters, some of which have been translated into English.

His works range from prose to poetry and from the mundane to the religious. He has also written works of History and Science. As well, he often comments on the work of previous and current theologians, philosophers and Sufi's. In Herat, his manual of irrigation design included advanced drawings and calculations and is still a key reference for the irrigation department. His poetry has been inspired by the ghazals of Hafiz, and his famous and beautiful Divan Haft Awrang (Seven Thrones) is, by his own admission, influenced by the works of Nizami. The Haft Awrang also known as the long Masnavis or Mathnawis are a collection of seven poems. Each poem discusses a different story such as the Salaman va Absal that tells the story of a carnal attraction of a prince for his wet-nurse. Throughout Jami uses allegorical symbolism within the tale to depict the key stages of the Sufi path such as repentance and expose philosophical, religious, or ethical questions. Each of the allegorical symbols has a meaning highlighting knowledge and intellect, particularly of Allah. This story reflects Jami's idea of the Sufi-king as the ideal medieval Islamic ruler to repent and embark upon the Sufi path to realise his rank as Allah's 'true' vicegerent and become closer to Him. As well,

Jami is known for his three collections of lyric poems that range from his youth towards the end of his life called the Fatihat al-Shabab (The Beginning of Youth), Wasitat al-Iqd (The Central Pearl in the Necklace), and Khatimat al-Hayat (The Conclusion of Life). Throughout Jami's work references to Sufism and the Sufi emerge as being key topics. One of his most profound ideas was the mystical and philosophical explanations of the nature of Divine mercy, which was a result of his commentary to other works.

Jami is also known for his poetry influencing and being included with Persian paintings that depict Persian



history through manuscript paintings. Most of his literature included illustrations that were not yet common for literature. The deep poetry Jami provides is usually accompanied with enriched paintings reflecting complexity. He worked within the Timurid court of Herat helping to serve as an interpreter and communicator. His poetry reflected Persian culture and was popular through Islamic East, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. His poetry addressed popular ideas that led to Sufi's and non-Sufi's interest in his work. He was known not only for his poetry, but his theological works and commentary on culture. His work was used in several schools from Samarqand to Istanbul to Khayrabad in Persia as well as in the Mughal Empire. For centuries Jami was known for his poetry and profound knowledge. In the last half-century Jami has begun to be neglected and his works being forgotten, which reflects an overarching issue in the lack of research of Islamic and Persian studies. Among his works are: Baharestan (Abode of Spring) Modeled upon the Gulestan of Saadi, Diwanha-ye Sehganah (Triplet Divans), Al-Fawaed-Uz-Ziya'iya., Haft Awrang (Seven Thrones) His major poetical work : The fifth of the seven stories is his acclaimed "Yusuf and Zulaykha", which tells the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife based on the Quran.

Jami -esokanan-e Kaja Parsa, Lawa'ih A treatise on Sufism (Shafts of Light), Nafahat al-Uns (Breaths of Fellowship) Biographies of the Sufi Saints, Resala-ye Manasek-e Hajj, Resala-ye Musiqi, Resala-ye tariq-e Kvajagan, Resala-ye Sarayet-e dekr, Resala-ye Moal o Jawab-e Hendustan, Sara-e Hadit-e Abi Zarrin al-Aqili, Sar-Resta-Yetariqu-e Kajagan (The Quintessence of the Path of the Masters), Shawahidal-Nubuwwa (Distinctive Signs of Prophecy), Tajnis 'al-Lugat (Homonymy/Punning of Languages) A lexicographical work containing homonymous Persian and Arabic lemmata., Tuhfat al-Ahrar (The Gift of the Nobel). Along with his works are his contributions to previous works and works that have been created in response to his new ideas.

