

## **Unity and Diversity**

### **Intentional Multidimensionality in Persian Sufi Language and the Method of Decoding It**

#### **Introduction**

Jalal al-Din Rumi and Muhammad Hafez Shirazi are two of the great mystics, Sufis, writing in Persian in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century. They are commonly referred to in the West just as Rumi and Hafez. Their poetry is still an essential part of the Turkish and the Persian religious and cultural settings. Hafez is today very much the national poet of Iran known for his elegance. Rumi on the other hand is the one known for religious depth, heavily influencing most of the countries in the Middle East and especially Turkey from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards. As an adult he lived in Konya, a city situated in what is now the country of Turkey and where the Mevlevi order commonly known as the 'Whirling Dervishes' did and still does influence both the religious and political life. The master and his order also influenced most of the other countries in the Middle East. The time from the twelfth century until the 14<sup>th</sup> century is often regarded as the epitome of Persian Sufism.

The objectives of this article are to suggest a method for analyzing the poetry of Rumi and Hafez within the discipline of History of religions. First a few poems and parts of poems will be presented. Then various aspects of the method such as historical-philological as well as those influenced by anthropology and their relevance for the study will be discussed. The focus is thus on the methodology and the aim is not to give a detailed and full analysis of the poetry presented. The poems are there for illustrating the relevance of various aspects of the method. The aim of writing this paper has been achieved, if the points made regarding method are clear at the end of it.

## The Poetry

We will start with a few poems of Hafez. This one is translated by H. H. (Hafiz 1962: 109–110) without any further reference in the book to the full name:

### O ask not

O love, how have I felt thy pain!

Ask me not how—

O absence, how I drank thy bane!

Ask me not how—

In quest, throughout the world I err'd,

And whom, at last, have I preferr'd?

O ask not whom—

In hope her thresholds dust to spy,

How streamed down my longing eye!

O ask not how—

Why bite my friends their lips, displeas'd?

Know they what ruby lip I seized?

O ask not when—

But yester-night, this very ear

Such language from her mouth did hear—

O ask not what—

Like Hafiz, in love's mazy round,

My feet, at length their goal have found,

O ask not where.

Some poems of Hafez quite similar to the one above have been translated into Swedish. The introduction clearly shows that the translator, who is a Swedish author, sees only human love and ordinary wine in the poems (Hafiz 1991). Manoochehr Aryanpur on the other hand divides Hafez' poems into four categories in his *A History of Persian Literature* (1973: 232–234). They are: 1 Lyrics in which Hafez speaks of human love and ordinary wine. 2 Poems in which Hafez writes of mystical love in which wine and rose have a symbolic value. 3 Poems in which Hafez makes quick shifts from one theme, image, or allusion to another. They deal with mystical love and symbolic wine etc but in a more complex way than in no. two. 4 Poems with social and political undertones. He places the poem quoted above in the first category. It is thus possible for both scholars and non scholars in the field of Iranistics to regard the poem discussed

above as a human love poem. Many, especially Westerners, would read most of Hafez poems in such a way i.e. as if they were just about human love and ordinary wine.

Another one of the poems ascribed to Hafez is the following translated by A.J. Arberry (Hafiz 1962: 117–118),

### The Light Divine

1

Within the magian tavern  
The light of God I see;  
In such a place, O wonder!  
Shines out such radiancy.

Boast not, O king of pilgrims,  
The privilege of thee:  
Thou viewest God's own temple:  
God shews himself to me.

2

Combed from the fair one's tresses  
I win sweet musk today,  
But ah! the distant fancy  
That I should gain Cathay.

3

A fiery heart, tears flowing,  
Night's sorrow, dawn's lament—

All this to me dispenses  
Your glance benevolent.

4

My fancy's way thine image  
Arresteth momentarily,  
Whom shall I tell, what marvels  
Within this veil I see?

Not all the musk of China,  
The scents of Tartary,  
Excel those subtle odours  
The dawn breeze wafts to me.

5

If Hafiz plays at glances,  
Friends, be not critical:  
For truly as I know him,  
He truly loves you all.

The first stanzas makes it harder to interpret this poem as nothing but a love poem. The light of God and the king of pilgrims indicate a religious setting. If that part is left out however we are once again close to the possibility of interpreting the text as an ordinary love poem.

