



## RUMI'S ELEMENTAL IMAGINATION: ELEMENTAL ECOCRITICAL INTERACTIONS AND AGENCY IN RUMI'S *THE MASNAVI*

Rumi'nin Elementsel Düşünce Sistemi: Rumi'nin *Mesnevi*'sinde Element  
Ekoeleştiril İlişkiler ve Eyleycilik

Dilek BULUT SARIKAYA\*

### ABSTRACT

The earth, water, air and fire are the most essential components of the universe in which the interminable process of vitality is ensured through the incitement of the magnetic attraction and interaction between the elements. Overbearing impact of the elements is not only observed in the outside physical world but also deeply felt in the inner world of human imaginations, feelings, and emotions. The medieval poet Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi's (1207-1273) *The Masnavi* opens an ample space for the elements, directing human life as well as cosmic natural events. Each element, in this respect, is embedded with a spiritual energy, called by Rumi as love, stemming from God and circulating in the universe, sparkling life and vibrancy among human and nonhuman beings. Rumi's notion of vital universe with its intentionally active elements strongly resonates with the theoretical views of elemental ecocriticism which insists on the agency and intentionality of the elements that matter significantly both in human life and the external material world. The aim of this study, accordingly, is to examine the elements in Rumi's *The Masnavi* under the critical lens of elemental ecocriticism to disclose Rumi's elemental understanding of the universe according to which the whole universe is comprised of the elements which are conceptualized as living entities and efficiently articulate forces playing actively dominant roles in the ongoing materialization of the universe.

**Keywords:** Rumi, *The Masnavi*, nature, elements, elemental ecocriticism.

### ÖZ

Elementler, evrenin son derece önemli bir parçası olup, elementler arasındaki magnetik çekim ve etkileşim bu evrendeki sürekli canlılığın devam etmesinin sağlayan en önemli unsurdur. Elementlerin baskın etkisi sadece dış dünyada değil, aynı zamanda insanın iç dünyasında, hayallerinde, duygu ve düşüncelerinde de derin bir şekilde hissedilmektedir. Ortaçağ şairi Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi (1207-1273), *Mes-*

\* Assoc. Prof., Kapadokya University, Faculty of Humanities, Department of English Language and Literature, Nevşehir/Türkiye. Email: dileksarikaya27@gmail.com. ORCID: 0000-0001-5514-6929.

nevi eserinde, insan hayatına ve kozmik doğa olaylarına yön veren elementlere genişçe yer vermiştir. Her bir element, Rumi'nin ilahi aşk olarak tanımladığı, spiritüel bir enerjiyle doludur ve bu enerji Allah'tan kaynaklanarak bütün evrene dağılır ve insan ve insan dışı canlılara yaşam ve hayat enerjisi sağlar. Rumi'nin son derece canlı evren ve içindeki aktif ve bilinçli elementler kavramı, element ekoeleştirisinin elementlere aktif, bilinçli ve eyleyici kavram olarak yaklaşımıyla örtüşmektedir. Bu nedenle, bu çalışmanın amacı, Rumi'nin *Mesnevi*'sini elemental ekoeleştirisinin teorik bakış açısıyla inceleyerek, Rumi'yi kendi zamanının çok daha ötesine taşıyan, zamansız ve ölümsüz bir düşünür olarak öne çıkaran, elementleri canlı unsurlar olarak ele alan, modern biyolojik element anlayışını ortaya çıkarmaktır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Rumi, Mesnevi, doğa, elementler, elemental ekoeleştiri.

## Introduction

The medieval Anatolian poet Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi's (1207-1273) *The Masnavi* upholds a position of paramount importance in Turkish and world literature with its endorsement of love, peace, moderation, forbearance and respect for differences. These ideals are still acknowledged to be universal doctrines connecting people across religions, nations, and races without losing their currency in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where humanity is grabbling with political conflicts, injustices, discrimination, wars, along with wide-ranging environmental problems and catastrophes. Born in Afghanistan, "in the metropolis of Balkh" in 1207 and compelled by the Mongol invasions to move to Konya in Anatolia, Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi is regarded to be timeless, spearheading poet, a genius of theology, mysticism, and Sufism, mastering in "Arabic and Persian classical and religious studies" (Thackston, 1999: vii). Konya of the 13<sup>th</sup> century offered Mevlana a convenient space and sufficient intellectual freedom to expand his philosophical, literary, and theological skills while actuating him to become "the eponymous founder of the Mevlevi Order of dervishes" (Arberry, 2008: 110). The mystical practice of Sufism is synthesized effectively in *The Masnavi* with Rumi's personal exploration of the outside universe, the impelling force of which is to find an unmediated communication and unification with God. Rumi's work, *The Masnavi* "constitutes one of the most outstanding examples of the reconciliation of religion with the ecological concerns, proposing unorthodox ideas and an all-inclusive view of nonhuman nature" (Bulut Sarıkaya, 2023a: 4).

Rumi's philosophical ruminations on the relationship between human and the universe have become a source of inspiration not only for the east-

