

UNVEILING THE GARDEN OF LOVE:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MYSTICAL SYMBOLISM IN
LAYLA MAJNUN AND GITAGOVINDA

by

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Prologue

*There is no love
but for the First Friend
whose naked glory you hide
under hundreds of veils*

- Annemarie Schimmel, *Nightingales Under the Snow*, 1997 -

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ABSTRACT

In this comparative study of two masterpieces of literary expression, attention is directed at unveiling similarities and differences of mystical significance between Nizami's *The Story of Layla Majnun* and *Love Song of the Dark Lord*, Jeyadeva's *Gitagovinda*. The study is conducted on theoretical constructs of Hermeneutics, guided by traditional norms and conventions of Persian and Sanskrit literary expression, and informed by the Traditionalist perspective of religion. These considerations represent the platform for the understanding and interpretation of elements or phenomena in the texts as symbolic expressions of the Sufi and Bhakti mystico-religious traditions.

At the level of literary expression, the study examines and compares the saga of love between two human characters in the Persian work, Layla and Majnun and between a human and divine figura in the Indian work, Radha and Krishna. Beyond this level, an esoteric perspective of Love is considered. This perspective contends that the depiction of human love is symbolic, allegoric, anagogic, and ontological. Accordingly the parallels between the texts are considered in terms of the love between the human soul and God, or the mystical connection.

In the attempt to unveil the mystical symbolism of "The Garden of Love" in the individual texts, the material or data is divided along three major themes, representing cyclical or returning stages of the spiritual Quest. The Quest refers to a process of transformation of the lover, from the human, worldly and materialistic, to the divine, celestial and spiritual modes of existence, involving much trial and tribulation. In this context, the first stage or theme is of love in union which also hints at impending separation. Next, is the stage of love in separation which involves pain and suffering, as well as pleasure and joy. The final stage, that of love in reunion, represents the end of the journey or the ultimate spiritual station, from which there is no return.

The study finds not only a wealth of common elements, but also shared truths and experiences of the two great mystico-religious traditions represented by the texts in question. Despite the fact that they originate from two apparently diverse cultural and geographical milieus, and employ apparently different forms of expression, there is a relatively high level of equivalence and correspondence at the level of literary phenomena, as well as in the spiritual dimensions conveyed. Thus, the study of phenomenal elements that are different leads to noumenal correspondences and parallels. Ultimately, the works attest to the dictum, Many Paths, One Goal, an idea expressed in almost identical words by Rumi as "The roads are different, the goal is one" and by Krishna as "All paths lead to me."

MENYINGKAP TIRAI TAMAN CINTA: KAJIAN PERBANDINGAN SIMBOLISME MISTIK DALAM LAYLA MAJNUN DAN GITAGOVINDA

ABSTRAK

Kajian perbandingan ini bertujuan menyingkap persamaan dan perbedaan bersifat mistik di antara dua ekspresi sastra yang unggul, yaitu *The Story of Layla Majnun* oleh Nizami, dan *Love Song of the Dark Lord, Jeyadeva's Gitagovinda*. Kajian dilakukan berdasarkan pendekatan Hermeneutik, berpandu kepada norma dan konvensi sastra tradisional Parsi dan Sanskrit, dan merujuk kepada persepektif Traditionalisme terhadap agama. Asas-asas tersebut merupakan landasan kepada kefahaman dan tafsiran elemen atau fenomena dalam teks sebagai ekspresi simbolik tradisi mistik-agama Sufi dan Bhakti.

Pada peringkat ekspresi sastra, kajian meneliti dan membandingkan kisah cinta dua watak manusia dalam karya Parsi iaitu Layla dan Majnun, dan antara watak manusia dan figura Tuhan iaitu Radha dan Krishna dalam karya India. Pada peringkat dalaman, perspektif esoterik tentang Cinta di pertimbangkan. Perspektif ini menyarankan bahawa penampilan cinta manusiawi sebenarnya bersifat simbolik, alegorik, anagogik dan ontologik. Justeru itu, keselarian antara dua teks dikaji dalam pengertian cinta jiwa manusia dengan Tuhan, atau sebagai ekspresi perhubungan mistik.

Usaha menyingkap simbolisme mistik berkenaan "Taman Cinta" dalam masing-masing teks melibatkan tiga tema utama yang merupakan peringkat-peringkat bersifat berputar atau kembali dalam Pencarian kerohanian. Pencarian tersebut merujuk kepada proses transformasi kekasih, iaitu daripada kewujudan yang bersifat jasmani, keduniaan dan materialistik, kepada mod kewujudan ketuhanan, syurgawi dan rohani. Proses ini melibatkan banyak ujian dan dugaan. Namun, peringkat pertama merupakan penyatuan yang juga membayangkan perpisahan. Peringkat seterusnya, iaitu cinta dalam perpisahan melibatkan kedua-dua aspek pengalaman cinta, iaitu pahit dan manis. Peringkat terakhir merupakan kesudahan perjalanan, atau perhentian kerohanian unggul yang tidak ada kembalinya.

Kajian mendapati banyak elemen yang sama bukan hanya dari segi ekspresi kreatif, tetapi juga kebenaran dan pengalaman yang dikongsi bersama oleh kedua tradisi besar agama dan rohani yang diwakili oleh teks-teks berkenaan. Yang menarik ialah walau pun karya-karya tersebut berasal dari persekitaran yang berbeza secara nyata dari segi budaya dan tempat, dan menggunakan bentuk ekspresi yang berbeza, terdapat keselarian fenomena dari segi makna sastra dan rohani. Justeru itu, pengkajian fenomena yang memperlihatkan perbedaan telah membawa kepada keselarian yang bersifat nomena. Dengan itu teks-teks yang berkenaan membuktikan kebenaran ungkapan Banyak Jalan, Satu Tujuan, suatu idea yang disampaikan dalam kata-kata yang hampir sama oleh Rumi sebagai "Jalannya berlainan, tujuannya satu" dan oleh Krishna sebagai "Semua jalan menghala kepada Aku."