The third poem of Hafez (Hafiz 1962: 129–130), referred to in this paper, has also been translated by A.J. Arberry. It is one of the most loved ones in Iran. Only parts of it will be quoted here.

### Saki Song

1

Come, saki, come, your wine ecstatic bring,  
Augmenting grace, the soul's perfectioning;  
Fill up my glass, for I am desperate—  
Lo, bankrupt of both parts is my estate.

Bring, saki, bring your wine and Jamshid's bowl  
Shall therewith bear to view the vast void whole;  
Pour on, that with this bowl to fortify

I may, like Jamshid, every secret spy.

.....

Bring wine, O saki, and its image there  
to Jamshid and Chosroes shall greeting bear;  
Pour on, and to the pipe's note I shall say  
How Jamshid fared, and Ka'us, in their day.

Bring wine, o Saki, that the houris spice  
With angel fragrance out of Paradise;  
Pour on, and putting incense to the fire  
The mind's eternal pleasure I'll acquire.

Bring, saki, bring your throne-bestowing wine;

My heart bears witness it is pure and fine;  
Pour on, that, shriven in the tide of it,  
I may arise triumphant from the pit.

.....

Why must I yet the body's captive be,  
When spiritual gardens call to me?  
Give me to drink, till I am full of wine,  
Then mark what wisdom and what power are mine;

.....

Intoxicate, of saintliness I'll sing,  
And in my beggar's rags I'll play the king.  
When Hafiz lifts his voice in drunken cheer,  
Venus applauds his anthem from her sphere.

In this poem a certain knowledge of Persian history and culture is required to be able to follow Hafez imagery. There also seems to be too many references to the religious sphere to interpret it in a strictly non religious way.

The influence of Jalal al-Din Rumi's poetry is not dominated by rather short poems like Hafez. Rumi is most famous for his long *Masnavi*. It's opening lines are in the translation of R.A. Nicholson (Rumi 1990: 5):

Listen to the reed how it tells a tale, complaining of separations—  
Saying, "Ever since I was parted from the reed-bed, my  
lament hath caused man and woman to moan.  
I want a bosom torn by severance, that I may unfold (to such  
a one) the pain of love-desire.

.....

'Tis the fire of Love that is in the reed, 'tis the fervour of  
Love that is in the wine.

It is not likely that anyone reading this and the continuation of it would regard it as non-religious text. On the other hand there are a lot of short poems ascribed to Rumi, which could certainly be read as ordinary love poems just as the main part of Hafez poetry.

We now leave the text presentation for the discussion of the methodology.

## Language and Religious Language

Before discussing the poems which we now have in written form but also transmitted orally in chanting, reciting etc. it seems to be a good idea to return to the *Cours de Linguistique Générale* by Ferdinand de Saussure. His view on language in this book has influenced most of the academic disciplines. However all these discussions referring to Saussure seems to be focused on language as the spoken and written language. Saussure's own way of discussing these matters already in 1915 (Saussure 1964: 27–39) indicates that he has a much broader perspective looking at the process of communication in its entirety, where the whole capacity of the brain is involved, but as a linguist he then focuses on written and spoken language. The entire setting is of utmost importance in discussing the poetry of Rumi and Hafez. It is obvious that their poetry is made for chanting, to be accompanied by music and definitely in the case of Rumi much of it has the rhythm of dancing (Ghomi 1993: 97–106). Any analysis of their poetry which does not take these things into account has reduced them to written documents with the logic of those documents. Then the whole influence of the music, the chanting and the dancing which is an important part of the poems when they were written is lost. This means that the influence on the emotions, what in the West is called the subconscious etc. is not understood, which then also goes for the composition of the poems, what they contain, what is sometimes called repetition etc. Thus the words as such are only one part of the poetry. When the poetry is sung nowadays it is usual for the singer to choose only a few lines and repeat them, not necessarily in the original order, to create the desired effect on the listener. Under these circumstances it is easy to understand the high esteem given to the musician.

