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# SELF IS MEANINGLESS WHEN THE OTHER IS NOT TRULY UNDERSTOOD: REVISITING THE PERSIAN MYSTICAL PARABLES OF RUMI'S *MATHNAVI* AND POMERANCE'S *THE ELEPHANT MAN*

## Abstract

The Other, whose presence is essential for the construction of the Self, has almost always been depicted peculiarly in the literary texts of the East and the West. The investigation of Jalal al-Din Rumi's parables and Bernard Pomerance's play, albeit the genres, time, place, and cultures are totally different—Rumi's parables are classical Persian poems and Pomerance's work is a modern American play—well indicates how the Other is mistakenly delineated and how the Colonizer's attempt at making the Other “almost the same, but not quite”—as Bhabha states—fails and leads to the unsophisticated fabrication of the Other. Self is well understood in relation to the understanding of the Other. In this research, it is shown how both the Other and the Colonizer fail when there is no thorough mutual understanding.

**Keywords:** self, other, Rumi, Pomerance, *Mathnavi*, *The Elephant Man*

## Introduction

Meaning emanates from difference; in other words, without difference there is no meaning and consequently there is no identification, no recognition, no progress, and in its severe form no “self.” Thus, our identity is formed in relation with others who are different from us. Different genders, classes, races, countries, cultures, arts, literatures and so forth construct our “identity” and our “self.” So “self” is meaningful with the presence of “other” whose quirky presence has almost always been a source of misunderstanding and misconception. This misconception and oddness of the identity formation are well delineated in different literary texts and in different cultures. The Self, the other, and the identity have directly or indirectly been the subjects of study by many critics such as Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Judith Butler, David Damrosch, Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, and Julia Kristeva. They have discussed these subjects in different ways. What makes it more interesting is that—as Harold Bloom discusses in *The Anxiety of Influence* and *The Anatomy of Influence*—Bernard Pomerance, the American playwright, very much like Jalal al-Din Rumi, a Persian mystic and poet, portrays the fabrication of the Other’s identity, though the genres, time, place and cultures are completely different.

Tötösy de Zepetnek in his definition of Comparative Literature introduces Comparative Literature as a method of studying literature in at least two ways:

First, Comparative Literature means the knowledge of more than one national language and literature, and/or it means the knowledge and application of other disciplines in and for the study of literature and second, Comparative Literature has an ideology of inclusion of the Other, be that a marginal literature in its several meanings of marginality, a genre, various text types, etc. (*Comparative Literature* 13)

Based on his definition, this article addresses the two ways. Two different pieces of literature, one a classical Persian poem and the other, a modern American play (though, its setting is in London) are studied. Additionally, the main concern of this study is to scrutinize the construction of the Other’s identity by comparing two different literary texts in different contexts which is in line with Tötösy de Zepetnek’s idea of a “dialogue” between literatures. “Dialogue is understood as inclusion, which extends to all Other, marginal, minority, and all that has been and often, still, is considered peripheral and thus an approach against all essentialism” (Tötösy de Zepetnek, “Contextual Study” 16). Dam-

rosch also believes that world literature is a method, “not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading,” in other words “the ways the works of world literature can best be read” (5).

Harold Bloom in *Anatomy of Influence* argues that “influence anxiety, in literature, need not be an affect in the writer who arrives late in a tradition. It always is an anxiety achieved in a literary work, whether or not its author ever felt it” (6). Bloom in *Anatomy* considers Shakespeare as the source of influence for all poets and generally speaking for all people; however, there is a line of critics who disagree on this point. Bloom, in *Anxiety of Influence*, suggests that “we have, almost all of us, thoroughly internalized the power of Shakespeare’s plays, frequently without having attended them or read them” (xviii). These two books of Bloom are about poetry, but they have wider implications and can be employed in different genres. Thus, based on Bloom’s ideas, it is not farfetched to consider that Pomerance, without acknowledgment, was influenced by Rumi.