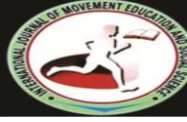
Jami's life can be divided roughly into three periods; the first covering his early years, education and establishment as a scholar, up until the age of 38; the second, a period when he abandoned his scholarly pursuits and became a Sufi and a follower of the Naqshandi order in Herat; and the third, when he withdrew more and more from public life and became a virtual recluse, concentrating upon his writing and his spiritual life. There is no doubt that Jami's adoption of the mystical path was sincere and life-long, going deeper than a mere attachment to Kashghari; he is said to have encountered a great Naqshbandi saint, Khwaja Muhammad Parsa as a child, receiving a never forgotten candy stick from him, and to have had a direct interior connection – what is called an 'Uwaisi' connection – to the founder of the Naqshbandi order Baha al-din Naqshband (d. 1389) himself. He was clearly a man of real spiritual attainment. It was widely expected that he would take over Kashghari's role as leader of the Herat Naqshbandi Order, but he refused this, preferring not to be distracted by the requirements of teaching. Instead he supported another Naqshbandi shaykh from Tashkent, Khwaja Abdullah Ahara (d. 1490), with whom he developed a close relationship and he acted as a kind of deputy to him in Herat, helping to establish the Naqshbandiyya as the predominant order in the region.

There is no doubt that Jami's adoption of the mystical path was sincere and life-long, going deeper than a mere attachment to Kashghari; he is said to have encountered a great Naqshbandi saint, Khwaja Muhammad Parsa as a child, receiving a never forgotten candy stick from him, and to have had a direct interior connection – what is



called an ‘Uwaisi’ connection – to the founder of the Naqshbandī order Baha’ al-dīn Naqshband (d. 1389) himself. He was clearly a man of real spiritual attainment. It was widely expected that he would take over Kashghari’s role as leader of the Herat Naqshbandi Order, but he refused this, preferring not to be distracted by the requirements of teaching. Instead he supported another Naqshbandi shaikh from Tashkent, Khwaja Abdullah Ahara (d. 1490), with whom he developed a close relationship and he acted as a kind of deputy to him in Herat, helping to establish the Naqshbandiyya as the predominant order in the region. However, he did take some students himself; it was said of him that “if a sincere person should suddenly appear, Jami would secretly enlighten him about his path”. Navai was also a powerful and rich man, a patron of the arts and artists, particularly miniature painting, and he had close connections to the Timurid court in Herat. It was during this middle period of his life, when he was in his 40s and 50s, that Jami too had considerable contact with the court, particularly with that of Sultan Abu Sayid (reigned 1459-1469) and Sultan Bayqara, who came to power in 1470 and reigned for 36 years, instituting a period of relative stability in a region where in-fighting between the descendants of Timur were the norm and regime-change was common. Bayqara’s reign provided the conditions for a great cultural flourishing, in which Jami played an important role, becoming the ‘poet laureate’ of the regime. He wrote a number of eulogies in praise of the rulers, but he was never a paid member of the court – it is made clear in the biographies that he never directly took money from the Sultan. But he did act as an advisor; in fact, cultivation of relationships with rulers was quite a feature of Sufi practice of this time, especially in the Naqshbandiyya, and it was consciously undertaken for the sake of intercession on behalf of their subjects: Jami himself wrote: ‘Closeness to virtuous and just kings, as is well-known to the intelligent and enlightened, is the best means for attaining goals pertaining both to religion and to the life of this world, for the perfection of outer and inner felicity. It renders possible aid to the unfortunate and facilitates intercession on behalf of the wretched’. We see similar instances in earlier times, with known instances of both Ibn ‘ Arabī and Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī using their relationship with Seljuk and Mongol rulers to attain clemency for the poor and needy. This was in fact an important part of the pastoral role that the Sufis played within society, in accordance with their underlying understanding that it is the function of the realized human being to be ‘a mercy to the universes’; i.e. to act as a conduit for the over-riding mercy of God.

By the 1470’s, when he was in his 50s, Jami had become one of the most famous and acclaimed figures in the Islamic world, known both as a poet and as a writer. When he went on hajj in 1472 – his only journey outside of the region of Khorasan – he rather comically had to flee from Aleppo to Tabriz in secret to avoid the emissaries of the Ottoman emperor Mehmet II, who were arriving with lavish gifts to persuade him to relocate to the glittering new court in Istanbul. He fled because he did not want to cause offence, and later wrote *Durrat al-fākhira* as a compensatory gift. One of the platforms of this fame, which made him so desirable to the Ottomans, was that he was a great exponent, and fierce defender, of the ideas of Ibn ‘ Arabi. These were a cornerstone of the Naqshbandi spiritual path – Khwaja Abdullah Ahara was considered an expert in akbarian doctrine and it is said that he and Jami had many conversations about the meaning of Ibn ‘ Arabi’s work. But these ideas were also extremely controversial, at this time causing considerable furore amongst the intellectual communities. One of the most widely discussed issues was Ibn ‘ Arabi’s assertion that the Pharaoh had died a believer in the divine unity. Sultan Bayqara even convened a conference in Herat where the leading scholars of the day were



