

Self-Discovery Through the 'Other': Reshaping Consciousness Among Sufism, Literature and Philosophy in Rumi's *The Merchant and the Parrot* and Montesquieu's *The Persian Letters*

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Abstract

This research paper explores how engaging with the 'other' can challenge and reshape one's preconceptions, focusing on Edmund Husserl's concept of intentional consciousness. It examines *The Merchant and the Parrot* by Jalal Al-Din Rumi (1207 –1273) and *The Persian Letters* by Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1689 –1755), highlighting how encounters with non-Western characters lead to self-reflection. By drawing on Husserl's theory that consciousness is always directed towards an object, it argues that interactions with individuals from different backgrounds allow for a reconsideration of one's culturally conditioned perspectives. Through the lens of intentionality, the paper investigates how observations of French culture by the Persians and the parrot's words prompt a reassessment of ingrained beliefs by accessing deeper truths beyond superficial consciousness. By applying Husserl's framework that consciousness is influenced by but not limited to its cultural context, it explores how the 'other' characters in the analyzed works offer unfiltered insights due to their outsider perspective. The research paper suggests that respectful dialogue with diverse viewpoints, as depicted in literary works, can catalyze expanding awareness, challenging biases, and fostering new philosophical insights in alignment with Husserl's concept of intentional consciousness. This interdisciplinary analysis connects the literary texts with Husserl's ideas to illustrate how cultural exchanges and encounters with the 'other' can prompt self-reflection and philosophical growth.

Keywords: Self-discovery, The Self and The 'Other', Intentional Consciousness, Sufism, Philosophy, Literature

1. Introduction

Self-discovery through the 'other' is a profound theme that permeates literature, Sufism and philosophy, offering insights into the intricate ways individuals shape their consciousness through interactions with external entities. In Jalal Al-Din Rumi's poetic masterpiece, *The Merchant and the Parrot*, and Montesquieu's seminal work, *The Persian Letters*, we witness characters navigating the complex terrain of self-awareness and identity formation through their encounters with the 'other'. Rumi, a prominent Sufi poet, delves into the mystical realm of human experience, exploring the transformative power of relationships and dialogue with the 'other' as catalysts for self-realization. Through the allegorical and spiritual journey of *The Merchant and the Parrot*, Rumi figuratively conveys the process of inner growth, consciousness and enlightenment that occurs when individuals engage with beings 'other' than themselves, leading to a deeper understanding of their essence and purpose. On the other hand, Montesquieu, a pioneering figure of the Enlightenment, uses the epistolary form in *The Persian Letters* to illuminate the impact of cultural encounters and social dynamics on personal identity. By portraying the exchanges between Persian travelers and European society, Montesquieu exposes the nuances of self-perception and reflection that arise when one is confronted with divergent worldviews and norms, prompting a reevaluation of one's beliefs and values. Through these distinct literary works, the exploration of self-discovery through the 'other' not only sheds light on the fluidity of human consciousness but also challenges traditional notions of individuality and existence. By engaging with Rumi's spiritual allegory and Montesquieu's sociopolitical commentary, we embark on a journey of introspection and enlightenment, unraveling the intricate threads that connect us to the world beyond ourselves.

In Rumi's *The Merchant and the Parrot*, a merchant possesses a caged parrot. As he prepares for a trip to India, he instructs each servant to ask for a gift. The parrot requests that the merchant convey a message to its fellow parrots in India. Upon delivering this message, one of the parrots dies, which saddens the merchant. When he returns home and shares this news with the parrot, it dies immediately. Upon throwing the parrot from its cage, the merchant is astonished to see it fly to a nearby branch. The lesson of this poem is that the parrot sought spiritual wisdom from India. When its request was fulfilled by leaving its body and mortal desires behind, this represented the path

to spiritual salvation. Thus, the lighthearted tale carries symbolic Sufi meanings and mystical teachings. Montesquieu's *The Persian Letters* is a satirical epistolary from the 17th century about a fictional Persian prince visiting France. The prince observes French society and politics from an outsider's perspective. They note differences between the 'other' consciousness, as well as contrasts between Persian and French culture. Through their correspondence, Montesquieu writes to his concubines about French culture and politics, offering a critical commentary on the era. One notable aspect of the novel is Usbek's harem of concubines, who provide insight into themes of power, desire, and gender dynamics. The concubines, including Roxane and Zachi, navigate their relationships with Usbek and each other, shedding light on the complexities of social hierarchy. Montesquieu uses the concubines' stories to explore themes of love, jealousy, and autonomy within the context of Usbek's patriarchal authority.

Both works utilize encounters between culturally diverse characters as a means for philosophical and social commentary. In Rumi's poem, a merchant engages in conversation with his parrot, unaware that the parrot is reshaping his consciousness. In *The Persian Letters*, two Persian noblemen, Usbek and Rica, observe and critique French society from each other's perspectives through their correspondence. In both narratives, the 'other' characters challenge preconceived notions through insightful observations and inquiries. The Persians' fresh perspective reveals aspects of French culture that are often taken for granted. The parrot, with its wise words, encourages self-reflection in the merchant. Discourse and dialogue across cultural and social boundaries catalyze deeper thinking in both works. *The Persian Letters* promote an examination of societal norms by comparison. The exchange between the merchant and the parrot transforms perceptions through respectful questioning.

