

The Manichaean *Living Self* Reflected in Persian Mystical Poetry

Omid Behbahani

Introduction

The Living Self, as part of the divine entity imprisoned in Matter, is a defined concept in the Manichaean mythological terminology. The essence of this concept, adopted and adapted in Iranian Mysticism and reflected in the words of Persian poets, is the focus of this article. After introducing the concept of Living Self, I will bring some examples of Rumi, Hafez, and a few modern Persian poets to demonstrate the continuity of ancient beliefs in classical and modern Persian poetry.

Manichaeism, founded in the third century CE by Mani, borne in Babylonia (a province of Persia at the time), once flourished in the ancient world and claimed followers from North Africa to China for over a millennium. It was adopted as the state religion by Uygur kingdom (762-840 CE). “In China the religion was proscribed in 863, but although persecuted it survived there at least until the 14th century.”¹

¹Mary Boyce: *A Reader in Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian, Textes et Mémoires*, vol. 2 (Téhéran, Liège: Bibliothèque Pahlavi, 1975), 4.

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As a dualistic religion, Manichaeism suggested an ongoing struggle between the forces of Good and Evil in the Universe. It was also an eclectic religion that provided a synthesis of previous religions, schools of thought and their mythology such as Gnosticism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism. Mani set out his teaching in an elaborate and complicated mythology.

The Manichaean Myth of Creation

In the beginning there were two separate realms: The Paradise of Light and the Hell of Darkness. The Paradise of Light is ruled by a supreme god, called the Father of Greatness. It is unbounded, uncreated, and eternal. Its substance is the Five Light Elements: Ether, Air, Light, Water, and Fire. Paradise is inhabited by countless Aeons², considered as powers of the Father of Greatness. There exists a goddess, the Great Spirit, presumably, the Father of Greatness' consort.

The Hell, ruled by the Prince of Darkness or Ahreman, is divided into five kingdoms, each made of the substance of darkness. It is inhabited by five kinds of devils: two-legged, four-legged, winged, swimming, and crawling. Each kind is divided into two sexes and lives in perpetual lust and strife. The Prince of Darkness is the personification of Matter.

By chance, the Devil (Ahreman) came to the boundary between the Hell and Heaven and saw, desired and invaded the Realm of Light. To protect his realm and to preserve its eternal peace the Father of Greatness evoked emanations of himself, by word, to do the battle with the powers of Darkness. These emanations are gods of Manichaeism.

In order to fight against the Darkness, three Creations of gods take place. Those of the First Creation are the Mother of Life, who evokes in turn her son, the First Man, himself a god. He, in turn, evokes his

²In Gnosticism and Manichaeism, Aeon is one of the orders of spirits, or spheres of being, that emanated from the Godhead and were attributes of the nature of the absolute, an important element in cosmology that developed around the central concept of dualism – the conflict between matter and spirit. In Persian the compound word *jān-zarreh* clarifies this meaning.

five sons, the Five Light Elements of the Paradise. With these, the First Man goes forth to fight the devils. The Light Elements are also called his *armour* and his *bait*. When the First Man is overwhelmed by the powers of Darkness, he is forced to throw the baits to distract the evil powers from Paradise. The devils swallow the Light Elements, are appeased and cease their invasion. By this act, a part of the Light has become absorbed in Darkness. This lost Light smothered by the Matter which has devoured it, suffers, and forgets its divine nature. Matter itself rejoices in the Light it has obtained, and grows to depend upon it.

The First Man, overwhelmed in the depth of Hell, remains unconscious in the battlefield. Recovering his senses, he cries out for help, and his mother, upon hearing him pleads with the Father of Greatness, who evokes the Second Creation of gods for his aid [...]. The most important of these gods is the Living Spirit. This god functions as the creator of the Universe and his sons rescue the First Man and he is led back to Paradise by the Mother of Life. According to this myth, the creation of the world is a device to rescue the Light, smothered by the Matter. The Living Spirit attacks and defeats the powers of the darkness. And then, from the bodies of the demons he has killed, he makes eight earths and from their skins, ten skies. He fetters their chiefs, alive, in the firmament. From a portion of the swallowed Light, that is still pure, he makes the Sun and the Moon. From the Light that is slightly defiled, he makes the stars. Thus, the Cosmos is made.