CHAPTER ONE

UNVEILING THE GARDEN OF LOVE

... whose naked glory you hide
under hundreds of veils.

- A. Schimmel -

1.1 Introduction

Man's mystical experience, which is a direct experience of the spiritual and the divine in the here and now, has been said to be a state which surpasses human understanding or description. Yet, throughout the ages, this experience has been expressed through diverse forms of sacred and traditional art. Thus art functions as a vehicle of expression of the mystical experience. In the words of Frithjof Schuon (1984):

... art ... is a projection of truth and beauty in the world of forms; it is *ipso facto* a projection of archetypes ... it means concentration; a way back to God ... The archetypes of sacred art are celestial inspirations; all other artworks draw their inspiration from the spiritual personality of the artist. The criteria for knowing the worth of a work of art are: the content of the work, its mode of expression and its technique, its style.

Of all the artistic forms of expression, Literature, specifically mystical literature, plays a central role. Just as music is the vehicle, or medium of expression for the musician, and paint the medium for the artist, so is language the medium of expression for the writer. Through this medium, mystical and metaphysical poets and writers have produced abundant and eloquent works extolling their spiritual experiences.

In most religious traditions the mystical experience is established as ineffable and inconceivable, precisely because it is a transcendental, other-worldly, and extra-ordinary experience. That being the case, the question usually posed is: how do words of an

ordinary, human language capture and convey an extra-ordinary, transcendental experience? The answer, as attested to by all major religious and literary traditions, has been by recourse to the language of symbolism.¹ Humanity uses symbols as a concrete or perceptible form to express the experience of abstract, imperceptible, spiritual and divine realities. As has been eloquently stated by Schuon:²

In order to bring the realm of the spiritual and the divine within the range of perception, humanity ... loses the immediate union with the divine and the immediate vision of the spiritual. Then it tries to embody in a tangible or otherwise perceptible form, to materialise what is intangible, and imperceptible. It makes symbols ... and sees in them and through them the spiritual and divine substance that has no likeness and could not otherwise be seen.

At the most heightened state of consciousness, the mystical experience has been perceived as an encounter between two intangible entities, namely, the human soul and Divine Reality. In order to express the abstract encounter therefore, the concrete has to be expediently employed. In this context, the paradigms of love between man and woman, in all its myriad aspects, have most often been employed by mystics as a means to express this experience. In portraying this earthly love, however, the concern is usually not with the actual persons figured, but with them as archetypes, and as symbols of divine realities.

It is also of significance that symbolic expression generally focuses on the *process towards union*, rather than on union per se, with the Divine. In diverse mystical traditions this ontological experience has been given emphasis, because mystical union is arrived at only through stages of a long and arduous path.³ This path, or journey, is expressed by the portrayal of human love-in-separation, in which the lovers are "torn" from each other. The separation is characterised by a searching, or quest and a journey

¹ In a general sense, symbolism may take the form of images, allegories, parables, metaphors or figurative expressions. It can also be in the form of characters, types, archetypes, prototypes or mythical figures.

² Quoted in Ananda Coomaraswamy, 1981, p. 252.

³ s.v. "Mystical Union," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1993.

back to each other, fraught with pain, agony, and intense longing. This state of affairs symbolises the consciousness of the human soul of its separation from God, and a yearning to return to its Source. This yearning has been hauntingly portrayed in "The Reed," one of the most beautiful Sufi poems ever written. It conveys the plaintive cry of the reed (symbolising the human soul) being torn from its original place (symbolising the Divine). The great Persian mystic of the 13th century, Jalalu'l-Din Rumi, wrote:⁴

Harken to this Reed forlorn,
Breathing, ever since 'twas torn
From its rushy bed, a strain
Of impassioned love and pain.
...
'Tis the flame of love that fired me,
'Tis the wine of love inspired me.
Wouldst thou learn how lovers bleed
Harken, harken to the Reed!

In the context of this process towards re-union, two great and dominant traditions, namely the Islamic-Sufi tradition of Persia, and the Hindu-Bhakti tradition of India, have produced literary works of singular beauty and merit in the form of prose, as well as poetry. In particular, two classic poems, Nizami's *Layla Majnun*,⁵ and Jeyadeva's *Gitagovinda*,⁶ have gained widespread acclaim and canonicity within their individual literary traditions, as well as sanctity in their originating mystico-religious traditions.

Accordingly, there have been literary studies and enquiries carried out on both *Layla Majnun* (henceforth *Layla*) and *Gitagovinda* (henceforth *Govinda*). However, it is the researcher's opinion that the profundity of these outstanding works cannot be sufficiently appreciated unless the literary elements therein are fully considered and explained in relation to the mystical content. In particular, the importance among mystics of symbols as the means for expressing the ultimate meaning of poems, renders

⁴ Quoted in Nader Ardalan, 1998, p.106.

⁵ *The Story of Layla & Majnun*, translated by Rudolf Gelpke, Zia Inayat Khan and Omid Safi. Revised ed., (New Lebanon, New York: Omega Publications), 1997.

⁶ *The Gitagovinda of Jayadeva: Love Song of the Dark Lord*. Translated by Barbara Stoller Miller. UNESCO Collection of Representative Works. Indian Series (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass), 1984.

it worthwhile to investigate the literary elements for their underlying mystical meanings. Apart from the literary and mystical meaning, the affinities and commonalities, and the differences and contrasts between these texts too, have not yet been considered from a comparative approach. Further, although scholars such as Toshihiko Izutsu, S.H. Nasr, and Ananda Coomaraswamy have extensively examined philosophical doctrines from a comparative point of view, no one has examined the poetry of these traditions from a comparative perspective.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The issue to be addressed in the present study is the symbolic meaning of expressions in *Layla* and *Govinda*, as representative works of two different literary and mystical traditions. Considering that symbolism is the main criterion of assessing a poem's ultimate meaning among the mystics it seems worthwhile to investigate the underlying philosophical assumptions of this poetic symbolism. In other words, the study focuses on the inward meaning of outward expressions.