2. Questions of the Study

- A. Can understanding oneself through the 'other' lead to a reshaping of consciousness? What aspects of the self might become clearer through viewing life through the perspectives of others?
- B. To what extent does seeking to understand others within their cultural and social contexts necessitate reflection on one's knowledge construction? Can learning about differing perceptions of "truth" and "reality" prompt a reevaluation of one's epistemological beliefs?
- C. By delving into diverse cultures and appreciating differing worldviews, can new understandings of selfhood emerge? What insights about identity and consciousness may surface from recognizing shared humanity across cultural divides?

3. Literature Review

While Montesquieu's *The Persian Letters* and Rumi's *The Merchant and The Parrot* both employ consciousness to prompt reflection in their readers, the works have not directly been compared by literary theorists or researchers before. Montesquieu uses the Persians as "epistemological tourists" to question French assumptions and further his philosophical project. The parrot and Persians serve as a "consciousness-raising device" that encourages readers to consider governance from other cultural viewpoints. However, researchers have not examined whether engaging with the diverse perspectives in Montesquieu's letters facilitates self-discovery in the same way studies have found for engaging with real marginalized groups. Several studies validate the idea that exposure to alternative worldviews can broaden one's identity beyond narrow cultural norms. However, these studies do not specifically analyze Rumi's poetry or compare how the fictional foreigners in Montesquieu's letters may achieve a similar effect on readers' perspectives and self-awareness as interactions with real diverse others. Direct comparisons of how they shape readers' consciousness and identities have not been made in the fields of philosophy, Sufism or literature.

Previous studies have explored limited aspects of representation and cultural exchange in Montesquieu's *The Persian Letters* and Rumi's *The Parrot and the Merchant*. Pucci (1985) *Orientalism and Representations of Exteriority in Montesquieu's "Lettres Persanes"* and Majid (2013) *Imagology and Exoticism in Montesquieu's Persian Letters* both examine how Montesquieu constructs and represents Persian identity and exteriority in his Letters. Pucci focuses on Montesquieu's use of Orientalism and the exoticization of Persia. Majid also analyzes imagology and exoticism at play in Montesquieu's depictions of Persians. While providing useful analyses of representation, neither study brings Rumi's text into direct conversation with the Letters.

Nikbonyad et al. (2015) *Examining The Merchant and the Parrot of Masnavi Molavi and Its Translations Based on Vahid's Model of Textual and Extra Textual Level*, examine Rumi's poem and its translations based on a model of textual and extra-textual levels. However, the paper does not situate the poem in its historical or comparative literary context. *The Merchant and Parrot: Adapted from the Persian poem 'Hekayat Tuti va Bazargan' by Rumi*. (2019) provides a helpful review of Herbert Mason's English adaptation. Nonetheless, the review is brief and does not analyze similarities or differences between Rumi and Montesquieu's works. By directly comparing how Rumi and Montesquieu portray cultural exchange between Persia and other lands, the proposed study aims to fill gaps in how previous studies have approached these influential texts individually, without bringing them into explicit dialogue. Examining their representations of Persia about one another can provide novel insights into historical perspectives on cultural relations.

4. Method

The method here involves shaping one's 'intentional consciousness' or 'self-awareness' through the 'other', as manifested by Husserl. Changing 'intentional consciousness' comes through gaining freedom, which allows one to change one's thoughts and thus replace an inauthentic intentional consciousness with an authentic one. In this case, existence is transformed from a 'false existence' to an 'authentic one'. At this point, the concubines in *The Persian Letters* discover the real crisis, which is the lack of 'intentional consciousness' or awareness, not just the lack of freedom. At this stage, comprehending 'the negative' in one's intentional consciousness is inevitable, so

there is an urgent need to reach a positive or authentic understanding. For the concubines, comprehending the positive was achieved through the negative, which is death, but death here expresses an existential stance that shapes one's 'intentional consciousness'. As for the parrot, it fully realizes the existence of a crisis in its 'intentional consciousness' but searches for a solution to transform its intentional consciousness positively. Therefore, 'intentional consciousness' is already formed but needs freedom to become authentic. Solving the crisis was achieved positively for the parrot by obtaining freedom in an intelligent way through its peers, which changed its 'intentional consciousness'.

Both narratives demonstrate how changing one's perspective and 'intentional consciousness' is catalyzed through gaining freedom of thought. Specifically, the concubines and the Parrot respectively come to recognize the constraints on their 'intentional consciousness'. This realization marks a crucial inflection point where acknowledging limitations becomes a necessity to progress toward authentic 'intentional consciousness', as defined by Husserl. Interestingly, "death" for the concubines and assistance from peers for the parrot respectively facilitate positive transformations in 'intentional consciousness' out of formerly restrictive circumstances. In both cases, overcoming crises hinged on freedom - whether through an "existential stance" or clever cooperation - which allowed for a change in 'intentional consciousness'. Ultimately, the stories depict formative journeys where preconceptions in 'intentional consciousness' are replaced by realistic self-awareness once psychological and physical liberty is attained, changing one's 'intentional consciousness'.