Throughout history, the authors of the East and the West have had much influence on one another; for instance, Edward FitzGerald was influenced by Omar Khayyam (Dick Davis) or Johann Wolfgang (von) Goethe was indebted to Khwāja Shams-ud-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥāfez-e Shirāzī (Hamid Tafazoli) and Sadegh Hedayat was influenced by Jean-Paul-Charles-Aymard Sartre and Franz Kafka (Homa Katouzian). Some of the authors have acknowledged the influence they got, and some have not. For instance, Eugene O’Neill and Tennessee Williams have acknowledged their indebtedness to August Strindberg and Anton Chekhov, respectively, but Harold Pinter has never acknowledged his indebtedness to Strindberg or Samuel Beckett has not acknowledged his debt to Chekhov. Regarding more recent authors, for example Tom Stoppard was also influenced by the absurdist playwright, Samuel Beckett. Franklin D. Lewis, in his book, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West*, argues that Doris May Lessing and Coleman Barks were directly or indirectly influenced by Rumi; Lewis also studies the adaptations and imitations done based on Rumi’s works.

### The Importance of the “Other”

Pomerance (d. 2017), in his play entitled *The Elephant Man* (1977), very much like some parables of Rumi (d. 1273), in *Mathnavi* (1260), beautifully portrays the fabrication of the Other’s identity. Pomerance depicts a man who is very much like an elephant and because of this extreme deformity he is treat-

ed as the Other and almost every character in the play perceives him as he/she likes. Without truly understanding the elephant man, they attribute different identities to him. They treat him as a mirror in which they see themselves. Therefore, as Homi K. Bhabha says, they try to make Merrick almost the same as themselves, but not quite (*The Location of Culture* 89); on the other hand, the elephant man resists and does not want to be quite the same, but as soon as he gives up and succumbs, he loses his Self, his identity and literally dies.

Both Rumi's and Pomerance's concern, in the texts under discussion, is the way the Other's identity is mistakenly constructed. For both of them, difference is necessary and inevitable. John E. Drabinski also discusses that "the difference that makes identity is neither cultural nor historical, but rather an intellectual sensibility and double propensity toward Being and the Other" (4). William E. Connolly emphasizes that "identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty" (64). Difference makes meaning and it is with difference and the presence of "other" that "self" is constructed and becomes meaningful. What these critics say about the importance of the Other and difference is very much like what Kristeva states: "Deprived of others, free solitude, like the astronauts' weightless state, dilapidates muscles, bones, and blood. Available, freed of everything, the foreigner has nothing, he is nothing. But he is ready for the absolute, if an absolute could choose him. 'Solitude' is perhaps the only word that has no meaning" (12). Jane E. Stets and Peter J. Burke also stipulate that "most of what we know about ourselves is derived from others" (133). Frantz Fanon believes:

Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other, that other will remain the theme of his actions. It is on that other being, on recognition by that other being, that his own human worth and reality depend. It is that other being in whom the meaning of his life is condensed. (168-169)

M. A. R. Habib quotes from Friedrich Hegel who believed difference was indispensable to the notion of identity (387). Hegel believed that "identity has its nature beyond itself" . . . "identity and difference are inseparable" (qtd. in Habib 388). Culler believes "the 'I' is not something given but comes to exist as that which is addressed by and related to others" (qtd. in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 206). What Culler believes is very much like what Türkkan states: "The

Other is not something outside or beyond the self, as the traditional Cartesian perspective would have it; rather, it is deeply implicated in and with the self” (Türkkan 369). Paul Ricoeur in his book entitled, *Oneself as Another* suggests from the outset that “the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other, as we might say in Hegelian terms” (3). However, Tabish Khair suggests that “the Other, which is central to the identity of the Self, is also always outside and different from the Self” (106).

*The Elephant Man*, written in 1977, is based on the real-life story of John Merrick known as the Elephant Man who lived in London during the latter part of the nineteenth century (John Simon 403). In *The Elephant Man*, John Merrick is depicted as a deformed creature with an elephant’s head; a “despised creature without consolation” (Pomerance 3). Ross, his manager, at the beginning of the play delineates Merrick’s deplorable situation from his own point of view. He believes that what amplifies Merrick’s pathetic situation is people’s degrading treatment towards his deformity: “to live with his physical hideousness, incapacitating deformities and unremitting pain is trial enough, but to be exposed to the cruelly lacerating expressions of horror and disgust by all who behold him—is even more difficult to bear” (Pomerance 3).

