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ORIGINAL STUDY

Rhythm as Ontology: Rethinking Rūmī's Concept of Samā between Sufi Praxis and Contemporary Performance Theory

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ABSTRACT

This article reconsiders the role of music, rhythm, and samāᶜ in the thought of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī by moving beyond their conventional classification as symbolic or auxiliary elements of Sufi spirituality. While existing scholarship has predominantly framed Rūmī's intellectual legacy around metaphysical love, ethical universalism, or mystical pedagogy, rhythm and embodied movement have been mainly treated as representational or secondary devices. This study challenges that tendency and argues that samāᶜ in Rūmī constitutes an ontological domain in which being is disclosed through movement rather than conceptual abstraction.

The article's originality lies in its theoretical repositioning of samāᶜ as a mode of knowing and being rather than a ritualized aesthetic expression. Drawing on close readings of the *Masnavi* and the Dīvān-e Kabīr, the study demonstrates that rhythm in Rūmī functions as a generative structure that mediates between cosmology, temporality, and corporeality. Furthermore, the article extends its analysis to contemporary digital and performative representations of Rūmī, arguing that modern visual circulation often flattens the ontological depth of samāᶜ by transforming lived movement into consumable spectacle (Han, 2017).

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary framework that integrates hermeneutic textual analysis with contemporary performance theory and philosophies of time. By situating Rūmī within current debates on embodiment, temporality, and performativity, the article positions Rūmī not as a historical mystic confined to a religious tradition but as an enduring theoretical interlocutor whose thought remains critically relevant to modern discussions of meaning, body, and time.

Keywords: Rūmī, Samāᶜ, Rhythm, Ontology, Embodiment, Performance theory, Temporality

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Introduction

Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī occupies a singular position in both Islamic intellectual history and global cultural consciousness. His works have been translated into numerous languages, incorporated into diverse cultural frameworks, and frequently mobilized in contemporary discourses of spirituality, ethics, and intercultural dialogue. Yet this global circulation has also produced a selective emphasis: Rūmī is often approached primarily through themes of love, tolerance, and mystical transcendence, while the structural components of his thought—particularly rhythm, movement, and embodiment—remain under-theorized (Schechner, 2013, pp. 58–61).

Within dominant strands of Rūmī scholarship, samāᶜ is typically interpreted either as a symbolic ritual expressing metaphysical truths or as a cultural manifestation of Sufi devotion. Such interpretations, while valuable, implicitly assume that meaning precedes movement—that rhythm merely represents an already-constituted truth. This assumption overlooks a more radical possibility embedded in Rūmī's writings: That truth itself emerges through movement, and that rhythm is not an expression of ontology but one of its primary conditions.

This article departs from representational readings of samāᶜ and asks a different question:***What if samāᶜ in Rūmī is not merely a symbolic representation of being, but an embodied mode through which being is disclosed and experienced?*** (Turner, 1969, pp. 94–97).

This shift in perspective requires rethinking rhythm not as an aesthetic accessory, but as a philosophical problem. It also demands an approach that moves beyond strictly theological or literary frameworks.

The central argument advanced here is that samāᶜ functions in Rūmī's thought as an ontological field in which being, time, and body intersect. Rather than conveying metaphysical doctrines through allegory, rhythm operates as a mode of disclosure—one that privileges lived temporality and embodied experience over conceptual abstraction. From this perspective, knowing is inseparable from movement, and understanding emerges not through contemplation alone but through participation.

By foregrounding rhythm and embodiment, this study seeks to reposition Rūmī within broader theoretical conversations concerning ontology, temporality, and performance. In doing so, it challenges the tendency to treat Sufi practices as pre-theoretical or merely devotional phenomena and instead argues for their relevance as sites of philosophical insight.

