



Rumi's Teachings in Indian Children's Literature

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Abstract: Rumi, one of the most influential spiritual poets in history, has left a profound impact on readers worldwide with his teachings of love, unity, and self-awareness. However, while Rumi's works are widely available for adult audiences, there has been a noticeable scarcity of children's literature in India that introduces young readers to his wisdom. This paper explores two significant works that address this gap: the picture book *What Shape is an Elephant? Rumi* published by Katha India, and the two-volume comic series *Sufi Comics-Rumi* by Sufi Studio. These adaptations creatively introduce Rumi's teachings to children through visually engaging and accessible formats, offering valuable spiritual lessons. Both works contribute significantly to the spiritual and moral development of children, promoting cross-cultural understanding by presenting Rumi's teachings alongside Indian and Islamic traditions. This paper highlights the potential for further exploration of Rumi's teachings in children's literature, through interactive books, animations, and school curricula, suggesting that these platforms can provide even more dynamic ways for future generations to engage with Rumi's timeless wisdom.

Keywords: Rumi, children's literature, spiritual wisdom, comics, teachings.

I. INTRODUCTION

Jalal-Ud-Din Muhammad Balkhi (1207–1273), commonly known as Rumi, one of the greatest Persian mystical in world history, has inspired countless readers with his teachings of love, and unity. His wisdom transcends cultural and religious boundaries, resonating deeply across the globe, including India, a country with its rich spiritual traditions. Rumi's magnum opus, *Mathnavi-Manavi*, is a six-volume poetic masterpiece that offers deep insights into human nature, spirituality, and the path toward divine love. Through parables, fables, and spiritual teachings, the *Mathnavi* guides seekers on their journey to transcend the ego and union with the Divine. Rumi's influence extends far beyond the Islamic world, with his poetry being translated into numerous languages. His universal messages of love, tolerance, and peace resonate deeply in both Eastern and Western traditions.

Rumi's poetry has been translated into numerous languages around the world, including English, Russian, German, Italian, French, Bengali, and many others. Over the years, Indian scholars and poets have played a significant role in interpreting and commenting on Rumi's works, translating his poetry into Indian languages such as Bengali, Hindi, Malayalam, Sindhi, Urdu, Punjabi, and more. These translations have taken various forms, including plays, biographies, and other creative adaptations. Numerous books and articles have been written over time, exploring Rumi's life and philosophy—ranging from biographies to fictional works inspired by his teachings—across different languages and formats.

Despite the wide availability of literature on Rumi for adults, there has been a notable scarcity of books that introduce his teachings to children in India. However, in recent years, important efforts have been made to address this gap, particularly through three children's books: the picture book *What Shape is an Elephant? Rumi* published by Katha India, and the two-volume comic series *Sufi Comics-Rumi*, published by Sufi Studio, Bangalore. These works mark a promising beginning in conveying Rumi's timeless spiritual wisdom to young readers, using creative and visually engaging formats.

II. INTRODUCING RUMI THROUGH A PICTURE BOOK

In 2005, Katha India, one of the foremost children's book publishers in the country, took the significant step of introducing Maulana Rumi's teachings to young Indian readers with the publication of *What Shape is an Elephant? Rumi*. It is based on the famous parable *The Elephant in the Dark Room* from Rumi's *Mathnavi*, this book plays a pioneering role in bringing Rumi's ideas to children through a story that is both accessible and culturally resonant.

Katha India has long been recognized as a leader in children's book publishing, with a focus on translating stories, folklore, and mythology from Indian regional languages into Hindi and English. They believe in the importance of narrating Indian stories to create a generation rooted in their culture. Not only do they bring stories from across India, but they also collaborate with international artists to share stories and folklore from around the world, including countries like Japan, Taiwan, Germany, Africa,

France, and Iran. This global outreach underscores Katha's dedication to nurturing a well-rounded and culturally aware readership.

What Shape is an Elephant? Rumi is a visually stunning illustration of Rumi's fable about perception. The narrative follows a group of Indians who bring an elephant into a dark room to exhibit. As different people touch the animal, each forms a wildly different impression of what an elephant is based on the part of the body they touch. One man touches the trunk and believes the elephant is like a water pipe, another touches the ear and says it is like a fan, while others compare it to a pillar or a throne. The story emphasizes that these different perspectives are not wrong, but limited. If only they had lit a candle, they would have realized that they all perceived the same truth from different angles. This fable teaches the important lesson that what we often perceive as differences between us are merely different ways of looking at one and the same truth. The book's beautifully rendered illustrations help young readers grasp this profound concept, guiding them toward a deeper understanding of unity and perception.

