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Sufi Symbolism in Diverse Literary Traditions

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Abstract— *The Persian poetry enriched with Sufi symbolism has left an enduring legacy that spans generations. Regardless of the religion, language, or region, writers from various backgrounds have contributed to this legacy. This paper aims to trace the borrowing of Sufi symbols, like "wine" and "Beloved," in the selected works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Emily Dickinson, and Allama Iqbal. Poets from diverse cultural, linguistic, and historical backgrounds reinterpret these symbols to craft their own potent poetic ideologies. Goethe recast these symbols to create poetry that espoused universal humanism, while Dickinson's poetry is contemplative; Allama Iqbal's poetry embodies metaphysical nationalism. The study employs comparative literature methodology and intertextual analytical tools to uncover thematic and metaphorical connections. The primary textual analysis compares selected poems by Goethe, Emily Dickinson, and Allama Iqbal to determine which Persian poetry lineages they derive from and what forms of continuity and change they employ. The method examines each poet's "strong misreading" as the site of creative resistance and reinvention using Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" framework. This paper will follow the cross-historical life of Persian poetical symbols through three divergent voices across history, showing that, although they may share common symbols, their varied imagery leads to different interpretations of spirituality and universality, thereby illuminating the lasting impact of Persian mysticism on world literature.*

Keywords— ***Comparative literature, Persian poetry, Sufism, Symbols, Wine***

I. INTRODUCTION

Persian literary tradition is deeply permeated with Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam; Sufi philosophy directly influenced the mystic characteristics emanating in the form of themes, symbols, and images within Persian literature (Chittick, 2003). Persian Sufi poets Rumi and Hafiz significantly influenced Persian literature by setting a high poetic standard with their use of symbolism for the divine love and soul's ascent, rendering subtle spiritual teachings in the form of beautiful verses, through which they presented their mystic view of the divine. Persian poetry is translated into different languages, and multilingual writers crafted newfangled composite poetry, borrowing symbols and themes from these translated writings. The paper attempts to decode the symbolism in the poetry of three different poets, including Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, Emily Dickinson, and Allama Iqbal. Though nineteenth-century Europe, America, and early twentieth-century South Asia are culturally distinct from one another, each poet works with Persian mysticism to conjure up his personal and universal poetic imagination. Persian symbolism has been adapted and employed by renowned poets worldwide to enhance the aesthetic appeal and thematic depth of their poetry.

II. METHODOLOGY

The paper employs a comparative literary approach based on intertextual analysis to reveal thematic correspondences and metaphorical connections. The poems of three eminent poets, namely, Goethe, Emily Dickinson, and Allama Iqbal, are discussed and compared with major pieces of Persian poetry to point out the borrowing of symbols. The study specifically uses Harold Bloom's 'anxiety of influence'

paradigm to examine the ways in which each poet responds creatively to his precursors.

III. ANALYSIS

Throughout the nineteenth century, scholars argued whether Rumi and Hafiz's writings about wine and love were to be taken literally or were meant to be read as symbolic. Persian Sufi poetry (espoused by great poets such as Rumi and Hafiz), laced with symbols like the Beloved, wine, love, etc., symbolizes various stages through which the human soul passes to attain divine love and experience spiritual intoxication. Sufi manuals composed pedagogical texts to instruct readers on how to interpret Persian Sufi poetry within specific spiritual and theological frameworks. These manuals stress that the multiple symbolic idioms present in Sufi poetry, such as the Beloved and wine, among others, should be read ultimately with respect to God and the mystical relationship between the divine and the soul; "Hafiz views the relation between the creator and created as that of a lover and beloved" (Aminrazavi, 2014, p. 160). In the Sufi tradition, poetry is a veiled discourse in which the meanings are hidden and can only be accessed by those who possess spiritual vision. Spiritual mentors offer hermeneutical strategies for extracting allegorical, symbolic, and metaphorical meanings that transcend literal interpretations. This interpretive act ensures that Sufi poetry is regarded as something more than merely artistic or literary and as a sacred pedagogical device designed to direct readers. The term "Beloved" never refers to a human but instead symbolizes God, with all expressions of love representing different aspects of realization: ecstatic union with the Divine presence and immanence. Hafiz writes in his *Divan*, "Hafiz! if thou desire the presence (union with God Most High)—from Him be not absent: When thou visitest thy Beloved, abandon the world; and let it go" (Clarke, 1891, p. 3). Sufi manuals are designed to train the reader's mind along certain predetermined mysticism lines so that poetic symbols constantly refer back to God as the true meaning behind all allegory and metaphor. This didactic legacy protects the doctrinal and experiential integrity of Sufi poetry, encouraging a religiously infused and contemplative reading that is fundamental to its spiritual objectives. Hafiz in particular is celebrated often for his mystical ambiguity as a result of the multivalence of meaning in his verses. To guide readers in correct interpretation of these symbolic verses, Sufi manuals instructed that 'wine' should be understood along predetermined spiritual lines as a metaphor for divine intoxication rather than physical drinking. Wine symbolizes ecstatic spiritual experience in Persian Sufi poetry. In the Sufi lexicon:

> For instance, cup-bearer is regarded as the spiritual guide that reveals spiritual secrets. Similarly, by wine is meant the fire of the love of God, which produces intellectual liberation and spiritual ecstasy. Tavern is a retreat where one communicates with the Beloved, and a drunkard is one who has gone beyond the realm of reason and has been initiated into divine mysteries (Aminrazavi, 2014, p. 141).

The nineteenth-century influential American writer Emerson, in his poetry "Bacchus," imitates Hafiz and speaks of wine as something that takes him beyond time and space. Emerson writes, "Bring me wine, but wine which never grew/ In the belly of the grape" (Aminrazavi, 2014, p. 135). It resembles a translation that he made of a famous poem of Hafiz, called "Saqi-Namah." Emerson translates Hafiz's verses as, "Butler, fetch the ruby wine, which with sudden greatness fills us" (Aminrazavi, 2014, p. 137). An early critic of Emerson, Joel Benton, discovered the similarity of style in the poems of Emerson and Persian poets, especially translations of the works of Hafiz. He concluded that even his translations reflect more of Hafiz's style than of his own; the effect is balanced by how deeply his original verses draw on the inspiration and spirit of Eastern thought. Joel Benton comments on Emerson, "When he translated Hafiz, he was probably thinking of his own workmanship; when he described him, he was simply absorbed in the poet" (Aminrazavi, 2014, p. 117).

Emerson's writing style influenced nineteenth-century American writers, who echoed the Sufi symbolism in their works. Emily Dickinson, being one of them, often echoes references to wine in a subtle, often metaphorical manner. In the poem entitled "Indian Summer," she writes:

> Permit a child to join;
>
> Thy sacred emblems to partake,
>
> Thy consecrated bread to break,
>
> Taste thine immortal wine! (Pelka, 2019, p. 155)

Emily Dickinson borrows the Sufi symbol of wine in her poetry to communicate the soul's longing for spiritual intoxication. Dickinson's poetry is similar to Sufi mystical poetry, even though she came from a different religious and cultural background. The phrase "immortal wine" in her poetry does not refer to the earthly liquid but to a spiritual ecstasy. The line "Permit a child to join" symbolizes the call for humility and the desire for access to transcendence, just like Sufis testify to their unworthiness and ask to be allowed entry into the tavern of love just to receive a drop from the wine-cup of divine reality. By employing wine as a symbol, Dickinson transforms her song of self from an individual or religious perspective into

a universal expression of spiritual yearning. Her poetry mirrored closely the Sufi paradigm of nothingness against God's overpowering presence. Emily Dickinson, in another poem, tries to describe a similar experience of ecstasy, employing the symbolism of wine as "liquor":

> I taste a liquor never brewed,
>
> From tankards scooped in pearl;
>
> Not all the vats upon the Rhine
>
> Yield such an alcohol! (Pelka, 2019, p. 92)

Emily Dickinson's verse "liquor never brewed" evokes a spiritual image that resonates closely with the Sufi symbolism of wine. In Sufi poetry, particularly that of mystic poets like Rumi and Hafiz, wine is not an alcoholic beverage but is instead a symbol for divine love, spiritual euphoria, and the soul's ecstatic experience of the divine. When Dickinson writes of tasting a "liquor never brewed" and claims that the vats on all of the Rhine do not yield such an alcohol, she is describing an effect of ecstasy that goes beyond ordinary human experience. Just as Sufis rely on symbols of wine, taverns, and intoxication to articulate the soul's ache for the divine's presence and union, Dickinson uses the word "liquor" to convey a similar transcendence. The "tankards scooped in pearls" allude to the element of purity and beauty in that experience, indicating that no earthly pleasure can surpass it and that it is beyond comparison. To Emily Dickinson as well as to the Sufi mystics, metaphorical drunkenness acts to represent states of spiritual inebriation, and they agree that ecstasy is not found at the bottom of a bottle or through any material pursuit but in the soul's encounter with something vast, enduring, and unspeakable. Emily Dickinson employs the symbol of Beloved in her poetry in a way similar to Sufi poets: "Abated—Distance is/Until thyself, Beloved" (Dickinson, 1960, p. 516). And so, Dickinson proposes that actual closeness is not about distance at all, but about the communion of spirits. The symbol of the Beloved is employed by Emily Dickinson in a manner highly parallel to certain Sufi poets, although its fielding and imagery remain patriarchally Western. Like Rumi and Hafiz, Dickinson's Beloved is often a divine presence, truth, or immortality rather than a human figure, for whom the soul pines with vast spiritual longing. In the poetry, love is a bridge between humanity and divinity that connects the soul to something infinite. Both Dickinson and the Sufis describe love as a way toward transcendence, wherein longing and separation foster spiritual receptivity.