Literature review and statement of contribution

Scholarship on Rūmī is both extensive and interdisciplinary, spanning fields such as Islamic studies, comparative mysticism, literary theory, and religious philosophy. Foundational studies have emphasized Rūmī's metaphysics of love, his articulation of divine unity, and his ethical vision of spiritual transformation (Chittick, 2005, pp. 26–27). Within this corpus, samāᶜ and music are often acknowledged, yet typically framed as pedagogical tools or symbolic expressions of inward states.

A parallel strand of literature has emerged in recent decades that presents Rūmī as a global icon of spirituality, frequently detaching his thought from its philosophical and ritual grounding. Han (2017, pp. 23–31) and Schechner (2013, pp. 58–61) time is not treated as a neutral container. While these approaches have contributed to Rūmī's international visibility, they often reduce samāᶜ to an aestheticized performance, reinforcing a separation between spiritual meaning and embodied practice.

More specialized scholarship has examined the relationship between samāʿ, music, bodily movement, and the Mevlevi tradition. Zekrgoo (2012), for instance, analyzes musical and dance metaphors in the Masnavi and emphasizes the symbolic and spiritual functions through which music and samāʿ orient the practitioner toward self-transcendence and divine reality. Studies of the Mevlevi tradition have similarly approached samāʿ through its musical, ritual, and performative structures. Shokouhi et al. (2018) examine the role of music within the Mevlevi āyin as a constitutive element of mystical practice, while Feldman (2022) reconstructs the historical development of Mevlevi musical and choreographic forms, demonstrating the complex relationship between samāʿ, musical structure, and embodied ritual. Together, these studies establish that sound and movement are not peripheral to the Mevlevi tradition but central to its historical and experiential formation.

Recent work has further drawn attention to the embodied and spatial dimensions of Sufi turning. Greeley (2022), for example, interprets the structured movement of the turning body as a practice capable of transforming ordinary space into a site of mystical encounter. Such approaches move significantly beyond purely textual accounts of Rūmī by taking embodiment, movement, and performance seriously. Nevertheless, their primary analytical concerns remain ritual function, mystical experience, sacred space, musical structure, or symbolic meaning. What remains less developed is an explicitly ontological account of rhythm itself: An inquiry into whether rhythmic movement merely expresses an antecedent metaphysical truth or participates in the constitution and disclosure of being. It is at this point that the present study intervenes, treating rhythm not simply as a vehicle of mystical experience but as a generative structure through which temporality, embodiment, and knowledge become mutually constituted. Against this background, the specific gap addressed by this article concerns the ontological status of rhythm in Rūmī's thought. Existing scholarship has established the ritual, musical, symbolic, and experiential significance of samāʿ (Zekrgoo, 2012, pp. 1–14; Shokouhi et al., 2018, pp. 75–88; Feldman, 2022, pp. 57–84) and has also illuminated important dimensions of embodied Sufi turning (Greeley, 2022, pp. 108–119). Yet comparatively less attention has been given to rhythm as a constitutive philosophical category. The question pursued here, therefore, is not simply what samāʿ represents or what spiritual states it facilitates, but how rhythmic movement may itself function as a mode through which being, temporality, and knowledge are disclosed. By shifting the analytical emphasis from the symbolic meaning of movement to its ontological productivity, this study develops an account of samāʿ as embodied knowing rather than merely as the representation of an already constituted metaphysical reality.

Nevertheless, the primary analytical concerns of these studies remain ritual function, mystical experience, sacred space, musical structure, or symbolic meaning. Although they substantially deepen our understanding of samāʿ as an embodied and performative practice, they leave open the philosophical question of how rhythm itself might function within the relation between movement, temporality, and being.

This article addresses that gap by proposing three key interventions:

A. ***Conceptual Reorientation:*** It reconceives samāʿ not as a symbolic ritual but as an ontological mode through which being is enacted.
B. ***Interdisciplinary Framework:*** It places Rūmī in dialogue with contemporary performance theory and philosophies of time, particularly those that foreground process, duration, and embodied action.
C. ***Critical Contemporary Extension:*** It examines how digital and performative representations of samāʿ alter its ontological significance, transforming experiential knowledge into visual spectacle.