5. Results and Discussion

This paper explores how the works of Jalal Al-Din Rumi and Montesquieu promote self-discovery through engagement with diverse perspectives. Rumi's poem *The Merchant and the Parrot* employs the framing device of a talking bird longing for its homeland and meeting its peers. Through its narration of encounters with various cultures and people, the parrot gains deeper insights into humanity and self-awareness. Similarly, Montesquieu's epistolary novel *The Persian Letters* features correspondence between Persian noblemen visiting early 18th-century France. As outsiders experiencing an unfamiliar culture, the Persians can observe and question French norms and institutions in ways that natives cannot. Both works utilize the literary technique of introducing 'other' protagonists to encourage the examination of one's preconceptions.

Rumi and Montesquieu portray cultural exchange and openness to differing perspectives as paths toward self-awareness. The works bridge literature, Sufism and philosophy by using fictional narratives to convey insightful social and humanitarian commentary. Through their 'other' figures, a deeper understanding of human nature and just governance can be attained. Scholars have analyzed the philosophical insights of both Rumi and Montesquieu into topics like governance and cultural relativism. This paper brings their works into the discussion by exploring how each facilitates self-discovery through engagement with the perspectives of the 'other'. In doing so, it sheds light on their enduring relevance in discussing identity, social progress, and pluralism across boundaries in literary, Sufi and philosophical thought.

The epistolary format, which utilizes letters to narrate a story or convey information, has been used in literature for centuries. This literary device provides authors with a unique method to present narratives, explore themes, and develop characters. In this paper, we will emphasize the significance and effectiveness of the epistolary format in literature. One of the main benefits of this format is its capacity to offer an intimate and personal viewpoint on the events and emotions depicted in a story. Through letters, readers gain direct insight into the characters' thoughts, feelings, and motivations, fostering a sense of immediacy and authenticity. The form allows authors to showcase the intricacies of human relationships and the complexities of individual experiences, making the story more relatable and engrossing. "The epistolary form can be seen as adding greater realism to a story, due to the text existing diegetically within the lives of the characters. It is in particular able to demonstrate differing points of view without recourse to the device of an omniscient narrator. An important strategic device in the epistolary novel for creating the impression of authenticity of the letters is the fictional editor." (Takeda, 2008, p.18) The epistolary structure allows for a multi-perspective narrative, as each letter represents the unique viewpoints and experiences of various characters. This not only adds depth to the story but also enables Rumi and Montesquieu to explore diverse cultural and philosophical perspectives. By using this form, Montesquieu manages to intertwine literature, Sufism and philosophy seamlessly, emphasizing the role they play in shaping individual and societal values.

Both Rumi and Montesquieu try to delve into human consciousness to discover the nature of human beings, and how reshaping consciousness through the 'other' changes their pre-gained concepts. Consciousness is a complex concept not amenable to sensory perception or philosophical analysis due to the intertwining of consciousness with multiple topics in a non-separable cognitive relationship when we want to know consciousness by its correlative subject that exists as an abstraction. They are bound by a union relationship resembling the interconnection between thought and language, both of which are abstractions that are not known except by each other. Consciousness and the subject are treated in the manner of such a philosophical relationship between thought and language. As Brentano explains:

The term 'consciousness', since it refers to an object which consciousness is conscious of, seems to be appropriate to characterize mental phenomena precisely in terms of its distinguishing characteristic, i.e., the property of the intentional inexistence of an object, for which we lack a word in common usage. (Brentano, 1922, pp. 142-143, Eng. pp. 78-79).

The relationship between consciousness and the subject is also a cognitive abstraction resembling the abstract relationship between thought and language. Consciousness does not produce its subject. Still, it is inherently related to it without mentioning the source for

generating the subject of consciousness - from where does its source originate? Without a subject, there is no meaning that can be cognized by humans, so cognitive consciousness would have no value. Abstract thought does not intrinsically generate anything material. According to Brentano, "Every mental state has a primary object (its intentional object), which is a sensory experience is a physical phenomenon like a sound or a color, and at the same time it is conscious insofar as it presents itself as a secondary object, that is, a purely mental phenomenon." (Brentano, 1982, p. 180, Eng. p. 98).