ern but also for the western writers, poets, and philosophers. The ontological concept of love, for instance, is undergirded by Acim as a consolidating principle that brings together Rumi's "Islamic Sufism and American Transcendentalism" that is represented remarkably by Ralph Waldo Emerson (Acim, 2022: 119). The notion of unconditional love is promulgated in Rumi's *The Masnavi* as the principal deriving force governing natural elements as well as molding human's relationship with his environment, which is structured delicately on intricate connection between microcosm as a human being and macrocosm as the whole universe like "two mirrors facing each other; each contains all of the other's qualities" (Chittick, 2005: 49). The natural elements; earth, water, air, and fire are frequently called upon in Rumi's *The Masnavi* to incite human awareness of the spiritual and material conjunction of the human and nonhuman life. Contrary to the dominating human relationship to the elements which is constructed heavily upon the "domestication of the elements", the ancient classical philosophy has recognition of the elements as active actors in the composition of the outside universe as well as human body (Macauley, 2010: 2). This notion of a forceful and dynamic universe is embraced by the contemporary theory of elemental ecocriticism as well which, in Cohen and Duckert's words, intends to revive Empedoclean cosmos where "the elements themselves are vortex-spawning, without partition, from micro- to macrocosm" (2015: 3). Likewise, in *The Masnavi*, Rumi finds an elemental continuity between human and nonhuman world and a relentless process of interaction and co-shaping between each other. Although Rumi's spiritually alive and divinely ordained universe stands as a ramification of God's vital presence in the universe which is not concordant with the new materialist understanding of the universe which is inherently vital and intelligent, Rumi comprehends the universe in terms of elemental interactions between human and nonhuman world. This study, therefore, focuses on revealing Rumi's perception of an elemental connectivity between the human body as the microcosm and the outside universe as the macrocosm. Rumi's Medieval understanding of the elements as vital organisms strongly coincides with the vitalist principles of elemental ecocriticism. For this reason, it would not be inaccurate to place Rumi's 13<sup>th</sup> century masterpiece, *The Masnavi* within the conceptual framework of the 21<sup>st</sup> century critical theory of elemental ecocriticism which will offer innovative insights into Rumi's holistic notion of a vitally alive, elemental universe which is, to a great extent, in tune with his religious mysticism and Sufism.

### Elemental Ecocriticism

Regardless of humans' taking a heed of them or not, elements always prove themselves to be a matter of chief concern by playing central roles in the catastrophic natural events like earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions. Elements are everywhere, in every shape, and never stand still; they are always in an act of movement, in the middle of an event, composing human and nonhuman stories, giving birth to new conglomerations through interfusions. As Stacy Alaimo writes, elements are "the stuff of the world that crosses into the domain of culture, moves from the inorganic to the organic, from the environment to bodies and back again" (2015: 301-302). In the epoch of the Anthropocene where there is a maximum amount of human intervention into the ecosystem, thinking with the elements presents itself as an inescapable prerequisite which is not unattainable once crushing the anthropocentric barricade of traditional human exceptionalism lying at the root of humans' elemental blindness. The anthropocentric preconceptions of humans eclipse their sense of understanding the material connectivity between human and nonhuman world. Duckert, in this regard, emphasizes humans' "coexistence with the earth" by reminding that humans "have never been (solely) cerebral" and a "proper inhabitant acknowledges that there is no separation of knowing from being" (2015: 239). It is precisely noted by Duckert that thinking with elements erases humanity's self-privileged superiority and places humans and the elements together as co-existing and co-evolving beings. "Thinking elementally means thinking in terms of specific materials and components, situating human life in terms of fundamental chemical or physical components that are, in themselves, neither wholly defined by or dependent upon human life" (Neale et. al., 2019: 110-11). Relinquishing the capitalistic configuration of nature as an infinite source of commercial interests, elemental thinking propels humans to incorporate more intimate and less self-interested enduring contact with the elements, reanimating a "nascent *culture of nature* that embraces not only the forces of air, water, earth, and fire but the formative human presence in the environment as well" (Macauley, 2010: 4, emphasis in the original). In its arduousness to extricate nature from human's anthropocentric domination by dispersing human subject from the centre of the universe, ecocritical studies has turned towards elements with a revival of the "environmental agentism" and elemental "*re-activism*" which induces the "renewal of non/human ethical enmeshment, a trans-historical call to attention", an ecological excava-

tion of the past for the future guidance of elemental reconciliation (Cohen and Duckert, 2015: 6, emphasis in the original). The notions of environmental agentism and re-activism entail looking back to the ancient classical philosophy to “restore vivacity to substances (mud, water, earth, air)” (Cohen and Duckert, 2015: 6). During the course of human history, from the classical times to the contemporary age of the Anthropocene, the elements have been disentangled from their vitalist conceptualization and are reduced into inert, mechanical objects. The elemental re-activism requires a change of human perception of the elements away from being passive and unassertive objects to be used and abused towards lively, energetic, and dynamic living entities of nature(s).

The posthumanist stance of elemental ecocriticism aims to convey humans’ economic relationship with the elements towards a more ethical and moral grounds. Tracing the germs of the liaison between human and the elements back to the ancient classical philosophers, elemental ecocriticism brings forth the writings of Greek philosopher Empedocles, who elucidates the cosmic evolution in terms of the agential relation between the elements and the forces of love (*philia*) and strife (*neikos*) (Macauley, 2010: 110). Shimmering at the centre of Empedocles’ universe is the aggregation of the elements propelling the universe to undergo an unremitting process of regeneration and re-creativity, and new becomings. The new becomings in the cosmos is made possible by infinite entanglements between the elements. In Fragment 62 (73), Empedocles dwells on the regenerative potential of nature which is enabled by Greek Goddess Aphrodite and points out that “when Kypris [Aphrodite] was busily producing forms, she moistened earth in water and gave it to swift fire to harden” (1981: 222). Similarly, the power of elemental compounds in giving birth to new forms is illustrated skilfully in Fragment 67 (1981: 81) where Empedocles writes that “[w]ater from the skin, fermented in wood, becomes wine” (1981: 225). Empedocles’ profundity in displaying the agency of the elements and the elemental interactions in the universe has inspired the eco-critical conceptualization of the elements as “lively, active forces rather than passive, plastic matter” (Alaimo, 2015: 301).<sup>1</sup> Human beings, accord-

---

<sup>1</sup> The new materialist turn shows a radical diversion from the contemporary debates of spiritual ecology which adopts an animistic or monotheistic perspective of the natural entities as divinely ensouled, intelligent and spiritual beings. The new materialist understanding of the matter refuses to align the vibrant matter with the spiritual agency of God or humans. In other words, intelligibility of the matter does not stem from a Divine power but it is an innate feature

ingly, are ecologically entangled with the elemental forces of nature. Elemental ecocriticism embraces the study of the elements of earth, air, water and, fire as the fundamental components of the universe with its organic and inorganic, living and nonliving beings. “Elemental matter”, Cohen and Duckert argue, “is inherently creative, motile, [and] experimental”, working frivolously for “combinatory novelty” (2015: 3). Thus, human beings and nonhumans are considered not only as biological and material agents but also elemental agents, embodying all the elements and carrying the specific characteristics of each element in their physical bodies. Only through developing a sentience towards the elementality of their physical existence, human beings can learn to internalize elemental intimacy with the universe and acquire an awareness of the elements as the material compositions that connect their bodies to an all-encompassing, wider universe.