As Ross calls him the “freak of nature”, Merrick’s condition is reminiscent of the freak shows in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nadja Durbach mentions that the heyday of the modern freak show was between 1847 and 1914. Durbach in her book, *The Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture*, argues that “these shows should not be dismissed as merely marginal, exploitative, or voyeuristic forms of entertainment. In fact, displays of freakery were critical sites for popular and professional debates about the meanings attached to bodily difference. It is no coincidence that freak shows reached their zenith at the height of Britain’s modern and imperial self-fashioning” (1, 2). Janet L. Larson believes that *The Elephant Man* begins “in radical politics, it ends in metaphysics and in between it directs questions of aesthetics and ethics against show business, theatrical illusion, and all kinds of imitative performance from language learning to orthodox religious discipline and the imitation of Christ” (335).

In Ross’s view Merrick is forcing himself to suffer these degradations to survive. Ross calls Merrick a “freak of nature,” the “Elephant Man” (Pomerance 3). Ross is earning money by exposing this deformed creature to the crowds. Thus,

the quirker Merrick is shown to the crowds, the more beneficial he becomes for Ross. Ross's view of Merrick is decidedly a financial look. Actually, all the characters look at Merrick from different points of view and what they attribute to him emanates from their special concerns, anxieties and desires.

### **Rumi's Parables of "The Reed-Flute" and "The Oilman and His Parrot" and Pomerance's play**

Many years before Pomerance, Rumi in the Prologue of his first book of *Mathnavi* put the following words in the mouth of the personified reed-flute which was lamenting its banishment from its home; the reed-flute moans that it is the Other, suffering from separation from its fellows:

Hearken to the reed-flute, how it complains,  
Lamenting its banishment from its home:  
"Ever since they tore me from my osier bed,  
My plaintive notes have moved men and women to tears.  
I burst my breast, striving to give vent to sighs,  
And to express the pangs of my yearning for my home.  
He who abides far away from his home  
Is ever longing for the day he shall return.  
My wailing is heard in every throng,  
In concert with them that rejoice and them that weep.  
Each interprets my notes in harmony with his own feelings,  
But not one fathoms the secrets of my heart." (Rumi 1)

Rumi complains that no one understands the true nature and sorrows of the uprooted reed-flute; instead, they interpret the flute's lamentation and no one understands the secrets of the flute's heart and what the reed-flute really is. Or, in another parable called "The Oilman and his Parrot," which is included in the first book of *Mathnavi*, Rumi narrates the story of a parrot amusing the oil field worker with its pleasant prattle and watching his shop when he was out. One day when the oilman was out, a cat broke one of the oil-jars; when the man came back, he got angry and hit the head of the parrot so harshly that the parrot's feathers dropped off; stunned, the parrot was speechless for several days. One day by seeing a bald-headed man, the parrot recovered its speech, it addressed the man and shouted out: "whose oil-jar did you upset?", and the bald-headed

man “smiled at the parrot’s mistake in confounding baldness caused by age with the loss of its own feathers due to a blow” (Rumi 6).

This way Rumi satirically shows the way people try to assimilate the Other’s identity with their own. Rumi relates this parable under the veneer of satire to criticize the way people ignore the Other’s true self and how heedlessly they fabricate the Other’s identity. Melinda Alliker Rabb argues that satire “examines national, historical, or ethnic identity”.... [and] brings objects of fear or danger into our midst by blurring the distinction between the broom and the dirt it sweeps, between us and them, or self and other” (582). The parable of “The Oilman and his Parrot” and the Prologue, “Reed-flute,” very much like Pomerance’s play, show how people’s fears, wishes and desires are reflected in the fabrication of the Other’s identity. Wolfgang Iser stipulates:

Otherness turns into a mirror for self-observation, and such a relationship sets the process of self-understanding in motion, because the alien that is to be grasped realizes itself to the extent to which one’s own dispositions come under scrutiny. The knowledge thus obtained is twofold: by getting to know what is different, one begins to know oneself. (36)

On the other hand, “the making of selves is a narrative process of identification whereby a number of identities that have been negotiated in specific contexts are strung together into one overarching story” (Neumann 212).

