

The Symbolism in Persian Mystic Poetry: A Brief Historical Overview

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Abstract

While some Sufis follow a literal reading of the Qur'an, others emphasize the emotional and spiritual components and ramifications of Islamic concepts. This paper maintains that the Sufi poets of Persia belong to the second category. The primary mission of their poetry has been to create an emotional connection with God through the process of experiencing Divine, or connecting with God on a personal level. This message is abundantly expressed in the Sufi poetry through a use of symbolism. This paper highlights the way various symbols are used to express the fundamental ideas of Sufi ideology.

Key Words: Symbolism, Persian Mystic Poetry, Overview

Introduction

The need to understand the context in which an individual is defined has primarily been predicated on an understanding of human existence. The various identities which man has taken throughout history are a result of being embedded in a particular context. Let us use the example of religion, where individuals are defined in the greater scheme of things according to their religion. When it comes to race, ethnicity, cast, culture, nation, or ideological affiliations, we can often also find new identities to emerge. In these instances, however, identities could only account for a human being within a specific framework that fluctuated depending on where they lived or how they related to an ideology. To locate a generalised context that will allow all of mankind to realise their true identity, an individual's need to search for their identity cannot be satisfied. Four fields of thought have



attempted to universalize human identity by alluding to the notion of Nature's motherhood. Religion, philosophy, science, and mysticism comprise these four fields. Through their disciplines, these people have crafted their own inquiry and inference tools.

The religions have based their ideas on revealed knowledge of Prophets and have therefore found the solution to the question. Truths like these are assumed to be indisputable, although people nevertheless disagree on the full gamut of their interpretation. The outer edge is, nevertheless, well-maintained. Monotheistic religions hold that, upon the Day of Judgment, people will be held accountable to God for the specific tasks allocated to them by Him. Only the religious literature and the teachings that may be deduced from studying the lives of the Prophets are sources of knowledge. To grasp the entire scope of the creation of God, one must go to the scriptures, which help us to understand our place in the universe.

Philosophy is characterised by disciplined inquiry that uses reason as a tool for finding out how the universe works. The many philosophers presented philosophical paradigms, which they used for the sake of rational argument, in which they tried to figure out the ultimate design by employing or not employing a creator. An attempt was also made to learn about the concept of human existence on a rational level. Modern science, which was largely developed on the basis of empirical research, tried to uncover the mechanisms of nature and of the human person in order to establish the functioning context and eventually an accompanying identity.

The path of mysticism diverged greatly. Religion and science in contrast to philosophy, did not primarily depend on the force of words and ideas; rather, it emphasised the emotional impact. Instead of using words and ideas, it utilised them in a new spirit. The divine origin of words and ideas meant that religion cherished them, whereas precisionism prized them, and in terms of uncovering facets of reality, science uses them. The literal meaning of words and concepts has little relevance if separated, but becomes more complex and emotional when related to the context in which it is utilised. The context of

use makes the word "therefore" more than just a simple word with a meaning and consequence.

Sufi Poets of Persia

Sufism, an Islamic movement, was based on an alternate view of the Quran, which emphasised possibilities and concepts in Islam instead of a literal understanding of the word of God. The corporation's most significant goal has been to acquire an emotional connection to truth through experiencing the Divine, which is a connection with God on a personal level.

The Sufi religion takes its name from the Arabic word Suf, which meaning "wool" in reference to the clothes of early Islamic ascetics. People who shunned the material wealth of this world in order to obtain spiritual enlightenment were known as ascetics. Their goal in life was to seek the love of God, hence therefore they were also called to as beggars. However, the name "beggar" is symbolic, here referring to their spiritual need rather than their financial difficulties. In Persia in the seventh century, this movement was just getting started. It quickly spread throughout the Islamic world, especially in the lands that would later form the Ottoman Empire.

Some individuals in Persia rebelled against the material emphasis of the Umayyad kingdom in the late 7th century and formed the Sufi movement (AD 661-749). Sufism established a distinct character and connotation about 150 years later, as its practitioners relinquished worldly desires.

Love of God without an afterworld recompense was presented by a female mystic in the 8th century, Rabia Basri (died in AD 801). This was the first time such a proclamation had been made, because it stressed worldly goals with a spiritual emphasis.

Without You – my Life, my Love –

I would never have travelled through these interminable lands.

You have showered me with so much grace.

