

The Concept of the Other World in Homer's *Odyssey* and Rumi's *Mathnawi*: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract: In this paper, we have examined the ancient Greek and Islamic mysticist understanding of the concept of the other world and compared these two utterly opposite yet unique approaches. In his monumental work called *Odyssey*, the ancient Greek poet Homer proposed a vision of the other world. In Homer's depiction, the other world is a space in which souls flow ever-lastingly without any purpose. When they get in contact with alive humans, they complained about their situation. Jalal al-Din al-Rumi, on the other hand, represents the Islamic mysticist approach to the concept of the other world and deviates from Homer from head to toe. For Rumi, this world is transient and illusory, humans reside here as guests, and they belong to the here-after because their souls are created in the other world. In his work called *Mathnawi*, Rumi speaks with the language of love and invites people to worship God. Loving God and his Messenger is his wings to the realm of meanings in the other world. In summary, Homer and Rumi both represent their cultures' understandings of another world, and their depictions have almost nothing in common. By examining and comparing their views and poems, we have intended to illustrate a vast array of cultures and how they interpret the concept of the other world.

Keywords: Homer, Rumi, other world, mysticism, depiction.

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Homeros'un *Odysseia*'sı ve Rûmî'nin *Mesnevî*'sinde Öteki Dünya Kavramı: Karşılaştırmalı Bir Analiz

Öz: Bu çalışmada, antik Yunan ve İslâmî tasavvufî öteki dünya anlayışını inceledik ve bu birbiriyle taban tabana zıt ancak özgün yaklaşımları karşılaştırdık. *Odysseia* isimli muazzam eserinde, antik Yunan şairi Homeros öteki dünyaya dair bir tasvir sunmuştur. Homeros'un tasvirinde, öteki dünya ruhların bir amaç olmaksızın durmadan aktığı boş bir âlemdir ve bu ruhlar insanlarla iletişime geçtiklerinde hallerinden şikâyet ederler. Öte yandan, Mevlânâ Celâleddîn Rûmî, İslâmî tasavvufî öteki dünya tasavvurunu yansıtmakta ve Homeros'tan baştan ayağa ayrılmaktadır. Mevlânâ'ya göre, bu dünya fâni ve aldatıcıdır, insanlar burada misafir olarak ikamet eder ve aslında öteki dünyaya aittirler çünkü ruhları orada yaratılmıştır. *Mesnevî* isimli eserinde, Mevlânâ sevgi diliyle konuşur ve insanları tek olan Allah'a imân etmeye davet eder. Allah'ı ve onun Resûlünü sevmek onu ahirette manâlar âlemine uçuran kanatlarıdır. Hülâsa, Homeros ve Mevlânâ kendi kültürlerinin öteki dünya anlayışları yansıtmaktadır ve onların tasvirlerinin neredeyse hiçbir ortak yönü yoktur. Bu görüşleri ve şiirleri inceleyerek ve kıyaslayarak, geniş bir kültür havzasının öteki dünya kavramını nasıl yorumladığını yansıtmayı hedefledik.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Homeros, Rûmî, öteki dünya, tasavvuf, tasvir .

Introduction

The concept of another world has been interpreted differently by various peoples, under the influence of factors ranging from religion to culture. Since the understanding of another world of a people affects many aspects of everyday life, it requires research and contemplation. In this paper, we have taken Homer and Maw-lana as the representatives of their cultures, and by examining and comparing their views, we intended to reveal some components of the notion of the other world.

1. The Notion of the Other World in Homer's *Odyssey*

Regarding the life of Homer, seven different narrations have found their way into modern times.¹ According to the common acceptance, he was born somewhere between the 8th and 9th centuries. Besides his reputation as a great literary artist, little is known about him. However, his influence on Western thought is unquestionable.² Before Homer, the ancient Greeks did not have a holy book, as Christians have the Bible and Muslims have the Koran. His writings provided a religious and cultural identity. His poems titled *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which bestowed him the enormous fame he has today, continue to inspire modern-day humans' imagination and artworks.³

After narrating a short phase of the Trojan War in his unpredictable classic *Iliad*, Homer told the story of the Achaean hero, Odysseus, in his monumental work called *Odyssey*.⁴ *Odyssey* is an epic poem consisting of 24 books, narrating how the king of Ithaca, Odysseus, went back to his home after the Trojan War. The tale starts with Odysseus's effort to escape the island, where he was

¹ Maarit Kivilo, "The Archaic Biography of Homer," *Studia Humaniora Tartuensia*, no. 2 (2001): 1–5.