Very much like Rumi’s parables, another character in Pomerance’s play, Fredrick Treves, a surgeon and a scientist, introduces Merrick scientifically to Mrs. Kendal, the actress. However, he has not come to any acceptable supposition about him: “you see the papillomatous extrusions which disfigure him, uhm, seem to correspond quite regularly to the osseous deformities,” . . . “there is a link between the bone disorder and the skin growth, though for the life of me I have not discovered what it is or why it is” (Pomerance 30). Half-elephant, half-man is an absurd sign for him; therefore, he asserts: “is he foreign?” (Pomerance 4). Treves considers Merrick as a macabre and dire creature which he wishes to examine at the hospital in the interest of science not humanity. The only thing Ross and Treves think about is money. Ross tries to convince Treves to take care of Merrick for he knows that Treves has the same concerns: “we—he and I—are in business. He is our capital, see. Go to a bank. Go anywhere. Want to borrow capital, you pay interest. Scientists even. He is good value though. You won’t find another like him” (Pomerance 4).

Every character in the play, very much like the characters in Rumi's parables, sees Merrick as he or she desires and not holistically. Mrs. Kendal, the actress, sees herself in Merrick and believes that he is very much like her: "Cheerful, honest within limits, a serious artist in his way. He is almost like me"; Bishop describes Merrick as "religious and devout"; Gomm considers him "practical, like me. He has seen enough of daily evil to be thankful for small goods that come his way, like me"; Duchess says: "he is discreet. Like me"; Treves delineates him as "curious, compassionate, concerned about the world, well, rather like myself" (Pomerance 39, 40). Therefore, Merrick's identity is recklessly constructed by others.

Merrick is mistakenly delineated through the limited knowledge of people who cannot understand him thoroughly; in other words, each has access to one aspect and depicts him in the darkness of his/her nescience without doing any effort to get closer to him and shed light on him to see him better and understand him as he is. So, by turning the light on to see the whole or by getting farther from or getting beyond the situation they are involved in, they can have a better view and understanding of the situation they are engulfed in and see the whole rather than the limited parts. On the other hand, one should try to perceive the Other's multidimensional identity by employing multifaceted perspectives; however, generally speaking, this kind of thorough understanding is impossible in Rumi, Pomerance and Bhabha's view.

In Rumi's view, it is impossible to gain a proper understanding of the Other unless one reaches the mystical stage of "annihilation of self" (*fana*) which is scarcely reachable. In Bhabha's view, this holistic understanding of the Other is impossible for he does believe in a resistance strategy employed by both the colonized (becoming almost the same, not quite the same) and the colonizer (letting the colonized to become almost the same rather than becoming quite the same) which he calls the "mimicry strategy." Bhabha's view towards mimicry is very much like Lacan's definition of mimicry as camouflage. In his essay "Of Mimicry and Man," Bhabha says: "it is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottle background, of becoming mottled—exactly like the technique of camouflage practised [sic] in human warfare" (Bhabha 85).

In Bhabha's view, none of them, neither the colonizer nor the Other or the colonized, can understand the Other because, as Rumi says, they cannot put aside their Self (*Nafs*) or ego. In Pomerance's view, the impossibility of complete



understanding is shown through the misunderstanding of people of Merrick's (the Other's) true identity and very much like Rumi, Pomerance shows how Merrick who reflects all characters' traits ends up dying literally, which is a kind of reaching into the "annihilation of self," though this annihilation is not mystical as proposed by Rumi.

