

Diwan al-Layla wal-Majnuun:
a poetic tale of love

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PREFACE

for Diwan al-Layla wal-Majnuun

If you just want to skip this preface and head to the main text, go for it...

Layla and Majnuun (or “Layla and Majnun” as it is more often written in the West) is cherished as a classic throughout the world. In Arabic, Layla means “night” and Majnuun means “mad man.” So one could rightly translate the title as “The Night and The Madman,” which speaks powerfully to major themes in the tale. This story of love has a renowned place in the lore of Arabic and Persian literature, but is even celebrated in other cultures. From its ancient roots even to today, it continues to touch people deeply in the core of their hearts. Yet it has only received limited recognition in the West outside of scholarly and spiritual circles.

Simply put, it is a story of pure love. A love which is beyond what words and concepts can fully describe. Yet this is exactly what has drawn so many storytellers, poets, and readers to this tale: the invitation to strive for something that cannot be attained in order to sate an intimate yearning within we cannot deny. This speaks to one of the beauties of love for those who are genuine and sincere. Love draws us to be “something” beyond what we are, as confined by the limitations of our identities. Yet this “something” is not only closer to what we truly are, it is the only Reality that is.

We are but a drop within the Endless Ocean of Reality and love seeks to draw us into relationship with that. But we are often too selfish and entrapped in the facades of this drawing to realize the purity of love. Like shadows striving to hold on to the objects that are producing them, we resist relinquishing the objects to become (dissolve into) pure light. Not so for Layla and Majnuun. Despite immense and prolonged suffering and hardships, their love remains pure - even as madness becomes one of the facades flowing over their love. This purity has lured poets and storytellers throughout the ages to the tales of these lovers, offering the chance to capture and share portions of love’s pure fragrance for those who present or are audience to these tales...

Those familiar with the story of Layla and Majnuun need not the repetition of an overview. And for those encountering it for the first time, it may be better to embrace this story of virgin love with a “virgin” mind free from forecasting the story. (Feel free to dive into the main text right now, you can always come back and read this later.) But since there are various versions of this tale, with a range of plot streams and outcomes, it is worth mentioning the framework I used.

I utilized English translations of the Persian version written by Nizami Ganjavi (transliteration: Nizaamii Ganjavii), in particular Rudolph Gelpke’s translation. Nizami was a Sufi poet born in the twelfth century A.D., and I do not hesitate to refer to him as a spiritual and literary master. His version of Layla and Majnuun is regarded as a masterpiece, one of the greatest works in Persian literature. I follow his plot structure and elements of his approach in composing a “new” adaptation.

The story of Layla and Majnuun has roots in the Arab oral tradition, so there is no single fixed version. And, as is one of the characteristics of this tradition, different versions of the same story may vary not only in detail but also in emphasis depending on the storyteller's intentions. Nizami draws from this diversity of accounts to formulate a renowned rendition of this tale, at times weaving disconnected stories and elements into a coherent whole. Being a Sufi, he also threads spiritual and mystical undercurrents into the themes and plot in ways that speak to those "who have ears to hear." So if you just want an earthly story of love, his version offers that. If you're drawn deeper into a space of spiritual metaphors, his version offers that too without imposing on those not interested in such. And if you're drawn even deeper into the quest to dissolve the ego into the uncompromising Reality of Love, his same version offers that too. This quality of unimposing layers within the text is something I strove for with the version I share.

Nizami's version is also written in long poem form, as are some of the other noted versions of Layla and Majnuun. He approaches this story as an epic, in span and length, and utilizes stories within the main story and a poetic playfulness evoking expansive exploration. This differs from some modern streams of poetry which strive to be more terse and concise. It also differs from some prose versions of this legend which capture the themes of the story but with less inclination to delve deep into the sea of metaphors, symbolism, and deeper meanings. Following Nizami's example, I dive into the pool of long form poetry, hoping my dances within the waters haven't gone too deep that some readers drown. But if you do, hopefully closing the book will suffice as a life jacket that brings you back to the surface...

I must also add that sometimes the story of Layla and Majnuun is referred to as an Arabic (or Persian) Romeo and Juliet. This is an over-simplistic comparison. Yes, there are some similarities and common ground: both are tragic tales of virgin lovers that play heavily upon poetry. But the scope of Layla and Majnuun (particularly within the hands of Sufi poets like Nizami) goes much further than Shakespeare's wonderful play: they occupy different realms within the universe of world literature.

