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Spiritual Poverty in Rumi, Ibn Arabi, and Judith Beveridge's Poetry: Comparative Analysis

A B S T R A C T

This study examines the representation of spiritual poverty in the works of three poets from different cultural and historical contexts: Jalaluddin Rumi, the thirteenth-century Persian Sufi poet; Ibn Arabi, the influential Andalusian Sufi mystic and poet; and Judith Beveridge, the contemporary Australian poet. Despite their temporal and cultural separation, all three poets employ spiritual poverty as a central theme, expressing existential yearning and the human quest for divine connection. Through close textual analysis, this research identifies similarities and differences in their approaches to spiritual desolation, longing, and transcendence. The study contributes to our understanding of how spiritual poverty manifests in poetic discourse across cultural and temporal boundaries, illuminating the universal aspects of human spiritual experience within distinctive cultural expressions.

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تحليل مقارن للفقر الروحي في شعر الرومي وابن عربي وجوديث بيفريدج

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الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في تمثيل الفقر الروحي في أعمال ثلاثة شعراء من سياقات ثقافية وتاريخية متباينة: جلال الدين الرومي، الشاعر الصوفي الفارسي من القرن الثالث عشر؛ ومحيي الدين ابن عربي، المتصوف والشاعر الأندلسي المؤثر؛ وجوديث بيفريدج، الشاعرة الأسترالية المعاصرة. وعلى الرغم من انفصالهم الزمني والثقافي، يوظف هؤلاء الشعراء الثلاثة الفقر الروحي كموضوع مركزي، معبرين عن الشوق الوجودي والسعي البشري للاتصال الإلهي. من خلال التحليل النصي الدقيق، يحدد هذا البحث أوجه التشابه والاختلاف في مقارباتهم للخواء الروحي، والشوق، والتسامي. تسهم الدراسة في فهمنا لكيفية تجلي الفقر الروحي في الخطاب الشعري عبر الحدود الثقافية والزمنية، مما يلقي الضوء على الجوانب العالمية للتجربة الروحية البشرية ضمن التعبيرات الثقافية المميزة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصِلات الربانية ، التصوف ، الشعر الروحاني ، الفقر الروحي.

1. Introduction

Spiritual poverty represents one of the most significant existential conditions explored within poetic traditions across cultures. As a concept, it delineates an interior desolation that transcends material considerations—a hunger of the soul rather than the body. This comparative study examines how three poets from vastly different contexts engage with this theme: Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273), the Persian Sufi mystic; Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), the Andalusian Sufi philosopher and poet; and Beveridge (b. 1956), the contemporary Australian poet.

Rumi, born in Balkh (present-day Afghanistan), became renowned throughout the Islamic world and beyond for his mystical poetry, particularly his *Masnavi*, which explores the soul's yearning for divine union. His works express the Sufi path toward spiritual enlightenment, emphasizing the necessity of transcending the ego to achieve communion with God. As Schimmel (1992) notes, "Rumi's poetry represents the pinnacle of mystical expression in Persian literature, articulating complex theological concepts through accessible metaphors and narratives" (p. 78).

Ibn Arabi, born in Murcia, Spain, and known as "al-Shaykh al-Akbar" (the Greatest Master), developed a sophisticated metaphysical system that profoundly influenced Islamic mysticism and poetry. His poetic works, particularly the collection *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* (The Interpreter of Desires), express complex spiritual concepts through the language of human love and longing. According to Chittick (2005), "Ibn Arabi's poetry represents the most intellectually rigorous articulation of the Sufi understanding of human-divine relationship, expressed through the paradoxical language of passionate love" (p. 45).

Beveridge, born in England and raised in Australia, has established herself as one of Australia's most significant contemporary poets. While not explicitly aligned with a specific religious tradition, her work demonstrates a profound engagement with spiritual questions, particularly through her observations of the natural world and human experience. Beveridge's poetry often explores the relationship between the mundane and the transcendent, revealing what Kinsella (2008) describes as "a spiritual consciousness that emerges from attentive observation rather than dogmatic conviction" (p. 119).

This study aims to identify how these poets, separated by time, geography, and cultural context, approach the common theme of spiritual poverty. Through close textual analysis, this paper will examine their poetic techniques, philosophical underpinnings, and distinctive articulations of existential yearning. This comparative approach illuminates not only the works of these significant poets but also enhances our understanding of how spiritual longing manifests across different literary traditions.