The aim of the discussion above was to emphasize the relation of written words to music, singing and dancing. A situation where the primary function of the words can just as well be emphasizing rhythm, creating various moods etc. The relation to art picturing the saki, gardens etc. is also important regarding the totality of the set-

ting in which the words are only one part. Religious language in these poems should then preferably be understood as the totality of the communication process or if language is restricted to what is written or spoken it should be emphasized that the words often have a very special function within the total setting of communication in the Sufi context.

Another important part of the Sufi language of Rumi and Hafez is that many poems could be understood as ordinary love poems. We will soon return to the reason for this as well as to symbols in this language.

### **The Historical and Philological Aspects of the Method**

One part of the development of history of religions has been emphasizing the necessity of historical work, placing the object of study in its historical setting. This has often been combined with emphasizing the importance of some knowledge of one or more languages relating to the object of study. We shall look at the relevance of these things for our discussion through a few examples.

A. Some parts of historical knowledge are essential for analyzing the poetry of Rumi and Hafez. One is the death of the 10<sup>th</sup> century Sufi called Hallaj. Since he said "I am the Truth", which was understood as God, he was killed for heresy, one of the major sins within traditional Islam being to put someone at the same level as God. Still, talking about the fate of Hallaj can be a very delicate matter. The result was, however, that a symbolic language became important, where it was not easy to tell if it was an ordinary love poem dealing with human beings or if it was about the union between man and God. Part of that setting is also the deep feeling of sadness when man and God are separated. The symbolic language created at times a safety essential for the Sufis. If there was not this kind of uncertainty regarding the meaning of love and beloved, things had to be hidden in other ways. It is obvious that Rumi's *Masnavi* is a religious text. But the union between God and man as well as many other things are very hard to specify in a clear way since king, Sufi, Rumi etc are merged into each other in such a clever way that the reader can seldom tell who is who. This multidimensionality of Rumi certainly has various reasons. One of them could be protection. Another one could be a deliberate way of leading the reader towards beginning to realize the unity between Man and God. Hafez' special way of creating multidimensionality most probably has at least these two aims, protection and guidance. Without the knowledge of the situa-

tion of Sufis at Rumi's and Hafez' time the hide and seek as well as the blurring of the picture can hardly be understood. With this historical knowledge the picture becomes clearer.

Another part of historical and religious knowledge necessary for analyzing the poetry of Rumi and Hafez is the importance of the concept of kingship in Persian traditions. In pre-Islamic times the king was regarded as the one closer to God than any other person. He was responsible before God for executing a just rulership. If the king lied, compare truth in the Sufi setting, he would loose his kingship and God would give it to someone else. As long as the king was a just ruler there would be peace among his subjects, animals would multiply, fertility would prevail, flowers would bloom etc. If the king was unjust peace would vanish, people would have a bad time, flowers would wither and birds would not sing. Many of these ideas were transmitted by Iranians from generation to generation and many of them were made part of the kingship ideology created for the Muslim Turkish rulers during the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Aneer 1985), which was then also passed on from generation to generation. Both Rumi and Hafez use the picture of the just ruler often identified with pre-Islamic kings, who guarantee peace and prosperity and are linked to the idea of the paradise garden with blooming flowers and singing birds. When tyranny is around the flowers loose their color and their fragrance and the birds do not sing any more. But in the end it is obvious in the poetry of both that the mystic has replaced the king. The mystic is the true king regarding closeness to God etc.

In the historical setting it should also be mentioned that Rumi spent his adult life in Konya as a religious personality having disciples. Hafez on the other hand seems to have spent much of his time writing poetry. Some of it was presented to rulers. Both of them lived at times of unrest. Hafez lived in the aftermath of the Mongols. There are certainly many more parts of history which are important for the analysis of the poetry in question. These have been given just as examples of how crucial historical knowledge is in these matters.