invited to debate this sticky issue, at which Jami employed all his famous debating skills on the side of the “Wujūdi”s (so called because of their defense of the doctrine of waḥ dat al-wujūd, or ‘unity of being’) saying: “Those who intend to proclaim him (Ibn ‘ Arabī) an unbeliever must first be capable of determining his mode of thought; explain it to those competent in such matters and then prove to all and sundry that it contravenes the sharia. During his struggle with works such as Fuṣ ṣ al-ḥ ikam and al-Futūḥ āt al-Makkiyya, Jami vowed that: “... if this gate be opened for me, I will expound the meanings intended by this group in such a way that people will easily understand them”. To this end, he wrote several prose works; amongst them a commentary upon Ibn ‘ Arabī’s Naqsh al-Fuṣ ṣ , a commentary upon the Fuṣ ṣ itself, commentaries upon the poetry of Faqr al-dīn ‘ Irāqī and Ibn al-Fāriḍ as well upon Rūmī’s Mathnawī, plus his most enduringly famous work, Lawā’ ih or “Divine Flashes’ which we will look at next week. Almost equally famous is his Nafaḥ āt al-uns, an account in the tradition of Sulamī and ‘ Attar of the Sufi saints from previous times to his own day. This is now one of the principal sources of biographical information about the early followers of Ibn ‘ Arabī; at the time, it was controversial in itself, not so much because of its akbarian content but because of the contemporary figures whom Jami chose to omit from it. One of the features of this era, which we will not go into here, was the debate between Shi’ and Sunnī thinkers. Jami was definitely Sunni and wrote critically in certain places of Shi’ ite ideas, and one should note here that within ten years of his death, the Safavids would triumph over the Timurids in the central regions which are more or less present day Iran – the Safavids being of course Shi’ ite, as Iran remains to Jami’s perceived anti-Shia sentiments were a major factor in what was the virtual eclipse of his writings in Iran for several centuries after his death; whilst his adherence to the ideas of Ibn ‘ Arabī were a major factor in his being embraced in Ottoman lands, where they became an integral part of the spiritual landscape. In terms of his own spiritual development, Jami seems to have been of an essentially malamī disposition – i.e. preferring not to take on overt spiritual roles but to live a simple life of study and seclusion, as he demonstrated when he refused to become the leader of the Naqshabandi order in Herat. He himself intimated that both the pursuits for which he is famous – poetry and scholarship – were undertaken only as ‘cloaks’ by which to hide his inner spiritual state.

Towards the end of his life he withdrew more and more from worldly concerns, and was overtly critical of the spiritual standards of his day, despairing of both the masters and the pupils; he said in verse:

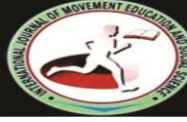
Thank God that I am neither a sheikh nor a follower,

[that I] neither seek knowledge, nor teaching and tutoring.

I am free from the bondage of the world, either impure or bright;

I shall sit in a corner of a shack, lone and solitary.

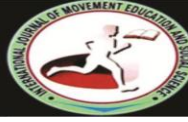
The last 10-12 years of life, when he was in relative solitude, were the most productive in terms of writing. It was during the 1480’s for instance that wrote, or at least completed the seven epic mathnawīs for which he is now most famous as a poet and compiled his Dīwān, as well as some of his Ibn ‘ Arabī commentaries. One of his most famous works is the Bahristan, a book of what Algar calls “entertaining and entertaining anecdotes”