### Rumi's Parable of "The Elephant in the Dark Room" and Pomerance's Play

Very much like the condition of Merrick in Pomerance's *The Elephant Man*, the parable of "The Elephant in a Dark Room" illustrates the same situation. "The Elephant in a Dark Room" is a well-known parable in book three of *Masnavi*. This parable portrays a crowd who come to see an animal in a dark room to recognize what it is. These people are not blind but because of the darkness of the room they are not able to recognize the animal. This parable truly depicts the way the identity of the Other is fabricated. The people are not blind, but they cannot understand the Other completely, as it is. This way Rumi shows that holistic recognition of the true nature of the Other is impossible. No one has access to this holistic viewpoint, unless one becomes quite the same which, in Rumi's mystical philosophy, leads to the "annihilation of self" or, as we see in Pomerance's play, it leads to the death of Merrick who does his best to become very much like the people around him and reflect each character's traits vividly, very much like a polished mirror. People in Pomerance's play, very much like people in this parable of Rumi, cannot understand the Other, thus they fabricate an identity for the Other.

In Rumi's parable, there is an elephant in a dark room and some Hindus want to exhibit it to the people. The people hastily thronged the room to visit it. Because there is no light in the room, people cannot see the elephant, each touches the elephant to guess what it is. One touches the trunk of it and says it is the rain pipe, another touches its ear and says it is a big fan, another touches its leg and says it is very much like a pillar, another touches its back and declares that it is very much like a great throne. But none of them can understand what it really is; since none of them sees it as a whole and each touches a part. Although all of them are right, all of them are paradoxically wrong. All these descriptions are correct because the elephant is the amalgamation of all these characteristics. The body of the elephant is composed of all these parts, but the elephant is none of them. Rumi continues: "The eye of outward sense is as the palm of a hand/

The whole of the object is not grasped in the palm. / The sea itself is one thing, the foam another;/ Neglect the foam, and regard the sea with your eyes” (108).

So as Rumi metaphorically states, senses are not enough for understanding the true nature of the Other, since the whole is not grasped in the palm. The palm and the restricted senses are not sufficient for a thorough comprehension. Each sense observes one aspect; therefore, for a correct apprehension of the true nature of the Other, one should shed light on it to see it as it is. In other words, wrong recognition of these people visiting the elephant does not originate from their blindness or their bigotry but from their nescience which is rooted in the darkness of the room and lack of light which metaphorically connotes limited or lack of knowledge of the Other’s identity or their limited access to the multi-faceted perspective towards the true nature and identity of the Other to grasp it as it is.

The condition these people are enmeshed in leads them to misunderstanding; no one could recognize the elephant—the Other—although each is defining it correctly based on his/her narrow perspective. Very much like Rumi’s elephant, Pomerance’s Elephant Man, the deformed, elephant-like character, is not apprehended holistically by the people around him. Merrick embraces most of the traits attributed to him by the people, but not by any one of them. And when all these identities are put together, very much like Rumi’s elephant’s limbs and like a puzzle, a new identity is created which is surprisingly different from its components; thus, paradoxically the new identity is none of them but all of them, and the nature of the amalgamation is completely different from the ingredients.”

It is true that Rumi’s elephant has all these characteristics attributed to it in the darkness, but at the same time it is not any of them. It is not a big throne, or a big fan, a pillar or a rain pipe, although it is what each character truly feels by touching it; “according to the part which each felt, he gave a different description of the animal” (Rumi 108). Very much like the way people, in Rumi’s parable, compare the elephant’s limbs to different objects, Treves scientifically describes Merrick with pictorial slides:

The most striking feature about him was his enormous head. Its circumference was about that of a man’s waist. From the brow there projected a huge bony mass like a loaf, while from the back of his head hung a bag of spongy fungous-looking skin, the surface of which was comparable to

brown cauliflower. The nose was merely a lump of flesh, only recognizable as a nose from its position. The right hand was large and clumsy—a fin or paddle rather than a hand. No distinction existed between the palm and back, the thumb was like a radish, the fingers like thick tuberous roots. (Pomerance 6)