Although the eminence of the individual texts in question has been expounded in literary studies and essays, to date there has not been an in-depth study in English of both *Layla* and *Govinda* from a comparative approach. Based on a casual observation of the texts in question, it appears that there are similarities, affinities and commonalities, as well as contrasts, disparities, and differences. This observation presents a challenging prospect for reconciling the manifest, literary elements, with the hidden, mystical dimensions of these elements.

At the literary level, the texts in question are acknowledged as masterpieces and as classic love stories. *Layla* is one of the best-known legends of the Middle East, of which it is said: "The two lovers of this classic tale are remembered to this day in the poems and

songs from the Caucasus to the interior of Africa, and from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean."⁷ Similarly, Jayadeva's work is repeatedly referred to as "the immortal lyrics of Gitagovinda."⁸

Most of the available literature is with regard to the conceptions of human love conveyed in these texts. There have been many retellings of the tragic love story of *Layla*. In several versions and adaptations in the West, in the neighbouring sub-continent of India, and even in popular Persian literature, it has frequently been regarded as a narrative of two ill-fated lovers separated by feuding families, much in the variety of Shakespeare's classic love story, *Romeo & Juliet*.⁹ Similarly, *Govinda* has often, even among Indian scholars themselves, been relegated to an account of "the illicit and rapturous love of Radha for Krishna," and perceived merely as an aesthetic rendition of an erotic Indian tale.

If there is a need for in-depth inquiry into the dimensions of love in the texts, there is a singular lack of comparative study of the two texts in particular. As individual love stories, the **extent** of literary parallels between them remains undiscovered. Consequently, the potential for mutual understanding and enrichment between the two literary traditions has been missed. In this context, it is possible that a comparative and systematic study of literary elements may reveal the extent of parallels between the two texts.

Beyond the extent of apparent literary parallels between *Layla* and *Govinda*, the real **nature** of the parallels between the two texts in question is also unknown. In other words, it has not been ascertained whether or not the manifest similarities and

⁷ <http://www.omegapub.com/nizami.html> (17 September, 2001).

⁸ In "Kavi Jayadeva's Gitagovinda," songs by Hemanta Mukherjee et.al, music by Sunil Satpathy. Recording by Sight and Sound Pvt Ltd., Bombay, 1989.

⁹ Adaptations also exist as films, especially in India, the most famous being "Heer Ranjha," and "Heera Panna," depicted as Indian characters, and the Punjabi "Sohni Mehwal," depicted as Middle Eastern, or Moghul, characters.

differences exist only at a superficial, physical, or outward plane, or if there is a deeper, mystical, or inward affinity between them. Therefore, there is a possibility that the literary elements in the texts of two different traditions veil a further dimension. This possibility arises from the idea that there are enduring and universal principles of likeness and correspondence among the world's mystical traditions that come to light when they are closely examined. In this connection, Huston Smith has posed a challenging question about the ubiquity of likenesses of this nature, in a powerful aquatic metaphor. He asks: "What precisely, ... is this subterranean water table which, pressurised by truth ... gushes forth wherever and whenever the earth is scratched?" (2001:140). This question has been considered in relation to different texts from different religious traditions, and it applies equally to the Persian-Islamic-Sufi, and the Indian-Hindu-Bhakti, traditions respectively. Thus, an inquiry into comparable concepts in the texts of *Layla* and *Govinda* may well be able to address the question.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

Within the context of the problem stated above, this comparative study on *Layla* and *Govinda* has two interconnected objectives.

The first and principal objective of the study is to ascertain the extent of equivalence in literary expression between the texts in question. For this purpose, the study will compare and contrast the symbols pertaining to love. These literary elements will be examined for similarities and differences in relation to underlying socio-cultural norms, and conventions of the Persian and Indian literary traditions.

The second objective is to establish the degree of correspondence in mystical expression relating to the individual authors' expressions of the spiritual and divine realities. To this end it will attempt to unveil and reveal the spiritual dimensions of the

symbols of love in the two texts in a comparative manner, and in consonance with the respective mystical traditions. Specifically, it will compare *Layla* in light of the underlying spiritual principles of the Islamic-Sufi tradition of Persia, and *Govinda*, of the Hindu-Bhakti tradition of India. It is necessary to point out that a caveat is attached to the understanding of the symbolism in the texts. It is acknowledged that differences arise between the commonly accepted opinion held by the majority or the masses, and the spiritual significance which the mystics or "the elect" typically abide by. That is, there is generally a difference in principles of interpreting the "letter" (or literal meaning) of a text or an expression, and the "spirit" (or essential meaning) of a text or an expression. In each of the religious traditions, the former is the "mainstream" position, and the latter, the "alternative" position. It is the latter position and understanding which is held by the esoterics and mystics, and which forms the basis of interpretation of both the poems in this thesis.

It is hoped that the juxtaposition of the texts with regard to the manifest literary forms, or substance, and subsequently the hidden mystical contents, or essence, will enable the study to ascertain whether the texts, and by extension the individual mystico-religious traditions, are expressing shared truths and experiences. Taken together, the above objectives hope to reveal a wealth of common elements of the two great traditions exemplified by *Layla* and *Govinda*.

1.4 Scope and Limitations

The comparative study of *Layla* and *Govinda* is based on English translations of the texts in question. Their particulars are tabulated below:

	<i>Layla</i>	<i>Govinda</i>
ORIGINAL WORKS	<i>Leyli o Majnun</i> (one out of five <i>mathnawi</i> in a collection entitled <i>Panj Ganj (Five Treasures)</i>)	<i>Gitagovinda</i> (in the tradition of performed recitation (<i>ragakavya</i>))
LANGUAGE	Persian	Sanskrit
AUTHOR	Nizami (pen-name for Abu Muhammad Ilyas ibn Usuf ibn Zaki Mu'ayyad), mystic poet of Ganjar, Azerbaijan, Persia (Iran)	Goswami Jayadeva, wandering seer-poet of Kindubilva, Bengal, India.
PERIOD OF PRODUCTION	Latter half of 12th century	Latter half of 12th century
TRANSLATED WORKS	<i>The Story of Layla And Majnun</i>	<i>Love Song of the Dark Lord: The Gitagovinda of Jayadeva</i>
TRANSLATORS	Rudolf Gelpke, Translator and Editor. Final chapter translated by Zia Inayat Khan and Omid Safi.	Barbara Stoller Miller, Editor and Translator.
LANGUAGE	English	English
PUBLICATION	New Lebanon, New York: Omega Publications, 1997.	New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977