But the world, in this stage, is motionless and without life. The sun is standing still in the sky. The Father, then, evokes the Third Creation, which is the creation of the redeeming gods. The Living Spirit, at this stage, is called the Third Messenger and functions as the deceiver of the demons. He evokes the Maiden of Light. Then the Maiden of Light and the Third Messenger, naked, show their divine beauty to the chief demons chained in the firmament. Beholding them, the males ejaculate and their seeds fall into the water and become a huge sea-monster which is defeated by one of the sons of the Living Spirit. Parts of those seeds fall on land and form the trees and plants. The

female devils, already pregnant from the unions in Hell, miscarry, and their abortions, containing less Light than the male semen, fall to the earth and people it with the five kinds of the living creatures, which correspond with the five kinds of species of demons. At this time transmigration of souls has started. Ahriman, observing the actions of the Living Spirit, does not sit still.

In order to defeat the process of redemption, Ahriman, or Matter, personified as Greed or Desire, prompts a pair of huge demon-animals to devour the offspring of the other animals which had populated the earth; thus, they absorb all the stolen Light they possessed into their own bodies. The pair then mate and produce Adam and Eve in the likeness of the Third Messenger and The Maiden of Light. The accumulated Light in their bodies is transmitted to the first human pair and it forms their souls. In the human body, the Light Soul, called the Living Self,³ is imprisoned and mixed with the Dark Soul (material soul), made up of lust, greed, envy, hate, etc. Lust ensures that the human body will propagate itself and so makes an enduring prison for a part of the swallowed Light.

The Process of Salvation

The Living Self, which makes up the human soul, cannot be physically redeemed. Its salvation depends on a conscious effort for virtue by each individual. Prophets should be sent to mankind to bring the Gnosis, or the Heavenly Knowledge to Adam's descendants. Only with the Knowledge of Truth comes the will for redemption; but Matter always seeks to submerge the soul in the oblivion, or the sleep of drunkenness. Mani called the soul, regarding this condition, the Old

³In Manichaean texts, there are two concepts of the same nature, but with different roles and functions:

Living self, *Grīw zindag* / *Grīw rošn* (Middle Persian); *Grīw žīwandag* / *Grīw rošn* (Parthian); Living Spirit *Mīhr Yazd* (Middle Persian); and *Wād žīwandag* (Parthian). Both are considered as one god: The Living Spirit (in Platonic philosophy: The creator of the world; in Gnosticism: The Heavenly being, subordinate to the Supreme Being, that is, the controller of the material world; and in Manichaeism a synthesis of all those mentioned, functioning as the *Redeemer*, and the Living Self, as the *Redeemed*. See Werner Sundermann, *Der Sermon von der Seele: Ein Lehrschrift des östlichen* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997), 14-16.

Man and the awakened soul as the New Man. The soul itself, being essentially of Light, can commit a sin, only through forgetfulness, by which it loses the strength to withstand the Dark Soul, with which it is shut into the *corpse* of the body.

Mani taught that the soul may be incarnated many times before attaining release through the perfected virtue. The soul having been judged whether one goes to life in Heaven or back to the world, and the mixture, or to death in Hell.

The Living Spirit will then fulfil the eschatological task and imprison the Matter in an eternal prison, sealed with a great stone. And finally, the gods and the redeemed will once more behold the face of Father of Greatness, hidden from them since the struggle began.

This Manichaean myth of creation, with its Gnostic roots, was adventure-packed and, as mentioned earlier, very complicated. Yet, it was a guideline and a code of conduct for every Manichaean. The myth shows that in order to redeem the imprisoned Light, the Manichaean gods rush courageously to fight against evil in the Hell of Darkness and some are even sacrificed. Every individual Manichean had to follow the example of their gods and tried to enact that endeavour in his life. They had to refrain from helping the evil matter; constantly taking measures to purify their souls, making sure that after death, their soul leaves the cycle of incarnations, reaches the state of salvation, and flies to the Paradise of Light. This was the Manichean Nirvana. The purification of soul was the goal of every Manichaean. They regarded their soul holy, and their body unclean.⁴

Mani, supported by Shapour I of the Sassanid dynasty, embarked on propagating his religion throughout Iran. But by and by encountered the hostility of Zoroastrian priests and, finally, by the order of Shapour's son, Vahram I, was imprisoned and died in heavy chains. After Mani's death, Manichaeans endured bloody persecutions at the hands of Zoroastrians and migrated to Oxus region where they flourished. "The Arab

⁴The Manichaean myth of creation in this article is mainly taken from Boyce, *A Reader*, 4-7.