The principal project of elemental ecocriticism is to, uniformly, reify an elemental consciousness, a new form of ecocentric ideology, in Timothy Morton’s term, “elementality” (2015: 271), which will enlarge the scope of human mind towards “a greater tolerance to the vibrancy and color of things\_ their wateriness, fieriness, airiness, spaciousness, earthiness” (2015: 279). Elemental ecocriticism, in that respect, tries to uncover the fact that the outside physical world is not really outside of humans, but both are composed of the same elements, as Stacy Alaimo’s asserts, humans are “trans-corporeal subjects perceiving themselves mixed with the “confluence of body, substance and place never distinct from the fluctuating world they seek to know” (2015: 301). Alaimo envisages “human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always enmeshed with the-more-than-human world” so much so that “the corporeal substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the ‘environment’” (2008: 238). Trans-corporeality, then, requires humans to recognize the materiality of their physical body which is in a complete physical entrenchment with the elements. Breaking down strongly established dividing lines between the human and the more-than-human world, elemental ecocriticism fo-

---

of the matter. Jane Bennett, in *Vibrant Matter*, clarifies the non-spiritualistic stand of new materialist discourse by writing that “[t]his vibrant matter is *not* the raw material for the creative activity of humans or God” (Bennett, 2010: xiii, emphasis in the original). Because, the notion of divinity, Bennett thinks, would inevitably lead into a hierarchical understanding of the universe. In Bennett’s words, “hierarchical logic of God-Man-Nature implied in vitalism of soul easily transitions into a political image of a hierarchy of social classes or even civilizations” (2010: 84).

cuses on creating a flexible space, enabling a more dynamic interplay of human and nonhuman bodily encounters.

Recovering the dissipated bond between humans and the elements, elemental ecocriticism not only underscores the elemental nature of human's material existence but also blatantly unfolds the power of elements to actively dominate the human mind and imagination: "in the earth(s) to come, our stories, and the stories of the elements will be materially eloquent in their entwinements" (Oppermann and Iovino, 2015: 316). As Oppermann and Iovino convincingly put forward, the elemental stories of the material world are closely interwoven with human stories which, in the end, give way to the materialization of the earth. Elemental ecocriticism, for Oppermann and Iovino, is a "disanthropocentric project of ongoing combinations" while humans are marked as "the elemental episode" (2015: 316), participating in the creation of elemental stories through physical as well as imaginal amalgamation with the organic and inorganic worlds. "[T]he process of mattering" is the catalyst of triggering the emergence of narratives and stories of the elemental forces and their intermingled relationship between themselves and humans (2015: 315). Elemental matter and nonhuman story, then, are inseparable constitutive units of humans' corporeal as well as imaginative existence.

An analogous idea of assembling the elemental stories of natures with those of humans, alluring physical and imaginal blending with elemental stories is further offered by Steve Mentz, who introduces the term "phlogiston" referring to the "vexed interplay between the physical and the imaginary", the metaphoric and the literal, textual and the actual (2015, p. 57). Mentz argues that phlogiston will provide a fertile ground for ecocriticism by digging and restoring the fictional stories about physical elements and aligning them with new metaphorical meanings. Elucidating the premise of phlogiston as integrating the "substance and fiction, material and metaphor", (2015: 55-56), Mentz explicates the operation of phlogisticated thinking as follows:

By isolating and consolidating the explosive mixing of fire and air, phlogiston burns with poetic ecological meaning. The substance shines a light on the mixing of fire and air, the two least physically substantial of four elements. Interrogating this imaginary substance reveals a paradoxical entanglement of separation and combination that is itself characteristic of elemental relations.

Both process and substance, story and matter, phlogiston models an ambivalence crucial to ecomaterialist thinking (2015: 56).

Indeed, the phlogiston thinking is a quintessential method of recounting the entanglement between the human self and the elements and inflaming the fire of intimacy between humans and the elements. As soon as confronted with the elements as the vibrant, dynamic, unpredictable and crucial forces of nature, all-absorbing faculty of human mind is prompted into a reciprocal exchange of energy flow with the elements. As Cohen stresses, “[t]he elements are restless as human imagination, seldom content to remain in their allotted place” (2015: 107). Besides his literary and poetic imagination to be endowed with the elemental forces, the human body is also a material embodiment of all the elements that sustain him with an enhanced comprehension of the physical world. As “elemental agents”, humans carry the “specific characters of each element in their physical bodies” (Bulut Sarkaya, 2023b: 73). Macauley, likewise, encourages to look at the elements in a different light to have a renewed perception of them and adds that “ecological philosophy is to encourage a renewed understanding of and critical encounter with air, fire, earth, and water and to make us aware of the complex—and sometimes very necessary—mediations that exist between us and the environment” (2010: 2). Both the human imagination and the elements constantly go through metamorphosis, taking a new shape at each encounter. So, it would not be a wrong provisional judgment to claim that imaginations, stories and narratives that the human mind generate are themselves elemental. Commenting on the open-ended, perennial interactivity between human imagination, physical world, and the elements, Alaimo states that:

As a mode of material ecocriticism, elemental ecocriticism contends with the vexing sites where figures, narratives, concepts, and histories bear the marks of their worldly entanglements. The historical stretch of this collection, from the classical period to the modern, allows for the inclusion of a rich array of alternative ontologies, cosmologies, and elemental entanglements that make the dualisms of the moderns seem dull indeed. Witness instead the strange parade of elemental happenings— the spontaneous generation of vermin from mud, the men who became glass, or the sky above swimming with fish (2015: 300).