Figure 1.1: Publication Background of Texts Being Studied

An important consideration with regard to scope is that, in this study the literary interest in the texts is of paramount interest, although the spiritual and philosophical interests are considered as an integral part of the works in question. That is to say, the focus of study will primarily be on literary mechanisms and devices that are ingeniously and intentionally utilised by the authors to convey realities, experiences, notions, and viewpoints. Thus the present study picks the "blossoms" from the gardens of love in *Layla* and *Govinda* to behold their resplendence, and to admire their fragrance.

The examination of the similarities and differences between *Layla* and *Govinda* is circumscribed significantly by two foundational and interrelated issues, that of language and genre. With regard to the issue of language, in both cases, critical acclaim of the translations has admittedly been high. However, the reliance, by necessity, entirely on the English translations, has diminished a full appreciation of the complexities of the works. In fact, some scholars maintain that the texts cannot be studied in their

translated versions for the intended purposes. This is because, in medieval court poetry of both the Persian and Sanskrit literary traditions,¹⁰ such special intricacies as the ambiguity of language, deliberate ambivalence in expression, emphasis on connotative and suggestive meanings of vocabulary, free use of imagery, frequent literary, scriptural and other references, and allusions intrinsic to aesthetic and devotional expressions, are all highly effective forms and devices abundantly employed in the original languages. The general consensus of opinion is that translation is inadequate and unsuited for transforming these features into the English language. Furthermore, a high degree of interpretation is not only unavoidable, but incumbent upon, the translator in the process of transforming one language into another. In the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer, "every translation is at the same time an interpretation" (1989:346).

As is widely acknowledged, and as will be explained in the section on the Methodology of this study, the process of interpretation is a highly complex, rigorous process that requires active participation on many levels of informed awareness, specific attitudes and modes of approach. The translated English versions of the texts being used as basis for the present study therefore necessitate a disclaimer.

As to the issue of genre, there are also limitations. In the case of *Layla*, the translation has been rendered as a novel in narrative prose, whereas the original is "a tragic poem in the tradition of courtly love" (Levy 1969:83). In Persian literature, as is the case for the original *Layla*, poems are always rhymed, within the principal verse form of the *mathnawi*. The *mathnawi* is particularly employed for heroic, romantic, or narrative verse, whereas the *ghazal* (the Western genres being the ode or the lyric)

¹⁰ The "cross-fertilisation," and thereby the resemblance, between these two literary traditions is not unexpected considering their shared linguistic roots in the Indo-Iranian and Indo-European languages. This factor has been discussed by many scholars. On the local scene, it is dealt with at length in several works of Muhammad Bukhari Lubis. See Bukhari Lubis, 1990.

which appears in parts of *Layla*, is a comparatively short poem, usually amorous or mystical and varying from four to sixteen couplets, all on one rhyme.

As for *Govinda*, although the English version is preserved in the original style of a poem of twelve cantos containing twenty-four songs, similarly, it has inevitably lost out on the rhyming patterns. Besides, as stated by the translator herself, "The *Gitagovinda*, ... has a wealth of meaning embedded in structurally intricate forms and concepts drawn from various levels of Indian literary tradition..." (1984:7). She also confirms that "as the relations among words are fluid, any translation of *Gitagovinda* is necessarily tentative" (ibid:43). Even in terms of mode, the original poem is a particular type of drama, the *ragakavya* which is customarily performed (acted, sung, danced, etc.), replete with "ideals, aims, subtleties, constructions, standards ... so utterly different from those of English poetry" (1978:234).

It is also held that the greatest charm of Persian and Sanskrit poetry lies in its musical effects. Just as the integration of sensual lyrics and plaintive cadences of the *ghazal*, situated within the original *mathnawi* complements and enhances the musical effect of the original *Layla*, similarly, the original *Govinda*, written in the form of devotional songs (*bhajan*), and set in various musical modes (*raga*) and beats (*taal*), evokes a certain emotion and response in its practitioner/audience, during a performance.¹¹ Consequently, the incorporation and transmission of these elements in the English translation have been a practical difficulty. Furthermore, this limitation is a particular shortcoming because it is related to the acoustic or auditory effects of the original texts, an element that is critical to the study of literary devices.

For the practicalities cited above, it may be that full justice cannot be done to the original texts. The endeavour is nevertheless undertaken on the following premises.

¹¹ For example, the presentation of *bhajans* in "Kavi Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda*," *ibid*.

Firstly, it is on the understanding that the translations represent "secondary" sources. Secondly, that the study be confined to the contents (the written form of the subject matter) of the translated texts as observable evidence of literary elements. Finally, on the premise of the sub-discipline of Comparative Literature, that without translated texts, in this case constituting authoritative translations, the world's greatest works would be unattainable and inaccessible between one culture to another.

This research is by no means a comprehensive account of all the paradigms of love in the texts in question, and nor is it necessary to be so. Consequently, the analysis of expressions is not exhaustive. Rather, single, and in some cases several, representative examples of expressions of a particular notion, concept, element, or aspect of love will be interpreted and explicated.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The present study anticipates its primary contribution to be towards a better understanding of the affinities in literary elements and subject matter of these two works, as well as an enhanced awareness of their perennial significance. It is hoped that the comparative analysis will unveil some fundamental and essential similarities of these two major works. The ramifications of this discovery may make a small contribution in edifying commonalities that lie beyond the surface of apparently distinct, and even contradictory, traditions. In view of this, the study expects to demonstrate in a limited manner, certain parallels in the mystical traditions of Islamic Sufism of Persia and Hindu Bhaktism of India.