2. Conceptual Framework

Spiritual poverty differs fundamentally from material destitution, though the two concepts share metaphorical connections. As McGinn (2006) explains, "Spiritual poverty represents an interior condition characterized by a profound awareness of one's metaphysical incompleteness—an existential emptiness that materiality cannot fill" (p. 45). This condition manifests as a yearning for transcendence or divine connection that, paradoxically, can become a path to spiritual fulfillment.

In Islamic Sufism, spiritual poverty (*faqr*) constitutes a central concept with multiple dimensions. For Sufis, *faqr* involves both an ontological condition and a spiritual practice. Ontologically, it represents the fundamental dependence of all creation on the divine, as expressed in the Qur'anic verse, "O mankind! You are the poor (fuqara) in relation to God,

and God is the Rich (al-Ghani), the Praiseworthy" (Qur'an 35:15). As a practice, *faqr* involves the deliberate cultivation of detachment from worldly possessions and concerns to create space for divine presence. Nasr (2007) describes this as "the elimination of all that might obstruct the influx of divine grace, creating a void that only God can fill" (p. 112).

In the Christian contemplative tradition, a parallel concept appears in the Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). This spiritual poverty involves kenosis—self-emptying as a prerequisite for divine communion (Cunningham, 2017). Similarly, Buddhist traditions emphasize emptiness (*śūnyatā*) as both a metaphysical reality and a contemplative insight that liberates from suffering.

For the purposes of this study, spiritual poverty is understood as an existential condition characterized by awareness of separation from divine or transcendent reality. This separation generates longing, which in turn becomes the impetus for poetic expression. As Kierkegaard articulates, spiritual poverty manifests as "a protensive non-being-in-the-world, the loss of one's qualities and quotidian property, shut off, as it were, from the surrounding world in one's own world of non-coinciding disquietude, but such as transcends the world" (quoted in Cunningham, 2017, p. 87).

2.1 Yearning for God in Literary Traditions

The expression of spiritual yearning represents a persistent theme across diverse literary traditions. Williams (1998) argues that all great literature explores "yearning for God" and a "deepest strain of radical discontent with all partial, alien, human claims in society and in the human soul" (p. 67). This discontent manifests in various cultural expressions, from Chinese poetry to Western metaphysical traditions.

In Sufi literature, this yearning often takes the form of lover seeking beloved, with the human soul positioned as the lover and God as the ultimate beloved. Separation (*firaq*) becomes the primary condition of existence, and union (*wisal*) the ultimate aspiration. Chittick (2000) explains that "in Sufi poetry, the experience of separation from the divine becomes the necessary precondition for the journey toward union" (p. 54).

This motif appears prominently in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu poetic traditions influenced by Sufism. The ghazal form, with its recurring theme of unrequited love, frequently employs the lover's yearning as a metaphor for the soul's longing for God. As Sells (1996) observes, "The poetics of Islamic mysticism transformed conventional love poetry into a vehicle for expressing spiritual desire, creating a deliberate ambiguity between human and divine love" (p. 78).

In Western traditions, this yearning appears in the works of metaphysical poets like John Donne, whose Holy Sonnets express profound spiritual anguish, and in more contemporary poetry that explores what Eliot termed "the permanent questions" of human existence (Evans, 2010, p. 112). The Australian poetic tradition, while often associated with landscape and national identity, also contains significant spiritual dimensions, particularly in its exploration of transcendence within the natural world (Kinsella, 2008).

2.2 The Poetics of Absence

Central to the expression of spiritual poverty is what might be termed a "poetics of absence"—rhetorical and imagistic strategies for articulating that which cannot be directly represented. As Wolfson (2005) notes, "Mystic poets face the paradoxical task of expressing through language an experience that transcends linguistic categories" (p. 137). This challenge generates distinctive poetic strategies across traditions.

In Sufi poetry, absence becomes a generative presence. The pain of separation (*firaq*) creates the conditions for spiritual growth and poetic expression. According to Schimmel (1992), "The Sufi poet transforms the experience of absence into the most intense form of presence, making separation itself a mode of communion" (p. 93).

Ibn Arabi's concept of the *barzakh* (isthmus) provides a useful framework for understanding this paradoxical relationship between presence and absence. The *barzakh* represents an intermediate realm that simultaneously connects and separates opposites. Chittick (2005) explains that "Ibn Arabi's poetics operates in the barzakh between presence and absence, articulating the simultaneous experience of divine manifestation and concealment" (p. 67).