The characters, in the play, look at Merrick as voiceless and marginalized, although Merrick is exerting his power by his resistance and not succumbing to the characters' desire. Merrick is more than what is described and understood by the characters. He is all of them and at the same time none of them. He is described, depicted and interpreted the way other characters desire. Merrick is filtered through the eyes of the seers and is construed based on their wishes, desires, anxieties, and fears. The police address Merrick as an “indecent bastard” and claim he'd, “be better off dead” (Pomerance 10). No one approaches him to find out what he really is; instead, everyone interprets him based on the atmosphere he/she breathes in. Merrick implores Treves and Gomm to accommodate him in a house in which the blind people are living, because as he claims, there is no one there to stare at him and judge him wrongly according to his own feelings without “fathoming the secrets of his heart”, as Rumi relates it in the first poem of *Mathnavi*. Tal Correm insists that “Merrick remains an object of voyeurism and exploitation” (128). Merrick tries to escape from the stares, judgments, and interpretations:

Merrick: Been reading this. About homes for the blind. Wouldn't mind going to one when I have to move.

Treves: But you do not have to move; and you're not blind.

Merrick: I would prefer it where no one stared at me. (Pomerance 22)

Treves assures Merrick that in his “Home,” the London Hospital, there is nobody staring at him. What Treves calls “Home” is ironic for Merrick, since for Merrick what they call mercy is cruelty:

Merrick: if your mercy is so cruel, what do you have for justice?

Treves: I am sorry. It is just the way things are. (Pomerance 27)

What the people see is just the “illusion” of Merrick not Merrick himself. In the tenth scene of the play, while conversing with Mrs. Kendal and employing an analogy of Romeo and Juliet, Merrick tacitly refers to people's nescient and restricted viewpoint, which leads to their misunderstanding of him. Merrick considers Romeo's action of holding the mirror to Juliet's breath as a sign of his

narrow-mindedness. He condemns Romeo for not taking an appropriate action to better comprehend the situation, thus seeing “nothing” on the mirror, which is an illusion not the reality, he kills himself. For Merrick the people around him are snobbish people who just care for themselves and nobody else; he cries: “Does he [Romeo] take her [Juliet’s] pulse? Does he get a doctor? Does he make sure? No. He kills himself. The illusion fools him because he does not care for her. He only cares about himself” (Pomerance 33).

Treves searches for an experienced and a competent nurse who could take care of Merrick, feed him, and be kind to him, since he knows that taking care of him is not a feasible job for everyone, for the only thing people heed is his deformed appearance and no one sees him as a human being like other people. Even Treves, a scientist, treats Merrick merely scientifically rather than humanly; he just diagnosed Merrick from one perspective, and this is a scientific perspective. He does not understand Merrick as a human being with different desires, fears, dreams and anxieties. This is the flaw and the source of failure of the characters as the colonizers.

Merrick reflects the people’s traits or is made to be like them, and this is Bhabha’s “mimicry strategy,” which is imposed on the Other, the marginalized, or the colonized. However, as Bhabha proposes, the colonizer out of his anxiety wants the colonized almost the same but not quite the same since “mimicry is at once resemblance and menace” (123). Bhabha also calls it “sly civility.” What secludes Merrick is the horrific face of people’s unreasonable presuppositions, interpretations, and consequently the oddity of their identity fabrication of him. Treves conversely interprets Merrick: “His [Merrick’s] terror of us all comes from having been held at arm’s length from society” (Pomerance 28). Treves asks Merrick to mimic his words and actions; “sly civility” is noticeably echoed in Travers’s ridiculous instructions and orders, which he asks Merrick to obey; this way he tries to make Merrick “civilized.”

Lisa Wedeen sarcastically states that in “colonial and modernization discourses people have to move up the evolutionary ladder and become more ‘civilized’ before they can be free” (869). Treves’s authoritative and disciplined personality is reflected in Merrick who is treated as an object, a robot rather than a human being. Samira Sasani says, “very much like Eliza in Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* who is educated by Higgins, Merrick is imitating Treves even in speaking” (123). Nasser Dasht-Peyma maintains that colonizers usually impose their

language onto the colonized, “coercing colonized people to speak the colonizers’ tongue” and it is evident in relation between Treves and Merrick (47). Merrick ludicrously repeats what Treves asks him to repeat. Treves’s imperious dialogue with Merrick is worth quoting in its full length:

Treves: This is your Promised Land, is it not? A roof. Food. Protection. Care. Is it not?