By making these interventions, the article contributes not only to Rūmī studies but also to broader debates on embodiment and performativity. It argues that Rūmī's thought offers a conceptual resource for rethinking how meaning emerges through movement – an issue of pressing relevance in an age increasingly defined by disembodied digital experience.

Theoretical framework: Rhythm, time, and embodiment

This study approaches rhythm not as a musical or aesthetic device but as a philosophical problem. In contrast to representational models that regard rhythm as a formal pattern imposed upon substance, the framework adopted here understands rhythm as a mode through which being unfolds temporally. Such an approach allows for a re-reading of Rūmī in which samāᶜ emerges as an ontological field rather than a ritual symbol.

Within this framework, time is not treated as a neutral container in which movement occurs, but as an intensive process constituted by movement itself. Bergson (2001, pp. 98–103) Rūmī's language repeatedly resists static temporality; his metaphors privilege circulation, turning, and transformation. Rhythm thus appears as the means by which time becomes perceptible and meaningful. Rather than marking repetition, rhythm produces difference through recurrence, enabling the emergence of new states of being within the continuity of motion.

Embodiment is central to this conception. Rūmī's discourse does not separate knowledge from corporeal experience; instead, it situates understanding within movement. The body, in this view, does not merely carry meaning but generates it. Merleau-Ponty (2012, pp. 203–210) Samāᶜ epitomizes this logic: Knowing occurs not through discursive explanation but through participation in rhythmic action. Theoretical models that oppose reason to movement or contemplation to performance fail to account for this structure.

From the perspective of performance theory, samāᶜ can be understood as a practice in which ontology is enacted rather than represented. Performance here is not reducible to spectacle or display; it is a space of transformation in which habitual relations between self, time, and world are suspended. Schechner (2013, pp. 28–35) Rūmī's insistence on turning (dawrān) reflects this suspension. By entering rhythmic motion, the subject detaches from linear temporality and enters a field of intensified presence.

This framework enables a reading of Rūmī that situates him within global debates on embodiment and temporality, without anachronistically imposing modern categories on his thought. Rhythm functions as a conceptual bridge, allowing samāᶜ to be understood simultaneously as Sufi praxis and as a philosophical articulation of being-in-motion. The ontological significance attributed to rhythm in this study therefore rests on the convergence of temporality, embodiment, and enactment. Rhythm is temporal because it exists only through unfolding duration rather than as an instantaneous object; it is embodied because its patterns become meaningful through corporeal participation; and it is performative because its significance emerges in enactment rather than remaining external to it. Samāᶜ brings these dimensions together: The moving body does not simply represent a metaphysical proposition but inhabits a temporality in which repetition, difference, and transformation are experienced as a continuous process. In this sense, rhythm may be understood as a mediating structure between abstract metaphysical claims and embodied experience. The term "ontology," as employed here, consequently does not imply that rhythmic movement literally produces existence itself. Rather, it designates the mode through which being is disclosed, experienced, and rendered intelligible within embodied

temporal practice. This distinction is crucial to the argument: Samāᶜ is ontological not because movement creates being ex nihilo, but because movement becomes a condition through which being is encountered and known.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology that integrates close textual analysis with theoretical inquiry. Rather than pursuing historical reconstruction or ethnographic observation, the research focuses on conceptual structures internal to the texts and their contemporary rearticulation.

Three methodological components are employed:

1. ***Hermeneutic Textual Analysis:***
2. Selected passages from the Masnav*i* and the Dīvān-e Kabīr are examined with attention to metaphors of sound, movement, rotation, and rhythm. The analysis is grounded in the original Persian text, with published English translations consulted where appropriate, in order to preserve semantic and conceptual nuance.
3. ***Conceptual Analysis:***

Key concepts - rhythm, embodiment, temporality, and movement—are analyzed across disciplinary boundaries, enabling a dialogue between Sufi thought and contemporary theory.