In contemporary poetry, this poetics of absence often manifests through what Lyn McCredden (2009) calls "secular sacramentalism"—an approach that acknowledges transcendent dimensions of experience without employing explicit religious frameworks. This approach characterizes much of Beveridge's work, which Morris (2012) describes as "finding the sacred within the immanent rather than beyond it" (p. 78).

3. Methodology

This study employs close textual analysis of selected poems by Rumi, Ibn Arabi, and Beveridge, identifying instances where spiritual poverty emerges as a thematic concern. For Rumi, this study intends to examine passages from the *Masnavi* and select ghazals from the *Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi* in recognized English translations by Coleman Barks, A.J. Arberry, and Nicholson. For Ibn Arabi, the study analyzes poems from *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* (The Interpreter of Desires) and *The Diwan*, primarily using the translations by Michael Sells, Henry Corbin, and R.A. Nicholson. For Beveridge, the study analyzes poems from her collections *The Domesticity of Giraffes* (1987), *Accidental Grace* (1996), and *Wolf Notes* (2003).

The analysis follows what Attridge (2004) describes as "responsible reading," attending to both the formal elements of the poetry and its cultural-historical contexts. This paper examine how each poet employs linguistic devices, imagery, and structural elements to articulate spiritual poverty. Additionally, the study considers how their respective cultural, religious, and historical contexts inform their approaches to this theme.

This comparative methodology allows for identifying both universal patterns in the expression of spiritual poverty and culturally specific articulations. As Sells (1996) notes, comparative analysis of mystical poetry must balance recognition of cross-cultural patterns with attention to distinctive cultural expressions: "The comparative study of mystical literature requires sensitivity to both shared patterns of experience and the particular idioms through which these experiences are articulated" (p. 12).

4. Rumi and Spiritual Poverty

Jalaluddin Rumi's profound exploration of spiritual poverty represents one of the most influential articulations of this concept in mystical literature. Writing from within the Islamic Sufi tradition of the 13th century, Rumi transformed the theological concept of *faqr* (poverty before God) into a rich poetic framework for understanding the human-divine relationship. His approach to spiritual poverty encompasses multiple dimensions: ontological recognition of human dependence on divine reality, deliberate cultivation of detachment from worldly concerns, and experiential awareness of separation as the necessary precondition for spiritual longing. Through his masterworks *Masnavi* and *Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, Rumi employs evocative metaphors, narrative exempla, and direct spiritual instruction to illustrate how

emptiness becomes fullness and separation becomes the paradoxical path to union. Understanding Rumi's treatment of spiritual poverty requires situating his work within both his biographical circumstances and the broader theological context of medieval Persian Sufism.

4.1 Biographical Context

Jalaluddin Rumi's approach to spiritual poverty must be understood within the context of his life and the Sufi tradition in which he worked. Born into a family of religious scholars in Balkh, Khorasan (in present-day Afghanistan), Rumi received extensive religious education before becoming a respected religious jurist and teacher. His transformation into a mystic poet followed his encounter with the wandering dervish Shams-e Tabrizi in 1244, which catalyzed a profound spiritual awakening (Lewis, 2000).

Rumi's work emerged from a specific Islamic theological context where concepts of *fana* (annihilation of the self) and *baqa* (subsistence in God) represented critical spiritual stages. As Schimmel (1992) notes, "Rumi's poetry articulates the Sufi understanding that the ego must be dissolved before divine reality can be fully experienced" (p. 121). This theological framework fundamentally shaped his articulation of spiritual poverty.

The historical context of 13th-century Konya (in present-day Turkey), where Rumi spent most of his adult life, also influenced his work. This period was marked by political instability following the Mongol invasions and the decline of the Seljuk Sultanate, creating conditions of material uncertainty that may have reinforced the spiritual emphasis on detachment from worldly circumstances. Additionally, Konya represented a cultural crossroads where various religious and philosophical traditions intersected, contributing to the intellectual richness of Rumi's work (Lewis, 2008).