Lastly, let me address some editorial issues. Since this tale has its roots in Islamic Arabia, I chose to maintain some of the Arabic and Islamic references in this version. For example, I use the Arabic word "allaah" (often written as "Allah") in the text instead of using the term "God" which is how it is sometimes translated into English. Some Arabic terms and names are italicized in the text, with brief definitions given in the glossary at the end. Also, I do not use capitalization in this text, which is in keeping with Arabic language. Initial words of "sentences" (poetic phrasings), names, titles, etc. are presented all in lower case. With the format being poetry, neither do I confine the text to standard sentence structure; sometimes I bend, or even break, the rules of grammar. I utilize commas and quotation marks throughout but, for the most part, refrain from punctuating the text with periods and question marks. The overall structure and arc of the text follows that of a novel expressed in the form of poetic verse.

With that said, I admit I may have bitten off more than I can chew, but hopefully not at the expense of this endearing story of Layla and Majnuun. I also apologize in advance for any editorial mistakes I did not catch. Any mistakes in this work please blame on my human imperfections. But for all that is good and "hits the mark," give all the credit for that to the Most

High.

In Surrender and Peace,

nashid

Nuun. By the pen and that which they write,
Thou art not, by the Grace of thy Lord, a *majnuun* (a madman).
And lo! thine verily will be a reward without end.
And lo! thou art of a tremendous character.
Soon thou wilt see and they will see
Which of you is afflicted with madness.

Surah 68 *Al-Qalam* (The Pen), Verses 1 - 6
translation from the Glorious Qur'aan

* * *

people think they love
but they know only their own ignorance

when one truly loves,
there is nothing to know
and surely no one to know it

love drowns all true lovers
to become their life
in the midst of their death

if you live to love
death is one of the requirements
even if you die before you die

until we overcome our selfishness
we cannot even begin to love...



PROLOGUE

bismillaah ar-rahmaan ar-rahiim

praise be to the beloved
who is the writer of all stories
who, with a hand in perfect stillness,
sets forth the ink of all (our) lives
these words are but traces
of inconceivable fingerprints
effortlessly imprinted
on the scrolls of life

praise be to the prophets and the masters
i rest as a contented babe
within the cradle of your guidance
let not a movement of “mine” emanate from me
let not the smallest inclination to act be “mine”
let only obedience to the blessings
of divine revelations
the beloved reveals through you
move this pen
and lead “my” life

praise be to nizami
nizami is a master
his account is the riverbed of this stream
 that pours through me
many are the accounts of this amazing tale
some blowing high as flags flapping in the wind
some buried by ages of passing gales and zephyrs
within the churned desert sands,
 grains that have forgotten
 the warmth of sunlight
 and have in turn
 been forgotten
may all the waters of this story
what is tangible, what is more subtle
be honored by this humble stream

all praise be to the beloved

○●○

PART ONE

1.

as-sayyid entered the dark hut humbly
draping the cloth back over the entrance
adjusting to dim of the candle's light
he approached with measured steps
and knelt by the elder's feet
he placed his hand on the aged knee
waiting to be greeted by the touch
of that wrinkled hand

“am i graced by a visit from *as-sultaan*,”
asked the elder

“the grace is mine
since i am thy child, oh shaykh”

“but still depressed
why should the pride of the clan of amiir
carry such melancholy”

“the wealth of this world
and its fleeting fame
are no lasting sources of happiness
all i have acquired
is like a camp fire contained by rocks
burning the grave of its own demise
 in the accumulating ashes and embers
although the flames are vibrant now
if there is no heir to keep them ablaze
they are destined to extinguish
death will not let me take
any tokens of this world beyond it”

“are you keeping your prayers”

“i have not missed a single one in months”

“and your *zakaat* {alms-giving} breathes
reports i have heard of your continuing kindness”
“yet i let not my left hand know
what the right has given

as you have taught me”

“then patience
these, with unbroken *adab* {moral character and behavior}
will not have your journey end in dismay
just as allaah has given you good fortune in business
and social affairs
trust that the beloved will grant you
the greater fortune
of a son

“as the prophet luqmaan, *alayhi salaam*,
says in the *qur’aan*
“oh my son,
keep up thy prayers
enjoin what is good
and forbid what is wrong
and persevere with patience
 whatever befalls thee
that is the steadfast heart of phenomena””

a tear dropped from the eye of as-sayyid
encouraged,
he kissed the hand of the shaykh
and said
“may allaah take my sight too
to be given just a portion of your wisdom
and may allaah grant
that one day
i will repeat these very same words
to a son of my own”