One of the main strengths of *What Shape is an Elephant? Rumi* lies in its ability to connect Rumi's fables to Indian spiritual traditions. The story mirrors the famous Indian parable *The Blind Men and the Elephant*, found in both Buddhist and Jain traditions, as well as Hinduism. This parable, which can be traced back to the *Udana*, a Buddhist text¹, exists in various forms across these religious traditions, making Rumi's story especially resonant for Indian readers. This cultural overlap makes the story immediately relatable to Indian readers, enhancing its impact. By anchoring Rumi's philosophy in familiar narratives, Katha provides young readers with an opportunity to engage with Sufi teachings without feeling alienated by foreign cultural elements. Moreover, the story's central message that different perspectives on truth often lead to misunderstanding gently introduces children to the idea of unity and the importance of seeing beyond superficial differences. The philosophical depth of the original Mathnavi story is simplified but remains intact, offering an ideal entry point for children to begin exploring deeper concepts of perception, truth, and self-awareness. As a result, the book succeeds in conveying Rumi's core message in a format suitable for a younger audience.

For this picture book, Katha collaborated with the Iranian artist Feeroozeh Golmohammad, an Iranian miniaturist, illustrator and writer. She has been illustrating children's books for more than three decades. She has won many national and international awards. This artistic collaboration between Katha and Iranian miniaturist Feeroozeh Golmohammad adds another layer of depth to the book. The detailed and vibrant illustrations, rendered in the Persian miniature painting style, captivate young readers while maintaining the authenticity of the cultural and historical context in which Rumi wrote. Golmohammad's art, known for modernizing Persian miniature traditions, complements the storytelling with intricate visuals that bring the tale to life.

The images enhance understanding and engage children's imagination, making Rumi's spiritual wisdom not just understandable but also memorable. The art serves as both a teaching tool and a visual feast, helping children to visualize the lessons being taught. This combination of text and illustration allows young readers to understand complex ideas through both visual and verbal storytelling.

What Shape is an Elephant? Rumi is a significant milestone in Indian children's literature. By choosing a simple story with profound meaning, Katha India has taken a crucial first step toward introducing Rumi's rich spiritual heritage to a new generation. The book serves as an invitation for further exploration, opening the door for more works that adapt Rumi's teachings for children. As it stands, *What Shape is an Elephant? Rumi* encourages curiosity and reflection, making it a valuable tool for early childhood spiritual education.

III ENGAGING CHILDREN WITH RUMI'S TEACHINGS THROUGH THE POWER OF VISUAL STORYTELLING: *SUFI COMICS-RUMI*

Comics, with their vibrant imagery and sequential storytelling, are an immensely popular medium among young readers. Recognizing this, Sufi Studio, a Bangalore-based Indian comics publisher, founded by brothers Mohammad Ali Vakil and Mohammad Arif Vakil, is the first in India to illustrate Sufi teachings through comics. Their two-volume series *Sufi Comics-Rumi*, released in 2014 and 2017, creatively presents Rumi's spiritual wisdom in a format that is both educational and engaging. In addition to *Sufi Comics-Rumi*, they have also published *40 Sufi Comics* and *The Wise Fool of Baghdad* among others, all featuring anecdotes and historical events from the Islamic world that impart spiritual lessons.

The unique strength of *Sufi Comics-Rumi* lies in its ability to convey deep spiritual lessons through a format that naturally appeals to children. By blending narrative, poetry, and visual art, the series successfully introduces children to Rumi's teachings in a way that feels approachable and engaging. Each chapter includes a poem by Rumi, presented alongside the English translation and a corresponding story. These stories, drawn from Rumi's Mathnavi, are illustrated in a Turkish-Iranian miniature style, reflecting the historical and cultural ambiance of 13th-century Persia.

What sets this comic series apart is its capacity to blend entertainment with spiritual education. Children are drawn into the stories by the vivid artwork and the engaging plots, but at the same time, they are learning valuable lessons about humanity, love, and unity. The success of the comic format in conveying Rumi's teachings lies not only in its accessibility but also in the powerful use of visual storytelling. The sequential art helps children follow complex narratives with ease, allowing them to engage with the characters and scenarios more deeply.

¹ Trinath, Mishra, *Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi*, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Government of India, 2010, Delhi, p.149.

The first story, *The Tattoo Artist*, opens with the thought-provoking question: “If you are irritated by every rub, how will you be polished?”² It tells the tale of a man who visits a barber to get a lion tattoo, but repeatedly stops the barber because he cannot bear the pain. Frustrated, the barber exclaims that he has never heard of a lion without a tail, head, or stomach, noting that even God has never created such a creature. The story is richly illustrated and conveys the message that one must endure discomfort and challenges in order to cleanse the soul and grow.