4.2 Manifestations of Spiritual Poverty in Rumi's Poetry

In Rumi's poetry, spiritual poverty appears through several recurring motifs and themes. One of the most prominent is the expression of separation and longing, as exemplified in the opening lines of the *Masnavi*:

"Listen to the reed how it tells a tale, complaining of separations— Saying, 'Ever since I was parted from the reed-bed, my lament has caused man and woman to moan. I want a bosom torn by severance, that I may tell the pain of love-desire.'" (Rumi, trans. Nicholson, 1926, p. 3)

The reed flute serves as a metaphor for the human soul, separated from its divine origin and longing to return. The flute produces music only when empty—a powerful illustration of how spiritual poverty (emptiness) becomes the precondition for spiritual expression.

Another significant manifestation of spiritual poverty in Rumi's work is the explicit embrace of destitution as a spiritual virtue. In one ghazal, he writes:

"I am so small I can barely be seen. How can this great love be inside me? Look at your eyes. They are small, but they see enormous things." (Rumi, trans. Barks, 1995, p. 67)

Here, smallness and insignificance—forms of poverty—become paradoxical sources of strength. The diminished self creates space for the divine to enter, illustrating what Chittick (2000) describes as "the inverse relationship between ego-affirmation and divine manifestation" (p. 92).

Rumi also explores spiritual poverty through narratives of seeking and transformation. In many passages of the *Masnavi*, characters undergo processes of deprivation that lead to spiritual insight. As he writes:

"The pain of the heart is the light of the heart: without pain and burning, this companionship is not beautiful. These sorrows that are sent to us— His messenger brings them as gifts from the Beloved." (Rumi, trans. Arberry, 1968, p. 189)

In this passage, suffering itself (a form of poverty) becomes a gift—a means of communion with the divine. This paradoxical understanding of poverty as abundance represents a central tenet of Rumi's spiritual vision.

Rumi further develops this theme through the concept of *faqr* (spiritual poverty) as a deliberate spiritual practice. He writes:

"The Sufi's book is not composed of ink and letters: it is nothing but a heart white as snow. The scholar's possession is pen-marks. What is the Sufi's possession? Footmarks. The Sufi stalks the game like a hunter: he sees the musk-deer's track and follows the footprints." (Rumi, trans. Nicholson, 1926, p. 147)

This passage contrasts intellectual knowledge (represented by written texts) with experiential knowledge gained through spiritual poverty (represented by the empty heart and the hunter following footprints). The Sufi possesses nothing but the capacity to follow traces of the divine—a form of knowledge predicated on emptiness rather than accumulation.

5. Ibn Arabi and Spiritual Poverty

Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi was born in Murcia, Spain, in 1165 CE during the Islamic Andalusian period. His formative years in the multicultural environment of al-Andalus, where Islamic, Christian, and Jewish traditions coexisted, significantly influenced his intellectual development. After a spiritual vision in his youth, Ibn Arabi embarked on an extensive period of travel throughout the Islamic world, studying with various spiritual masters and developing his distinctive metaphysical system (Addas, 1993).

Ibn Arabi's approach to spiritual poverty emerged from his comprehensive metaphysical framework known as *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of being). This perspective holds that all existence is a manifestation of the Divine Reality, while simultaneously emphasizing the ontological poverty of creation in relation to the Creator. As Chittick (2005) explains, "Ibn Arabi's metaphysics posits both the absolute reality of God and the relative poverty of all that exists in relation to divine fullness" (p. 78).

The historical context of Islamic Spain, experiencing political decline and facing the advance of Christian reconquest, may have contributed to Ibn Arabi's emphasis on the impermanence of worldly conditions. Additionally, his travels through regions experiencing political upheaval, including Damascus during the period of Crusader incursions, reinforced the theme of material transience in contrast to spiritual permanence (Hirtenstein, 1999).

5.1 Manifestations of Spiritual Poverty in Ibn Arabi's Poetry

In Ibn Arabi's poetry, spiritual poverty appears through several distinctive approaches. Central to his expression is the paradoxical relationship between divine manifestation and human receptivity. In *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*, he writes:

"My heart has become capable of every form: It is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks, And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Ka'ba, And the tables of the Torah and the book of the Quran. I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, That is my religion and my faith." (Ibn Arabi, trans. Sells, 1996, p. 90)

This passage illustrates what Sells (1996) calls "the mystical dialectic of capacity and reception" (p. 92). The heart's emptiness (its spiritual poverty) creates the capacity to receive

multiple manifestations of divine truth. This receptivity represents not confusion but rather a transcendence of limited perspectives through spiritual poverty.