4. ***Critical Representational Analysis:***

Modern performative and digital representations of Rūmī and samāᶜ are examined to assess how ontological dimensions are transformed through aestheticization and visual circulation. This combined approach allows the study to remain textually grounded while extending its implications beyond the historical context of Rūmī's writings. The textual corpus is delimited to selected passages from the Masnavi and the Dīvān-e Kabīr in which sound, listening, rotation, dance, repetition, and movement function as conceptually significant motifs. Passages were selected purposively rather than exhaustively, on the basis of their relevance to the article's central analytical categories of rhythm, temporality, embodiment, and becoming. The analysis proceeds in two stages: First, each passage is interpreted within its immediate poetic and Sufi conceptual context; second, the conceptual implications of its imagery are examined in relation to the theoretical categories developed in this study. Particular attention is given to whether movement functions merely as metaphorical representation or assumes a constitutive role in the production of meaning and knowledge. This procedure does not seek to establish a comprehensive account of rhythm across Rūmī's entire corpus; rather, it uses theoretically salient passages to develop and test the article's proposed interpretation of samāᶜ as an ontological and embodied mode of knowing.

Close readings: Rhythm and becoming in the Masnavi and the Dīvān-e Kabīr

Listening as ontological entry (Masnavi)

The opening verse of the *Masnavi* famously begins with an imperative to listen:

بشنو از نی چون حکایت می‌کند

از جداییها شکایت مي کند.

Bishnav az ney chon ḥekāyat mī-konad

Az jodā'ī-hā shikāyat mī-konad

(Rūmī, Masnavi, I:1, Nicholson ed., 1995)

"Listen to the reed, how it tells a tale, complaining of separations."

Interpretations often emphasize separation and longing, framing the reed as a metaphor for the human soul. While valid, such readings risk overlooking the epistemological significance of the command to listen. Knowledge does not begin with seeing or reasoning but with auditory receptivity. Sound, carried by breath and rhythm, precedes conceptualisation.

Listening here is not passive reception but an ontological entry point. Sound unfolds in time; it cannot be grasped instantaneously. To listen is to submit to duration. Rhythm thus becomes the medium through which meaning arises, situating understanding within temporal flow rather than abstract cognition.

Rotation and knowledge (Masnavi)

Elsewhere, Rūmī links movement directly to the maintenance of existence:

چون ز گردش باز ماند آسمان

تنگ گردد عرشه کون و مکان

Chon ze gardesh bāz mānad āsemān

Tang gardad 'arṣa-ye kawn o makān

"If the heavens were to cease their rotation, the realm of being and space would constrict."

Here, motion is not an accident of creation but its condition. Stasis equates with ontological collapse. Knowledge, by implication, requires movement; to stop is to lose access to being. *Samāʿ*, as embodied rotation, materializes this principle in human experience. The passage presents cosmic motion not as an incidental feature of creation but as integral to the continuity of the order created: The imagined cessation of rotation is associated with constriction rather than stability. Read within the conceptual framework developed in this article, this imagery allows movement to be interpreted as more than a metaphor for change. It suggests a cosmological pattern in which continuity depends upon motion. The epistemological significance attributed to this pattern should therefore be understood interpretively rather than as an explicit doctrinal statement by Rūmī. If being is poetically imagined through ceaseless movement, embodied participation in movement can be read as one possible mode of encountering that dynamic order. Samāʿ, understood in this sense, does not reproduce cosmic rotation literally; rather, the turning body gives experiential form to a broader Rūmian imagination of existence as movement, transformation, and relational continuity.

Dance and universality (Dīvān-e Kabīr)

The Dīvān-e Kabīr intensifies this logic by extending rhythm to the entirety of existence:

در رقص آیید که جانها همه در رقص آیند

کان جهان را نبود آن سر که چنین نخرامد

Dar raqṣ āyīd ke jān-hā hame dar raqṣ āyand

Ka'n jahān rā nabovad ān sar ke chenīn nakharāmad

(Rūmī, Dīvān-e Kabīr, ghazal 14, 2007 ed.)