We find Husserl's endeavor to discover the nature of the relationship between language and mind, as they both orient themselves towards perceiving things together, so the mind embodies the thing and intends it simultaneously with evoking the language of expression in it, in an almost instantaneous simultaneity, and intentionality in modern poetry means objectivity in its judgments on a linguistic text. Therefore, it is a site of intersection between the text, its creator and its recipient in its literary domains. In language, we find that the elements of this subject are related to the origin of the letter and sound sequences and what they produce of terms according to a certain sequence and the relationship of signification to the signified, etc. Here there is no infallibility for the text, as the matching between "signification and the signified", which is the essence of "intentionality" in the term with all that results from it of rules that regulate understanding the term, and then the expression and the application of the concept of the "intentional system" to texts cannot be applied in its entirety except to an infallible text by the absolute absence of subjectivity in the entire subject. Therefore, the intentional mechanism can work in these texts with complete tranquility to discover the objective judgment in any infallible text, since one side of the equation is fixed, which is the absence of subjectivity in the text and the intentionality of the single system in the set of infallible noble texts. The intentional researcher has only to confirm the negation of his subjectivity in discovering the objective judgment in the issue dealt with by the text, according to Husserl, "The tree as the transcendent object or the "physical thing belonging to nature [...] can burn up, be resolved into its chemical elements. The tree as the noema "cannot burn up; it has no chemical elements, no forces, no real properties" (Husserl, 1983, p. 216).

Husserl argues that 'intentional consciousness' can be divided based on whether it is subjective consciousness oriented towards the self or objective consciousness oriented towards the subject matter and content of what is being consciously experienced. He provides examples from literature to illustrate this distinction. Based on Husserl's discussion, 'intentional consciousness' can be divided into two types (Husserl, 2001, p.9). The first is subjective consciousness, which involves, in *The Merchant and The Parrot*, the parrot's dialog and coded messages exchanged with its companions. These messages represent intentional and subjective consciousness, where consciousness is positive as it represents life. In *The Persian Letters*, the subjective consciousness is represented by the letters the prince sent to his concubines, which helped form his subjective consciousness. The second type is objective consciousness, which is linked to the subject matter and content. In *The Merchant and The Parrot*, the parrot's dialogue with the merchant significantly contributed to clarifying the significance of objective intentional consciousness and the constructive development of consciousness. However, it was the message from his peers that ultimately led to a solution through their intentional consciousness. In *The Persian Letters*, the courtesans' objective intentional consciousness is represented by the idea of suicide. Suicide here forms consciousness but through a negative means of achieving the goal.

Rumi's poem *The Merchant and the Parrot* delves into themes of self-discovery and consciousness that resonate with Husserl's philosophical notion of intentional awareness. Initially, the merchant perceives the parrot as merely an exotic object for sale due to his selfishness, but their interaction fosters a deeper understanding. Through dialogue with the parrot, the merchant starts to look beyond superficial qualities and acknowledges the parrot's interiority and subjectivity. The parrot's ability to speak intelligently and reason challenges the merchant's assumptions. His consciousness expands as he recognizes another being's capacity for thought, speech, and personhood that goes beyond its physical form. This illustrates Husserl's concept that consciousness is always directed toward an intentional 'other' in the world. By engaging the parrot, the merchant's awareness transforms as he realizes the subjectivity within the 'other' that previously seemed merely objectified, as Rumi writes in his poem a message from the parrot to his peers expressing a deep sense of longing and injustice, also; the parrot questions the fairness of wasting its life in captivity while its peers enjoy freedom in the lush gardens:

'Does it seem fair for me to be wasting my life in longing and to die here far away?

""Am I to be allowed to continue in durance vile, while you are in green nooks among the boughs?

""Is this to be the loyalty of friends—for me to be in a cage, and you out in the gardens?

""Recall to memory that grieving bird, O ye grandees, in the morning draft amid your delightful nooks."" (Warner, Trans., 1917, lines 9:12)

Their exchange exemplifies how interactions with the 'other' can lead to self-realization about one's interior state of consciousness and presumptions. The merchant comes to see his consciousness as permeable and imperfect, capable of overlooking the interior experiences of different beings. This shaping of consciousness through open engagement with alterity prefigures philosophical discussions of intersubjectivity in thinkers like Husserl, Gadamer and Levinas. In his conversation with the parrot, the merchant exhibits a false sense of existence defined by superficial perceptions. When first noticing the parrot as a symbol of philosophical thoughts, the merchant objectifies the parrot as a mere commodity defined by its exterior attributes rather than inner consciousness. This preconception is challenged when the parrot forces the merchant to confront his assumptions. By speaking intelligently rather than merely mimicking, the parrot reveals an interior subjectivity that transcends its perceived physical status. This dismantles the merchant's belief in a fixed existence defined solely by outward appearance:

[The parrot proceeds then to expatiate upon love, and upon the union existing between souls.]

The merchant received the message, with its salutation, to deliver to the bird's kindred.

And when he came to the far-off land of Hindustan, he saw in the desert parrots, many a one. (Warner, Trans., 1917, lines 13:15)

The parrot goes on to fulfill his goal towards consciousness, this explicitly positions the parrot's true self as a conscious, reasoning man rather than the form of a bird, directly attacking the merchant's false perception. By recognizing another being's capacity for speech and thought beyond the body, the merchant begins to realize his consciousness and way of engaging with others was limited. When the parrot asks the merchant to deliver his message to his peers, this indicates the immaturity of defining existence superficially rather than acknowledging deeper interior realities. This prompts a shift in the merchant's consciousness. This shows the merchant embracing a truer existence by acknowledging his previous narrow perceptions and wrongfully objectifying another:

The merchant sore repented of telling his message and said: "'Tis only for the death of a living creature I am come.

