



REIMAGINING MAHABBAH IN ISLAM: AL-GHAZALI AND JALALUDDIN RUMI IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study undertakes a comparative literary inquiry into the conceptual construction of *mahabbah* in the thought of al-Ghazali and Jalaluddin Rumi. Methodologically, it adopts a qualitative approach, employing comparative analysis combined with content analysis. The primary sources include *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, *Kimiya' al-Sa'adah*, *Fih Ma Fibi*, and the *Mathnawi*, supported by a range of secondary literature pertinent to the theme. The findings reveal that al-Ghazali conceives *mahabbah* as the culmination of spiritual ascent, attained progressively through the *maqamat*. For him, love represents the loftiest station—the fruit of *ma'rifah*—which ultimately manifests in obedience and inner contentment. In contrast, Rumi envisions love as the singular path by which the soul is liberated from spiritual maladies, a transformative journey toward God realized through gnosis and mystical union. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on Sufi spirituality by illuminating how ethical and mystical orientations toward divine love shape different yet complementary pathways within Islamic thought.

Keywords: *Mahabbah*, al-Ghazali, Rumi, Ethical Sufism, Mystical Sufism

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini merupakan penelitian kepustakaan yang bersifat komparatif mengenai konstruksi konseptual *mahabbah* dalam pemikiran al-Ghazali dan Jalaluddin Rumi. Secara metodologis, penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode komparatif serta analisis isi. Sumber primer yang dikaji mencakup *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, *Kimiya' al-Sa'adah*, *Fih Ma Fibi*, dan *Mathnawi*, dengan dukungan berbagai literatur sekunder yang relevan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa al-Ghazali memahami *mahabbah* sebagai puncak pendakian spiritual yang dicapai secara bertahap melalui *maqamat*. Bagi al-Ghazali, cinta merupakan *maqam* tertinggi—buah dari *ma'rifah*—yang pada akhirnya termanifestasi dalam ketaatan dan ketenteraman batin. Sebaliknya, Rumi memandang cinta sebagai satu-satunya jalan untuk membebaskan jiwa dari berbagai penyakit spiritual, yakni sebuah proses transformatif menuju Allah yang terealisasi melalui gnosis dan kesatuan mistis. Temuan ini memberikan kontribusi pada diskursus spiritualitas tasawuf dengan memperlihatkan bagaimana orientasi etis dan mistis terhadap cinta Ilahi membentuk jalan yang berbeda, namun saling melengkapi, dalam khazanah pemikiran Islam.

Kata Kunci: *Mahabbah*, al-Ghazali, Rumi, Tasawuf Akhlaki, Tasawuf Irfani



INTRODUCTION

Love constitutes a fundamental element in the formation of relationships that interconnect all entities within the cosmos. In the absence of love, what emerges is hatred, intolerance, and the disintegration of harmony in both social and political life. Within the realm of Sufism, discourses on love (*mahabbah*) are central: they are deliberated, internalized, and practiced as spiritual paths (*sulūk*) for seekers of truth. *Mahabbah ilāhiyyah* represents one of the essential methods by which human beings draw near to God. Numerous Sufi authorities have articulated diverse perspectives on *mahabbah*, among them Imam al-Ghazali, Rabi'ah al-'Adawiyah, Jalaluddin Rumi, Imam al-Tustari, Shaykh Zulfikar Ahmad, and others—each developing distinctive doctrines and methods toward the attainment of spiritual goals (Loka & Yulianti, 2019; Murni, 2020).

The selection of an appropriate method is crucial for ensuring that a teaching can be properly practiced and meaningfully embodied, as it relates directly to one's comprehension and capacity to implement it (Badwi, 2017). Method, by definition, refers to a systematic way of attaining a specific goal. It ordinarily consists of sequential steps that guide a seeker progressively toward the intended destination (Siregar & Mulyono, 2024). Yet the choice of method is often contingent upon the context and conditions in which it is applied.

In Sufi practice, approaches to drawing nearer to God take multiple forms. They may include *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the self), *riyādah* (spiritual training), and *mujāhadah* (striving). They may also involve the triadic process of *takhallī*, *taḥallī*, and *tajallī*, as well as other frameworks such as *maqāmāt* (spiritual stations) and *aḥwāl* (spiritual states) (Khusnadi et al., 2022, pp. 23–24).