**B.** Some remarks on the knowledge of language. The great dilemma of every translator of Sufi poetry is the multidimensionality. When the poem is translated into a European language she or he has to choose one out of many possibilities thereby not even being able to indicate a few of the other ones. Part of the richness of the Persian language is not to repeat the same word. Often such translations as the fair one hide many different Persian expressions. One example is in the second of Hafez' poems presented above. The line in Arberrý's translation is *Combed from the fair ones' tresses*. The Persian word translated by the fair one is *butan* which in a word by word transla-

tion rather would be idol. Arberry's translation conveys the right meaning since the symbol here stands for God, but it does not convey the character of the anti-language used by Hafez. Even more interesting is the continuation from the multidimensional point of view. Arberry translates *the distant fancy That I should gain Cathay*. The Persian text in Arberry's edition in the same book (Hafiz 1962: 66) has *the thought is certainly far away that I see / experience khata*. The latter has been interpreted as Cathay i.e. the country whereas the very same letters can mean sin. Then the line would be *the thought is certainly far away that I see / experience sin*, which should be put in the context of getting musk from the idols tresses. It would be quite easy to multiply these examples, but this may be sufficient for making the point that almost all the multidimensionality in the use of words is lost in a translation. That also influences the possibility of analyzing eventual patterns of Persian heritage as the background for the imagery.

### **The Functions of the Poetry**

Iranians today often refer to giving people hope and comfort in a situation of turmoil, when they talk about Rumi's and Hafez poems. It is very obvious in the case of Rumi's *Masnavi* that it is intended to lead people who so wish to mystical understanding and pave the way to unity. The same is certainly true for many of Hafez' poems if we look upon them not as ordinary love poems, but speaking about unity between man and God and reflecting the hardships while traveling the path to unity. If we put the poetry of them both in relation to music, singing and dancing this heavily supports the function of leading man to unity with God. It is also evident that an important function of many of their poems is to create an identity which is partly a Sufi identity and partly a Persian identity as opposed to an Arab-oriented Muslim identity. Deeper studies of various functions would certainly be fruitful in analyzing these poems.

### **Symbolic Clusters**

Clifford Geertz has discussed the question of creating meaning and symbolic clusters in various contexts. Many anthropologists have developed the ideas of symbolic clusters for example Professor Göran Aijmer at Göteborg university in Sweden. Here I will not discuss the

question of creating meaning in any deeper way, but I do suggest that the concept of symbolic clusters creating symbolic fields is important or rather crucial for the analysis of Rumi's and Hafez poems. It is important since various symbols are not treated as separate entities. We lose perspective, if we discuss the symbols one by one without realizing the connection between them and how much of their meaning is actually depending on combining them.

In the poems we have seen the recurring wine, love, lover and beloved. One of the combinations or clusters is thus wine being the symbol of love, lover symbolizing man and beloved symbolizing God.

Another such combination of symbols is the saki, the one who pours wine into the beaker or the bowl, the wine, the lovers and the beloved. Often in the poetry the saki merges with the beloved.

Still another combination of symbols is the tavern, the wine, magi and God. In many poems God is called the master, *pir*, of the magi. Magi, the Zoroastrian priest, is in early Arab-oriented Muslim literature a term for the worst type of a heathen. The Persian Sufis, as can be seen in the poems above, made this a word of honor for themselves. Magian tavern is a Sufi construct, combining the title of honor with the place of wine-drinking. The Zoroastrian priests certainly did not have taverns. The combination strengthens the Persian identity against Arab-oriented religious learned people in the same way as the fair one or actually the idol in the same poem above on the divine light.

Another important combination of symbols for example in the Saki song is the king, justice, prosperity, deep insight.

The various combinations of symbols, symbolic clusters, together create a totality from which parts are taken and combined in various ways in the poems. Seldom all of them are there together, but reading some poems with various themes gives the whole combination of symbols, which has been used by the poet. It gives the picture of a Sufi setting, where the essential thing is the path to the unity with God. With it goes the Persian identity indicated in the garden of roses symbolizing paradise, kingship, justice, prosperity, the love of nature etc. Only in combination do these symbols point to the complex situation of the Persian Sufis.

## Conclusion

We have looked at the importance of parts of the historical and philological method for the analysis of Rumi's and Hafez' poems. That includes the historical setting as well as knowledge of the language to

be able to see the multidimensionality of words, expressions and lines of poems as well as the symbolic language.

We might add that the history of Hafez' poems is so complicated that only a thorough study of manuscripts can tell which of them are by Hafez himself. We have also discussed the functions of the poems, something which is very much of a certain anthropological way of working. Anthropologists are also important in the discussions on symbols especially symbolic clusters. Without combining the various symbols and seeing the meaning they bring about we are somehow lost in the wilderness running in various directions. Keeping the various parts of the suggested method together might make the scholarly journey easier.

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