Corollary to the above, this study also hopes to supplement the limited corpus of comparative studies available in English on these two mystical texts. As most extant studies are limited by language, i.e. Arabic or Hindi, and thereby by readership, i.e. to

the Middle Eastern or Arabic-literate readers and to the sub-continent of India, this study aims to fill a niche in inquiries conducted in English.

Finally, the study hopes to promote greater awareness of, and sustain interest in, the common wealth and universality of the spiritual and perennial dimension in man's existence. In the context of ever-widening gulfs in the relationship between cultures of the world, and contemporary emphasis of secularism and material gains, such awareness is viewed as essential to mutual appreciation, harmony and acceptance.

1.6 Review of Related Literature

As the present study spans several broad areas such as the literary, the philosophical and the mystical disciplines, three main inter-related and overlapping areas have been identified as related literature that is relevant. Firstly, that of specific textual studies, critical analyses and comparisons of *Layla* and *Govinda*, secondly, the comparison of the nature, aesthetics, and poetics of traditional Persian and Sanskrit literary expression in general, and thirdly, studies of the metaphysical aspects of Sufism and Bhaktism, including writings on the interpretation of spiritual and traditional symbols.

With reference to the first area of relevance, as far as the researcher has been able to determine through extensive review of previous works, as well as by discussion with scholars in institutions of higher learning in Malaysia, India, the United Kingdom, and Canada, no comparative analysis of this particular pair of texts has yet been carried out in English. Only one source, which mentions in passing both *Layla* and *Govinda* in a comparative context was identified. The author, David C. Scott, in an essay entitled "Radha in the Erotic Play of the Universe," discusses ways in which the divine-human

inter-relationship is symbolised in the Bhakti tradition, and possible affinities with the Christian tradition. In an endnote to his essay, Scott observes that:¹²

In a remarkable coincidence, three of the world's best-known works of romantic love which occupy pivotal positions in their respective cultures - Beroul's *Tristan and Isolde* in Europe, Nizami's *Layla and Majnun* in the Islamic world, and Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda* in India - were all produced at roughly the same time, in the twelfth century CE. Whether this represents happenstance, coincidence, or springs from sociohistorical trends coalescing across the globe is beyond our present scope. However, it is striking that the poetry of passion should predate and possibly prefigure important cultural-historical changes in Europe, India and West Asia. It is as if the unfolding discovery of each other portrayed in the love story sheds light on what is fundamental to the human spirit.

Being tentative and exploratory in nature, however, Scott's essay does not attempt to determine whether the commonalities are in fact a "remarkable coincidence," "happenstance," or in fact, "fundamental to the human spirit."

Also of a comparative nature, although indirectly so, is an illuminating interpretation of the classic Sufi poem, *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, by Sri Paramahansa Yogananda. Yogananda's explication, entitled *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam: A Spiritual Interpretation*,¹³ is relevant to the present study in that firstly, it reveals the mystical essence of Khayyam's masterpiece, and secondly, it represents a Hindu mystic's sensitive insight into a Sufi poem. Thus it is considered a valuable model in bringing to light the beauty and deeper truths behind the figurative expressions in the poem. A contemporary study, *Devotional Poetics & the Indian Sublime* by Vijay Mishra,¹⁴ is an important work which compares European theories of the sublime in comparison with that of a non-Western one, namely the Hindu Brahman. Using a wide range of central texts (including the *Gitagovinda*) of the Hindu religious and literary traditions as basis for his analysis, Mishra propounds the theory of the sublime in

¹² http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/researchd.dll/showarticle?item_id=146 (18 September 2001).

¹³ Sri Paramahansa Yogananda, 1997. Yogananda is world-renowned for his work, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, and widely revered as one of India's great saints of the twentieth century.

¹⁴ Vijay Mishra, 1998.

confronting the fundamental problem of how a devotee establishes a relationship with an attributeless God.

Literary studies in English specifically on either of the individual texts are relatively limited in terms of depth, as well as in number. In the case of *Govinda*, a sole major work from the West has been identified. Lee Seigel's *Sacred And Profane Dimensions of Love In Indian Traditions as Exemplified In The Gitagovinda Of Jayadeva*, originating as an academic thesis, was published under the prestigious South Asian Studies Series of the Oxford University Press. Seigel's work is a comprehensive exploration of the conceptions of love as a universal theme, examined from both the secular and the spiritual aspects. It also deals with archetypal themes as patterns in literature, and their symbolic and allegoric implications.

From within the Indian tradition, Kapila Vatsyayan is generally acknowledged in India and abroad as an authority of Sanskrit, and scholar of *Govinda*, on which she has authored many definitive monographs. One of the most current of her contributions in this regard is a substantial multimedia package, completed in 1998.¹⁵ Besides presenting and explaining fundamental concepts of traditional Indian art, Vatsyayan provides valuable elucidations on selected verses of *Govinda*. She points out the author's ingenuity in incorporating artistic elements like music, song, dance, painting, and recitation, into *Govinda* to arouse audience emotion and participation in the mood of devotional passion (*madhura bhava*) of a performance. Also worthy of mention is the contribution of Suniti Kumar Chatterji, who has been described as "the doyen of Sanskrit scholarship."¹⁶ *Makers of Indian Literature: Jayadeva* is a series of essays in which Chatterji ventures to reconcile extreme opinions regarding *Govinda*, on the one

¹⁵ See "The Gita Govinda Project." <http://ignca.nic.in/gita.htm> (20 August 2001).

¹⁶ See publisher's remarks on blurb of Suniti Kumar Chatterji's *Makers of Indian Literature: Jayadeva* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi), 1981. Chatterji was the late National Professor of India in Humanities and President of the Sahitya Akademi.

hand its "frank eroticism" and on the other, its "status of a religious work" (ibid). This volume is an important addition to the literature on Jayadeva and *Govinda*.