Within al-Ghazali's system of Sufism, the position of *mahabbah* arises only after the attainment of *ma'rifatullāh* (gnosis) (Arif et al., 2023, p. 86). In contrast, Jalaluddin Rumi posits love as the sole path by which the soul is healed of its maladies—a spiritual ascent that must itself be preceded by gnosis (Chittick, 2005, pp. 11–12). Hence, for al-Ghazali, *mahabbah* is the ultimate telos, whereas for Rumi, it serves as a transformative medium through which gnosis is realized.

Although both figures address the theme of divine love, their perspectives diverge significantly, producing distinct conceptual constructions of *mahabbah*. This divergence provides the rationale for the present study: to compare and analyze their respective methods of attaining *mahabbah*. The research problem is therefore framed around the following questions: how do al-Ghazali and Rumi differ in their conceptualization of *mahabbah*, and what methods do they propose for ascending through its *maqām*?

Previous scholarship has engaged with related themes. Zahra Ahmadi (2014), for instance, explored the influence of love in Rumi's life, drawing on sources such as the *Mathnawi*, *Ghazaliyyat-i Shams*, *Rubā'iyāt*, *Majālis-i Sab'a*, and *Fihi ma fihi*. She concluded that Rumi's conception of love, shaped profoundly by his master Shams al-Tabrizi, diverges from ordinary understandings of love. For Rumi, love compels the renunciation of worldly attachments that veil the divine and enables the emergence of the sacred; indeed, love animates the cosmos itself.

Similarly, Mohammad Reza Modarres Zadeh's article *Parallels of Love in Rumi and Donne* (2016) juxtaposes Rumi's mystical love poetry with that of the English poet John Donne. Despite vast differences in culture, religion, and historical context, both figures

express strikingly similar experiences of love, which they portray as a transformative force that creates a new existential condition, obliterates worldliness, and unites lover and beloved in ecstatic union with the divine (Zadeh & Anushirvani, 2016, p. 24).

Narges Khani (2020) likewise investigated the role of love in Rumi's life and oeuvre, again drawing upon the *Mathnawi*, *Ghazaliyyat-i Shams*, *Rubā'īyyāt*, *Majālis-i Sab'a*, and *Fihī ma fihī*. She concluded that Rumi's conception of love is radically distinct from contemporary notions: through Shams al-Tabrizi, Rumi discovered a love that both sanctifies and transforms, dismantling and recreating reality itself. For Rumi, love cannot be defined, only experienced; its ultimate purpose is to lead the seeker into deeper knowledge of God.

Turning to al-Ghazali, Ridzuan Masri's article *The Idea of Love in al-Ghazali's Literature* (2013) examined the *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, showing that *mahabbah* constitutes the highest station of devotion to God. Attaining this station requires strenuous effort in acquiring *ma'rifah*, which, in turn, demands profound self-knowledge. For al-Ghazali, to know oneself is the indispensable condition for knowing God, and without it the attainment of *ma'rifah* is impossible.

Taken together, these studies provide valuable insights and significantly enrich the present investigation. Nevertheless, this study distinguishes itself by focusing explicitly on the divergent constructions of *mahabbah* in al-Ghazali and Jalaluddin Rumi, as well as the specific methods each proposes for traversing the spiritual path toward divine love.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative and comparative approach in order to explore the construction of *mahabbah* in the thought of Imam al-Ghazali and Jalaluddin Rumi. The selection of this approach is grounded in the

recognition that the subject of inquiry—love as a mystical and ethical category—cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures, but rather requires interpretive engagement with textual, conceptual, and spiritual traditions. The comparative framework is employed to highlight both convergences and divergences between two seminal figures who represent distinct typologies within the Sufi tradition: al-Ghazali, generally associated with *akhlaqī* (ethical) Sufism, and Rumi, widely acknowledged as a major proponent of *'irfānī* (gnostic or mystical) Sufism. By juxtaposing these two typologies, the study seeks to illuminate the different epistemological and methodological underpinnings of their conceptions of divine love.

The primary method of analysis is content analysis, which has been adapted for the examination of classical Sufi texts. Content analysis is particularly suited to this inquiry because it allows the researcher to systematically identify patterns, themes, and categories within textual materials while remaining attentive to the interpretive depth required in the study of religious and mystical thought. The procedure begins with the close reading of textual sources, including al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* and *Kimiya' al-Sa'adah*, as well as Rumi's *Mathnawi* and *Fihī Ma Fihī*. These works are chosen as they constitute the principal articulations of each thinker's views on love and spirituality, and they provide a representative basis for comparison.