Several favours, numerous gifts –

I am on the lookout for Your love -

Then all of a sudden, I am overwhelmed by it.¹

Clearly, the preceding poetry explains that love is the fundamental underpinning of life. If you only have a vivid imagination, you will not get anything done. Rabia Basri asserts that her travel is motivated by a need for love, and she sees divine love in all she sees. At that point, she realises that everyone experiences that one moment when their love for the world expands, and that feeling is the purpose of existence. The experiences of love and the heart became the core of Sufi belief as early as the 8th century.

In this context, Bayazid Bastami, a famous mystic, took this concept a step further and declared that love was an essential aspect of God and the creation was a manifestation of love. He focused more on the aim of life, which is love, in contrast to the religious task of reaching heaven. The reasoning behind the preference was that the creation of paradise is inferior to the Divine characteristic of love, which has not yet been created. This had a strong emotional impact on the emotional scale, and also made a solid argument based on logic. To make a long story short, after advocating a more practical interpretation of “worship of God”, Fanaa went on to create the doctrine of “fanaa”, which referred to the complete absorption of human self into that of God. To an extreme subjective extreme, in 10th-century Persia, Manṣūr Hallaj, in ecstasy, proclaimed, “I am the Truth.” The claim was impossible to process and he was put to death. One of his renowned poems contains a concise formulation of the topic. He said, we are two souls incarnated in a single body; when you see me, you also see Him, and when you see Him, you also see us.²

In contrast to Mansur Hallaj, who refers to the transcendent union with God in a way that makes distinctions disappear, but who is wary of the reality that as a human being he is the product and not the designer, Adam promises that his goal is to unite people with God. The next two lines are very self-explanatory if you realise the meaning of the final couplet. To perceive God, you would need to see the state of union that a human being has with Him. While the final verse describes a different scenario, it does not claim that seeing God will show you my face. This also states that if you encounter God, you will see the entire human race. The assertion “I am the Truth” can

be taken to suggest that his announcement is itself the truth. The identity of mankind is most likely what is being referred to when 'I' is said. The main idea is of a level of oneness to the extent that a human being must give up their personal identity in order to become part of the divine. Similarly, the belief of loving God and the spirit is oneness via the elimination of self was also held. This was the foundation on which Sufi doctrine was built. This particular concept would grace the works of Sufism for many years.

Prose, narrative poem, quatrain, and ghazal all developed in Persia around the 11th century, as can be seen in this poem and prose writings of Sufis (lyrical poem). According to the 11th-century Sufis, love was first described by their predecessors in the early Sufi tradition. There are various examples from the following centuries that could be cited with regard to Persian poets. Saadi's Sheraz said something very similar:

Of one Essence is the human race,
thus has Creation put the Base;
One Limb impacted is sufficient,
For all Others to feel the Mace.³

To know the Essence, how would that be possible? The solution is also found in the works of the Islamic philosopher Ibne Arabi, who was highly esteemed for his wisdom and was also rumoured to have had mystical tendencies. Furthermore, he was a poet, who also incorporated his intellectual discoveries and spiritual insights. With only a few words, he says something very important about true inquiry. He says that in order to see the beloved, I would need His eye, not mine.⁴

The above idea concerns the philosophical conundrum of understanding, in which there must be a distinction between the object and the subject for either to be known. Applying this stance leads to the conclusion that to understand God, one needs to grasp His will, and this means that to love God, one must feel His love.

As part of their Sufi beliefs, Sufis give much weight to the concept of the soul and hence promote poets to challenge the claim that afterlife as preached by religious academics is literally true. Hell and Heaven or of Pain and Pleasure

were assigned to the human spirit in the earthly existence by Umar Khayyam. the poet endorses that it is the state of the soul that determines whether the individual has reached paradise or hell.⁵

Love has been defined as a gift of the heart by mystics. Rumi and Hafez added to the idea's complexity in the 13th and 14th centuries. Rumi stated that humans have a profound emptiness within their souls, and this must be filled with divine love. The vacuum is caused by a lack of a connection with loved ones, and the only way to fill the vacuum is to delve inside and search for sentiments. The following poem captures the idea:

Your heart has a candle that is waiting to be lit.

There is an unfilled vacuum in your soul.

You are aware of it, are not you?

You sense your estrangement from the Beloved.

Invite Him to replenish you; accept the flame.