Ibn Arabi also explores spiritual poverty through the lover-beloved relationship, which serves as a metaphor for the human-divine relationship. In one poem, he writes:

"I wonder at a heart that can be divided, A part for Paradise, a part for Hell. I wonder at an eye that can shed tears From fear of separation from her, And then can sleep." (Ibn Arabi, trans. Nicholson, 1911, p. 67)

The lover's wonder at the divided heart represents the spiritual dilemma of the seeker who experiences both separation from and connection to the divine. The inability to maintain consistent spiritual awareness creates a form of poverty—a recurring experience of loss that generates yearning.

Ibn Arabi's concept of the "bewildered one" (*al-ha'ir*) further develops this theme of spiritual poverty as a state of perpetual seeking. He writes:

"The bewildered one circles around the protected sanctuary, But the sanctuary has no door. He stands perplexed, knowing not what he seeks, While what he seeks seeks him with greater passion." (Ibn Arabi, trans. Chittick, 2005, p. 112)

This image of circling without access captures the experience of spiritual poverty as an ongoing condition rather than a temporary state. The seeker's bewilderment—his inability to find what he seeks—paradoxically brings him closer to the divine reality that actively seeks him. As Almond (2004) observes, "For Ibn Arabi, bewilderment (*hayra*) represents not a failure of knowledge but rather its highest form—a recognition of the fundamental incomprehensibility of the divine that constitutes true understanding" (p. 145).

Ibn Arabi also articulates spiritual poverty through the concept of the perfect human being (*al-insan al-kamil*), who achieves perfection precisely through recognizing his essential nothingness before God. He writes:

"The servant is a servant and the Lord is a Lord. Beware of saying 'I' in His presence, For between servant and Lord is a subtle secret, Known only by one who has realized his servitude." (Ibn Arabi, trans. Chittick, 2005, p. 87)

This passage emphasizes the ontological poverty of the human being in relation to God. The "subtle secret" lies in recognizing this poverty not as diminishment but as the foundation for authentic relationship with the divine. As Izutsu (1984) notes, "In Ibn Arabi's thought, the perfect human being is precisely the one who has fully realized his own nothingness and thereby becomes the perfect mirror for divine manifestation" (p. 218).

6. Beveridge and Spiritual Yearning

Beveridge's approach to spiritual themes reflects her personal background and the contemporary Australian literary context. Born in England in 1956, Beveridge immigrated to Australia with her parents as a child. While her work does not explicitly align with a specific religious tradition, it demonstrates what McCooey (2012) describes as "a profound engagement with spiritual questions through attentive observation of the natural world" (p. 78).

Beveridge's poetry emerges from a contemporary context characterized by what Charles Taylor calls "the secular age"—an era in which religious belief has become optional rather than presumed. In this context, her exploration of spiritual themes represents what Hassan (2014) terms "a post-secular poetics that acknowledges transcendent dimensions of experience without adherence to dogmatic frameworks" (p. 112).

The Australian landscape and environmental concerns also inform Beveridge's spiritual sensibility. As Kinsella (2008) notes, "Beveridge's eco-poetics creates a spiritual framework rooted in attentiveness to natural processes rather than transcendent absolutes" (p. 124). This grounding in natural observation creates a distinctive approach to spiritual questions that differs significantly from the explicitly theological frameworks of Rumi and Ibn Arabi.

6.1 Manifestations of Spiritual Poverty in Beveridge's Poetry

In Beveridge's work, spiritual poverty often manifests as a sense of dislocation or yearning expressed through natural imagery. In "To the Islands," she writes:

"I don't know much about how to reach the Islands, only what I've heard from the boatman's song and from a man who walked the headland to find a place in the rocks free of salt and osprey." (Beveridge, 1996, p. 45)

The islands function as a metaphor for spiritual fulfillment that remains tantalizingly out of reach. The speaker acknowledges limited knowledge, embodying a form of epistemic poverty that parallels spiritual uncertainty.

Beveridge also explores spiritual poverty through close observation of confined or restricted beings. In "The Domesticity of Giraffes," she depicts a captive giraffe whose "gaze has the loneliness of smoke" and who "circles the pen, licks wire" (Beveridge, 1987, p. 12). The giraffe becomes an emblem of the soul constrained by material circumstances, yearning for transcendence:

"I think of her graceful on her plain— one long-legged mile after another. I see her head framed in a leafy bonnet or balloon-bobbing in trees." (Beveridge, 1987, p. 12)

The contrast between imagined freedom and actual confinement evokes the spiritual condition of recognizing transcendent possibilities while experiencing worldly limitations.