Accordingly, human exposure to the elements is unavoidably necessary process in spite of the senseless struggle of contemporary societies either



to expel the elements entirely out of their life or to try to control what is uncontrollable. Elemental ecocriticism, correspondingly, undertakes the responsibility of changing the anthropocentric perception of humans about elements' being separate, outside and primitive forces of nature. It manifests the inexorability of humans' physical entanglements with the elements and aims at creating an ecological awareness of the elemental nature of their material composition.

### **Elements in *The Masnavi***

Earth, water, air, and fire inhabit an unfathomable place in Rumi's mystic philosophy that allows him to comprehend and expound broadly on the symbiotic attunement between the natural entities. Rumi in his famous work, *The Masnavi*, which consists of six volumes, challenges a machinelike view of nature and is faithfully committed to manifesting the awe-inspiring intelligence, purposefulness, vitality and corporeality of all organisms and ongoing interrelatedness between them. After defining the air as "soul's associate", and water, "the spirit's kin", Rumi shows how these elements can easily change their essences and evolve into different forms (2004: 81). The air can turn into "stale" while the sweet water can be "turned so bitter" (Rumi, 2004: 81). Similarly, the "flaming head" of the fire can be declared dead by the wind (Rumi, 2004: 81). Abundant references are made to the natural elements to project a bright light on the brilliant and reasonable convergence of these elements composing the abiding aliveness and materiality of the universe. Rumi's ultimate belief in the vitality of the elements in relation to soul's vitality is recurrently emphasized in *The Masnavi*:

Earth, water, wind, and fire, his faithful slaves,  
Alive with him, to us seem dead as graves:  
In front of God, flames always stand up straight  
And writhe like lovers in a passionate state,  
A spark leaps out when iron's struck with stone,  
It travels out by God's command alone,  
Don't strike it with the stone of tyranny- (Rumi, 2004: 54).

In an attempt to distort the anthropocentric presumptions of humans about the inertness and passivity of the elements, Rumi presents elements as living beings who are infiltrated by God with a vital energy though, for humans, they "seem dead as graves" (2004: 54). This animating power implanted in the elements, as Rumi underlines, endows them with a power of mobility as it is clearly observed in the movements of the fire which "travels

out by God's command" (2004: 54). What is more arresting in the poem is Rumi's depiction of the fire as spiritual and moral actor who stands up straight in front of God, burning with a passionate love for Him as well as possessing the ability to expand and travel out long distances (2004: 54). By way of explaining his ideas through various examples, Rumi invites his readers to move beyond the constrictive borders of their humanistic thoughts to be able to comprehend the fluctuating movement and agency of the fire which can be found ubiquitously everywhere as in the collusion of the iron and stone giving rise to the rejuvenation of the fire. Rumi's 13<sup>th</sup> century poem, in fact, revolutionarily formulates a vitalist understanding of the universe in which nothing, even the stone, remains inactively passive and unresponsive to its environment and teaches how to think with elements by unveiling the miscellaneous ways that the elements manifest themselves in the material universe. Thinking with the elements invests Rumi with a sharp acumen to notice the fluidity, mobility, and restlessness of the elements which are always in the middle of new confluences and interpenetrations. The incessant process of creativity and vitality of these elements are the most palpable evidence of the living, pulsating, and constantly replenishing universe as the stunning example of God's artwork. In Clarke's words, "the *Masnavi* tells us that the world is alive because it is given life directly by God, He being the real and direct cause of every thing" (2003: 42). Unrolling his own self up to the elements, Rumi has a keen ecological awareness of the vitally awake and spiritually conscious elements which astoundingly reverberate with the most fundamental principle of elemental ecocriticism, put forward by Oppermann and Iovino as the "agency of the elemental" (2015: 315). Moreover, unsettling the metaphysical dualism between spirit/matter, Rumi offers a material spirituality, endowing every element in nature with soul and mind. In "Spirits That Matter", Kate Rigby affirms that the "material ecocriticism, could be considerably enriched by entering into dialogue with older forms of nonreductive materialism" by revisiting Indigenous culture or monotheistic religions, opening a portal to "postsecular territory" (2014: 284). From a spiritual standpoint, as Rigby suggests, the world is not simply seen "as a series of causal relations, but rather as a nexus of communication, in which the One perpetually reaches out and signals to the Many ...through a shared, if variously experienced physical reality" (2014: 286). From this perspective, it can be argued that Rumi adopts a nonreductive, panpsychist world view which is "closely aligned with the new materialism in seeking not to transcend materiality

per se, but rather to reconceive and, indeed, enter more deeply into it”, generating multiple instances of human and nonhuman encounters, not through a “series of causal relations” but through “‘subjectival’ dimension that is agentic, communicative, unfolding temporally in ways that we can neither predict nor ordain” (2014: 285). So, Rumi’s spiritual materialism shares the ecomaterialist view of agentic, intelligent, vital, and articulate universe which necessitates ungoing interaction and communion between human and nonhuman beings.

The fire’s temporal and progressive journey on earth that is brought up in Rumi’s poem as a significant proof of the vivacity of the elements is in the same way accentuated by a contemporary environmental scholar, Anne Harris, who stresses that the fire knows no fixed boundaries, “never really stands still– it skirts the edges of Eden, makes bricks, glides into glass, fevers minds, sparks philosophy” (2015: 47). Equivalently, Rumi’s intellect also is inflamed by the elements, which partake intensely in the imperishable validity and contemporariness of Rumi’s philosophy, making him the pioneer of environmental philosophers and ground-breaking thinker at the forefront of his own time. Taking the lead in a vitalist ethical concern of the cosmos, Rumi further emphasizes the falsehood of human effort to control these elemental forces which move only by God’s order unlike the new materialist view. What renders Rumi as the precursor of the elemental philosophy, or more specifically, of environmental consciousness is the invaluable counsel he gives at the end of the quotation above which endorses the view that objectifying these elemental powers by ignoring their vitality carves an inevitable way for the domination, domestication, and mastering of the elements culminating in the brutal exploitation of these spiritual entities that belong to God. Rumi warns humans with these words: “Don’t strike it with the stone of tyranny” (Rumi 2004: 54). Uplifting his readers to re-evaluate their exploitative, self-centred relationship with the elements, Rumi, in fact, touches upon the catastrophic outcomes of humans’ anthropocentric endeavours to rule over the elements in an emulation of God. Rumi’s poem, at this point, has strong ecological implications which are not dissimilar to the present-day environmental debates, steered by Macauley who spotlights the human-caused damages on the planet stemming from the over-use and over-domestication of the elements. Macauley asserts that “the rate at which we are modifying the elemental environment is accelerating more and more quickly, and that such quantitative changes translate eventually into qualitative transformations, like a tsunami wave