conquest of Persia in the 7th century gave a brief respite from persecution to the Manichaeans there, and some even returned from Oxus to their homes.”⁵ The political and intellectual atmosphere of the first and second century AH, especially in the beginning of the Abbasid Caliphate, provided the alternative thinkers, including Manichaeans to take part in public debates.⁶ The translation movement⁷ can be considered as the key factor to enrich the Islamic intellectual capacity by absorbing the scientific and scholarly heritage of the time, written in Greek, Syriac, Middle Persian, Indian, etc. The Persian writer and translator Abdullah Ibn Al- Muqaffa’, who translated Persian books from Pahlavi into Arabic is said to be a Zandiq, an epithet given to Manichaeans.⁸

Therefore, it is possible that such translations might have helped the ancient Iranian ideas, as well as mystical concepts to endure throughout ages in Persian literature, such concepts as:

- Kingdom of Heaven (Paradise)
- Hell of Darkness
- Two absolutely opposed principles of Good (Light/Spirit) and Evil (Darkness/Matter)
- Father of Greatness (the Supreme God)
- Ahreman (the Prince of Darkness)
- Aeons
- Demons and Angels
- Mixture of Good and Evil
- The Imprisonment of the Soul in Man’s body
- Knowledge of Truth (Gnosis)

⁵Boyce, *A Reader*, 3.

⁶حسین مفتخری و راحله ضائفی، “حیات فکری مانویان در قرون نخستین اسلامی،” فصلنامه تاریخ اسلام، سال ۸، شماره مسلسل ۳۱ (۱۳۸۶)، ۴.

⁷The Arabic Translation Movement was a widely supported movement under Islamic ruling that resulted in the translation of materials from various languages such as Middle Persian into Arabic.

⁸غلامحسین مصاحب (ویراستار)، دایرةالمعارف فارسی (تهران: فرانکلین، ۱۳۵۶)، ذیل مدخل “زندیق”.

- Longing for return to Paradise
- Perception of Light as a pure and clean substance
- Question of Man's Origin
- Unity of Man and God
- Macrocosm and Microcosm⁹
- Battle between the powers of Light and Darkness
- World Soul
- Living Self, which is the topic of this article.

These concepts and several others became a part of imagery and metaphors of many mystic poets, such as Sanai, Attar, Rumi, and Hafez, and continued to appear in the poems of the contemporary poets like Ahmad Shamlou, Sohrab Sepehri, Simin Behbahani, and Houshang Ebtehaj (H. E. Sayeh).

Rumi (1207-1273) is a world-renown poet and acclaimed Persian Sufi-master of 13th century, whose ecstatic poems have been translated into English and several other languages. The following poem can be interpreted as a question by the Living Self, directed to the World Soul. The Living Self complains of being separated from the World Soul. This may be considered as an adaptation and interpretation of the Living Soul by the Iranian Mystics:

O' Soul of the World!¹⁰

⁹Nasser Khosro (1004-1088), expresses these concepts as:

جهان مهین و جهان کهین: "وطن مر تو را در جهان برین است / تو هر چند امروزه در تیره طینی / جهان مهین را به جان زیب و فری / اگر چه بدین تن جهان کهینی / جهان برین و فرودین توی خود / به تن زین فرودین، به جان زان برینی." بنگرید به ناصر خسرو، دیوان قصاید، تصحیح مجتبی مینوی و مهدی محقق (تهران: انتشارات دانشگاه تهران، ۱۳۵۳)، جلد ۱، ۷-۱۵.

¹⁰"جان و جهان دوش کجا بودهای / نی غلطم در دل ما بودهای." بنگرید به جلالالدین محمد مولوی، کلیات شمس، به کوشش توفیق سبحانی (تهران، قطره، ۱۳۸۱)، جلد ۲، ۱۶۱۲.

Although, the more frequent form appearing in the credential editions of *Ghazaliāt-e Shams*, is *jān-u jahān*, the less frequent one: *jān-e jahān* is more suitable to the well-established idea of the World Soul. So, my interpretation considers: *jān-e jahān*.

Where hast thou been last night?
 Nay, wrong I am
 Thou hast been in my heart [...]
 Thou art the mirror
 The colour reflected on thee, is just an image
 Thou art free from any colour.¹¹

The following line of Rumi's poem may be interpreted as the imprisonment of the souls in the material world and their separation from the Paradise,¹² just like the Five Elements of Light being devoured by Matter in the Hell of Darkness, as the Manichaeon myth indicates. In this poem, Rumi calls on the World Soul to help rescue the souls from the "battlefield" (material world), in the same way the Living Spirit did. This can also be interpreted as the Living Self¹³ who asks the World Soul¹⁴ for redemption from the material world:

As the souls from the spiritual world are imprisoned in the earth¹⁵
 Come and redeem these souls from the battlefield in the earth¹⁶
 And take them as the spoils of war!