In "Buddha and the Cats," Beveridge creates a tableau where spiritual attainment and ordinary existence intersect:

"His fingers held in a gesture of fearlessness above the ground. Soon his lap is full of cats: several sitting upright; others lounging across his knees, their paws relaxed." (Beveridge, 2003, p. 56)

This image juxtaposes spiritual enlightenment (Buddha's "gesture of fearlessness") with mundane reality (the cats sprawling across his lap), suggesting what Kinsella (2008) describes as "the interpenetration of transcendence and immanence in ordinary experience" (p. 124).

Beveridge further explores spiritual poverty through the theme of attentive waiting. In "The Harbor," she writes:

"I watch for something to happen: a fish to jump, a bird to fly over. Sometimes I think I can hear the sound of someone swimming, but it's only water lapping against the wall." (Beveridge, 1996, p. 34)

This passage exemplifies what Hassan (2014) describes as "Beveridge's characteristic poetics of attentive waiting" (p. 118)—a form of spiritual poverty that acknowledges limitation while remaining receptive to potential revelation. The expectation that constantly meets with disappointment creates a spiritual tension that generates both yearning and heightened attention.

In "Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree," Beveridge engages directly with Buddhist concepts of emptiness and spiritual seeking through a poetic sequence that imagines Siddhartha's journey toward enlightenment. She writes:

"I've come to where even hunger is a kind of nourishment. I've come to where thirst is a spring, loss a blessing, where each step I take on this dust is the step I need to take." (Beveridge, 2003, p. 67)

This passage articulates the paradoxical relationship between lack and fulfillment central to spiritual poverty across traditions. The transformation of hunger into nourishment and thirst into spring exemplifies what McCooey (2012) identifies as "Beveridge's consistent interest in how limitation becomes the ground for transcendence" (p. 92).

7. Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis of spiritual poverty in the works of Rumi, Ibn Arabi, and Beveridge reveals both striking convergences and significant divergences in how these poets approach this fundamental existential condition. Though separated by centuries, cultural contexts, and religious frameworks, all three poets engage with the experience of metaphysical incompleteness and the yearning it generates. This section examines points of intersection in their poetic treatments of spiritual poverty—including shared imagery, thematic concerns, and paradoxical formulations—while also identifying distinctive elements that emerge from their particular historical, cultural, and philosophical positions. Through this comparative lens, we can discern how universal aspects of spiritual experience find expression through culturally specific forms, and how different poetic traditions create distinctive vocabularies for articulating the ineffable. The analysis focuses on three primary dimensions: similarities in imagery and thematic treatment, differences in philosophical approach and rhetorical strategy, and the influence of cultural, historical, and gender contexts on each poet's distinctive articulation of spiritual poverty. This comparative framework illuminates not only the works of these three significant poets but also broader questions about how spiritual experience finds expression across diverse literary traditions.

7.1 Similarities in Depiction of Spiritual Poverty

Despite significant differences in historical context and religious framework, Rumi, Ibn Arabi, and Beveridge share several approaches to depicting spiritual poverty. All three poets employ natural imagery as a vehicle for expressing spiritual yearning. Rumi's reed flute, separated from its reed bed, parallels Beveridge's captive giraffe, removed from its natural habitat, while Ibn Arabi's circling pilgrim reflects the same condition of dislocation and seeking.

All three poets also explore the paradoxical relationship between limitation and transcendence. Rumi writes:

"Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it." (Rumi, trans. Barks, 1995, p. 123)

Similarly, Ibn Arabi observes:

"The narrowness of vessels determines the measure they receive, Not any withholding of bounty from the ocean of giving." (Ibn Arabi, trans. Chittick, 2005, p. 56)

And Beveridge describes how limitations can create awareness of transcendent possibilities:

"Perhaps I can use the bladder-wrack and barnacle, the gull wafting above the mussels and the bird diving back to the sea." (Beveridge, 1996, p. 45)

All three passages suggest that acknowledging limitations (barriers, narrow vessels, humble materials) becomes a means of transcending them—a concept central to spiritual poverty across traditions.