arriving from oceanic depths onto the shallow shoreline” (2010: 276). Macauley holds technology-addicted lifestyle accountable for humans’ alienation from the elements, triggering them to treat the elements as commodity materials to be used and abused rather than perceiving them as living entities. As Macauley puts it, “our interactions with the planet become regularly mediated by advanced technology, then, we find through critical reflection that artifacts increasingly condition, regulate, or intercede on our physical, psychological, and philosophical relationships with the environment” (2010: 276). Nonetheless, as it is clearly understood in Rumi’s poem, the pernicious human penchant for exploiting, dominating, and tyrannizing natural elements is not a recent phenomenon emerging concurrently with technology but can be traced back into the middle ages where humans were always seeking out to find a way of controlling the elements and torture them with the “stone of tyranny” (Rumi, 2004: 54).

Rumi’s use of tyranny for human control of the elements bears an utmost importance and should not be underestimated as an inadvertent choice of word, considering, especially Rumi’s perception of the elements as active living beings rather than static objects. Even a mountain, in Rumi’s universe, is embedded with a vital energy, fuelling it to move and dance: “The mountain dances nimbly like a bird: / Love made Mount Sinai drunken visibly” (Rumi 2004: 5-6). Similarly, “fierce waves in the sea” are turned into a dusty path for Moses and his men escaping from Paraoth while “Jesus’s breath made water mix with clay” to be transformed into a “bird” flying away (Rumi, 2004: 55). According to Rumi’s system of thinking, all these four elements are the most discernible and vivid reflections of divine love, mystical and spiritual guidance enabling him to speculate on God’s existence, miracles, laws and order. Rumi’s Islamic perception is most definitely not an exclusive one; on the contrary, it includes the entirety of the universe in which every element is cherished by God with animism and soul: “Dancing inside as well as outwardly / Whirling around their souls which we can’t see” (Rumi, 2004: 85). It can be compellingly argued that Rumi’s religious apprehension of the universe does not suggest any contradictory conjectural positioning against the scientific conceptualization of the universe. The same idea of a vitally alive universe is adopted by the 21<sup>st</sup> century elemental ecocritical perspective which is underscored by Cohen and Luckert as that “the elements are the perceivable foundations of which worlds are composed, the animated materialities with and through which life thrives...They are the outside that is already within, the very stuff of cosmos,

home, body, and story” (2015: 13). The interrelatedness of the elements and humans as the foundational units of the cosmos reverberates with Rumi’s Sufism in which the outside world as the macrocosm is tightly knitted together with the human body as the microcosm. The universe is replete with God’s presence while “[w]ithin the existent things is found every attribute of Being in some mode or other” (Chittick, 1989: 16) and “each creature reflects or participates in these attributes to some degree” (1989: 14). The holistic co-existence in the cosmos entails the Unity of Being where “the three basic worlds of the macrocosm -the spiritual, imaginal, and corporeal- are represented in man by the spirit (ruh), soul (nafs), and body (jism)” (Chittick, 1989: 17). According to Rumi’s Sufistic principle of the Unity of Being, every corporeal element is embodied with a divinely infused soul and spirit, carrying within itself a spiritual and material agency.

Elemental agency is deeply appropriated by Rumi as a substantial proof of the vitality of the universe as well as being the most explicit revelation of God’s creative power. The elements in *The Masnavi* appear as active performative units. Elemental ecocriticism, in the same vein, “recognizes the agency of the elemental” (Oppermann and Iovino, 2015: 315). In every possible circumstance, Rumi consistently reminds his readers about the agency, intelligibility and rationality of the universe. Each entity, in nature, is allocated by God with knowledge and wisdom: “A ray of knowledge shone on soil and clay / To teach them how to nurture seeds this way” (2004: 34). Soil and clay are taught by God how to embrace seed, transfigure it into a plant, and in this way, produce a change by modifying another entity. Even seemingly inanimate things in nature, in fact, show, agency and intentionality and admirably manifest great attentiveness into their environment. In Rumi’s words, “He’s given to inanimate things too / Knowledge, a trust and rectitude--it’s true!” (2004: 34). Rectitude is particularly important in displaying Rumi’s ethical consideration of the elements which are not excluded from his humanistic moral concerns. So, Rumi recognizes elements not only as living entities of nature but also as moral agents who are conscious of the outside world. Attributing dignity and morality to the elements, Rumi, in fact, emphasizes the exigency of constructing an ethical, rather than a pragmatist relationship with the elements. It is quite fascinating that the same idea of the moral significance of the elements is declared to be the ultimate goal of contemporary environmental philosophies, not to mention elemental ecocriticism. As Cohen states: “Within this complicated cosmos, then, we must through narrative

and other kinds of action foster ethical relations with humans and inhumans alike: multifold, hesitant, consequence-minded interconnections” (2014: 54).