"There was perchance a connection between these parrots, two bodies with but a single soul.

"Ah, why did I do it! Why did I carry out my commission! I am helplessly grieved at telling this." (Warner, Trans., 1917, lines 18:20)

Conversely, Montesquieu illustrates through Usbek and Rica how exposure to cultural differences prompts a reevaluation of identity. Their experiences reflect Husserl's idea that consciousness is influenced by openness to external worldly phenomena. The characters begin to perceive consciousness as intersubjective and plural, rather than restricted by rigid cultural boundaries. Like Rumi, Montesquieu demonstrates the combined power of literature, Sufism, and philosophy to foster expanded self-awareness through respectful interactions with the perceived 'other.' This highlights consciousness as permeable, with the potential for deeper interconnected understanding among all people.

When Usbek first arrives in Paris, he maintains a sense of false existence defined by his rigid Persian cultural identity. In Letter 8, he expresses dismay that French women do not adhere to Persian standards of modesty. However, living immersed in French society exposes Usbek to alternative perspectives that challenge his fixed perceptions. In Letter 9, Rica observes Usbek beginning to question cultural absolutes. Here, Usbek's encounter with French culture destabilizes his belief in the superiority of Persian traditions and a false sense of stable identity. He begins to acknowledge the contingency of cultural practices. Rica also holds preconceived notions and must dismantle false existence. Cultural immersion opens Rica's eyes to pluralism, recognizing his limited perspective. By the end, both characters fully embrace more universal, plural identities. In Letter 119, Usbek is no longer beholden to a single culture, he discovers a truer self through cultural exchange. Likewise, in Letter 120 Rica states all people share in that divine light which enlightens every man who comes into this world. Through depicting characters dismantling rigid cultural identities imposed by insular upbringings, Montesquieu illustrates how direct encounters with diversity challenge false existences. Only by embracing pluralism and common humanity can one escape limiting perceptions and know themselves and others authentically:

After what I've told you about the customs of this country, you will easily understand that the French do not pride themselves on fidelity; they believe that it's just as ridiculous to swear to a woman that they will always love her, as it is to claim that they'll always be healthy, or always happy. When they promise a woman that they will always love her, they assume that she, for her part, is promising that they will always find her loveable, and if she does not keep her word then they no longer feel obligated to keep theirs. (Montesquieu, 2008, p.104)

Montesquieu provides insight into the French perspective on fidelity in relationships. The French view on fidelity is portrayed as different from the conventional understanding of loyalty and commitment. According to Montesquieu, the French do not place a high value on making eternal promises of love and devotion. Instead, they consider such declarations as somewhat absurd or unrealistic. The reasoning behind this perspective lies in the belief that promising eternal love is akin to guaranteeing perpetual good health or everlasting happiness. The French view such promises as unattainable or unsustainable in the long term. By equating the promise of eternal love to promises of perpetual well-being, the French suggest that these declarations are based on uncertain and unpredictable factors that cannot be guaranteed indefinitely.

Both Rumi's poem *The Merchant and the Parrot* and Montesquieu's *The Persian Letters* illustrate characters transforming their consciousness when encountering cultural and social others that challenge their preconceived notions of self and the world. This process of self-discovery through alterity aligns with Husserl's theory of intentional consciousness. For Husserl, consciousness is always directed "intentionally" toward objects beyond itself. One's perceptions are shaped not innately but through intentional engagement with the 'other' phenomena. When the merchant first views the parrot, his consciousness holds a pre-intentional belief that it is merely a commodity defined by superficial traits. However, the parrot's speech acts as the 'other' that intentionally disrupts his perceptions, prompting a necessary shift. Experience, from this perspective, is not a passive reception of external stimuli by consciousness. Rather, it is an active process where the experiencer interacts with the experienced being, attributing meaning and content through intentional acts of perception. This dynamic performance shapes how the experienced being is perceived and understood, emphasizing the active role of the experiencer in constructing their reality. As Husserl explains:

Experience is not an opening through which a world, existing prior to all experience, shines into a room of consciousness; it is not a mere taking of something alien to consciousness into consciousness... Experience is the performance in which for me, the experiencer, experienced being "is there", and is there as what it is, with the whole content and the mode of being that experience itself, by the performance going on in its intentionality,

attributes to it. (Husserl, 1969, p.39)

Likewise, Usbek and Rica's Persian cultural identities represent pre-intentional self-understandings disrupted through their intentional interactions with French culture and society. Immersion in the 'other' world forces them to acknowledge the contingency of their prior worldviews. Their consciousnesses are reshaped through direct encounters with diversity. Both works illustrate consciousness as not innate but formed through intentional relations with alterity, aligning with Husserl. Selfhood is shown to be permeable rather than fixed, shaped through openness to the 'other'. Rumi and Montesquieu depict characters gaining truer self-knowledge by dismantling preconceptions and embracing pluralism.