Merrick: Right, Mr. Treves.

Treves: I will bet you don’t know what to call this.

Merrick: No, sir, I don’t know.

Treves: You call it, Home.

Merrick: Never had a home before.

Treves: You have one now. Say it, John: Home.

Merrick: Home.

Treves: No, no, really say it. I have a home. This is my. Go on.

Merrick: I have a home. This is my home. This is my home. I have a home.

....

....

Treves: If I abide by the rules, I will be happy.

Merrick: Yes, sir.

Treves: Don’t be shy.

Merrick: If I abide by the rules I will be happy.

....

Treves: Don’t be upset. Rules make us happy because they are for our own good.

Merrick: Okay.

Treves: Don’t be shy John. You can say it.

Merrick: This is my home?

Treves: No. About rules making us happy.

Merrick: They make us happy because they are for our own good. (Pomerance 25, 26)

The more Merrick resembles the others, the more threatening he becomes for the colonizers. As Treves claims, Merrick is an example of “a parable of growing up? To become more normal is to die? More accepted to worsen?” Yet, as noted by Pomerance, “as he’s achieved greater and greater normality, his conditions

edged him closer to the grave” (64). The more Merrick assimilates himself, the more he loses his identity, and it is what Taylor suggests about the colonized: “The denial of difference, that is, complete assimilation, constitutes an erasure and a loss of the identity and culture of the colonized peoples” (Taylor 28). As Bhabha stipulates, the colonizer wants the colonized or the Other to become “almost the same but not quite” (*The Location of Culture* 89), so although Treves instructs Merrick to become like others, he does not want to make him quite the same as others.

Literally, as Treves says, the more Merrick resembles them, the closer he gets to death and destruction and the situation worsens. Merrick, very much like Treves, does not want to become quite the same since it means the death of him and losing his own authentic identity. This is what Bhabha means when he talks about mimicry and hybridity. Bhabha highlights the ambivalence of the colonized and the colonizer too. Sanjiv Kumar argues that Bhabha “is the foremost contemporary critic who has tried to unveil the contradictions inherent in colonial discourse in order to highlight the colonizer’s *ambivalence* with respect to his attitude towards the colonized *Other* and vice versa” (119). As David Huddart argues: “when the relationship between self and other seems to be one of domination, the fact that there is a relationship at all suggests that domination is not total” (46).

By not seeing Merrick’s true identity and by fabricating unsophisticated new identities for Merrick, they literally kill Merrick. Near the end of the play, Treves laments: “He [Merrick] is very excited to do what others do if he thinks it is what others do.” . . . “Yet he makes all of us think he is deeply like ourselves. And yet we’re not like each other. I conclude that we have polished him like a mirror, and shout hallelujah when he reflects us to the inch. I have grown sorry for it” (Pomerance 64).

The resemblance of Pomerance’s *The Elephant Man* to Rumi’s parables beautifully shows how similar the East and the West are; or in other words, how similar the nature of human beings is. Regarding these literary texts belonging to different genres, times, places and even different cultures, one sees how similarly they portray the Other. Rumi mystically sees the unity in all these ostensible pluralities. William Chittick in his book, *The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi*, maintains that for Rumi “there is no reality *but* the Reality. Since God alone is real, man’s real Self is God. Man attains to Reality only by passing away from his illusory

