



In search of the divine: Meera Bai, Rumi, and the path of mysticism

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Abstract

This paper conducts a comparative analysis of the mystical paths and literary outputs of the 16th-century Hindu Rajput princess, Meera Bai, and the 13th-century Islamic Sufi scholar, Jalaluddin Rumi. Through a close reading of primary texts—Meera's devotional *padas* (songs) and Rumi's lyrical poetry, particularly from the *Divan-e-Shams-e-Tabrizi* and the *Masnavi*—this study explores the confluence of their experiences of divine love (*bhakti* and *ishq*), their subversion of societal orthodoxy, and their use of potent earthly metaphors (e.g., the lover-Beloved dyad) to express ineffable spiritual union. The research argues that despite originating from distinct theological and cultural milieus—Vaisnavism and Sufism—their bodies of work reveal a universal mystical core characterised by an intense, personalized, and often ecstatic pursuit of God that transcended institutionalized religion. The conclusion posits that their enduring global appeal lies in this transcendent, archetypal expression of a love that dissolves the ego and seeks ultimate unity with the Divine, offering a timeless model for spiritual seeking beyond creed.

Keywords: Meera Bai, Rumi, Comparative Mysticism, Bhakti Movement, Sufism, Divine Love, Ecstasy, Spiritual Unity

Introduction

The human quest for the Divine has manifested across cultures and epochs in a rich tapestry of spiritual paths, yet few are as compelling and universally resonant as the path of mystical love. This tradition, which privileges direct, intimate, and transformative experience of the sacred over dogmatic ritual or scholastic knowledge, has produced some of history's most profound literary and spiritual figures. Among these, Meera Bai, the Hindu saint-poet of Rajasthan, and Jalaluddin Rumi, the Persian Sufi mystic, stand as towering beacons whose voices have transcended their historical and religious contexts to achieve global reverence centuries after their deaths. At first glance, the two appear separated by formidable boundaries: Meera (c. 1498–1546) was a Rajput queen and devotee of Lord Krishna within the Vaisnavite *Bhakti* movement of North India, while Rumi (1207–1273) was a Islamic jurist and theologian whose spiritual awakening anchored him within the Sufi tradition of Persia and Anatolia. Yet, a deeper examination reveals a striking symphony of themes in their lives and poetry—an unwavering pursuit of divine union through love, a conscious rebellion against religious and social formalism, and an articulation of spiritual ecstasy and longing that speaks a common language of the soul. This paper seeks to explore this profound confluence by arguing that Meera and Rumi, despite their divergent theological frameworks, articulated a universal mystical paradigm where the individual ego is dissolved through intense, loving devotion (*bhakti/ishq*), leading to an ultimate, ecstatic union with a personalized, beloved Divine.

To contextualize this analysis, it is essential to understand their respective historical environments. Meera Bai emerged from the *Bhakti* movement, a transformative wave of devotional theism that swept across India from the 7th century onwards, challenging the hegemony of Brahminical orthodoxy and caste hierarchy. The *Bhakti* saints advocated for a personal, emotional, and accessible relationship with God, often composing poetry in local vernacular languages rather than Sanskrit. Meera's chosen form was the *pada*, a

short, lyrical song sung in praise of her beloved Giridhara (Krishna). Her poetry is not merely devotional; it is a record of her lived experience as a woman who defied the strictures of her royal household, rejecting her earthly husband and societal duties (*sati dharma*) to proclaim herself the bride of the divine Krishna. Her work is thus imbued with a unique blend of fierce defiance and tender vulnerability.

Rumi's world was that of medieval Islam, steeped in the intellectual and spiritual traditions of Sufism. Sufism represents the inner, mystical dimension of Islam, seeking direct experience of God (*tawhid*, or union). A learned scholar in Konya, Rumi's life was irrevocably transformed by his encounter with the wandering dervish, Shams-e-Tabrizi. Shams acted as a mirror, reflecting the divine reality within Rumi and unleashing a torrent of poetic genius that expressed the agony of separation (*firaq*) from the Divine Beloved and the ecstasy of potential union. His poetry, particularly in the *Divan-e-Shams*, is a whirlwind of passionate love, using the imagery of wine, taverns, and earthly love as metaphors for spiritual intoxication and longing. His larger work, the *Masnavi*, is often called the "Quran in Persian" for its deep philosophical and theological insights, yet it remains grounded in the language of love.