Coding is then employed as an analytic tool to classify and organize the relevant data. The coding process focuses on identifying the core characteristics of *mahabbah* in each thinker's work and the methods proposed for attaining the *maqām* of divine love. For al-Ghazali, attention is given to the sequential stages of the *maqāmāt* and the positioning of *mahabbah* as the culmination of spiritual

ascent. For Rumi, the coding process highlights his portrayal of love as both the path and the transformative force leading to gnosis and mystical union. These codes are subsequently grouped into thematic categories that facilitate cross-comparison between the two frameworks.

The final stage involves interpretation and descriptive exposition, wherein the coded data are synthesized into a coherent narrative. Rather than reducing the texts to abstract categories, the analysis endeavors to preserve their spiritual depth while rendering them accessible for comparative evaluation. This approach ensures both methodological rigor and fidelity to the religious context of the texts under investigation (Asmi, 2022, p. 69).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Religious Experience in Sufism

The theoretical framework employed in this study draws upon Ninian Smart's notion of the *experiential and emotional dimension* of religion (Smart, 2011, p. 168), which provides a lens for examining the concepts of *maqāmāt* and *aḥwāl* in the works of the two Sufi authors under discussion. Smart explains that although human beings strive to interact with and participate in the "invisible world" through ritual, such endeavors are usually bound up with hopes or realizations rooted in lived, worldly experience. He identifies several forms of religious experience: *dhyāna* and empathy, and another category he terms *bhakti*. The first refers to a purely mystical state (*empathy of images—mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—an attitude of awe and wonder before mystery) that does not necessarily require worship of a deity (Smart, 1995, p. 61). The second, by contrast, conveys an impression of an "encounter with God," which generally entails acts of worship directed toward Him. Rudolf Otto famously described

this latter form as the experience of the *numinous Other*. This may be understood as the manifestation of "a religion that has found God," wherein the numinous of the first type is given concrete form within a particular religious tradition, complete with prescribed obligations of worship. Rennie further adds that this experience reflects the interface of religion with the "visible world," generating a distinctive ethos or culture within a given community (Rennie, 1999, p. 65). In this context of religiously motivated action, Smart refers to such dynamics as "expressions."

According to Abu Nasr al-Sarrāj (d. 988 CE), *maqām* refers to the spiritual rank or station denoting the proximity of a servant to God, achieved through worship, *mujāhadah* (spiritual struggle), *riyāḍah* (discipline), and the full dedication of both outward and inward being to the divine presence, accompanied by detachment from worldly influence. In contrast, *aḥwāl* represent inner states resulting from perfected *dhikr* (remembrance of God). Al-Junaid al-Baghdādī likewise affirmed that *aḥwāl* are impermanent, fluctuating, and transient. For al-Sarrāj, *aḥwāl* are divine gifts, bestowed rather than acquired through human striving, in contrast to *maqāmāt* which require deliberate spiritual effort (al-Sarrāj, 1960/1380H, pp. 65–66).

In his seminal work *al-Luma'*, al-Sarrāj provides a systematic exposition of *maqāmāt* and *aḥwāl*. *Maqāmāt* are described as progressive stages attainable through disciplined exertion, while *aḥwāl* emerge as divinely granted states once the seeker has traversed the *maqāmāt*. Al-Sarrāj identifies seven principal *maqāmāt*: repentance (*tawbah*), vigilance (*wara'*), asceticism (*zuhd*), poverty (*faqr*), patience (*ṣabr*), reliance (*tawakkul*), and contentment (*riḍā*). Correspondingly, he delineates ten *aḥwāl*, or inner states bestowed upon the seeker: watchfulness (*murāqabah*), nearness (*qurb*),

love (*maḥabbah*), fear (*khawf*), hope (*rajā'*), longing (*shawq*), intimacy (*uns*), tranquility (*ṭuma'nīnah*), witnessing (*mushāhadah*), and certainty (*yaqīn*).