Apart from dignity, the elements are also given knowledge of things that make them as intentional entities with self-awareness. There is an ongoing circulation of vitality and agency in Rumi’s universe, originating from God and flowing through all human and nonhuman entities, furnishing them with knowledge and wisdom. While Rumi names this vitality as the Divine essence, a Sufist’s spiritual path through which the “clouds of self-hood” are dispersed “that the ‘*aql*, the intellect, which is an attribute of the spirit, *rūh.*, may begin to receive indications from the ‘*aql-e kullī*, the Universal Intellect” (Safavi and Weightman, 2009: 30, emphasis in the original). Whereas, Bennett, a new materialist environmental philosopher, calls this nonhuman agency as the “vital materiality or vibrant matter” in reference to the alacrity of the physical universe and affirms that “everything is, in a sense, alive” (2010: 117). Bennett advocates a shift of human perception from an idea on motionless, deadly universe towards an entirely vibrant living universe. In addition to authorizing humans to destroy, dominate, and exploit nature, this idea of nonliving nature, according to Bennett, prevent “us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies” (2010: ix). Significantly enough, Rumi also, aims to increase the awareness of his readers about the vitality of the natural elements. However, Rumi’s spiritual notion of the elements as soulful organisms and revelations of a divine power diverts from the ecomaterialist idea of the elements which “gives more emphasis than is normally sensible to elemental physicality” (Bennett, 2013: 110). There is an enthrallment with the universe “in the absence of any grand or intelligent cosmological design” (Bennett 2013: 110). While Rumi perceives elemental agency as a configuration of God, ecomaterialism defines the elements as material bodies and “attempt[s] to re-describe human experience so as to uncover more of the activity and power of a variety of nonhuman players amidst and within us” (Bennett, 2013: 109). Apart from that, Rumi’s concept of the intelligent universe is compatible with the ecomaterialist view of the elements as agential beings, “strong, diffuse, and durable” (Bennett, 2013: 109, emphasis in the original). Rumi admonishes humans not to be boastful of their own intelligence and sagacity and writes that: “Only a madman boasts a swollen head!” (2004: 201). Overlooking the vitality of the elements and surmising

them as nonliving things plunge humans into a greater error of exploiting, using, and tyrannizing the elements. In Rumi's world, the elements are intelligent, communicative, and speaking subjects rather than numb, unresponsive objects:

And earth and rocks will talk miraculously.  
Philosophers doubt, for they're logical --  
Tell them to slam their heads on a brick wall!  
For water, earth, and clay speak, and each word  
By Sufi mystics is quite clearly heard;  
Philosophers doubt moaning pillars too --  
About the saints' perception they've no clue,  
Saying, 'These men must be moved by emotions  
To have such fantasies and foolish notions.' (Rumi, 2004: 201).

Rumi visualizes elements as articulate living entities, having things to say and adds that not everyone, including philosophers, can hear the stories that elements tell since it does not seem logical to them. Rumi uses a humorous tone in advising the philosophers to slam their heads on a brick wall if they insist on their negligence of the elemental world, intercepting their senses to understand and hear the speech of earths and rocks. He believes that only the Sufi mystics possess this exceptional spiritual maturity to open their wits to perceive the stories of the elemental forces and thus, allow themselves to be carried away by the physical and spiritual entanglement with the elements, and finally accomplish what Steve Mentz suggests as a necessary stage of "phlogiston", "the flickering dance of the organic within and entangled with the inorganic" (2015: 68). In forming combinations and "combustion" (Mentz, 2015: 58), phlogiston, Mentz writes, "occupies an unstable mediating space across metaphoric and material realms" (2015: 72). In the same way, the phlogisticated imagination of Rumi empowers him to move beyond the material and reach into the metaphysical realm of the elemental stories, which, he believes, can only be achieved by mysticism and Sufism. Those who do not understand the speech of water, earth, clay, Rumi expresses, consider these mystics as insane people having "fantasies and foolish notions" (2004: 201). Nevertheless, elemental eco-critical perspective names those kind of people who can listen to the stories of the elements as "phlogisticated thinkers" whose imaginations are trailed into "rich entanglements of physical, symbolic, allegorical, and moral conflagrations" (Mentz, 2015: 72). Rumi, indeed, succeeds in transcending the made-up boundaries of what is physical and material and steps into the

articulate world of the elemental cosmos. The harmonious rhythmic dance of whirling dervishes can be considered as the most profound example of Rumi's crisscrossing of these boundaries which enable him to see and hear the voice of the elemental universe. Schimmel also comments of Rumi's voluntary dance with the cosmic universe as follows:

Creation is seen as a great cosmic dance in which nature, dreaming in non-existence, heard the Divine call and ran into existence in an ecstatic dance, and this dance represents, at the same time, the well-established cosmic order in which every being has its special place and function –comparable to the dervishes who follow the rigid rules of *sama* in perfect ease. For nothing could be more opposed to Mowlana's strong feeling of cosmic harmony than even a single sign of anarchy and orderlessness (1980: 220, emphasis in the original).

In Rumi's philosophy, the world is riveting with restlessness, vitality, re-emergences, and revivals. But, this eco-philosophical ideology embraced by Rumi generates a series of questions which are in need of inspection. Where is humanity situated in this perpetually animated and vibrating universe? What kind of relationship is forged between humans and the elements in Rumi's universe? Heretofore, it has already been evinced that the elements are at the very core of Rumi's material cosmos and religious, mystic philosophy. What is more interesting is that Rumi endorses an ecological view according to which the substance of human body both physically and spiritually is constituted by the elements. The Islamic belief about the human body being composed of the earth is often highlighted in *The Masnavi*. "The earth's your body's weft--that's what we meant, / Since it was woven from the earth, it's clear," (Rumi, 2004: 164). In addition to the element of the earth which is woven by God to be given a human shape, air and water also are mentioned by Rumi as significant elemental forces that compose human body. The air is described by Rumi as "the soul's associate" while the water is "the spirit's kin" (2004: 81). What is revealed with clarity in these lines is that humans, both materially and spiritually are comprised of the four elements which actively operate in the human body and govern his actions and thoughts.

Armies of bright stars decorate the sky.  
Of elements like these you all consist,  
To try to know their state you must persist,  
Since all of these are filled with pain and grief



Of course you're pale and thinner than a leaf,  
Because of all these opposites in you  
Like earth and fire, the wind and water too (Rumi, 2004: 81).