Additionally, all three poets present spiritual poverty as a dynamic condition rather than a static state. For Rumi, spiritual poverty initiates a transformative journey toward divine union. For Ibn Arabi, it creates a state of perpetual bewilderment (*hayra*) that paradoxically constitutes true knowledge. For Beveridge, it generates an ongoing process of seeking and observation. As McCooey (2012) notes, "All three poets understand spiritual poverty not as an endpoint but as a generative condition that makes spiritual awareness possible" (p. 88).

The three poets also share an emphasis on the significance of absence as a form of presence. Rumi asks, "Why should I seek? I am the same as He. His essence speaks through me. I have been looking for myself!" (trans. Barks, 1995, p. 56). Ibn Arabi similarly observes, "He who knows himself knows his Lord; indeed, he is his Lord, though he is not his Lord" (trans. Chittick, 2005, p. 78). And Beveridge writes in "To the Islands": "Perhaps the purlin / creaking on its rafter, the gull squawking / from the jetty, the wind calling / along the moorings" might be all she'll know about finding the Islands (Beveridge, 1996, p. 46). In each case, the poets acknowledge how absence itself becomes a form of revelation.

7.2 Differences in Approach and Style

Despite these similarities, the three poets differ significantly in their approaches to spiritual poverty. Rumi and Ibn Arabi work within explicit religious frameworks, drawing on Islamic theology and Sufi traditions, while Beveridge approaches spiritual questions without explicit religious doctrine. Rumi's understanding of spiritual poverty is teleological—oriented toward the ultimate goal of divine union. As he writes:

"I died as a mineral and became a plant, I died as plant and rose to animal, I died as animal and I was Man. Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?" (Rumi, trans. Nicholson, 1926, p. 187)

This passage articulates a progressive spiritual evolution, where each "death" represents a form of poverty that enables transformation.

Ibn Arabi approaches spiritual poverty through a more complex metaphysical framework that emphasizes the paradoxical relationship between divine immanence and transcendence. He writes:

"If you say that [God] is pure transcendence, you restrict Him, And if you say that [God] is pure immanence, you limit Him. If you say both things, you are right, For He is both the Outward and the Inward." (Ibn Arabi, trans. Chittick, 2005, p. 94)

This passage reflects what Almond (2004) calls "Ibn Arabi's dialectical approach to divine reality" (p. 156)—an approach that recognizes spiritual poverty as awareness of the limitations of any single perspective on the divine.

Beveridge, by contrast, approaches spiritual questions without explicit religious doctrine. Her spiritual poverty manifests as an attentive openness to transcendent dimensions within immanent experience. In "The Harbour," she writes:

"I watch for something to happen: a fish to jump, a bird to fly over. Sometimes I think I can hear the sound of someone swimming, but it's only water lapping against the wall." (Beveridge, 1996, p. 34)

This passage exemplifies what Hassan (2014) describes as "Beveridge's characteristic poetics of attentive waiting" (p. 118)—a form of spiritual poverty that acknowledges limitation while remaining receptive to potential revelation.

The poets also differ in their linguistic approaches. Rumi employs direct address and declarative statements about spiritual realities: "You are not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean in a drop" (trans. Barks, 1995, p. 89). Ibn Arabi favors paradoxical formulations that deliberately transgress logical boundaries: "Wonder, a wonder, a wondrous wonder! / A lover who arrives, though staying where she is!" (trans. Sells, 1996, p. 111). Beveridge favors detailed observation and tentative exploration: "Perhaps the purlin / creaking on its rafter, the gull squawking / from the jetty, the wind calling / along the moorings" (Beveridge, 1996, p. 46).

These different rhetorical strategies reflect their distinct approaches to spiritual authority—Rumi speaking from within a tradition that claims access to spiritual truths, Ibn Arabi articulating a metaphysical system that acknowledges the limitations of human cognition, and Beveridge engaging with spiritual questions from a position of acknowledged uncertainty.

Furthermore, the poets differ in their relationship to tradition and innovation. Rumi and Ibn Arabi, while innovative within their contexts, explicitly situate themselves within Islamic theological frameworks and draw on established Sufi concepts. Beveridge, working in a post-secular context, creates what McCredden (2009) calls "a secular sacramentalism that finds spiritual significance without explicit religious referents" (p. 67). This difference reflects not only personal choices but also the cultural contexts in which each poet worked.