Complementing the foregoing titles are a number of articles, commentaries, and guides on *Govinda*. Miller's *Love Song of the Dark Lord: The Gitagovinda of Jayadeva*, acknowledged as one of the most authoritative among English translations, is accompanied by criticism and commentaries by the translator herself.¹⁷ These explain the contents of the creative work itself, as well as provide edifying notes on technical aspects like poetic structure and language, information on the milieu of Jayadeva and the Sanskrit poem, and the religious/symbolic ferments within which the characters of Krishna and Radha are inscribed.

An interesting comparison is made by John B. Alphonso-Karkala in his essay, "The Theme of Love and the Use of Poetic Imagery in the *Song of Songs* and *Gita Govinda*."¹⁸ The essay is primarily a literary approach to the treatment of love in the abovementioned texts. Understandably, although he does indicate its "perceptions of Reality through existential body-apparatus" in *Govinda* (1979:50), Karkala does not develop the idea in depth within the confines of an essay.

Related literature in English that is relevant to the text of *Layla* is scarce. No full-length textual study in English on this work has been identified, although there are several essays and commentaries on it. Gelpke's explanation in the "Introduction" to his translation is useful to the understanding of the narrative and poetic elements of the work. Of relevance, though indirectly, is a comprehensive work by Michael W. Dols entitled *Majnun: The Madman in Medieval Islamic Society*.¹⁹ Dols' book, which has

¹⁷ This translation was accepted in the Indian Series of the Translations Collection of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and copyrighted to Columbia University Press in 1977, under the Translations From The Oriental Classics series. Miller has lived and travelled widely throughout the Indian subcontinent to study Sanskrit and Indian music and art.

¹⁸ John B. Alphonso-Karkala, 1979.

¹⁹ Michael W. Dols, 1992.

been positively reviewed by Islamic scholars as "an impressive *tour de force* in both scope and depth," is on the theme of madness in Islamic literature generally, rather than solely on the character of Majnun.²⁰ A student guide by Paul Brians, Professor of English at Washington State University entitled "Study Guide for Nizami: Layla and Majnun," is available on his website on the Internet.²¹ This is a brief, chapter-by-chapter study guide which provides useful pointers in understanding some cultural and symbolic aspects of the narrative. However, Brians' tendency to an Eurocentric or Orientalist approach as evidenced from some of his uninformed comments, detracts from the worth of his "Study Guide."²²

Related literature on the second area of relevance, the Persian and Sanskrit literary traditions, is fairly abundant. An appropriate foundational work is *An Introduction To Persian Literature* by Reuben Levy.²³ In this work the author provides a comprehensive overview of older and traditional literary forms and conventions of Persian poetry and prose, as well as focuses on particular illustrious Persian mystics, including Nizami. Of equal importance in providing sources for the interpretation of Persian poetry, are Annemarie Schimmel's elucidation of symbols in "The Rose and the Nightingale: Persian And Turkish Mystical Poetry,"²⁴ and A.J. Arberry's *Classical Persian Literature*.²⁵

²⁰ See Paul E. Walker's "Book Review," Feb. 1997, v.36, no.3. p. 281-3. See also, Carl Petry, April-June 1997, v.11,7 no.2, p.388.

²¹ <http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/love-in-the-arts/layla.html>, and http://www.webivore.com/sites/Nizami_Study_Guide_for_Layl.html (7 October 2001).

²² Reflected in his statement as follows:

Nizami is perhaps the most famous (even immortalized in two songs by Eric Clapton: "Layla" and "I Am Yours") ... This site contains a study guide for 'Layla and Majnun' which has become the most recognizable of Nizami's five romances, *thanks to Eric Clapton's song* (emphasis mine).

²³ Reuben Levy, 1969. Levy served as Professor of Persian in the University of Cambridge. This book, the first to appear in English in the UNESCO Introductions to Asian Literatures, also constitutes an introduction to the Persian Heritage Series sponsored by the Royal Institute of Translation of Teheran and UNESCO.

²⁴ See Annemarie Schimmel, 1975, pp. 287-343.

²⁵ A.J. Arberry, 1958.

A counterpart of the above works on poetry from the Indian tradition, is *Principles of Literary Criticism in Sanskrit*,²⁶ edited by R.C. Dwivedi, an authoritative Sanskrit specialist. Most of the essays in this volume, written in English with a small portion in Hindi, deal with particular aesthetic principles, common trends, comparative studies, and philosophical considerations of Sanskrit poetics. Sisirkumar Das' *The Mad Lover: Essay on Medieval Indian Poetry*,²⁷ is a short but illuminating book explaining the poetics of religious emotion, as well as the character of Radha as a common symbol for conveying devotional ecstasy in Bhakti poetry. Equally authoritative on the topic is Edward C. Dimock's *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaisnava-Sahajiya Cult of Bengal*, which was first presented as part of a doctoral dissertation at Harvard University.²⁸ This work deals meticulously on the Bhakti tradition of the love of God, the aesthetic theory of *rasa*, and the origins of the figure of Radha.

There are numerous books and essays on mystical traditions of the world, including that of Sufism and Bhaktism, and on the meaning and interpretation of their symbols. In this connection, Javed Nurbakhsh's *Sufi Symbolism: The Nurbakhsh Encyclopedia of Sufi Terminology* is an invaluable reference,²⁹ providing detailed, informed explanations of the meaning of major symbols in Sufi literature, including those pertaining to mystical love. David Kinsley's work, *The Divine Player: A Study of Krsna Lila*,³⁰ is eminent as a comprehensive reference for interpreting Bhakti symbols in particular. Two outstanding contributions to the interpretation of sacred symbols are Rene Guenon's *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*,³¹

²⁶ R.C. Dwivedi, ed., 1969.

²⁷ Sisirkumar Das, 1989.

²⁸ Edward C. Dimock, Jr., 1991.

²⁹ Javed Nurbakhsh, 1984.

³⁰ David Kinsley, 1989.