The Construction of *Mahabbah* in Imam al-Ghazali

Imam al-Ghazali begins his discussion of love with the assertion that loving God and His Messenger is an obligation incumbent upon every believer. One of his textual foundations is the well-known ḥadīth narrated by al-Bukhari and Muslim: “Three things, whoever possesses them will taste the sweetness of faith: that Allah and His Messenger are more beloved to him than anything else...” (Bukhari, 2012, p. 199 [no. 16]; Hajaj, 2006, p. 40 [no. 43–76]). Al-Ghazali interprets this love primarily as obedience: for how could one truly obey without first being grounded in love (al-Ghazali, 2002, p. 503)?

He further defines *mahabbah* as the mutual affection between God and His servant—the love of the faithful directed toward their Lord and the reciprocation of divine love bestowed upon them. What distinguishes al-Ghazali from many other Sufi masters is his willingness to articulate a clear and direct definition of love. Whereas numerous Sufis claim that love cannot be defined, for it is an ineffable experience that eludes language, al-Ghazali provides a systematic exposition. For him, love is an inclination toward something, a presence in the heart that is granted as an unsolicited gift. Love cannot be engineered, manipulated, rejected, or avoided; it is accepted as part of the human *fiṭrah*—the divinely ordained nature. Elsewhere, he characterizes *mahabbah* as an inclination toward what brings delight and pleasure to the lover, particularly the inner joy that arises as a divine bestowal (al-Ghazali, 2002, p. 501).

Within his treatment of *mahabbah*, al-Ghazali identifies love of God as the highest

maqām within the Sufi path, the ultimate telos of human striving. It is the final station, surpassing all others, after which there are no additional *maqāmāt*, only *aḥwāl*—inner states such as longing, contentment, or joy—that emerge as the fruits of divine love. In this respect, al-Ghazali situates love at the very center of metaphysics (Lumbard, 2016, p. 112).

To attain this supreme station, however, the seeker must first traverse earlier *maqāmāt*: repentance (*tawbah*), righteous deeds characterized by patience (*ṣabr*), and asceticism (*zuhd*). For al-Ghazali, *zuhd* entails detachment from worldly concerns, the discernment between temporal and eternal priorities, and a deliberate redirection of attention toward the hereafter. By cultivating such dispositions, the seeker strengthens the orientation of the heart toward divine love, until worldly desires lose their hold, leaving only yearning for God, tenderness of heart, and the sweetness of intimate devotion (al-Ghazali, 2002, p. 502).

Thus, *mahabbah ilallāh* in al-Ghazali's thought emerges as a deeply integrative reality, binding together inner practice, spiritual experience, guiding principles, and divine wisdom. When the heart is illumined by God's love, no other attachments can compete, for it is wholly filled with the incomparable delight of nearness to Him. At this stage, the entire inner orientation of the believer is directed toward seeking God's pleasure and envisioning the hereafter as the final destination of life's journey.

Al-Ghazali enumerates several causes from which genuine love of God may arise (al-Ghazali, 2002, pp. 510–543):

1. Knowledge and recognition of the One who is loved;
2. Beneficence toward the self, leading to the realization that all goodness ultimately derives from God, without whose permission no act of kindness is possible;

3. Affinity rooted in harmony with divine attributes, qualities, or ideals;
4. Attachment to all that pertains to the Beloved;
5. Congruence between the lover and the Beloved.

After establishing that true love is directed toward the Divine Essence, al-Ghazali proceeds to outline practices that can intensify *mahabbah*. The first is detachment from worldly entanglements: love of God cannot take root in a heart already filled with competing loves. He illustrates this with a vivid analogy: “A vessel cannot contain vinegar if it is still filled with water” (al-Ghazali, 2002, p. 576). Just as the *kalimat al-tahlil* (*lā ilāha illa Allāh*) signifies liberation from all but God, so too must the heart be emptied of all attachments in order to be filled with divine love alone.

The second practice is the deepening of *maʿrifah* (gnosis). The more profound and expansive one’s knowledge of God, the stronger and more enduring one’s love becomes. Al-Ghazali likens love to a tree whose roots are firmly planted, whose branches reach into the heavens, whose foliage offers shelter, and whose fruits appear abundantly on every bough. When love takes root in a healthy soul, its fruits manifest through the limbs in acts of devotion and goodness. In *Kimiyā’ al-Saʿādah*, al-Ghazali explains that one whose heart is filled with love of God experiences abiding joy in every aspect of life, for God is ever near, intimately present with His beloved (al-Ghazali, 2001, p. 65).