² Geoffrey S. Kirk, "Homer: Greek Poet," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 14, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Homer-Greek-poet>.

³ Elton Barker and Joel Christensen, *Homer: A Beginner's Guide* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2013).

⁴ Michael Silk, "The Odyssey and Its Explorations," in *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*, ed. Robert Fowler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 31–44.

captivated by a nymph named Calypso.⁵ This splendid work illustrates universal themes like a homecoming, hospitality, temptation, fate, and free will.⁶ The universality of the main themes creates a timeless piece of art to be enjoyed by readers from all ages and lands. Moreover, the attitude of the main character, Odysseus, throughout the tale and his craftiness offer a beautiful reading experience and practical admonitions.⁷

As various artworks represent various approaches to center terms of life, Homer's ground-breaking work called *Odyssey* provided a unique interpretation of death and another world.⁸ In the 11th book of the *Odyssey*, Homer takes us to the underworld, which surprisingly is not under anything but just an empty place far away. Furthermore, unlike other depictions of another world, we do not witness any judgment, punishment, or reward in Homer's underworld.

The underworld is more like a gray area where the souls of the dead flow aimlessly. Following the advice of Circe, Odysseus decided to visit the underworld to get in contact with Tiresias, hoping that he would help him make up with Poseidon. Odysseus performed a ritual to get in contact with the dead people. He had a chance to have long and poignant conversations with the male heroes of the ancient past, besides taking an excellent piece of advice from Tiresias. In one of these conversations, the greatest warrior of the world, hero of the Trojan war, Achilles, states that he would rather live the life of a slave under a cruel master instead of dying as a hero. He confidently expressed that he would abandon his short and glorious life, dramatic fall in the war, and reputation as a great hero, to be alive, even if it is a life of a miserable slave who has to do the menial works of others for a living. This statement of Achilles underscored the value of life and illustrated how

⁵ Naomi Blumberg, "Odyssey: Epic by Homer," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, September 23, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Odyssey-epic-by-Homer>.

⁶ Agathe Thornton, *People and Themes in Homer's Odyssey* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁷ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1997).

⁸ Jasper Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009).

death is worse than any other thing in the eyes of an ancient Greek.⁹

Another thing to notice is that, during his visit to the underworld, Odysseus also ran across a former companion of him, Elpenor, who passed away a while ago in the tale, and his body was left for decay. When Elpenor saw Odysseus, he begged for him to find and bury his body. Considering ancient tales mirror the traditions and values of the people, this incident gives us a clue about the importance of a burial ritual in ancient Greek life.¹⁰ Although the concept of the afterlife underwent significant alterations over time, Homer's *Odyssey* hints at the value of living and the undesirability of death and the afterlife in the ancient approach.

In the ancient world, the pollution of death was a significant issue. The dead was considered as a source of contamination, not in terms of hygiene but rather spiritual contamination. Death was not allowed in holy places like temples because it was accepted as repulsive to Gods. Relatives, close friends, and anyone who touched the corpse were automatically contaminated, and the process of grief was shaped under a specific law (Retief & Cilliers, 2010).

2. The Notion of the Other World in Rumi's *Mathnawi*

Mawlana Jalal al-Din al-Rumi was born in a city called Balkh, located in Khorasan, in CE 1207. He is the founder of one of the leading Islamic mysticist cults named Mawlawîyah. Besides being an influential Sufi, he also is a majestic poet and scholar.¹¹ His celebrated work called *Mathnawi*, consisting of 25.700 couplets, transmitted in 6 volumes, was put down on paper in Persian by his successor Husam al-Din Chalabi.¹²

Mawlana illustrates the realm of his heart in this ravishing

⁹ Homer, *The Odyssey*.

¹⁰ Homer, *The Odyssey*.