³¹ Rene Guenon, 1995.

and the writings of Ananda C. Coomaraswamy on symbolism, assembled in *Coomaraswamy: Selected Papers - Traditional Art and Symbolism*.³²

And last but undoubtedly not least, is the "Bible" of Traditionalism, Frithjof Schuon's *The Transcendental Unity of Religions*,³³ which forms a basis for understanding the mystic expression in this study. Schuon's starting point is the acknowledgment of the fact that there are diverse religions which exclude each other. In reality, this means that all are right, not in their dogmatic or exoteric exclusivism, but in their unanimous esoteric signification, which coincides with metaphysics or intellectual intuition. In other terms, it coincides with the *philosophia perennis*. The religious, orthodox or theological perspective of this intuition is based on Divine Revelation. In fact, intellectual intuition - the "eye of the heart" - is a gift to man, but hidden under a sheet of ice, so to speak, because of the degeneration of the human species. In this context sacred art may be seen as an exteriorization of this inherent unity. Thus it may be said that the mystic-poet is a channel of projection of truth and beauty in the world of forms, and poetry is *ipso facto* a projection of archetypes. Thus art is a consecration. Schuon's words in this regard are as follows (1984:78):

... all traditional art, no matter of what kind, is the fact that in a certain sense the work is greater than the artist himself, and brings back the latter, through the mystery of artistic creation, to the proximity of his own Divine Essence.

1.7 Methodology

As has been stated, this study compares literary elements in the texts of Layla and *Govinda* to ascertain firstly, the extent of equivalence in literary expression, and secondly, the degree of correspondence in mystical expression, between the two texts. The analysis of the authors' experiences and realities as expressed in the two texts will

³² Ananda C. Coomaraswamy, 1987.

³³ Frithjof Schuon, 1984.

therefore be subjected to intra-textual interpretation and explanation, as well as inter-textual comparison. This will include both similar/parallel expressions as well as contrastive/contrary expressions, pursued at both the literary and the mystical levels of meaning.

The major, underlying principle of the present study of *Layla* and *Govinda* is the progress from the lower, to the higher level of understanding of human expression. This means that through the interpretation of the literary elements, this study aims to unveil and reveal the mystical elements in the two texts. This principle, aptly stated by Reza Shah-Kazemi in relation to the writings of Martin Lings, is especially relevant for stating our purposes. He writes that (Shah-Kazemi 1999:25):

... interpretation of the image furnishes us with a key for comprehending the realm of forms to that of the *Essence*, from the *particular* to the *Universal*, and from the *symbol* to the *Archetype* (emphasis mine).

Generally speaking, the expressions in the texts allow multiple levels of interpretation. Therefore the study will initially extract the data for comparison by identifying particular expressions from each of the two texts that demonstrate similarities as well as differences. Foregrounding the literary variations in expression in the respective texts, the study attempts to bring out the nature of textual and outward similarities and differences between them. Subsequently, it compares the esoteric, or underlying spiritual principles of the Islamic-Sufi tradition discerned from *Layla*, with that of the Hindu-Bhakti tradition evinced from *Govinda*. In this way the question of whether or not there is a significant equivalence between the texts at the literary and spiritual levels may be reliably ascertained.

Within the above context, the notion of hermeneutics, focussing specifically on the ideas developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, has been identified as the method, or approach, of enquiry. The hermeneutic approach is informed by the

Traditionalist perspective, which is primordial in its origins, but contemporary in its formulations. The ideas and perspectives of this approach is in fact intrinsic to hermeneutics, even though the Traditionalists deal mainly with traditional and spiritual principles, rather than with poetry. The key concepts and features of hermeneutics, as well as the Traditional perspective, are described in the ensuing pages.

Hermeneutics has been variously regarded as, a theory, a method, a science, and an art, of interpretation. It has been identified as the most appropriate for our purposes due to its applicability to a wide range of subjects. Particularly, it is pertinent to enquiry of an inter-disciplinary character such as the present study involving the literary and spiritual disciplines.

Hermeneutics has ancient origins. In the West, the term originated in the classical Greek tradition. The etymology of the term can be traced to Hermes, the Greek god, more familiarly known as Mercury in Latin. He is identified, among other things, as a messenger (of the god Jupiter), who transmutes olympian messages into a language understandable to the lowly mortals (Quito 1990:8). He is also known as the god of sleep, of alchemy and transformation, and of boundaries, who guides the newly dead to the underworld. "Hermeneutics" as related to interpretation derives from the term *hermeneuein* meaning "to interpret." In this context it has three senses: to interpret poetry orally, to explain, and to translate. This Greek term is closely associated with *hermeneutike mantike*, the technique of oracle interpretation, whereas poets are referred to as *hermenes ton theon*, "interpreters of the gods."³⁴ Hermeneutics has come to mean "the process of bringing a thing or situation from unintelligibility to understanding" (Palmer 1969:3). In the same context, it is associated with "revealing the hidden" (op.cit:517). For this reason, heremeneutics has been particularly applied to the

³⁴ s.v. "Hermeneutics" in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Co-edited by Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan, (Princeton: New Jersey), 1993, p. 516.

interpretation of works of divine origin, including the *Vedas* and the Qur'an. In the Hindu tradition, the counterpart of hermeneutics originates from *brahmavidya*, meaning "the supreme science."³⁵ Whereas, in the Islamic tradition, *ta'wil*, meaning "to cause to return" or to lead something back to its beginning or origin, is a legitimate form of hermeneutics in Islamic literary criticism.³⁶

Hermeneutics has re-emerged as an important discipline in the human sciences, particularly in philosophy and literature. The philosophers directly responsible in the 19th and 20th centuries are of the German and French schools. Notable of the former group are, F.D.E. Schleiermacher, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, whereas taking centre stage of the latter group are Paul Ricoeur and Jacques Derrida.