Remind those who claim differently that Love comes to you of its own volition

and that the desire for it cannot be taught in any institution.⁶

At another instance Rumi identifies soul as the knower and suggests that it is only after that one get out of ideas that only relate to a limited view of reality that the heart is illuminated.⁷

The disappearance of worldly identities in the name of religion, and then even the distinction of gender was brilliantly articulated by Hafez, who makes it quite apparent that identities such as nationality, gender, and personality are meaningless when you are ready to sacrifice yourself for love. He holds the belief that self disappears when there is no sign of it.⁸

The concept of merging with God is the underlying principle of Sufi thinking. Loving is a reward for those who deny the existence of the human self. Poet Hafez describes the correct road in the following ode. In order to understand God, one must transform the intangible into something tangible. When that is done, the enlightened one offers advice, telling people that only the one who knows the difference between God and creation can reach

perfection and possesses true knowledge of love. The thought gets its literary shape in the following poem.

Only
That Illumined
One
Who keeps
Seducing the formless into form
Had the charm to win my
Heart.
Only a Perfect One
Who is always
Laughing at the word
Two
Can make you know
Of
Love.⁹

One of the most nuanced human experiences is experiencing and expressing love with God. There are sentiments associated with the experience that are so strong and high-quality that words are unable to express it. It started when I came to realise that signs can be used to show others the subtleties of the Beloved, as well as experiences of love.

The Use of Symbolism in Sufi Poetry of Persia

John Walbridge defines symbolism as “a means of communicating that which cannot be communicated in other ways.” Something that we also find in the Qur'an is the convention of using symbolic expression to communicate subtleties. Symbolism was employed masterfully here, with just the right amount of subtlety.

Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth; a likeness of His light is as a niche in which is a lamp, the lamp is in a glass, (and) the glass is as it were a brightly shining star, lit from a blessed olive-tree, neither eastern nor western, the oil whereof almost gives light though fire touch it not – light upon light – Allah guides to His light whom He

pleases, and Allah sets forth parables for men, and Allah is Cognizant of all things. (24:35)

The poem is employing light, lamp, glass, niche, star, and oil as metaphors for God's reality. In a manner similar to the usage of many other scholars, this verse has been variously interpreted. There is general agreement that light is associated with knowledge and wisdom, because it illuminates the things that are visible and understood. Furthermore, the stanza itself is a metaphorical representation of the concept, which uses symbols that we already know and see, to help clarify a deep reality. Since this was the case, Sufi poets made extensive use of symbolism as a means of communicating emotional importance.

the Persian poets utilised wine, a cup, a rose, and a nightingale to paint sensations that could not be put through words Several mystical poets, for instance Rumi, make reference to wine to talk about the feeling of union, and it is quite clear that this is because of the intoxicating effect of the wine, which is quite similar to that of being united with the Beloved. In his faith, the Kaaba and an idol temple are one.¹⁰

Rumi includes another mystical premise in which the Kaaba is considered a metaphor for God, and an idol temple is understood as such a religious icon. While the rose represents the Beloved's beauty, the nightingale signifies the soul. When used in a framework in which the soul travels through multiple phases of union with the Beloved, the metaphors and symbols employed by Persian poets take on a more nuanced meaning. Achieving unity with the divine soul is nothing but a process of ever-greater unification that the soul undertakes in her quest for perfection. In the Sufi faith, there are many stages or stations, as the seeker progresses on their spiritual path. While each station truly describes a certain type of practise and self-discipline, the state refers to what the mind reaches after dedicating oneself to a particular regimen of practise and discipline. Solitary and withdrawn, renunciation, silence, dread, and hope are some of the places where one may go to experience renunciation, silence, fear, and hope. The last stop is where the Sufi declares his service to the world. so he endures feelings such as desire, introspection,

connectivity, personal bliss, deeper insight, zen-like stillness, serenity, journeying, jhana, love, oblivion, and timelessness (baqaa). This is the case in all these different states and stations, where the symbols take on various connotations.¹¹

The Sufi way mentioned above has been defined by Junayd Baghdadi, who said, “God makes you die to yourself, and then resurrects you by His hand.” According to Sufi teacher Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the Sufi path exists to help us realise who we truly are. It is to help us become our own archetype or essence. A Sufi tradition advises of getting rid of the outer self to make way for the discovery of a true self.

Conclusion

The idea that the fundamental reality of life can be expressed to mystic symbols has been one of the profound discoveries made by human beings. The Persian mistakes contributed by expressing mystical ideas through poetry and it was acceptable to the masses. However, the symbols they used were taken from everyday life in order to make people realise the already known categories of experience in a new context and with a deeper meaning. This technique is frequently witnessed in the above examples of poetry and regardless of the culture and tradition, geography, race, ethnicity and class this mode of communication is universal. The idea that this is a deeper universal self in every human being is in its self-transforming because it helps one to translate the human potential into reality and at the same time enables one to question the acquired identity.

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