In *The Merchant and the Parrot* and *The Persian Letters*, the parrot and the concubines respectively represent the self/ego, while the French culture and 'other' parrots constitute the 'other' that helps reshape and reform the self/ego and consciousness. The letters/messages sent directly or encrypted to the 'other' are the mechanism for shaping consciousness, where it is the responsibility of the self/ego to receive these letters/messages and reflect on them. The formation of consciousness of the self occurs through rebellion against the current situation and understanding the consciousness of the 'other', which acts as a mirror image to reflect on the consciousness of the 'other'. In 'other' words: The parrot and concubines represent the self/ego, French culture and 'other' parrots are the 'other' that helps reform identity and consciousness, Letters/messages to the 'other' shape consciousness by prompting self-reflection and Consciousness of the self is formed through challenging norms and comprehending the consciousness of the 'other', gaining insight through their perspective. In both works, interaction with the culturally different 'other' facilitates reshaping one's sense of self and awareness through reconsidering established views from an alternative vantage point. Husserl writes, "The ego constitutes itself for itself in, so to speak, the unity of a history" (Husserl, 1983, p. 75)

In *The Persian Letters*, the prince encounters French consciousness, culture, and thought, which deeply impresses him. He writes letters about these experiences to the concubines. Upon receiving these letters, the concubines are influenced, prompting internal inquiries that contribute to their developing self-awareness. Consequently, this consciousness gradually emerges and takes shape, becoming evident in their correspondence. However, this journey of one concubine's consciousness ends tragically with her suicide, seen as a means to attain existence or being. In essence, the prince's exposure to French culture and consciousness left a significant impact on him; he described his observations in letters to the concubines. Their thinking was shaped by these letters, leading to profound questions and a gradual evolution of self-awareness. Nevertheless, this process culminated in a tragic conclusion for one concubine, highlighting that while the letters fostered new perspectives and evolving self-awareness, they also led to a heartbreaking outcome.

Here, suicide represents a positive 'existential stance' attained through negation. Suicide is considered a position resulting from the formation of consciousness, and also a stance regarding existence. This kind of existence is inauthentic and not genuine existence, and therefore suicide is preferable to an inauthentic existence. The stance taken through suicide is one taken for the sake of allowing ideas to live on and reshaping consciousness. In other words: Suicide here symbolizes a positively existential position reached through denial/negation, it is seen as an outcome of developing self-awareness and a position on the question of existence, the existence available was not authentic/genuine existence. Therefore, suicide was deemed better than an inauthentic form of living. The suicidal act was a stance taken to allow thoughts/ideas to continue and reform consciousness even after death. So, suicide in this context represents taking a philosophical position that privileges authentic existence and the progression of ideas over physically living an inauthentic life. It is an extreme act of rebellion against prescribed existence:

Yes, I have deceived you; I have bribed your eunuchs, I have played upon your jealousy, and I have managed to make of your dreadful seraglio an abode of delights and pleasures. I am about to die: soon the poison will be coursing through my veins, for why would I remain here, when the only man who gave me a reason for living is dead? I am dying, but my shade will be well escorted on its flight; I have dispatched ahead of me those sacrilegious guards who spilt the most precious blood in the world. (Montesquieu, 2008, p.243)

Through this negation, rebellion is declared against the inauthentic existence through an apparent rebellion against the prince, as he only wants sensual pleasure from the concubines. Forming consciousness for them meant that sexual gratification was no longer the standard for existence. Here, a cognitive and existential stance is expressed through their rejection of the inauthentic existence. Knowledge is what shapes consciousness. Negation allows open rebellion against the prescribed inauthentic life, this rebellion is directed at the prince, as he only desires the concubines for physical pleasure, developing self-awareness changed their understanding of what defines existence, existence is no longer just about sexual gratification as dictated by the Prince, Suicide expresses an intellectual and philosophical rejection of the fake existence. It demonstrates a stance shaped by the new knowledge and consciousness gained Knowledge and learning are what enabled the transformation of their consciousness. Suicide in this context is a defiant philosophical act against prescribed meaningless existence, informed by newly developed self-awareness and knowledge. Roxane acknowledges their harsh words and expresses vulnerability as she faces death, suggesting a shift from anger to acceptance and resignation:

My language will no doubt seem new to you: after dealing you such an agonizing blow, might I also perhaps force you to admire my courage? But it is over; the poison consumes me, my strength abandons me, the pen falls from my hand; I feel that even my hatred is fading away... I am dying. (Montesquieu, 2008, p.244)

In *The Persian Letters*, the palace represents the boundaries of the alleged freedom. In *The Merchant and The Parrot*, the cage represents those boundaries. In the novel, pleasure is sensual and lustful. But in the poem, pleasure is aesthetic and intangible. The guards in the

novel are human beings, which are the eunuchs to protect the prince's concubines. But in the poem, protection is symbolic to enhance the beauty of the scene, such as the fountain and flowers. In the novel, the transition from false existence to real existence is through "death", so death constitutes an existential position against false existence and represents the loss of love. But in the poem, the parrot lives in estrangement and distance from its habitat. Usbek's letters to the concubines reveal a crisis of lack of awareness. But the parrot's message to its friends expresses awareness of the crisis. Usbek's response to the concubines leads to finding a solution to the crisis, while the parrot's friends' response to it leads to solving that crisis. The crisis here lies in the disappearance of freedom and thus the disappearance of awareness; freedom either leads to death or escape from the cage. For the prince it was losing a concubine, and for the merchant it was losing the parrot. They lost their possessions to give them freedom and reshape their awareness from scratch.