The following verses are brought to attention in the translation of *Masnavi*, amongst the best known and most influential works of Sufism. In the following lines, a reed-flute is the metaphor for the lamentation of the Living Self:

¹¹English translation by A. Tahami (unpublished).

¹²Paradise in this poem is called: *jahān-e rūh* (the Spiritual World).

¹³In Persian Mystical literature, the Manichaeon concept of Living Self can be interpreted as *nafs* which after acquiring the knowledge of Truth becomes "jān," longing to return to its divine origin. This is what F. W. Nietzsche calls *Der Geist* (See Also *Sprach Zarathustra*, www.pileface.com, 156).

¹⁴The World Soul or the Cosmic Soul /*Die Weltseele*. See Sundermann, *Der Sermon von der Seele*, 14-16. This is what is meant by Iranian Mystics as: *jān-e jahān*.

¹⁵In the original verse: *āb-u gel* (water and earth) is a metaphor for Matter.

¹⁶"ز جهان روح جانها چو اسیر آب و گل شد / تو زدار حرب گلشان برهان و غارتی کن." بنگرید به مولوی، کلیات شمس، جلد ۱، ۱۰۱۶.

Hearken the reed-flute, how it complains,¹⁷
 Lamenting its banishment from its home:
 “Ever since they tore me from my reed-bed
 My plaintive notes have moved men and women to tears,
 I burst my breast, striving to give vent to my 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 [...]”¹⁸

The poem of the reed-flute is in 35 couplets and all of the lamentation of the soul, being far away from its origin.

Hafez (1315-1390) is one of the greatest Persian poets in the eyes of Iranians. If just one book of poetry is to be found in a Persian home, most likely that book is his *Divān* (the collected poems). Many of Hafez’s verses have become proverbial sayings.

In the following poem, we can see the complaint of the Living Self, trapped in the cage of body, and is waiting for the moment of death to be released:¹⁹

The dust of my body is the veil of the (true) Beloved’s face:
 O happy that moment when from off this face, the veil I cast!
 Not fit for a sweet singer like me, is the cage (of the world) like this
 To Rizvān’s rose-bed²⁰, I go; for the bird of that sward am I²¹

The concepts of the imprisonment of the Living Self in the prison of

¹⁷بشنو از نی چون حکایت می کند / وز جداییها شکایت می کند. “بنگرید به جلالالدین محمد مولوی، مثنوی معنوی، تصحیح محمد استعلامی (تهران: زوار، ۱۳۷۵)، جلد ۱، ۹.

¹⁸*Masnavi i Ma’navi: Book I*, trans. E. H. Whinfield (Ames, Iowa: Ophaloskepsis, 2001), 3.

¹⁹حجاب چهره جان میشود غبار تنم / خوشا دمی که ازین چهره پرده برفکنم. “شمسالدین محمد حافظ، دیوان، تصحیح محمد قزوینی و قاسم غنی (تهران: انجمن خوشنویسان، ۱۳۶۸)، ۲۶۶.

²⁰An allusion for Paradise.

²¹*The Divan-i Hafiz*, ed. and trans. Clarke H. Wilberforce (Bethesda: Ibex Publishers, 1997), 661.

body and its belonging to the kingdom of Heaven is revealed in another poem by Hafez:²²

Openly, I speak; and of my own utterance, heart-happy—am I:
Love's slave, I am; and of both worlds, free am I.
The bird of holy rose-bed (paradise), am I. Explanation of separation
(from paradise) what shall I give,
(And) into this disaster's snare-place, how I fell?
The angel, I was; and loftiest paradise was my abode:
Into this ruined cloister (this world), me, Ādam brought.²³

Ahmad Shamlou (1925-2000) is one of the most influential poets and writers of modern Iran.

This short poem of Shamlou can be interpreted as a dialogue between the Living Spirit (the World Soul and the creator and controller of the Macrocosm), and the Living Self (the suffering imprisoned Light in the human body, or Microcosm):

– Where are you?²⁴
In the boundless expanse of this world,
Where are you?
– I am standing on the farthest point of the world:
By your side.
– Where are you?
In the impure stretch of this world
Where are you?
– I am standing on the most impure standpoint:

²²فاش میگویم و از گفته خود دلشادم / بنده عشقم و از هردو جهان آزادم. "بنگرید به حافظ، دیوان، ۲۴۵.

²³*The Divan-i Hafiz*, 703.

²⁴تو کجایی؟ / در گستره بی مرز این جهان / تو کجایی؟ "بنگرید به احمد شاملو، مجموعه آثار (تهران: نگاه، ۱۳۸۴)، ۸۱۷.