"Come into the dance, for all souls come into the dance; This world has never been without such movement."

Dance here is not expressive ornamentation but ontological inclusion. To exist is to participate in rhythm. Meaning does not precede motion; it emerges through it. The invitation to dance is thus an invitation to being. This article departs from.

Repetition as difference

A recurring misunderstanding of samāᶜ concerns repetition. In Rūmī, repetition does not entail sameness. Each turn reproduces difference within continuity. This logic aligns with rhythm understood as generative recurrence rather than mechanical repetition. Knowledge, like motion, deepens through reiteration, not accumulation.

The digital age, performance, and the crisis of representation

The contemporary reception of Rūmī increasingly unfolds in digital and performative environments. From staged samāᶜ performances shared online to algorithmically circulated images of whirling bodies, Rūmī's thought is now mediated through visual repetition and instantaneous consumption. While such circulation amplifies accessibility, it simultaneously transforms the ontological status of samāᶜ (Schechner, 2013, pp. 102–110). The discussion of digital representation offered here should be understood as a theoretical extension of the article's textual analysis rather than as a systematic empirical study of particular digital platforms or audiences. This distinction is important because digital mediation does not simply reproduce live performance in another format; it can reconfigure relations among performance, embodiment, temporality, space, and spectatorship (Auslander, 2008; Dixon, 2007). Scholarship on digital religion likewise demonstrates that religious practices and materialities are not merely transferred online but are reshaped through the technological and representational conditions of digital environments (Campbell & Connelly, 2020, pp. 471–486). From this perspective, the relevant question is not whether digital representations of samāᶜ are inherently less authentic than embodied practice, but how mediation alters the conditions under which samāᶜ is encountered. A recorded or digitally circulated performance may preserve and extend access to samāᶜ while simultaneously transforming its temporal, corporeal, and spatial dimensions. The critical issue, therefore, concerns which aspects of embodied and participatory knowledge are retained, transformed, or diminished when samāᶜ is encountered predominantly through visual mediation.

When samāᶜ is encountered primarily through digitally circulated images or recordings, aspects of its experiential and temporal density may be displaced as embodied participation is reconfigured into visual observation. Rotation becomes an object to be consumed rather than a process to be inhabited. This shift reintroduces a strict separation between performer and observer—precisely the division that samāᶜ disrupts in Rūmī's thought. What was once a participatory mode of knowing becomes a representational image.

From the perspective developed in this article, this transformation is not merely aesthetic but ontological. Rhythm, when reduced to visual repetition, loses its generative function. Movement no longer produces knowledge; it illustrates an already-codified identity. The digital image freezes motion into legibility, erasing the indeterminacy through which meaning emerges.

Performance theory helps clarify this rupture. While performance entails transformation through enactment, spectacle privileges display. In many contemporary appropriations, samāᶜ shifts from the former to the latter. The re sult is not misinterpretation but flattening: A reduction of ontological depth into symbolic currency.

Yet this crisis should not be understood as cultural decline. Instead, it reveals the enduring critical relevance of Rūmī's thought. By confronting a digital condition defined by fragmentation, acceleration, and disembodiment, samāᶜ serves as a counter-model—a practice rooted in duration, repetition-as-difference, and embodied presence.

Discussion

The analyses presented across this article collectively argue that Rūmī's conception of samāᶜ cannot be adequately understood within representational or symbolic frameworks alone. Rhythm, as articulated in both the Masnavi and the Dīvān-e Kabīr, functions as a generative principle through which being is disclosed. Movement is not secondary to meaning; it is its condition.

This recognition repositions Rūmī within contemporary theoretical debates. His thought intersects with discussions of embodiment, temporality, and performativity, offering a non-dualistic alternative to models that oppose intellect to body or theory to practice. What emerges is an ontology of motion in which knowing unfolds through participation rather than reflection alone.