self and subsiding in his real Self” (126). Fatemeh Keshavarz believes that in Rumi’s *Mathnavi*, “Love was the elixir that transformed us from slaves into lovers longing for obedience and subsequently union” (40). Annemarie Schimmel stipulates that Rumi’s “topics cover almost every aspect of life, but the center of his thoughts is Love, which is sometimes interchangeable with the Beloved, and one often wonders whether it is Love or the Beloved that is intended by his words” (101). Pomerance, in this play, also believes in the unity of all human beings though his view is not mystical. He shows it by Merrick’s death. Merrick cannot tolerate plurality and fragmentation; in other words, he cannot tolerate the fragmented identity they made for him. When he loses his self, and the unity, he surprisingly becomes all the characters and literally dies. As soon as he gets fragmented, he dies. Merrick’s fragmented identity is oddly fabricated by various traits attributed to him by different people, though he is not any of them.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the following parable well sums up the discussion. In this parable of Rumi, which is included in the second Book of *Mathnavi*, Rumi recounts that there were four people, a Persian, an Arab, a Turk and a Greek who were traveling together; a man gave them a dirhem and asked them to buy something with it. The Persian said he would buy “angur” with it, the Arab said he would buy “inab,” the Turk said “uzum,” and the Greek said he would buy “staphyle.” All of these words mean the same, and it is “grapes,” but because they are not familiar with one another’s language, they thought they wanted different things, so a quarrel arose among them. Meanwhile a wise man who knows all these languages came up and told them that they all wanted the same thing, grapes.

Very much like Rumi’s parable, all these fabricated identities for Merrick originate from one identity which is Merrick himself, but each character recounts it in his/her own words. It is like fragmented images seen in a broken mirror; different images, even distorted ones are seen, though there is only one sound image. Coleman Barks, inspired by Rumi, discusses that all these misunderstandings, quarrels and disintegrations lie in “separation from the source”: “language and music are possible only because we’re empty, hollow, and separated from the source. All language is a longing for home” (17).

Very much like Rumi's parable of "grapes," all the characters in *The Elephant Man*, in their own words, label Merrick as the Other, so in this sense they are doing the same and saying the same, though differently. The Otherness of Merrick is pronounced differently by numerous perceivers. All of them are fabricating diverse quirky identities for Merrick while all of these identities are one thing. On the other hand, all these characters are reflected in Merrick and Merrick is all of them, so all of these characters, including Merrick himself, are the same. So, the root of all these squabbles lies in separation, plurality, fragmentations and lack of holistic understanding of the Other who is very much like us or generally speaking, it lies in lack of holistic and multifaceted understanding of one another which definitely leads to the lack of understanding of one another. The colonizers fail to understand Merrick, the Other, completely. Merrick is the marginalized character, who is colonized by the men who consider themselves superior and shape Merrick's identity. In other words, the identity of Merrick is shaped in their hands; although there is no land to colonize, they colonize Merrick's identity. If they had understood him as he was, there would have been no dichotomy as Self and the Other. Merrick also fails to resist becoming quite the same. If he had not succumbed to the artificial fragmented identity ascribed to him by the characters, he would not have died. Self-understanding is rooted in understanding the Other as it is. Without the other, self has no meaning. Thus, here, none of them is the winner.

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# BEZNAČAJ JASTVA BEZ RAZUMIJEVANJA DRUGOGA: NOVO ČITANJE RUMIJEVIH PERZIJSKIH MISTIČKIH PARABOLA *MESNEVIJA* I POMERANCEOVE DRAME *THE ELEPHANT MAN*

## Sažetak

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Drugi, čija je prisutnost ključna za izgradnju Jastva, oduvijek je osebužno prikazivan u književnim tekstovima Istoka i Zapada. Usprkos različitim žanrovima, vremenu, mjestu i kulturi, usporedna analiza parabola i klasičnih perzijskih pjesama Dželaluddina Rumija te moderne američke drame Bernarda Pomerancea jasno razotkriva iskrivljen prikaz Drugoga, ali i činjenicu da pokušaj kolonizatora da Drugoga učini „gotovo, ali ne sasvim istim” — kako navodi Bhabha — propada i dovodi do izmišljenog prikaza Drugoga. Jastvo se najbolje poima u suodnosu poimanja Drugoga. Ovaj rad nastoji dokazati da manjak dubinskog međusobnog razumijevanja izaziva propast i Drugoga i kolonizatora.

**Ključne riječi:** jastvo, Drugi, Rumi, Pomerance, *Mathnavi*, *The Elephant Man*