On the side of this grand grass washing river

Singing for you.²⁵

Sohrab Sepehri (1928-1980), the notable Iranian poet and painter who is particularly famous for his mystical poems which demonstrate an atmosphere free of envy, greed, egoism, and brutality. In the following poem, titled “Water,” we can find a metaphor for light, love, and purity:

Let's not muddy the water:²⁶

Perhaps a pigeon is drinking in a distance

Or perhaps in a further thicket a goldfinch is washing its feathers

Or a pitcher is being filled in a village²⁷

Simin Behbahani (1927- 2014) was a prolific Persian poet and writer. She was especially known for creating modern *ghazals*. A selection of her poems is translated into by Farzaneh Milani and Kaveh Safa.²⁸ Simin was nominated twice for the Nobel Prize in Literature (1999 and 2002), receiving many literary accolades around the world.

In the following poem Simin, in a state of imagination, talks about the vision of Buddha, who invites her to the transcendental world, and she finally is joined to God, at the Kingdom of Heaven:

Risen from ebony and night²⁹

my Buddha-like hallucination

Takes me away from this world

with opened, inviting arms

²⁵Translated into English by A. Tahami, (unpublished).

²⁶آب را گل نکنیم / در فرودست انگار، کفتری میخورد آب. “بنگرید به سهراب سپهری، هشت کتاب (تهران: طهوری، ۱۳۶۳)، ۳۴۵-۳۴۷.

²⁷Translated into English by A. Tahami (unpublished).

²⁸Simin Behbahani, *A Cup of Sin: Selected Poems*, ed., trans. Farzaneh Milani and Kaveh Safa (New York Syracuse University Press, 1999).

²⁹برآمده از آبنوس و شب، توهم بودانشان من / گشوده دو بازو به دعوتم / ربنده مرا از جهان من. “بنگرید به سیمین بهبهانی، مجموعه اشعار (تهران: نگاه، ۱۳۸۲)، ۷۶۳-۷۶۴.

The echo of bagpipe from that world
laud with the melody of “my beloved, my beloved!”
Tempting my motionless soul to curve like a dancing snake
dancing with that melody
Opening the door of this small house³⁰
showing the unbounded land
Handing over the wideness of Nirvana to my soul
The silky dusk is my gown
The stars are the ornaments of my skirt
How loveable am I
having received so many presents!
My traverse on the carpets of light
My ascension over the staircase of the clouds
My accession on the throne of the Sun and the Moon
My glory, my Paradise
My body: the accumulation of Aeons
A germless image
as your hands with the light and the breeze passed over my bones
Behold!
He is at my side!
Behold!
The conjunction of that Sun and this Moon.³¹

³⁰An allusion to the *material world*.

³¹Translated into English by A. Tahami (unpublished).

Houshang Ebtehaj (b.1928) wrote under the pen-name Sayeh. His beautiful poems are sometimes so eloquent that one may think they are written by Hafez (and sometimes by Rumi):

Good news!³²

The beloved embraced me

I became his shadow he took me to the sun

I am the soul of whatever can be seen or felt

I am both crying and laughing

The embraced soul I am,

as the beloved embraced me!

I am the Ka'ba

I am the Qibla

Come and pray towards me

as the beloved embraced me

The pleasant vision of him

Was shining in my eyes

Two mirrors reflected on each other

I saw him, he saw me!

I am a naked beam of light

I am a redeemed soul

You will not see me anymore

As I am not his shadow anymore!³³

³²مژده بده مژده بده یار پسندید مرا / سایه او گشتم و او برد به خورشید مرا. "بنگرید به هوشنگ ابتهاج (ه. الف. سایه)، آینه در آینه: برگزیده شعرها (تهران: چشمه، ۱۳۶۹)، ۱۲۵-۱۲۶.

³³Translated into English by A. Tahami (unpublished).

These lines were only a few instances among the treasures of Persian mystical poetry to represent the evidence of ongoing and vivid mystical motifs found in them. In this way, the Modern Persian poets, as well as their classical predecessors– Rumi, Hafez, and many others – reached an intuitive awareness and ecstasy to bind the Buddhistic concept of Nirvana and the Manichaeian belief of imprisonment of the soul in man’s body to the Sufi concept of annihilation in God.³⁴ And similarly, the concept of the Living Self, surviving in the collective memory of Iranians, goes on living.

³⁴*Fana’ fi Allah*: The Sufi teaching of passing away from worldly reality and being made subsistent in divine reality. See under *BAQĀ’ WA FANĀ’*: <http://www.iranicaonline.org>,

نیز بنگرید به دایرةالمعارف فارسی، ذیل ”فنا“.



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