The second story, *Keep Your Dragon in Snow*, begins with the quote: “Pride is a deadly sin.”³ It tells the story of a young hunter who proudly brings the frozen body of a dragon to the city, claiming to have killed it. However, the dragon begins to thaw in the city’s heat and eventually awakens, swallowing the hunter entirely. This story serves as a powerful metaphor for one’s lower self, which, like a frozen dragon, will resurface if not kept under control. The story warns that one’s ego or lower self can never be fully defeated and must always be managed carefully.

Another famous story, *A Quarrel About Grapes*, is particularly relevant today, as it addresses conflicts that arise from misunderstandings between cultures and religions. In the story, a man gives a Turk, a Greek, a Persian, and an Arab a coin, and each wants to use it to buy grapes. However, because they do not understand each other’s languages, they start arguing, each assuming the others want something different. This story highlights how ignorance and lack of communication can lead to unnecessary conflict, reminding readers of the importance of understanding and knowledge.

These stories are filled with vivid illustrations that depict both the humor and the profound moral lessons of Rumi’s tales. These visuals serve as an essential bridge between the teachings of Rumi and the everyday experiences of young readers. The attention to detail in both art and storytelling ensures that the spiritual and philosophical depth of Rumi’s work is maintained, while still being presented in a format suitable for children. The use of symbolic imagery, such as the dragon in *Keep Your Dragon in the Snow*, allows children to engage with deeper metaphors without being overwhelmed by the philosophical concepts. This careful balance between depth and accessibility makes *Sufi Comics-Rumi* an effective tool for introducing children to Sufi philosophy.

Sufi Comics-Rumi represents a valuable contribution to the growing space for spiritual and philosophical comics in India. While Indian comics have traditionally focused on mythology, history, and fantasy, this series carves out a niche for Sufi literature, providing children with an opportunity to engage with spirituality in a fresh, visually appealing way. The success of this comic series points to the potential for further exploration of Sufi teachings in Indian children’s literature, highlighting that comics can be a powerful tool for conveying complex spiritual ideas in a format that is both fun and meaningful.

Both *What Shape is an Elephant?Rumi* and *Sufi Comics-Rumi* serve as excellent examples of how children’s literature can be used to nurture spiritual and moral development. By introducing children to Rumi’s teachings at an early age, these works help lay the foundation for a lifetime of reflection on concepts such as self-awareness, humanity, and the pursuit of truth. The philosophical depth of Rumi’s teachings, while complex, is rendered accessible through these adaptations. Both the picture book and the comic series simplify Rumi’s wisdom into narratives that children can understand, without losing the essence of his message. This is particularly important in early childhood education, where stories are often used as vehicles for conveying moral and ethical lessons. The simplicity of the language, combined with the profoundness of the themes, allows children to reflect on their own experiences in relation to the lessons being taught.

Another significant advantage of these works is their capacity to promote cross-cultural understanding. By presenting Rumi’s teachings alongside Indian spiritual traditions and Islamic teachings, both books encourage children to appreciate the commonalities between different cultures and philosophies. This approach not only helps children develop a sense of spiritual curiosity but also fosters empathy and respect for diverse perspectives a crucial skill in today’s interconnected world.

The publication of *What Shape is an Elephant?Rumi* and *Sufi Comics-Rumi* marks the beginning of what could be a much larger movement to bring Rumi’s teachings to children in India. There is vast potential for further adaptations of Rumi’s stories, perhaps through interactive digital books, animated series, or inclusion in school curricula. These platforms could offer even more immersive ways for children to engage with Rumi’s wisdom, allowing them to explore his teachings in ways that are dynamic, reflective, and culturally relevant.

CONCLUSION

The introduction of Maulana Rumi’s works into Indian children’s literature is a significant achievement, one that paves the way for deeper engagement with his teachings among younger generations. Both *What Shape is an Elephant?Rumi* and *Sufi Comics-Rumi* successfully translate Rumi’s complex spiritual ideas into formats that are accessible, visually engaging, and culturally resonant. These works not only introduce children to valuable philosophical lessons but also encourage them to explore the universal themes of love, unity, and self-awareness that lie at the heart of Rumi’s poetry. As Indian children’s literature continues to evolve, there is immense potential for Rumi’s presence to grow, offering future generations a gateway to his timeless wisdom.

² Vakil, Mohammad Ali, Mohammad Arif Vakil, and Tanzilur Rahman, editors. *Sufi Comics-Rumi*. Sufi Studio, 2014, Bangalore, India, p.p.17.

³ Vakil, Mohammad Ali, Mohammad Arif Vakil, and Tanzilur Rahman, editors. *Sufi Comics-Rumi*. Sufi Studio, 2014, Bangalore, India, p.p.29.

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