Although differing from each other in terms of features developed in the notion of hermeneutics, both Hans-Georg Gadamer,³⁷ and Paul Ricoeur,³⁸ underscore its philosophical and ontological nature.³⁹ In opposing its consideration as a methodological, and therefore scientific, process, Gadamer says that truth eludes the methodical individual and hence, method retards, if not subverts the truth. In other words, we reach the truth not methodically but dialectically.⁴⁰ In the same vein,

³⁵ *Brahmavidya* is considered an introspective tool, with which the inspired *rishis* (literally "seers") who lived ascetic and celibate lives (*brahmacharya*) in the forest hermitages (*ashram*) of ancient India analyzed the awareness of human experience to see if there was anything in it that was absolute. "Supreme" because where other sciences studied the external world, *brahmavidya* sought knowledge of an underlying reality which would inform all other studies and activities. The discoveries of *brahmavidya* is *shruti*, i.e. records of the direct encounter with the divine transmitted through *shabda*, literally, "sound" or "that which is heard." See, "Introduction" in *Bhagavad Gita*, translated with a general introduction by Eknath Easwaran (London: Arkana), 1986, pp.4-5.

³⁶ *Ta'wil* refers specifically to spiritual exegesis of the revealed truths contained in religious sources. In the Islamic literary tradition, it is an esoteric form of interpretation to achieve the inner understanding of the text, arrived at by means of symbolic interpretation. However, the idea of penetrating the significance of a symbol is by intuitively sensing the original spiritual experience attained by the author of the text, and not through rational elucidation. See, Md. Salleh Yaapar, 1988, pp.44-45.

³⁷ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1986.

³⁸ See Paul Ricoeur, 1985.

³⁹ The ideas propounded by each of these philosophers are adopted and used interchangeably in the ensuing description and explanation of the features of hermeneutics considered essential to the process of interpretation in the present study.

⁴⁰ In Quito, p.51.

although Ricoeur does not rule out hermeneutics as a method, he discards the objective, rigid, structured method of the natural sciences. He says (ibid:94):

The question of truth is no longer the question of method; it is the question of the manifestation of being, for a being whose existence consists in understanding being.

Ricoeur's understanding of symbol highlights the revelatory function of a symbol. An obvious meaning itself points analogically to a second meaning which is not given otherwise.

In this context, his idea of the "architecture of meaning" is explained in the following manner (Blaikie 1995:154):

The symbol as it stands means more than one thing; there are different levels of meaning contained in it. The most obvious, or literal meaning hides the figurative meaning but at the same time it also discloses it, since the figurative meaning cannot be grasped except through the literal meaning.

However, even though all symbols are signs, every sign is not a symbol. A symbol enjoys a 'double intentionality'. Therefore while a sign manifests other than itself, like a symbol it does not invite thought. Signs perform indicative function while symbols also perform a revelatory function.

Basically, there are two opposing positions in Hermeneutics, centering on whether or not it is possible to arrive at an objective interpretation of meaning in a text, and to objects in the world. On one hand, objectivity is rejected as being impossible, on the conviction that there cannot be any understanding outside of history and culture. On the other, that interpretation is fundamental and integral to all human existence, and therefore, that it is the task of ordinary people.

In the hermeneutical definition, a text is viewed as a projection of the human world, in that it imitates the world in a relation of *mimesis* and *poesis*. This means that the text is not merely a copy or duplication of the world, but an author's creative and

intentional act, conveying a particular discourse. Further, the text entails a specific context which is determined by its "historical tradition," or "culture" or "worldview," and situated in a particular time and space. This context or milieu, constitutes the historicity of the text. As the author's act is his construction of the human reality situated in a particular context, his text should therefore be understood through its historicity, rather than as an autonomous entity.

In this context, it is important to the process of understanding and interpreting a text to be aware that the author and text originate from different cultures or traditions, or, in Gadamer's terms, different "horizons." Awareness of this difference invariably influences and colours the interpreter's understanding. Consequently, there has to occur a "fusion of horizons," in order for interpretation to take place. This is a process whereby the horizons of the text are merged with the horizons of the reader. According to Ricoeur, this process is accompanied by *Aneignung* or appropriation, meaning "genuinely to make one's own what is initially alien" (1986:68). For Ricoeur, this is essential to the theory and method of interpretation. In order to appropriate a text effectively, the interpreter has to approach it with the correct attitude. This attitude is firstly, one of sympathy, in relation to the text, and secondly of suspension, in relation to the self.

In the first instance, that of sympathy, the aim is to "hear" or "see" what lies beyond the words of a text. In doing so, the interpreter's openness to the tradition entailed in the text will allow the text to reveal itself to the interpreter. In this regard, Gadamer says (1989:300-301):

Interpretation ... does not refer to the sense intended, but to the sense that is hidden and has to be revealed. The involuntary expression(s) ..., like everything else, need explication, i.e. to be understood not only in terms of what they say, but of what they bear witness to.

In this connection, it is important to look beyond what is said in the everyday meaning of the language, to what is being taken for granted, while it is being said (Blaikie 1995:64). In allowing the text to reveal itself, the anteriority of the text, or what stands "in front" of it, comes into play. This notion of anteriority is explained by Ricouer as follows (1986:68):

Ultimately, what the reader appropriates is a *proposed world*, which is not behind the text, as a hidden intention would be, but *in front of it* as that which the work unfolds, discovers, reveals. Henceforth, to understand is *to understand oneself in front of the text*. It is not a question of imposing upon the text our finite capacity of understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self.

Ricouer also recognises that appropriation, and ultimately appreciation and acceptance, is enabled when the nature of the interaction between the self and the text "ceases to appear as a kind of possession, (and) implies instead a moment of dis-possession of the narcissistic ego" (ibid). In this context an important contrastive differentiation is held between "self" and "ego," whereby it is the text, "with its universal power of unveiling, which gives a *self* to the *ego* (ibid)."

Appropriation is also underpinned, in the second instance, as stated above, to the suspension of the self. This requires the interpreter to become aware of his own deep-seated assumptions, prejudices, or horizon of meaning, with regard to the nature of the experience or the object being studied. Without the encounter between the self and the text, these pre-conceived notions would otherwise have remained unknown or ignored. Awareness, and subsequently a relinquishment, of prejudices, brings about a suspension of presupposition and judgment, as well as a critical self-consciousness and ultimately, a transformation or metamorphosis. In this case metamorphosis is understood as a relinquishment of the self as it were, by the interpreter, to the objective guidance and support of the text. Subsequently, a genuine understanding is achieved, not only of