“trust in the beloved
and the beloved will see you through
allaah knows best
even what the beloved denies us
will prove to be for our benefit
if we remain obedient and sincere
yet i sense this denial is only for a season
perhaps to better prepare you,
or the world,
for the coming of a son”

* * *

the perseverance of patience
which seemed like a lock barring fate's deliverance
became the key which, over many years,
cleansed and cultivated as-sayyid's heart
to become sensitive and gentle enough
to receive the precious pearl gem placed
 within his care
doubt not the power of prayer unanswered
to mold the human being
to a greater divine intention

such that when deliverance came
and the last of the birthing wails were exclaimed
the silene of anticipation filled the home
to give audience to
the muted whimpers of an infant's cry
which was followed by
the taunt of approaching footsteps
as a servant appeared with a smile
 to inform as-sayyid
that he was now the father
 of a beautiful baby boy

the patient petitioning was now a hope fulfilled
in joy,
the verse spewed forth from his lips
words of luqmaan
which he had uttered to himself so many times
"oh my son,
though it be but the weight
 of a grain of a mustard seed
and though it be in a rock
or in the heavens or in the earth
allaah will bring it forth
behold,
allaah is the knower of the subtle,
aware"

when the father's eyes were gifted
the first sight of his son
the light of deferred affection
displaced every shadow with love's brilliance
the new father
humbled
to be made worthy

to serve as caretaker of
this newborn treasure
and all he would become

even as a babe
his smile was a blossoming miracle
already bursting forth
in unrestrained openness
so moved was the father
that he let forth the flow of his riches
to flood the streets with a grand feast
the ripples granting expensive gifts to anyone
who came to pay respects to his heir
yet this parade of giving did not end there
as the care of the wet-nurse
became a charity of its own
basking in her care
the babe drank *iimaan*,
 knowledge from the heart,
 in every swallow of milk
he absorbed gentle compassion
from every cuddle and kiss
and he was consumed with these
because he was so cute
such that the streaks of indigo
adorned to his face for protection from evil
concealed the magical dance of his soul
veiling from the unsuspecting eyes of others
the love that overflowed
through his baby breaths

a seal of his destiny
hidden in plain sight

when that first fortnight passed
and the fullness of his moon beamed
his name was given:
 qays
a testament to the fullness of his measure
a beauty that did not wane
but instead waxed firmly to its own perfection

so it was
that the first seven years were golden
with even the emergence of peach fuzz hairs

tickling his chin as a thin beard
a forecasting shadow of his deep maturity
a sign of heaven's blessings and challenges
dawning upon him
in a way he would not be able to escape
○●○

2.

it was under the tutelage of a strict task master
that his language, mannerisms, and expanding knowledge
became servants of his flourishing beauty
his words were unscathed pearls
that emerged without breaking the oyster's shell
his actions,
the illumination of these jewels
reflecting the soul concealed within

but even he had to take pause
when she appeared
the new student,
 daughter of another clan
as she walked,
it seemed as if the earth moved
to place itself under her feet
she floated about
with the flowing grace of an uplifting flower
her eyes could see,
with a penetrating innocence,
through all the veils that cover the soul
she could render the whole universe
into complete defeat
 with a simple glance
 or the bat of her eyelash
her face was the true moon,
 the only moon,
abiding in unrelenting perfection
a fullness that would not recede
and this perfection was beautifully contrasted
by the dark depths of her hair
the silk strands woven with the perfect luster
 of a raven's wing
her only blemish,
 if such a word is apt,
was the mole placed perfectly
on her naturally ruby-tinted cheek
to use the word again:
 for him,
 she was the perfect
 the perfection of perfection
 the climax of creation manifest

when the teacher asked her to say her name
oh, the perfection of perfection again:

“layla”

how perfect
the name means “night”
and with just the utterance of that
qays’ days turned into an infinite ecstatic night
wherein the stars of her presence
made resplendent the celestial expanse of his heart
he was rendered naked before her
happily with nothing to hide
although he didn’t know why

from their first encounter
their destiny began to unfold
sitting in groups of three and four
layla was placed in the same group as qays
overcome by her presence,
the teacher’s instructions were an unwanted
distraction to him
“the dignity of bedouins is our unfailing manners
and manners are part of the language of etiquette
these may seem to be trivial things,
but they are not:
these are what distinguish the people of order
from desert brutes