The Construction of *Mahabbah* in Jalaluddin Rumi

Jalaluddin Rumi—born Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Bahā’ al-Dīn Walad b. Ḥusayn b. al-Khaṭṭābī al-Bakrī (6 Rabī’ al-Awwal 604 AH / 30 September 1207 CE)—first saw the light in Balkh, a province of the Khwarazmian

realm in northern Persia. He was nurtured within a noble lineage: through his mother he is traditionally traced to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, while through his father he is linked to Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq. Educated by his father—an eminent jurist (*faqīh*), *muftī*, and spiritual guide affiliated with the Kubrawī order under the lineage of Shaykh Najm al-Dīn al-Kubrā—Rumi is even said to have received the honorific “chief of the scholars” by the Prophet in a visionary dream (Rumi, 2014, p. 12).

Prior to meeting his later master, Shams al-Tabrīzī, Rumi had already attained distinction as a scholar of *fiqh*, Qur’ān, and ḥadīth, as well as logic, philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy (Zare-Behtash, 2017, p. 98). Under his father’s tutelage he was formed in the religious sciences and, even before Shams’s arrival, was appointed by his father to succeed him as *khaṭīb* and jurist.

Rumi’s decisive turn toward Sufism was catalyzed by his encounter with Shams al-Tabrīzī in Konya (629/1232). As Schimmel (cited in Zare-Behtash) notes, Sufism for Rumi comprises a theoretical dimension (*taṣawwuf*) and a practical, dervish dimension (*darwīshī*). Through this synthesis, Rumi emerges as an exemplar of surrender and devotion to God, his ardor of love inspiring countless seekers.

Among Rumi’s major works, *Fīhi mā fīhi* is perhaps the most pedagogically direct: a compendium of spiritual counsel and responses to questions over time, comprising 71 chapters, six of which are in Arabic (Rumi, 2014, p. 24). Complementing this prose is the *Mathnawī*, an epic poetic corpus in which the oceanic experience of divine love (*maḥabbah*) is voiced with unmatched intensity. Through these texts, Rumi articulates a philosophical and initiatory framework in which Sufism is the religion of love as immediate experience.

In Rumi's doctrine, *maḥabbah* is foundational—it must be present prior to and beneath other spiritual practices. Yet entry into love is preceded by *ma'rifah* (gnosis): knowledge of God quickens love; love, in turn, manifests in obedience, humility, effacement of self, and virtues such as *khawf*, *rajā'*, *tawbah*, and *shukr*. *Ma'rifah* is an intimate cognition of God—as though the inner eye beholds Him—beginning with profound self-knowledge, as encapsulated in the maxim, “Whoever knows himself knows his Lord” (Pakar, 2013, p. 180).

From this vantage, the human being (*microcosm*) enshrines within himself the macrocosm. Humanity is no trivial dust of the universe but its mirror and prototype, resonant with the Qur'ānic phrase “*aḥsani taqwīm*” (Q 95:4). The doctrine of *tajallī* (divine self-disclosure) follows: the human heart is the gate to the macrocosm—“Neither My heavens nor My earth can contain Me, but the heart of My gentle, serene servant can” (Munirruddin, 2023; cf. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal via Wahb b. Munabbih in Hadadi, 2005, p. 39).

Rumi therefore urges inner reckoning (*muḥāsabah*) as the path to knowing God and His attributes. He cautions against halting at the surface of reason: reason is a waystation, not the summit. What appears as causal sufficiency—clothes warming the body, medicine producing health—can become veils if they eclipse divine causality. One must pierce the outward to realize the inward; refine the *bāṭin* so that action flowers beautifully in the *zāhir*.

In *Fīhi mā fīhi*, Rumi repeatedly insists that the empirical face of things is not their ultimate reality: the earth's dust veils the inner gold; forms conceal divine qualities. Thus, do not be deceived by appearances: seek the essence. By recognizing human frailty and God's majesty, the seeker opens into *ma'rifah*, from which love necessarily springs (Rumi, 2014, p. 59).

To expose our fixation with surfaces, Rumi deploys the mirror parable: people love the mirror-image yet ignore their true face. “Unveil your face (now veiled), so you may discover that I am the mirror of your face—and thus the finest mirror for you; whatever appears in the mirror is My very existence” (Rumi, 2014, p. 303). Likewise, on desire, he teaches: the many cravings (“cake, sweets, fruit, dates...”) stem from one source—hunger; when that is sated, the others fall away. Seek the one essence behind multiplicity; do not be dominated by *nafs* and unclarified passion (Rumi, 2014, p. 37).