¹¹ Reşat Öngören, "Mevlânâ Celâleddîn-i Rûmî" (Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2004), 441.

¹² Semih Ceyhan, "Mesnevî," in *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi* (Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2004), 326.

work. Even if the writing style is poetic, the primary end is not creating art or the poem itself. He aimed to tell the truth about human beings and guide people to the truth. Rumi speaks with the language of love and invites people to worship the one and only God. In this sense, *Mathnawi* unquestionably has a religious nature. Loving God and his

Messenger is his wings to the realm of meanings in the other world. According to Rumi, the nuanced soul of the human is downhearted ever since he was taken away from the sacred state and brought to this material world; he wants to arrive at his genuine home, which is the other world, namely, the sweet hereafter.¹³

From the perspective of *Mathnawi*, life is only worth living with and for divine love. Death is a moment where one gets rid of all the limitations and shades of the material world. Getting ready for this moment is a lifelong process.¹⁴ One has to see the actual aspects of this world and turn away from its illusory facades; hence he can achieve the absolute happiness which can only be attained with salvation in the other world. Furthermore, Mawlana used the notions of the cage, dungeon, and dark and gloomy house as a simile for the body because the Creator trapped the soul into a body made of clay. As the body is made of clay, it is in its hometown. However, the soul is feeling homesick, as it belongs to the hereafter. That is why, for Mawlana, death is a moment of reunion, even a wedding night where one meets the lover.¹⁵

As Mawlana states, this transient and illusory world is a prison for the believer, and death is a moment of emancipation that allows one to go back to where one truly belongs, the hereafter. With death, the seashell, the meaningless body, the vessel dies; however, the pearl remains, namely, the soul.¹⁶ Attaching great

¹³ Kerim Zemâni, *Şerh-i Mesnevî-i Ma'nevî* (Tahran: İntişârât-ı İttılâât, 1382).

¹⁴ F. Asiye Şenat Kazancı, "Mevlana'nın Ölüm Algısının Kur'ânî Arka Planı," *Şarkiyat İlmi Araştırmalar Dergisi*, no. 11 (2009): 67-79.

¹⁵ Mevlânâ Celâleddîn Rûmî, *Mesnevî-i Şerîf*, ed. Süleyman Nahîfî (İstanbul: Sufi Kitap, 2014).

¹⁶ Shahbaz Mohseni, "Mevlana'nın Nazarında Ölüm," trans. Tuğberk Uğurlu, *Tarih Kültür ve Sanat Araştırmaları Dergisi* 5, no. 1 (2016): 92-101.

importance to the hereafter does not necessarily mean that one should completely abandon this world. In line with the Quranic view, this world is considered as a field where one sows seeds, carries the harvest to the mill of the hereafter. All the deeds of this world will turn back in the hereafter as the voice echoes on top of a mountain.¹⁷ During life, one dies many times, metaphorically, as the maturation process continues. Compared to other deaths, the actual death which takes one to the homeland and beloved God is so much more desirable.¹⁸

Conclusion

Moving from a passage taken from the *Odyssey*, we have asserted that ancient Greeks may have viewed another world as an undesirable, meaningless and empty space. Further to that, the great importance attached to life may have encouraged them to gravitate towards positive sciences and philosophy. Jalal al-Din al-Rumi, on the other hand, represents the Islamic mysticist approach to the concept of the other world and deviates from Homer from head to toe. For him, what matters is the other world, and one has to strive to arrive there with relief in the heart.

After all, we may conclude that religious, social, and cultural factors affect the understanding of the other world. In this paper, we have intended to illustrate a vast array of cultures and how they interpret the concept of the other world by examining two of the prominent approaches, Homer's avoidant interpretation, and Mawlana's spiritual understanding. With this comparative analysis, we aimed to encourage readers and former researchers to contemplate the various layers of the concept of the other world.

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¹⁷ Rûmî, *Mesnevî-i Şerîf*.

¹⁸ Rahman Moshtagh Mehr and Kadir Turgut, "Mevlânâ'ya Göre Varlık ve İnsan Hayatı Kavramı II," *Şarkiyat Mecmuası*, no. 20 (2012): 173-95.

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