Extending the literary tradition to Europe, the influence of Sufi poetry on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is apparent. Goethe wallows in the wine imagery, associating it with creative inspiration and socialistic wisdom. Goethe's admiration for Hafiz's poetry is evident in his compilation of 12 volumes entitled *West-Eastern Divan*, which advocates for secular cosmopolitanism and cultural exchange between the Orient and the Occident. Goethe was introduced to Hafiz's *Divan* in 1814 through translations by Josef Von Hammer. His love for Hafiz's *Divan* in particular gave him a true understanding of mystical love. Poetry, being a process of dialogue, helped in bridging the gap between east and west. Goethe (ca. 1914), in his *West-Eastern Divan,* writes:

> If Hafis should but take his share,
>
> And quaff with me the Eilfer; Therefore to Paradise I fleet,
>
> Where ne'er, alas, of Eilfer The faithful drink! May it be sweet,
>
> Heaven's wine! yet 'tis not Eilfer. Quick, Hafis, quick, and hasten thence,
>
> A bumper's here of Eilfer (p. 152)

In this poem Goethe invokes the Persian Sufi master Hafiz to explore the contrast between spiritual ecstasy and earthly joy, using the symbolic image of wine. Goethe imagines himself fleeing to Paradise but laments that there they are denied the simple, joyful experiences that make earthly life rich. Goethe describes that the wine of heaven may be sweet, yet it lacks the earthly pleasure that familiarity condones. Goethe, through his poetry, indicates that he treasures the Sufis' acceptance of wine as a symbol for mystical union when inviting Hafiz out of Paradise to share a glass with him, interpreting the symbol of wine in his own way. In doing so he uses the Sufi symbol of wine to suggest that true paradise might not reside in some far-off spiritual plane but rather may be found immanently within the ecstatic experience of life in the present, a message perfectly tuned with Hafiz's own poetic vision. Goethe (ca. 1914), in his *West-Eastern Divan,* writes:

> NORTH and West and South up-breaking!
>
> Thrones are shattering, Empires quaking;
>
> Fly thou to the untroubled East,
>
> There the patriarchs' air to taste!
>
> What with love and wine and song
>
> Chiser's fount will make thee young (p. 1)

Goethe, in his poem "Hejira," contrasts the chaos of the political West with the peace and spiritual satiety of the East. By his verses "Fly thou to the untroubled East, / There the patriarchs' air to taste," he metaphorically commands the soul to take refuge in the wise and peaceful East. More precisely, in Goethe's works, the East is a land of spirituality and poetic inspiration. With the words "Chiser's fount," he indicates Khizr, who is a saint in Islamic

tradition. The Sufis believe that Khizr drank the water of life, so he is immortal. Therefore, by asserting "Chiser's fount will make thee young," Goethe suggests that by turning to the East, one can renew the spirit.

One of the critics of Goethe, Burdach, points out that Goethe was inspired by a historical character while referring to the "Beloved" in his poem in *West-Eastern Divan*. However, this question leads to a deeper secondary interpretation where it is mentioned in Goethe's *Divan* that his "Beloved" may represent not only a young lady but also Truth, or more broadly, the Ideal (Goethe, 1914, p. 45). In this reading, the poem has a literal as well as a spiritual layer of meaning. On the level of apparent meaning, it speaks to human love and admiration; on a deeper level, it embodies the poet's desire for divine truth, everlasting beauty, or supreme reality. This dichotomy is reminiscent of Goethe's romantic feature, where terrestrial affection stands as a substitute for celestial passion, and the Beloved embodies an archetype of the divine or ideal that one seeks in the poet. Goethe's poetry makes a deep connection to universal humanism as a celebration of the shared spiritual, moral, and creative capabilities of all humanity above race, nation, or religion. In works such as the *West-Easter Divan,* Goethe meditates on the bond between East and West; he cites Persian poets, like Hafiz, and uses them as a source for expressing his appreciation for Islamic culture and Sufi mysticism. And in doing so, he provides a vision of the world as a place where civilizations can harmoniously coexist, which supports his notion of universal humanism.