Unlike al-Ghazali, Rumi resists defining love in discursive terms. When pressed, he replies: do not ask for a definition—love is elemental; live it. In Chapter 49 of *Fīhi mā fīhi*, he offers only a broad gesture: love is that in which humans find sustenance and delight—joy in kin, children, lawful desire—pleasure and the lifting of hardship (Rumi, 2014, p. 343). His poetry intensifies this stance: “*In expounding love, reason lies prostrate, like a donkey sunk in mud. Love itself is the proof of love; the sun is proved by the sun—if you seek proof, do not turn your face away from it.*” (Rumi, 2018, p. 17; cited in Ahmadi, 2014, p. 3)

Or again, through Layla and Majnun: the caliph, seeing Layla's unremarkable features, scoffs; Layla answers, “Be silent—you are not Majnun.” Only the lover comprehends love (Masnawī 1/407–408; Ahmadi, 2014, p. 4).

For Rumi, love is a sweet madness that heals arrogance and dissolves ego (Zare-Behtash, 2017, p. 103). The lover gives without claim, desiring only the Beloved's joy—like a parent's love for a child, or a friend's fidelity. Such love trains the soul, stripping it of self-importance and strengthening it through sacrifice and obedience to God (Rumi, 2014, p. 21).

Rumi further insists that love demands proof. Cultivate *khawf* and *rajā'*, which beget

sincere tawbah—for claims without practice are empty. He cites a dialogue wherein the Prophet tells ‘Abbās: “God asks for evidence of your claim.” Hence Rumi: “It is easy to profess love—but love requires visible proof” (*Fīhi mā fīhi*, ch. 1; Rumi, 2014, p. 31). Proof ranges from vigilant self-reproach to refraining from acts that would wound the Beloved—even if unseen—extending this ethic outward as a universal mirror for conduct (Rumi, 2014, pp. 71–72).

Love also entails sacrifice: Rumi quotes the story of Amīr Barwānah, willing to pledge intellect and life for the flourishing of Islam (Rumi, 2014, p. 31). The more sincere the love, the more the soul becomes divinized: love is neither mere joy nor sorrow—it is the vanishing of ego. Again, Layla–Majnun figures the annihilation of self and contentment with one’s apportioned lot—since God gives each only what he can bear (Rumi, 2014, p. 86). Sacrifice thus trains the heart into *riḍā*.

Rumi’s verses on yearning paint the lover’s resolve: Majnun rides a she-camel that continually turns back to its calf; realizing the conflict of loves, he abandons the camel to reach Layla on foot (Rumi, 2014, p. 54). The moral: sever what impedes the journey to the Beloved; relinquish the world when it cannot serve ascent to God.

Cosmically, love moves the universe: arrivals and departures, sickness and health, day and night—all flow by love’s current. Rumi reads the celebrated dictum—“Were it not for you, I would not have created the heavens”—as locating the universe’s telos in God’s love for the Prophet; divine love thus encompasses all (Ahmadi, 2014, p. 4; Zadeh & Anushirvani, 2016, p. 25). Love is dynamic power beneath the spiritual and material orders, optimizing the senses, sharpening intuition, dissolving egoism, reconciling disputes, and tearing down social veils (Özdemir, 2005, p. 5). In short, *maḥabbah* is

the path by which the microcosm returns to and realizes the macrocosm—“from God, for God, and toward God” (Rumi, 2014, p. 43).

Table 1. Comparative Snapshot: al-Ghazali vs. Rumi on *Mahabbah*

Aspect	al-Ghazali	Rumi
Definition of love	A divinely given gift: an inclination and inner delight bestowed by God.	Indefinable in discursive terms; the essence that must be lived and tasted.
Relation to gnosis	Ma‘rifah → maḥabbah (gnosis gives rise to love).	Maḥabbah → gnosis (love is the vehicle toward ‘irfan).
Reason vs. love	Reason can describe love but cannot resist its arrival.	Love eludes reason’s control, description, and delimitation.
Mystical apex	Riḍā (contentment).	Fanā’ (ego-annihilation) in ecstatic love.
Ethical consequence	Obedience to divine commands and prohibitions.	Proof through sacrifice and demonstrable dedication.
Dominant metaphors	Happiness, inclination, delight.	Fire, ocean, consuming and boundless.