about various classes of men which he finished in 1487. This was dedicated to his surviving son, Ziya al-din Yusuf – he had four sons but tragically lost three of them, writing a famous moving elegy to one who died in his teens. The two or three commentators that I have read tend to dismiss Jami’s own statement that his poetry and his scholarship were mere ‘cloaks’ by which his real state and stature were veiled from the world, as well as the many other statements that he, like Rumi, made about despising the very medium of poetic expression. They do this on the basis that he was too much of a poet – writing throughout the whole of his life, from childhood to within days of his death – and too much of a scholar (the Naqshbandis, despite their emphasis upon practices such as dhikr, did not require of him that he gave up his intellectual interests, so these too he continued to pursue from childhood to grave) for these to be anything but essential components of his character. But I think what we can read into this statement is the emphasis that he himself gave to the spiritual side of his life over his more manifest achievements. In Jami, one comes across the reality of genius, just as one does in Ibn ‘ Arabi, he is an absolute giant of a man, and it is clear that for him the highest levels of attainment in the human arts and sciences came easily, springing out of an extraordinary interior state rather than sought for their own sake. Thus one could say that he was a true follower of the Naqshbandī way, which was defined by Baha’ al-dīn Naqshaband himself as “being outwardly with men, inwardly with God”.

Jami has often been called the “the seal of the Persian poets”, not only because he is really the last great writer in the tradition – it being the case that from the end of the 15th century, the creative edge of the poetic arts moved towards India and Turkish cultures, and there were no immediate great successors to him writing in Persian. He is also called ‘seal’ in the way that Muhammad is called ‘the seal of the prophets’ because his work sums up, encompasses, codifies and completes the entire tradition which began in the 10th/11th centuries with people like Nizāmī. We have mentioned before that there were three main forms of Persian poetry at this time (Jami’s poetry was entirely in Persian); the ghazal (the lyrical poem usually a love poem); the mathnawī (the long epic poem) and the ruba‘ī (the short four liners). Usually, poets were known for their mastery of one form over the others, but Jami was acknowledged as being mutafannin, skilled, in all of them. What is more, he revived and/or mastered all the sub-forms of the genres.

Jami was a highly respected and renowned figure in the Timurid dynasty, because besides his status as the poet laureate of the era, he was affiliated with the Naqshbandi Sufi tariqa, the most prominent order in the region at that time. Jami’s literary reputation in the Timurid court and his connection with the Naqshbandi Sufis granted him a celebrity status in Central Asia and Transoxiana during that time. Although a few studies have been published in the twentieth century, a small number of contemporary scholars have recognized his contribution to Persian literature and his importance in the Naqshbandis, which was the most influential Sufi order in Central Asia in the fifteenth century. In spite of his celebrity status especially outside of Iran, there is a lack of scholarly material on Jami’s contribution to Persian literature. Jami acted as the caliph (representative) of Khwaja Ahrar in Herat. He lived at a time when the social condition of the population in the Timurid domain was not at its best, due to high taxes and oppression by the dynasty. Jami was able to reduce people's suffering through his position at the court and as the poet and Sufi of the Naqshbandis in the city.



REFERENCES:

1. 'Abd al-Rahman Jami, Baharistan, eds. A'lakhan Afsahzad, Muhammadjon Umaruf, Abu Bakr Zuhur alDin, Tehran: Mirath-i Maktub, 1379.
2. 'Abd al-Rahman-i Jami, Diwan-i Jami, ed. A'lakhan Afsahzad, Tehran: Mirath-i Maktub, 1378.
3. Abd al-Rahman Jami, "Laweah", Tasawuf Foundation, Lahore, 1649
4. Abd al-Rahman Jami, "Masnavi Haft Awrang", Markaz-e Mutaleate Irani, 1378.
5. 'Abd al-Rahman Jami, Nafahat al-Uns Min Hazarat- al-Quds, Tehran: 'Elmi, 1375.
6. Afsahzad, A'lakhan , A Critical Study of Jami's Bibliography and Writings, Tehran: Mirath-i Maktub, 1999.
7. Buehler, Arthur F. Sufi Heir of the Prophet: The India Naqshbandiyya and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Saint. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998.
8. Hadr, Jahan G.J.. ter. "The Importance of the Spiritual Guide in the Naqshbandi Order", the Heritage of Sufism V.II. The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism (1150-1500) ed. Leonard Lewisohn. London: Khaniqahi Nimatullahi. Pub. 1992:rp Oxford: Oneworld, 1999.
9. "The Legacy of the Timurids." Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Series 3,8,7, (1998).
10. "The Mashayikh-I Turk and Khojagan: Rethinking the Links between the Yasavi and Naqshbandi Sufi Traditions." Journal of Islamic Studies 7, 2 (1996):