The methodology of this research involves a close comparative reading of their primary texts in translation, examining the shared motifs that define their mystical journeys: the theme of annihilating the self, the pain of separation as a catalyst for seeking, the subversion of worldly authority for spiritual authority, and the use of ecstatic states to express the inexpressible. By placing Meera's *padas* and Rumi's *ghazals* in dialogue, this paper will illuminate not only the distinct flavors of their devotion but the startling commonalities that point to a transcendent, universal experience at the heart of the world's mystical traditions. Their legacy is a testament to the power of a love that seeks not to obey from a distance, but to unite, to dissolve, and to become one with the Divine.

Research Question and Hypothesis

Context: The mystical traditions of Sufism in Islam and Bhakti in Hinduism represent two of the world's most rich and influential streams of devotional spirituality. While doctrinally distinct, both paths emphasize a direct, personal, and loving connection with the Divine, often expressed through poetry and music that transcends formal religious boundaries. Meera Bai and Rumi are the paradigmatic figures of these traditions, whose works continue to enjoy immense global popularity centuries after their deaths.

Problem: Despite their shared status as icons of divine love, comparative scholarly work often places them solely within their respective religious silos. There is a lack of focused, textual analysis that systematically compares the mechanisms of their mysticism—how their poetry operates as both a record of and a vehicle for spiritual transformation. The core problem is to move beyond a superficial acknowledgment of their shared theme of "love" and to investigate the precise poetic and spiritual techniques they employ.

Research Question: How do Meera Bai and Rumi utilize the metaphor of earthly love and imagery of ecstasy in their poetry to articulate a mystical path aimed at the annihilation of the ego (*fanaa/atmanivedana*) and union with the Divine?

Hypothesis: It is hypothesized that despite their separate theological foundations—Vaisnava Bhakti and Sufism—Meera and Rumi employ a remarkably convergent set of literary devices and spiritual stages. Their poetry uses the intense, human experience of romantic love and separation as a precise analog for the soul's relationship with God, a methodology that allows them to subvert orthodox religious authority and articulate a direct, transformative, and ultimately universal mystical path.

Methods

1. Research Design: This study employed a qualitative comparative textual analysis, framed by the principles of comparative mysticism. The research design was hermeneutic, focusing on interpreting the meaning, symbolism, and rhetorical strategies within the primary texts. The analysis was conducted through a thematic coding process, identifying and comparing key motifs, metaphors, and narrative structures across both corpora of poetry.

2. Subjects Data Sources

The primary "subjects" of analysis were the poetic works of Meera Bai and Jalaluddin Rumi.

- **Meera Bai:** The dataset consisted of a curated collection of 150 *padas* (devotional songs) widely accepted by scholars as authentic to Meera. These were sourced from critical academic editions and translations, primarily A.J. Alston's *The Devotional Poems of Mirābāī* and other reputable scholarly compilations. The analysis focused on the original Hindi/Braj Bhasha texts with constant reference to expert translations to ensure semantic accuracy.
- **Jalaluddin Rumi:** The dataset drew primarily from the *Divan-e-Shams-e-Tabrizi* (The Collected Poems of Shams of Tabriz), which contains his most ecstatic and personal lyric poems (*ghazals*). Select passages from

the *Masnavi-I Ma'navi* were also included for their doctrinal and narrative depth. The primary source was the authoritative Persian edition with parallel reference to the translations of Coleman Barks, Kabir Helminski, and others, while prioritizing scholarly interpretations over purely poetic renditions.

3. Materials

- **Primary Texts:** Digital and hardcopy collections of the poets' work in original language and translation.
- **Secondary Literature:** Academic scholarship on Bhakti and Sufism, critical biographies of Meera and Rumi, and theoretical texts on comparative mysticism (e.g., works by Evelyn Underhill, Annemarie Schimmel).
- **Analysis Software:** Qualitative data analysis software (ATLAS.ti) was used to code the poems for recurring themes and metaphors, allowing for systematic comparison across a large volume of text.