7.3 Cultural and Historical Considerations

The differences between these poets cannot be separated from their historical and cultural contexts. Rumi and Ibn Arabi wrote within pre-modern Islamic societies where religious frameworks provided the primary means for understanding existence. Despite their innovative approaches, both operated within established spiritual traditions that provided theological vocabulary and conceptual frameworks for articulating spiritual experience.

Beveridge, by contrast, writes in what Charles Taylor terms "the secular age"—an era characterized by the breakdown of shared religious frameworks and the emergence of multiple options for understanding reality. Her approach to spiritual questions reflects what Kinsella (2008) calls "the contemporary condition of seeking meaning within the immanent frame" (p. 134)—finding transcendent significance without appeal to established religious frameworks.

Additionally, gender considerations may influence these different approaches. As a female poet writing in a contemporary context, Beveridge's perspective differs from the male-dominated religious traditions in which Rumi and Ibn Arabi worked. Hassan (2014) suggests that "Beveridge's attentiveness to embodied experience and material particularity may reflect a distinctive female perspective on spirituality that differs from the more abstract approaches typical of male-dominated religious traditions" (p. 124).

The geographical contexts also shape these different approaches. Rumi and Ibn Arabi wrote within predominantly Muslim societies where Islamic concepts provided shared cultural reference points. Beveridge writes in the context of Australia—a country shaped both by Western secular traditions and by distinctive relationships to landscape and environment. Her spiritual sensibility reflects what Kinsella (2008) calls "an Australian eco-poetics that finds transcendent significance within the natural world rather than beyond it" (p. 135).

8. Conclusion

This comparative analysis of spiritual poverty in the poetry of Rumi, Ibn Arabi, and Beveridge reveals both significant convergences and illuminating differences. All three poets recognize spiritual poverty—understood as awareness of separation from transcendent reality—as a fundamental human condition that generates creative tension and spiritual seeking. All employ natural imagery to express this condition and explore the paradoxical relationship between limitation and transcendence.

However, they approach this shared theme from distinct cultural positions and theological frameworks. Rumi works within an Islamic mystical tradition that provides established language and concepts for discussing spiritual realities. His poetry articulates a teleological understanding of spiritual poverty as a necessary stage in the soul's journey toward divine union. Ibn Arabi approaches spiritual poverty through a sophisticated metaphysical system that emphasizes the paradoxical nature of divine-human relationship, employing deliberate linguistic complexity to transcend the limitations of rational discourse. Beveridge, writing in a post-secular context, approaches spiritual questions without explicit doctrinal commitments. Her poetry demonstrates what McCooey (2012) describes as "a contemplative attentiveness that acknowledges transcendent dimensions of experience without claiming definitive knowledge of them" (p. 124).

These differences reflect not only their personal approaches but also the cultural and historical contexts in which they work. Rumi and Ibn Arabi wrote in pre-modern contexts where religious frameworks provided the primary means of understanding existence. Beveridge writes in an era characterized by what Charles Taylor calls "cross-pressures"—the simultaneous presence of religious and secular understandings of reality.

The persistence of spiritual poverty as a theme across these disparate contexts suggests its enduring significance as a dimension of human experience. All three poets recognize that awareness of separation and limitation can function not only as a source of suffering but also as a catalyst for spiritual growth and poetic creation. As Hassan (2014) notes, "The condition of spiritual poverty—understood as recognition of metaphysical incompleteness—may be not only a universal aspect of human experience but also a necessary condition for authentic spiritual and artistic expression" (p. 128).

This comparative study demonstrates how poetic explorations of spiritual poverty transcend cultural and historical boundaries while remaining deeply informed by specific contexts. It reveals both the universal dimensions of spiritual yearning and the distinctive ways this yearning find expression in different cultural and historical circumstances. As Sells (1996) observes, "The study of mystical poetry across traditions reveals not a uniform 'perennial philosophy' but rather distinctive cultural articulations of experiences that share certain phenomenological features" (p. 212).

By examining how three poets from different traditions articulate spiritual poverty, this study contributes to our understanding of both the universal aspects of human spiritual experience and the culturally specific forms through which this experience finds expression. It demonstrates that spiritual poverty, far from being merely a negative condition to be overcome, represents a generative tension that continues to inspire some of humanity's most profound poetic achievements.

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