And looking upward he said: "My nightingale, give some explanation of what you have done!..."

Said the parrot: "That bird it was gave me counsel how I should act; in effect, this: 'Rid yourself of your speech, voice, and talking;

"For it is your voice that has brought you into captivity.' And then to prove its counsel it died itself."

[The parrot dilates further in religious manner upon the changes and chances of mortal life.]

Then Polly gave one or two bits more of guileless advice, and now said:—

"Adieu, good-by! Farewell, my merchant; you have done a mercy to me: you have set me free from bonds and oppression.

"Farewell, O merchant: I am now going home; and one day mayest thou become free just like me." (Warner, Trans., 1917, lines 40:46)

Exploring the theme of self-discovery through the 'other' in the works of Rumi and Montesquieu is profoundly significant in revealing the intricate interplay between individual consciousness, external influences, and identity construction. Rumi's lyrical mysticism and Montesquieu's philosophical examination converge to provide unique insights into how people shape their understanding of self and the world through relational experiences. In Rumi's *The Merchant and the Parrot*, the allegorical dialogue between the Merchant and the Parrot symbolizes a journey of self-enlightenment and spiritual awakening through the reflection of 'the other.' Rumi's focus on interconnectedness and empathy highlights the transformative power of relationships in broadening one's awareness of the divine and the self, surpassing conventional boundaries of existence. In contrast, Montesquieu's *The Persian Letters* explores the complexities of cultural exchange and social observation, where the Persian travelers' interactions with Western society serve as a lens for examining and redefining identity and values. By engaging with the 'other,' Montesquieu prompts readers to question their preconceived notions of selfhood and societal norms, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the fluid nature of consciousness and existence. Through the juxtaposition of Rumi's spiritual introspection and Montesquieu's critical analysis of cultural encounters, these literary works encourage readers to reflect on the multifaceted relationship between the self and 'other,' emphasizing the essential role of external influences in shaping individual consciousness and nurturing a deeper sense of interconnectedness within the human experience.

Their literary works thus explore self-discovery through the 'other' philosophically, showing consciousness as intersubjective and world-disclosing rather than isolated. Only through direct social and cultural exchange can limiting perceptions be overcome and a universal perspective embraced. Sufism, philosophy and literature present selfhood as emerging through engagement with exterior phenomena beyond the self. In these texts, Sufism, philosophy and literature convey how consciousness is formed through openness to alterity rather than innate attributes alone. Both genres approach self-knowledge as a process of intentional relations with social and cultural others.

Both Rumi's poem and Montesquieu's novel depict characters holding false or illusionary conceptions of self and reality that are challenged through encounters with social and cultural others. However, their works also highlight distinctions in how such preconceptions are formed and dismantled. In *The Merchant and the Parrot*, the merchant's false identity stems from superficial materialism - he views the parrot solely as a commodity defined by its monetary worth. His limited perspective reflects an egoistic consciousness focused only on self-interest. The parrot acts as the other's force that expands his intentional horizons by demonstrating intellect and subjectivity beyond surface attributes.

Comparatively, in *The Persian Letters*, Usbek and Rica's false identities are shaped more by insular cultural upbringings that impose rigid norms defining appropriate behavior, dress, religion, etc. Their preconceptions reflect an ethnocentric consciousness bounded by tradition rather than individualism. Immersion in diverse French society forces them to acknowledge the contingency of such cultural constructs. While both works show preconceptions being dismantled through social exchange, Rumi's poem depicts a more abrupt disruption of illusion through direct speech acts. The merchant's perceptions are shattered in a moment by the parrot's ability to converse. Montesquieu's novel illustrates a gradual, incremental reshaping of thought through prolonged immersion in an alien environment.

Additionally, the results of challenging false identities vary. The merchant develops a more holistic, empathetic understanding of the parrot as a fellow subjective being. In contrast, Usbek and Rica's perspectives broaden to encompass pluralism and cultural relativism rather than focusing on a specific 'other.' Both works offer valuable insights into how literature, Sufism, and philosophy can deepen the understanding of consciousness and selfhood. While Rumi and Montesquieu offer complementary depictions of dismantling illusion through social interaction, their approaches also highlight some distinctions in the nature and transformation of preconceived identities. Rumi explains in the poem, "The merchant responded: "To God's keeping go thou; thou hast taught me from this instant a new path of life." (Warner, Trans., 1917, lines 47)