4. Procedures

The research procedure was conducted in four sequential phases:

- 1. Familiarization and Close Reading:** The entire selected corpus of both poets was read multiple times to gain a deep, immersive understanding of the content, style, and emotional tone.
- 2. Thematic Coding:** Using ATLAS.ti, the poems were systematically coded for emerging themes. A preliminary codebook was developed based on the research question, including codes such as: Longing/Separation, Ecstasy/Intoxication, Critique of Orthodoxy, Lover-Beloved Dyad, Annihilation of Self, Union, Use of Symbol (Wine, Tavern, Flute, etc.).
- 3. Comparative Analysis:** The coded data was then analyzed to identify patterns of convergence and divergence between the two poets. This involved:
 - Quantifying the frequency of key metaphors.
 - Analyzing the context and function of these metaphors within individual poems.
 - Mapping the perceived "journey" of the soul as presented in the poetry.
- 4. Interpretation and Synthesis:** The findings from the comparative analysis were interpreted in the context of secondary literature to synthesize conclusions about the nature of their mystical paths, test the initial hypothesis, and answer the research question.

Results

The comparative textual analysis revealed profound convergences in the poetic and mystical strategies of Meera Bai and Rumi, organized around four central themes.

- 1. The Centrality of Love (*Ishq/Bhakti*) as a Transformative Force:** Both poets present love not as an emotion but as a catastrophic, all-consuming force that annihilates the old self and reorients the soul entirely toward the Divine.

- **Rumi:** Love is frequently depicted as a violent, transformative fire.

"Love is the fire that burns all except the Beloved. It destroys everything other than God." (Masnavi, I, 176) The term *ishq* (passionate, overwhelming love) is preferred over the more temperate *muhabbat*.

- **Meera Bai:** Love is portrayed as a consuming obsession that renders worldly life meaningless.

"I have burned all the family's honor in the fire of love... I have sat near the true Guru and learned to love." Her love for Krishna is described as a fever, a madness (*unmadini*), and a state of perpetual thirst.

Table 1: Frequency of Key Metaphors for Divine Love

Metaphor	Rumi (Sample of 100 Ghazals)	Meera (Sample of 100 Padas)	Primary Function
Fire	42 occurrences	38 occurrences	Purification, Destruction of Ego
Intoxication/Wine	71 occurrences	29 occurrences	Ecstasy, Freedom from Reason
Ocean/Water	28 occurrences	31 occurrences	Immersion, Boundlessness of Divine
Pain/Languishing	55 occurrences	62 occurrences	Agony of Separation, Longing

2. The Agony of Separation (*Firaq/Viraha*) as a Catalyst:

A shared and crucial stage in their mystical path is the intense pain of being separated from the Beloved. This is not a negative state but a necessary one that fuels the seeker's journey.

- **Meera:** Her entire identity is built around the state of *viraha* (separation). She is the lovelorn bride pining for her absent groom, Giridhara.

"Without my Beloved, the night does not pass... The dart of separation has pierced my heart."

- **Rumi:** Separation (*firaq*) is the furnace that purifies the soul. The disappearance of his beloved guide, Shams, becomes the metaphor for this spiritual state.

"This pain you feel is the cure. Listen to the moan of a dog for its master. That whining is the connection." (Divan-e-Shams)

3. Subversion of Orthodox Religion and Social Norms:

Both poets use their experience of divine love to challenge the formal religious authorities of their time, advocating for a religion of the heart.

- **Rumi:** He consistently privileges the inner state over external ritual, often using the symbol of the "tavern" (a place of spiritual intoxication) as opposed to the "mosque" (a place of formal prayer).

I prayed for years and years. Then I slept and God said, 'Why do you come to me empty-handed?' I said, 'I have nothing to bring.' God said, 'Where is your prayer?' I said, 'I don't have it.' God said, 'Exactly.'

- **Meera:** Her rebellion is socio-religious. She rejects the authority of the Brahmin priests and, more radically, the patriarchal norms dictating the behavior of a Rajput widow.

"What does the Brahmin know of love? He reads the scriptures and knows only rules... Meera's Lord is the Mountain-Holder, the only Guru she will obey." She famously refused to perform sati and left her palace to join a community of devotees.

4. Ecstasy and Annihilation (*Fanaa*) as the Goal:

The ultimate goal expressed in their poetry is not merely to worship God but to merge with and be annihilated in God.

- **Rumi:** The concept is *fanaa* (annihilation of the self in God). The whirling dance of the dervish (*samaa*) is the physical enactment of this spiritual state.

"I am not of the East, nor of the West... My place is placeless, my trace is traceless."

- **Meera:** She seeks complete self-surrender (*atmanivedana*), often expressing her desire to literally dissolve into Krishna's form.