“so here,
with the tea
when you are poured a full cup
that means you are welcomed and can stay
so let the hosts pour full cups for your guests,
and to the brim if you really like them”

oh, fate could not wait to unveil its dance
qays, the host of his group,
looked at layla
she was his most cherished guest
what brim could contain the limit of his adoration
he set his brim to the seventh heaven
and let the tea flow
and flow it did,
over the cup’s edge
but he was oblivious to the liquid spilling over,
he was entranced by her smile

and her by his
until a chastising voice exclaimed
“qays, what are you doing”

his glance to the teacher
was only brief enough to end
the waterfall of tea
the children’s laughter was a distant echo
part of the background that did not concern him
there was nothing more important
than the ever-deepening night into which he stared
in which he felt himself disappearing
the only thing that kept him from vanishing
was her returning gaze
which reflected her soul into his

all was lost within the beauty of her eyes
yet somehow he still heard the teacher
as the next set of instructions was given
“pouring a cup halfway
is a polite way of signaling to the other party
that it is time for them to leave
so hosts,
even if you just poured them a full cup,
pour your guests a half cup
so they can move on to another group”

the other hosts proceeded
to pour half-filled cups to their guests
but nothing in the universe
could compel qays to do so to layla
those eyes,
the endless depth of the night
a moment spent elsewhere
would prove to be too much
she had to stay
so he could remain entrapped within her spell

he poured and placed before her
another cup
filled perfectly to the brim

another student’s commentary was only half-heard
but rang completely true
“teacher, i think qays is in love”

yes,
in love
drowning in the ocean of her
before he knew his breath
could be completely taken away
the whole of his being
placed completely within her hands
before he realized he could extend himself that far
and she too,
a victim of this whispering whirlwind
that spontaneously unfolded of its own accord
they had no chance to abstain
from drinking this cup filled
 which seemed to never empty
no thought or forewarning
as the nectar poured down their throats
only intoxication
only two children inebriated
by a force that would fall the strongest
 of discerning adults
 bearing sober hearts of stone
love

so together
they each drowned in the fragrance of this flower
knowing and yet not knowing
the other was also in love
they even ceased to know themselves
submerging deeper and deeper
into a magical unspoken intimacy
day by day,
 minute by minute,
 breath by breath
falling deeper into the other's heart
which was somehow within their own heart
they were consumed in oneness
and without anyone else noticing
for who would suspect that such young children
could fall so deep in love
that such beautiful innocence
could be so ensnared
in enigmas that usually reserved their hunting
for maturing youth and adults

while children play

and toil their minds with the stuff of learning
lovers drown
in the unteachable lessons of endearment
how to caress you when my hand is still afar
how to know what cannot be known
and yet know
 there is something
 upon which we impose
 the name "love"
an unfolding mystery that overshadows
what is obvious

an older qays would later write:
*"oh layla, know
though the etiquette of bedouins declareth
that a cup poured half full means
 the time of departure hath arrived
when my cup i pour before thee
i cannot help but fill it beyond the brim
every single time*

*"may our time of departure never arrive
may eternity truly never have an end
just as thou never came
but 'here' always was, is,
 and forever will be*

*"we merely found each other in each other
in the shadow of the school yard
a timeless dwelling of togetherness always existing
underneath the teacher's gaze realized"*

○●○

3.

how often is the blossoming of love
 immersed in bliss
yet seasons of blossoms
 are limited in time
are virgin lovers,
lost in the innocence of youth,
 keen to these facts
and the fact that
as love's luminosity illumines
it casts shadows upon the landscape
from which the flower blossoms rise

such is a torment of love
among a humanity that proclaims to
but does not truly honor love

rare are those who are
oblivious to torment,
 even within the ecstasy of bliss
and the bliss of love enlivens beauty
as in his heart,
 the night was unveiling
 into a night of a million glorious nights
it was incomprehensible to qays
how layla could become even more beautiful
but he was not the only one to become dumbstruck
 by her emerging grace
even other boys began
to adore the wonder of layla

he noticed
how they would vie for just a glance from her
with something unbecoming in their eyes
to witness others staring at her lustfully
put a tint of sourness
in the sweet taste of his devotion to her
within the writhing bitterness of his arising jealousy
it mattered not
that layla was no less committed to him
to qays,
another's gaze was an intrusion
upon what should be only
 the sky of his night

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