By depicting characters who hold false conceptions of self and world that are disrupted through encounters with cultural and social others, Rumi and Montesquieu's texts provide insightful implications for comprehending processes of self-discovery. Their works illustrate some key realizations: Firstly, the two texts show how preconceived, bounded identities can form barriers that isolate individuals within limited perspectives, preventing true self-awareness. Whether through materialism, ethnocentrism, or other factors, false existences reflect a failure to recognize the permeability and relational nature of consciousness. Overcoming such illusions requires embracing pluralism through openness to exterior diversity. Secondly, direct social interaction and cultural exchange are revealed as essential means of dismantling preconceptions. Merely intellectualizing otherness is insufficient - lived immersion in difference provides experiential insights that reshape thought in profound ways. This implies a need for meaningful interpersonal and intercultural contact to foster self-understanding on both individual and societal levels. Additionally, their works suggest false identities can never be fully escaped, but must be continually re-examined and relinquished through ongoing encounters with new perspectives. Consciousness is depicted as perpetually incomplete rather than perfectly knowable - self-discovery remains a process rather than a destination. An attitude of perpetual open-mindedness is needed. Ibben, Uzbek friend in letter 65, explains:

but when I had become a little accustomed to these delightful thoughts, I realized that my happiness was not so close at hand as I had first imagined, although I had overcome the greatest of all the obstacles. I had to outwit the vigilance of her guards; I dared not share with anyone the secret of my life; we—she and I—would have to do everything; if I missed my opportunity and was caught, I risked being impaled, but I could imagine no torture more cruel than missing my opportunity. (Montesquieu, 2008, p.123)

Rumi's *The Merchant and the Parrot* and Montesquieu's *The Persian Letters* also highlight that disrupting illusion often requires jarring disruptions of habitual perceptions, whether through dramatic speech acts or abrupt cultural transitions. Gradual exposure may not sufficiently shatter limiting mindsets. However, they also imply such transformations should cultivate empathy and pluralism rather than specific attachments. Most importantly, Rumi and Montesquieu demonstrate literature, Sufism and philosophy's potential to synergistically further comprehend selfhood when in dialogue. Each genre offers unique and complementary insights – philosophy and Sufism provide theoretical frameworks while literature presents vivid narratives exploring applications. Together, they cultivate deeply contextualized understandings. In examining these implications, the works convey how embracing otherness holds profound significance for individual and social well-being. In a world growing ever more interconnected yet polarized, their lessons remain urgently relevant for dismantling barriers and fostering mutual understanding between diverse communities.

7. Conclusion

The exploration of other cultures can indeed lead to profound self-discovery. By immersing oneself in diverse perspectives, experiences, and worldviews, individuals can gain new insights into their own identities and beliefs. Understanding oneself through the lens of others has the potential to reshape consciousness by shedding light on different aspects of the self that may not have been apparent before. This process of self-examination can reveal hidden truths and prompt a deeper understanding of one's thoughts and behaviors. Seeking to understand others within their cultural and social contexts requires reflection on one's knowledge construction. Exposure to differing perceptions of truth and reality can challenge existing epistemological beliefs, leading to a reevaluation of one's understanding of the world. Delving into diverse cultures and embracing differing worldviews can result in new understandings of selfhood. Recognizing shared humanity across cultural boundaries can illuminate common threads of identity and consciousness that transcend cultural divides.

The works of Rumi and Montesquieu analyzed in this paper illustrate processes of self-discovery that can be further elucidated through the lens of Edmund Husserl's theory of intentional consciousness. For Husserl, consciousness is always directed outward in intentional relations with objects in the world, with the structure of subject and object mutually constituted. This framework provides a philosophical model for comprehending the transformations depicted. For the merchant and Usbek/Rica, their initial conscious states reflect a failure to recognize the intentional intertwining of self and other - their perspectives remain fixed inwardly toward a limited range of objects, forming closed circuits of self-reference. Without acknowledging exterior diversity and relationality, true self-awareness cannot emerge. However, encounters with the parrot and French culture disrupt these enclosed conscious systems by introducing novel objects that expand the merchants' and Persians' fields of awareness. Their consciousnesses are forced outward toward new intentions, reshaping subject-object relations. Where before the parrot and French were merely external objects, they now engage as subjects in their own right that mutually shape consciousness. Most profoundly, the works demonstrate how conscious experience is perpetually open and incomplete rather than statically bounded. For Husserl, consciousness is always directed toward a "horizon" of potential new objects that can reshape intentional relations in unexpected ways. Likewise, the texts portray self-discovery as an interminable process of continually relinquishing past conscious formations through openness to future encounters with difference.

In conclusion, the study of other cultures offers a rich opportunity for self-discovery and personal growth. By engaging with diverse perspectives and reflecting on one's own beliefs and assumptions, individuals can deepen their understanding of themselves and the world around them. Embracing cultural diversity and recognizing the interconnectedness of human experiences can lead to a more profound appreciation of the complexity of identity and consciousness. Ultimately, the journey of exploring other cultures can be a transformative experience that enhances self-awareness and promotes cross-cultural understanding and empathy.

Authors' contributions

Dr. Ahmed Hasan Anwar was responsible for the study design and revising. He also was responsible for data collection. **Dr. Shaimaa**

Mohamed Hassanin and Dr. Nesreen AlAhmadi drafted the manuscript and revised it. They read and approved the final manuscript.

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