Rumi further emphasizes that love requires not only inner feeling but also outward proof. In *Fīhi mā fīhi* he cites a report in which the Prophet tells ‘Abbās, who had declared his repentance, “God asks for evidence of your claim.” From this Rumi concludes: it is easy to profess love, but genuine love requires visible proof (Rumi, 2014, p. 31). Love, therefore, cannot be reduced to a mere interior state of emotion; it must be accompanied by actions that testify to its authenticity. Proof of love may take the form of vigilance, self-reproach, and moral restraint, so that the lover avoids falling into a

“pit” that would estrange him from the Beloved. In this sense, the lover must become a mirror to himself: when he transgresses, even if unseen by the Beloved, he will immediately feel pain. This ethic extends outward, for Rumi teaches that one must act toward others as toward oneself—whatever brings joy to the self ought to be offered to others, and whatever harms the self must never be inflicted upon them (Rumi, 2014, pp. 71–72).

Alongside proof, love demands sacrifice. Rumi recounts the story of Amīr Barwānah, who was prepared to sacrifice intellect and life itself for the strength of Islam (Rumi, 2014, p. 31). The more sincere and selfless one’s love, the more the soul becomes divinized. Love, he insists, is neither joy nor sorrow but the annihilation of ego. Here the tale of Layla and Majnun again provides an allegory: the true lover is one who effaces the self, accepts what is allotted by the Beloved, and remains content with the share God has given, since He never burdens a soul beyond its capacity. Thus sacrifice, in Rumi’s view, is an act of disciplining the heart, compelling it toward *riḍā* and acceptance (Rumi, 2014, p. 86).

This self-effacement is also dramatized in his poetic imagery of longing. In one passage, Majnun attempts to ride a she-camel to meet Layla, but the animal continually turns back to its calf, preventing progress. Realizing the conflict of loves, Majnun dismounts and continues on foot, abandoning the camel in order to reach his beloved (Rumi, 2014, p. 54). The parable teaches that the lover must decisively renounce all attachments that hinder the journey to the Beloved, just as the seeker must abandon worldly loves if they obstruct the way to God.

For Rumi, love is not only ethical but cosmological: it is the force that moves the universe. All opposites—arrival and

departure, health and sickness, day and night—are governed by love’s dynamism. He cites the celebrated dictum, “Were it not for you, I would not have created the heavens,” to argue that the cosmos itself was brought into being out of God’s love for the Prophet Muhammad. In this perspective, the Prophet embodies the archetype of the heart and of love itself, transcending all boundaries of intellect and knowledge (Ahmadi, 2014, p. 4). Love, then, is the reason for existence, encompassing both the worldly and the otherworldly (Zadeh & Anushirvani, 2016, p. 25).

Rumi thus conceives of love as a dynamic energy that undergirds both spiritual and material reality. It optimizes the senses, sharpens intuition, abolishes egotism, reconciles divisions, and dismantles social hierarchies (Özdemir, 2005, p. 5). In everyday life, love is the antidote to arrogance and conflict, erasing the veils that divide humanity. To love, for Rumi, is to educate the heart in the school of God’s ocean, so that through love of self and creation the seeker may ultimately come to know God. Once God permits recognition, the lover becomes an “astrolabe,” dissolving into the absolute beauty of the Divine, never to be severed again (Rumi, 2014, p. 43). In this sense, the movement of the microcosm toward the macrocosm is accomplished through *mahabbah*.

CONCLUSION

Typologically, al-Ghazali and Rumi stand within distinct domains of Sufism: al-Ghazali is situated in the tradition of *akhlaqī* Sufism, whereas Rumi belongs to the *irfānī* current. Their respective constructions of *mahabbah* thus diverge in both orientation and structure. For al-Ghazali, love is a divinely bestowed gift that can be clearly defined, arising as the fruit of *maʿrifah*. For Rumi, by contrast, love is not an antecedent gift but the

very process through which *ma'rifah* is attained. Yet despite these divergences, certain principles remain shared. Both regard *mahabbah* as culminating in transformative inner states (*aḥwāl*): for al-Ghazali, love gives rise to obedience and *riḍā*; for Rumi, gnosis issues in *fanā*, the annihilation of the self in the Beloved. Thus, while their typologies and emphases differ, their constructions converge in affirming love as the axis of spiritual ascent and the threshold to the highest mystical states.

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