EXPLAINED: Brad Pitt’s Rumi-inspired tattoo might be lost in translation

The verse is from 'The Essential Rumi,' which is a compilation of Rumi poems as ‘translated’ by Coleman Barks and John Moyne.

Hollywood star Brad Pitt showed off his latest tattoo to photographers in New Orleans on May 17, which features a translation of a Rumi verse – but figuring out what it actually says is proving to be easier said than done.

"Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there,” reads the tattoo on the inside of Pitt’s right bicep in three lines of black lettering.

Although it initially looks easy to comprehend, one should read the whole poem, if possible in its original Persian, to understand it completely, like in all the works of the great mystic.

The verse is from "The Essential Rumi," which is a compilation of Rumi poems as "translated" by Coleman Barks and John Moyne. In the book, the poem titled "A Great Wagon" continues with the following verse:

"When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about. Ideas, language, even the phrase each other doesn’t make any sense.”

Because the book doesn’t have footnotes or references showing the original versions of selected Rumi poems, it is hard to explain the meaning or verify the accuracy of the lines on Pitt’s bicep now.

"Despite the fact that he admittedly speaks no Persian, he is world-renowned as a translator of Rumi and other mystic poets of Persia,” Barks is described on Goodreads. Many native speakers of Persian, however, have been criticizing Barks’ translations. After comparing the original poems with Barks’ rendition, Amazon user E. hosseini had written in 2005 that the “translation seems to be distorted.”

All in all, whatever its true meaning is, Pitt’s new tattoo is yet another proof how Rumi still bridges cultures and nations, whether in Hollywood or Turkey or Iran.

"The name Rumi means ‘from Roman Anatolia.’ He was not known by that name, of course, until after his family, fleeing the threat of the invading Mongol armies, emigrated to Konya, Turkey, sometime between 1215 and 1220,” Barks explains in the foreword of “The Essential Rumi.”

Argentine-Chilean writer and cultural analyst Ariel Dorfman had even recommended “The Essential Rumi” last year “to bridge national differences and help Americans connect with regular Iranians.”

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