CHAPTER THREE

PHALLOCENTRIC ESOTERICISM IN THE TALE OF THE SLAVE GIRL WHO SATISFIED HER SEXUAL URGES WITH HER MISTRESS’S DONKEY

In this Chapter, the tale of the slave girl and the donkey (V:1333–1429), one of the most vulgar tales in the Mathnawī, will be analyzed. I will begin with a summary of the tale and then proceed to examine the interpretive possibilities initiated through the instability of the subject and different subjective positions of interpretation in this tale. Of particular interest will be Rūmī’s use of linguistic resources like metonymy for unsettling the erroneous literalization of symbolic formations that are used for the purpose of communicating esoteric symbols. I will argue that in this tale the phallus is the signifier of esoteric secrets, i.e., the phallus functions as an esoteric symbol. Conversely, when this esoteric symbol is literalized in the form of the penis, it could be conceptualized as a fetish. Related to the hidden nature of esoteric symbols, the paradox of disclosure and concealment (that the secrets cannot be openly divulged or completely dissimulated) will also be discussed.

Summary of the Tale

The tale begins with a slave girl who had trained a donkey to engage in sexual intercourse with her in the manner of men. The author informs us that the slave girl would slide a gourd over the penis (kīr) of the donkey to prevent it from fully penetrating and injuring her during intercourse. The donkey becomes thinner every day, because his time of feeding and resting is spent in the sexual act with the slave girl. The mistress of the house, the owner of the donkey, becomes concerned about the state of the donkey and begins to investigate the reason for its thinness. She finds her slave girl satisfying her sexual urges with it. Having become sexually excited and jealous herself, she sends the slave girl away and begins to engage in the sexual act with the donkey. However, not having noticed the important protective function of the gourd used by the slave girl, she dies in the process. Against this background, Rūmī warns the reader against the harms of unrestrained sexual urges, which he argues,
are from eating. Therefore one has to eat less or to get married. The tale then turns to the discussion that on the spiritual path, the external forms are only “borrowed.” Knowledge of the external forms is an incomplete knowledge that, like a snare, traps heedless birds. Complete knowledge is the knowledge of the secrets of the inner meanings that is possessed by a true master. One cannot become a master simply by observing the external forms alone, as the mistress’s mistake of seeing the external form and missing the important fine point of the gourd demonstrates. There are many hypocrites who fool others with what they have learned of external forms. They have pretensions of mastership after learning just a few things from a master. Like parrots they are unaware of their own speech, for they have learned only the external form.

The Instability of the Subject: A Lacanian Approach

DiCenso identifies the contiguity of the Lacanian critical interrogation of the attributes and function of the ego with religious thinking when he states: “I believe this contiguity with religious thinking is most important for understanding the Lacanian subject.”¹ What is the “Lacanian subject,” and how is it relevant to an understanding of the subject in the tale of the slave girl and the donkey? In The Subject of Semiotics, Kaja Silverman identifies the “subject” as a semiotic construction that cannot be understood apart from signification, discourse and the Symbolic order. Silverman credits Emile Benveniste with recognizing the importance of signification in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis and dividing the subject into a speaking subject and a subject of speech.² To this dual association Silverman adds a third, which she calls the “spoken subject.”³ Her primary concern is with the cinematic text, thus the spoken subject for her denotes the “projected viewer” whom she locates “in front” of the discourse, in contrast to the speaking subject who is “behind” the discourse. The cinematic model is not unrelated to an analysis of Rūmī’s representational strategies in some of his tales, as more than one pornographic tale lent itself to visual representation.

¹ DiCenso, The Other Freud, 123.
³ Silverman, The Subject of Semiotics, 198.