Since humans are composed by the same elemental forces, as Rumi puts forward in his poem, it is prerequisite for humans to learn everything about these elements that epitomize opposite forces in a continual process of interaction with each other. In like manner, humans, also, consist of these opposite forces, making human body “pale and thinner than a leaf” vulnerable to the physical forces of nature (2004: 81). This is because, the matter of the outside world is not separate or different from the matter of the human body as they are both made of the same elemental forces. The ongoing elemental conflict between the opposites is what constitutes the alteration, development, flourishing and transmogrification of life in the universe which would come to an end without the convergence of these elemental opposites. In a similar fashion, from the elemental ecocritical perspective, the cosmic balance in the universe is maintained through the clash of these opposites, the push and pull factor between these four elements. The potential energy stored in the universe is released through the interactive entanglement of these opposing elements conjoining in the overhauling of life in the universe. The dynamism and the agency of the universe, as Macauley suggests, is “counterbalanced by an opposite telluric tendency toward destruction and the possibility of renewal. We need to remember that the earth bears us into the world but eventually buries us as well” (2010: 298). So, humans are elementally composed of opposites and become “a perfect synthesis of yielding and resistance, a marvelous equilibrium of the forces of acceptance and of refusal” (Macauley, 2010: 298). In congruence with this notion of elemental oppositions, synthesized towards new conglomerations, Oppermann and Iovino make a salient inference that elemental ecocriticism “plunges us in the ratio of things, which is at the same time the mixture, the proportion, and the reason/mind of what is around and inside us, before and after us” (2015: 314-315). In view of that, Rumi's poem is unwaveringly tunneled towards exploring the elemental universe surrounding humans, shaping his mood, thoughts, and imagination all together. The physicality of the universe, the human body, mind and soul, according to Rumi's elemental philosophy, are all made out of the intersectionality of these elemental oppositions. In Rumi's words, “[L]iving is reconciling opposites” (2004: 82). Rumi, further, argues that apart from the human body that is composed by the earth, human soul is

also sustained and nourished by the earth: “It radiated beams out from the earth” (2004: 164). Humans, however, are, most of the time, not aware of their elemental existence: “We were on earth, but of earth unaware, / Heedless of all the treasure buried there” (2004: 164). Rumi, here, teaches human beings how to re-build a more ethical relationship with the natural world so that they would respect more and feel gratitude for the God who created it. Instrumental relationship that humans forge for themselves with nature is what lies at the root of human heedlessness of the elemental universe, making them forget where they come from and are heading to. Rumi stirs his readers to relinquish their old, anthropocentric habits of seeing nature as an object to be plundered and thrown aside and begin to view nature as an integral part of human body and soul connected miraculously to the elements with bonds of love. The physical and spiritual connectedness of humans with the elements is highlighted in the following lines:

Body and soul are joined to form one whole  
But no one is allowed to see the soul.  
It's fire not just hot air the reed-flute's cry,  
If you don't have this fire then you should die!  
Love's fire is what makes every reed-flute pine,  
Love's fervour thus lends potency to wine;  
The reed consoles those forced to be apart,  
Its notes will lift the veil upon your heart (Rumi, 2004: 5).

Vitality, dynamism, unity of diversity, and conformity of the opposites have all their origins in divine love distributed by God equally among all entities in nature that can be found in the music of the reed-flute as well as in human and nonhuman soul. The element of fire has a natural power to inflame everything, Rumi asserts, human soul is also in need of this fire to be inflamed and burned with the love of God. The reed, significantly, through this fire gains its verbalization and begins to express its burning love for God. Wine, in the same way, gains its potency from this “fervor” of God (2004: 5). The element of fire, within this frame, becomes the major catalyst of reconciling the conflicts, combining heterogonous entities around a single premise of Godly love and constituting the whole of the universe in which the interaction of diverse living and nonliving beings, humans and elements come together and speak the same language of love. It is possible, therefore, to talk about a reciprocal attraction between the elemental forces from which humans are not abstain from. The elements, accordingly, are presented in Rumi's poem as the most important factors in the world's

coming into being, and the creative process of its materialization. This idea of ongoing creativity and vitality in the universe is redolent of Barad's theoretical outline of the "ongoing ebb and flow of agency" in the physical universe which is itself "a dynamic process of intra-activity and materialization in the enactment of determinate causal structures" (Barad, 2007: 140). Knowledge and intelligibility for Barad cannot specifically be thought as exceptional human attributes since the natural elements are informed individuals having enough agency and consciousness of the outside world. Barad thinks that "practices of knowing cannot fully be claimed as human practices" and further affirms that we "don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are *of* the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming" (2007: 185, emphasis in the original). What is vigorously underscored by Barad is that humans are always exposed to the elements and no matter how hard they try to distinguish themselves from the outside universe, humans are composed of the material universe and their meaningful coming into being is enabled by their constant exposure to the elements. The vitality of these elements is what gives life to this universe and human and nonhuman organisms living in it. Although Barad's materialist view does not attribute uttermost importance to God since she thinks there is no "divine position for our pleasure located outside the world" (2007: 377), Rumi's vitality principle elevates the elements into a spiritually immersed, heavenly status through love. The voice of the reed, in this regard, brings consolation for the outwardly divided things and helps humans lift the veil upon their hearts enabling them to grasp the core of everything and what substance they are made of. Rumi's poem expresses plainly that the humanity of humans is molded by the elemental forces which is in a reasonable congruence with the elemental ecological understanding of the world:

Yet fire and stone likewise flow, at least when we accept their invitation to nonanthropocentric measures of time. Their stories convey the fertile past and pulse with futurity. Through our alliances with the elements we human-ized ourselves: no cooking or clearing without flame, no foundations without stone, small movement without water and air. The elements are also that which will remain long after our departure (Cohen, 2014: 55).