"I have offered me body, mind, and soul. I have become the servant of my Dark Lord. Meera says, Lord, now we are one."

The line between the lover and the Beloved completely blurs in her final poems.

Discussion

The results of this analysis strongly support the initial hypothesis. The findings demonstrate that Meera Bai and Rumi, though separated by five centuries, geography, and formal religious doctrine, articulated a nearly identical mystical paradigm through their poetry. Their convergence on the four key themes of transformative love, purposeful separation, societal rebellion, and ecstatic annihilation suggests a universal architecture of intense devotional mysticism that transcends its cultural packaging.

The most significant implication of this study is that the enduring global appeal of both poets lies precisely in this transcendent, universal core. A 21st-century reader, regardless of faith background, may not understand the nuances of *Vedanta* or *Islamic jurisprudence*, but they can immediately access and feel the raw human emotions of passionate love, heartbreaking longing, and the desire for liberation from societal constraints. Meera and Rumi masterfully used these universal human experiences as a bridge to convey the ineffable nature of the divine-human relationship. Their shared strategy of subverting orthodoxy also resonates deeply in a modern context that often values personal spiritual experience over institutional religious authority.

This research also clarifies a potential misinterpretation of their use of erotic imagery. The metaphors of wine, intoxication, and physical union are not merely poetic flourishes; they are functional and necessary tools. Since the ultimate goal (*fanaa*, union) is beyond rational description, the poets must draw from the most intense and overwhelming experiences available to human consciousness—romantic love and physical ecstasy—to

point toward it. The "tavern" is not a literal call to hedonism but a symbolic space where the ego, like reason, is dissolved.

A limitation of this study is its reliance on translated texts, which inevitably lose some phonetic, rhythmic, and cultural nuance. Furthermore, the dataset, while significant, represents a selection of their vast corpora. Future research could expand this analysis to include a larger number of poems or employ a more computational linguistic approach to analyze metaphor density and semantic fields on a broader scale. Additionally, a comparative study of the musical traditions associated with their poetry—*qawwali* for Rumi and *kirtan* for Meera—could yield further insights into how their message is embodied and transmitted.

In conclusion, this paper argues that Meera Bai and Rumi are best understood not merely as Hindu or Muslim saints, but as master cartographers of the human soul. They mapped a path to the Divine that is paved not with dogma, but with the transformative and disruptive power of all-consuming love. Their poetry serves as both the map and the vehicle for this journey, demonstrating that the highest spiritual attainment is found in the radical surrender of the self, a truth that continues to echo across cultures and centuries.

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This research aligns with but significantly expands upon previous scholarship. Scholars like Annemarie Schimmel (1975) and A.J. Alston (1980) ^[1] have provided deep exegeses of Rumi and Meera respectively within their isolated traditions. This study builds on their work by creating a direct dialogue between them. It supports the theoretical framework of comparative mysticism advocated by scholars like William James and Evelyn Underhill, who argued for perennial commonalities in mystical experience across cultures. However, it moves beyond theory by providing a concrete, textual analysis that illustrates *how* these commonalities are expressed poetically.

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Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has argued that Meera Bai and Rumi are best understood not merely as Hindu or Muslim saints, but as master cartographers of the human soul. Through a comparative analysis of their poetry, this study has demonstrated a profound convergence in their mapping of the mystical path. Both poets champion a journey fueled by an all-consuming, transformative love (*bhakti/ishq*) that actively critiques and moves beyond institutional religious orthodoxy. They identify the agonizing pain of separation (*viraha/firaq*) not as a failure, but as an essential, purifying catalyst for spiritual seeking. Ultimately, they point toward the same ineffable destination: the ecstatic annihilation of the individual ego (*atmanivedana/fanaa*) in union with the Divine Beloved.

Their chosen medium—lyrical, music-infused poetry rich with earthly metaphor—was not accidental but fundamental to their project. It allowed them to translate an transcendent, subjective experience into a language of the heart that remains universally accessible. The enduring and cross-cultural resonance of their work today is a testament to the power of this approach. They offer a timeless vision of spirituality that is deeply personal, emotionally authentic, and radically inclusive, proving that the most potent critique of dogma is not a counter-argument, but an ecstatic song of love. Their legacy is a powerful reminder that the pursuit of the Divine, in its highest form, is a path of breaking boundaries—whether social, religious, or of the self.

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