Shifting the literary tradition to Asia, one cannot neglect the Sufi influence on Asian writers, mainly Allama Iqbal. He considered the Persian Sufi poet Rumi to be the epitome of love, the embodiment of knowledge, and the incarnation of action. Nicholson comments in the introduction of the English translation of Allama Iqbal's book *Asrar-i-Khudi* that "Asrar-i-Khudi is composed in the metre and modelled on the style of the famous Masnavi" (Iqbal, n.d.). He further highlights that Allama writes in Persian style by invoking the Saki to fill his cup with wine: "Arise and pour pure wine into my cup, / Pour moon beams into the dark night of my thought" (Iqbal, verse 85-86). Allama Iqbal appropriates the symbol of wine in his poetry with a more philosophical tone. He invokes his spiritual master, Rumi, in his poetry:

> There appeared the Master, formed in the mould of Truth,
>
> Who wrote the Koran in Persian.
>
> He said, "O frenzied lover,
>
> Take a draught of love's pure wine (Iqbal, verse 115-118)

The verses of Allama Iqbal are symbolic, referring to essential subjects and noumenal divine messages from tradition; at the same time, they are transcendental and autobiographical in nature. He conjures the figure of Rumi, whom he refers to as his "Master" and who is famous for deploying Persian poetry to articulate spiritual truths. Allama Iqbal praises Rumi for his command over the Persian language and for being instrumental in giving birth to mystical literature; by bringing his name into the equation, he invokes an entire tradition of spiritual teachers who aim to enliven a soul. The "draught of love's pure wine" is standard Sufi imagery for spiritual intoxication or even divine revelation, while the advice is that the seeker ("frenzied lover") should imbibe this transforming love and spiritually drink from it so that he can become more self-fulfilled and closer to divine. Allama Iqbal prompts the seeker to kindle that source of inner illumination that leads in the direction of truth. He writes, "There is a beloved hidden within thine heart" (Iqbal, verse 343). He gently directs attention to the fact that our final quest, the "Beloved," is not outside us but inside our hearts. He describes love as the "Fountain of Life" (Iqbal, verse 334). Allama Iqbal writes for the enlightenment of the soul and spiritual awakening; through his poetry he tries to emphasize that the power of a community lies in the moral and spiritual awakening of its individuals. He aims to unite the nation beyond material and geographical boundaries, which are inherently defined by purpose, faith, and divine consciousness.

When analyzed with reference to the influence theory, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Emily Dickinson, and Allama Iqbal shared common Sufi symbolism. Each of the three poets expresses their existential and spiritual lyrics by incorporating specific aspects of their individual cultural backgrounds and philosophical ideas to address issues related to the human experience and the search for higher knowledge. Each poet creatively absorbs and transforms the symbolism used by his predecessors: Goethe reinterprets Persian Sufi symbolism for a German Romantic audience; Allama Iqbal writes deliberately from within the Islamic tradition; Emily Dickinson, while less overtly related to Eastern literature, reimagines spiritual ecstasy and transcendence in a voice that is distinctively American. This interplay corresponds to Harold Bloom's concept of "anxiety of influence," in which each poet contends with his predecessors to create authentic expression. In terms of influence theory by Harold Bloom in his book *The Anxiety of Influence*, "strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves" (p. 5). Emily Dickinson's depiction of the soul on its way is inward and contemplative, a portrayal of inner change. Goethe includes this symbol in a universalist model

of human aspiration. Allama Iqbal's poetic profile is fluid and social, stressing individual as well as collective spiritual development. Finally, these three authors constitute a dialogue that is not restricted to imitation but treated as an integral aspect of their own respective work and philosophy. It is shown in comparative perspective that the three poets share a common symbolic legacy from Persian poetry but reshape it under unique cultural, ideological, and political circumstances.

CONCLUSION

This paper sheds light on the ongoing resonance of Persian poetic symbols across distinct cultures and languages, illustrating the way in which Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Emily Dickinson, and Allama Iqbal engage in a transhistorical dialogue that redefines mystical symbolism along divergent poetic trajectories. By tracing the path of these symbols, the study advocates for mysticism as a powerful force in world literature that drives creativity in spiritual and philosophical imagination. Sufi poetry, with its universal message of love and brotherhood, transcended borders and influenced the development of new poetic language and offered new modes of writing. It is a shared message of universal love and tolerance that brings together the mystical poetry of thirteenth-century Persian Sufi poets with the visionary outpourings of the poets of later generations to keep the nations united by sharing the common message of love and peace.

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