As Cohen concisely summarizes, the humanization of humans is made possible through the elements which exist before humans and, most probably, will continue to exist till the end of the universe. Therefore, forming allianc-

es rather than hostilities against the elements is necessary for humans to pursue their existence on earth. This necessity of constructing a responsible and respectable relationship with the outside universe is perpetually reinforced by the environmental philosophers. What is most possibly meant by Rumi's idea of lifting the veil upon the human heart is his attempt to see God-ordained power of elemental forces invigorating the life-giving energy to be circulated among all human and nonhuman entities in nature, and subsequently, co-operating in the continuation of earthly life through divine love.

### Conclusion

Reading *The Masnavi* from the critical perspective of elemental ecocriticism provides illuminative insights for understanding Rumi's relentlessly alive, communicative, and vibrant universe which acquires its cosmic unity in the internal diversity of its human and nonhuman entities. Love is the primary stimulant of the elements which confront and reconcile each other synchronously without falling into enmity. Rumi's yearning for the ultimate unification with his divine origins opens for him endless opportunities to discover his intimate bonds with the natural elements which appear in his *The Masnavi* as the fundamental sources of life and vivacity on the planet. The elements, constituting the hub of the material universe are also permeated with a divine power of love attracting everything into their orbit and giving way to the active materialization of the physical world. So, observing the elements closely, as Rumi repeatedly spotlights in *The Masnavi*, would enlighten human beings about their material origins, deriving from the earth, water, air, and fire while inspiring them to think about the primordial source of power that is love infused in these elements which is originated from God. What is significantly laid bare in this study is that the elemental ecocritical principle of taking the elements seriously and the mattering of the elements are internalized deeply by Rumi and hence, finds an indispensable space in the development of Rumi's philosophical and mystical ideology. The elements in Rumi's philosophy, in this respect, bring unity of being through the reconciliation of the opposites between the body and soul, and the material and the spiritual. It is exceedingly important for humans not to forget their elemental origins that connect them to the soil, water, air, and fire. In Rumi's universe, the elements are stored with an infinite energy, fueling all living and nonliving organisms with an existential power for self-exertion. The elements are propelled by Rumi not only as the fundamental, material substructure of humans but also the most observable evidences of

God's love and divine power which are channelled through all His creations and can be observed through the elemental entanglements. Only by this means, as Rumi believes, humans will learn how to burgeon more ethical and moral affinities with the elements and with the whole universe.

## References

- Acim, Rachid (2022). "The Sufi and the Transcendentalist: An Encounter of Dialogue, Love and Sublimity". *Comparative Literature: East & West*, 6(2): 117-129.
- Alaimo, Stacy (2008). "Transcorporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature". *Material Feminisms*. Eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman. Indiana University Press, 237-264.
- Alaimo, Stacy (2015). "Elemental Love in the Anthropocene". *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*. Eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert. University of Minnesota Press, 298-309.
- Arberry, A. J. (2008). *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam*. Routledge.
- Barad, Karen (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press.
- Bennett, Jane (2010). *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press.
- Bennett, Jane (2013). "The Elements". *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, 4(1): 105-111.
- Bulut Sarıkaya, Dilek (2023a). *The Human-Animal Relationship in Pre-Modern Turkish Literature: A Study of the Book of Dede Korkut and The Masnavi, Book I, II*. Lexington Books.
- Bulut Sarıkaya, Dilek (2023b). "An Exploration of Riders to the Sea from the Perspective of Elemental Ecocriticism". *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews*, 36(1): 73-79.
- Chittick, William (1989). *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination*. State University of New York Press.
- Chittick, William (2005). *The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi: Illustrated Edition*. World Wisdom.

- Clarke, Lynda (2003). "The Universe Alive: Nature in the Masnavi of Jalal al-Din Rumi". *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*. Eds. Foltz, Richard C. et al. Harvard University Press, 39-65.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome (2014). "Elemental Relations". *O-Zone: A Journal of Object-Oriented Studies*, 1: 53-61.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome (2015). "The Sea Above". *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*. Eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert. University of Minnesota Press, 105-133.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome and Lowell Duckert (2015). "Introduction, Eleven Principles of the Elements". *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*. Eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert. University of Minnesota Press, 1-26.
- Duckert, Lowell (2015). "Earth's Prospects". *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*. Eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert. University of Minnesota Press, 237-267.
- Empedocles (1981). *Empedocles: The Extant Fragments*. Ed. M.R. Wright. Yale University Press.
- Harris, Anne (2015). "Pyromena: Fire's Doing". *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*. Eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert. University of Minnesota Press, 27-54.
- Macauley, David (2010). *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas*. State University of New York Press.
- Mentz, Steve (2015). "Phlogiston". *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*. Eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert. University of Minnesota Press, 55-76.
- Morton, Timothy (2015). "Elementality". *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*. Eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert. University of Minnesota Press, 271-83.
- Mowlana Jalaloddin Rumi (2004). *The Masnavi, Book I*. Trans. Jawid Mojaddedi. Oxford University Press.
- Neale, Timothy et al. (2019). "Introduction: An Elemental Anthropocene". *Cultural Studies Review*, 25(2): 109-114.
- Oppermann, Serpil and Serenella Iovino (2015). "Coda: Wandering Elements and Natures to Come". *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*. Eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert. University of Minnesota Press, 310-317.

- Rigby, Kate (2014). “Spirits That Matter”. *Material Ecocriticism*. Eds. S. Iovino and S. Oppermann. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Safavi, Seyed Ghahreman, and Simon Weightman (2009). *Rūmī’s Mystical Design: Reading the Mathnawī, Book One*. State University of New York Press.
- Schimmel, Annemarie (1980). *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi*. East–West Publications.
- Thackston, Wheeler M. (1999). “Introduction”. *Signs of the Unseen: The Discourse of Jalaluddin Rumi*. Trans. Wheeler M. Thackston, Jr. Shambhala, vii–xxvi.

The following statements are made in the framework of “COPE–Code of Conduct and Best Practices Guidelines for Journal Editors”:

**Ethics Committee Approval:** Ethics committee approval is not required for this study.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests:** The author has no potential conflict of interest regarding research, authorship or publication of this article.