These findings extend existing interpretations of samāᶜ by shifting the analytical emphasis from what movement symbolizes to what movement does within the production of meaning. Scholarship emphasizing the spiritual and symbolic significance of music and dance in Rūmī has demonstrated that samāᶜ cannot be separated from processes of mystical transformation (Zekrgoo, 2012, pp. 1–14), while historical studies of the Mevlevi tradition have shown how musical and choreographic structures became constitutive features of its ritual formation (Feldman, 2022, pp. 57–84). Research on Sufi turning has further demonstrated the importance of bodily movement and spatial experience in the production of mystical encounter (Greeley, 2022, pp. 108–119). The present analysis builds upon these approaches but proposes a further conceptual step: Rhythm can be understood not only as the medium through which mystical meaning is expressed or experienced, but as a temporal and embodied structure through which meaning itself becomes possible.

This interpretation also clarifies the relationship between Rūmī's poetic language and the contemporary theoretical concepts employed in this study. Bergson's account of duration and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment are not presented here as intellectual influences on Rūmī, nor is Rūmī retrospectively assimilated into modern European philosophy. Rather, these theoretical perspectives function as comparative analytical tools that make visible a shared philosophical problem: The inadequacy of understanding time, body, and meaning as static or separable categories. Read in this way, Rūmī's imagery of listening, movement, repetition, and dance offers a historically distinct articulation of a problem that contemporary theories of temporality and embodiment approach through different conceptual vocabularies.

The interdisciplinary lens employed in this study enables a re-evaluation of Sufi praxis as a site of philosophical production. *Samāᶜ* operates not as a supplement to doctrine but as an epistemic event. Such a view challenges the marginalisation of embodied knowledge within both philosophical and religious studies.

Moreover, the critique of digital representation extends the article's relevance beyond Rūmī scholarship. In an era in which images and algorithms increasingly mediate meaning, the ontological stakes of rhythm and embodiment acquire renewed urgency. Rūmī's insistence on lived movement confronts the abstraction and commodification characteristic of digital modernity.

Conclusion

This article has argued that music, rhythm, and samāᶜ occupy a central position in Rūmī's intellectual system, not as aesthetic embellishments or symbolic rituals, but as ontological conditions through which being is enacted and known. By foregrounding movement, duration, and embodiment, Rūmī articulates a mode of thought that resists conceptual closure and privileges process over representation.

The study contributes to existing literature by reframing samāᶜ as an ontologicalfield rather than a cultural artefact, situating Rūmī within contemporary theoretical conversations on performance and temporality, and critically examining the implications of digital mediation. In doing so, it demonstrates that Rūmī's relevance extends beyond spiritual discourse into the philosophical inquiry of how meaning emerges through movement. Several limitations define the scope of this study and indicate directions for further research. First, the argument is developed through purposively selected passages from the Masnavi and the Dīvān-e Kabīr rather than through an exhaustive analysis of Rūmī's corpus; the proposed ontology of rhythm should therefore be understood as an interpretive framework rather than as a claim to represent the totality of Rūmī's thought. Second, the dialogue established with contemporary theories of temporality, embodiment, and performance is comparative and heuristic, and does not imply historical influence or conceptual equivalence between Rūmī and modern theoretical traditions. Finally, the discussion of digital mediation is theoretical rather than based on systematic empirical analysis of platforms, performances, or audiences. Future research could test and extend the framework developed here through broader textual comparison, ethnographic research on contemporary samāᶜ practices, and empirical analysis of how digitally mediated performances are produced, circulated, and experienced across different cultural contexts.

Ultimately, samāᶜ appears not as a relic of premodern mysticism but as a radical reminder: To know is to move, and to move is to participate in being. In an age captivated by images of motion, Rūmī calls us back to motion itself (Schimmel, 1992, p.107).

AI usage statement

The author declares that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the conception, writing, analysis, interpretation, or preparation of this manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The author have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Author contribution

This article was written exclusively by the author, acting alone and based on the necessary research; there has been no contribution from any other individual.

Data availability

The datasets generated during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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