

AGENCY OF THE SELF AND THE UNCERTAIN NATURE OF THE BELOVED IN PERSIAN LOVE MYSTICISM: EARTHLY, ETHEREAL, MASCULINE, OR FEMININE?

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Abstract: It seems that the controversies over the nature of the beloved in classical Persian mystic poetry (also known as Sufi poetry) as an earthly or ethereal phenomenon would never end. Those in favor of the celestial reading of it consider their counterparts to be narrow-minded. The adherents of terrestrial love, though, see mystical readings dogmatic and outdated, prevailed by traditionalists. The topic gets even more complicated when one takes into account the attitudes in the medieval Muslim world toward pederasty, *shāhid-bāzī*, on the one hand, and the Divine Feminine / Masculine Beloved, on the other hand, and, thus, the gender of this beloved. The present article explores the beloved in Persian classical mystical poetry via five different but related approaches: historical, philosophical, translational and comparative, linguistic and poetic, and, ultimately, developmental. The study concludes that an essentialist reading of the beloved in Persian love mystic poetry would create numerous problems, and that the spirit of Persian classical poetry in this regard is the spirit of uncertainty with a certain purpose: it is the manifestation of the self-poet's agency, choosing one's object of desire without explicitly revealing it and, thus, living one's own life of choice without fearing the threads of religious fundamentalism.

Keywords: Persian mystical poetry; beloved; gender; earthly/ethereal; uncertainty.

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Introduction

A year of that moment *that* I spend with you is only a day,
and the moment of that instant that I spend without you is a year

...

Ḥāfīz! Do not complain if you yearn union with the beloved
You will need to be more patient with the separation

(*'An dam kib bī tu bāsham yik sāl hast rūzī*

Vān dam kib bī tu bāsham yik lahẓib hast sāli

...

Ḥāfīz makun shikāyat gar vaṣl-i dust khwābī

*Zin bishtar bibāyad bar hijrat 'iḥtimālī*¹

Who is this “you” whose separation is so difficult and the union with whom is so sweet to Ḥāfīz? Is it God? A young man? Or a delicate lady? It seems that the controversies over the nature of the beloved in classical Persian mystic poetry (also known as Sufī poetry) as an earthly or ethereal phenomenon would never end. Those in favor of the celestial reading of it consider their counterparts with close affinities for an earthly beloved to be narrow-minded. The adherents of terrestrial love, though, see mystical readings dogmatic and outdated, prevailed by traditionalists. The topic gets even more complicated when one takes into account the attitudes in the medieval Muslim world toward pederasty and/or homosexuality, *shahid-bāzī*, and, thus, the gender of this beloved. How should one read this beloved? Is it, like what many translators interpreted and what many scholars of religion and Islamicists read it, solely a capitalized divine Beloved? Or does it have an earthly or humanly nature? What is the role of the subject finding oneself in relation to this beloved? Does the subject demonstrate agency, choosing and representing this beloved? If yes, how? The present article explores and analyzes the nature of the beloved in classical mystical Persian poetry via five different but related approaches: philosophical, translational and comparative literature, linguistic, poetic, and ultimately, historical and developmental. The study concludes that a structural and essentialist reading of the beloved in Persian classical poetry as either earthly or ethereal, masculine or feminine, would create numerous problems at multiple levels, and that the spirit of Persian classical poetry in this regard is the spirit of uncertainty due to various reasons. As the article

¹ Ḥāfīz, *Dīvān-i Ḥāfīz, Including 43 Translated Qazals* (Tehran: Zarrīn-u Sīmīn, 1999), “464” lines 4 & 7.

argues, this is the manifestation of the self-poet's agency, choosing one's object of desire without explicitly revealing it. The focus here is on the most renowned classical Persian poets in Iran and worldwide of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: Rumi, Ḥāfīz, and Sa'dī. The present research hopes to offer an expanded meaning of mystical love to read and interpret Persian mystical-lyrical poetry. What follows illustrates the tensions and controversies in the related literature, giving various reasons why each essentialist way of reading the beloved in classical Persian poetry is reductive.

Rumi and A Mainly Divine Beloved

Discussing the beloved in Rumi's cosmology and poetry, Annemarie Schimmel writes that "although the earthly beloved may be attractive, yet, Rumi takes up Shiblī's verdict against a man who mourned the death of his friend: 'Why do you love someone who can die?' One has to take into one's embrace a friend who cannot be embraced,"² and Schimmel continues, "everything is worthless, compared with the absolute beauty and grandeur of the Beloved."³ Islamicist William Chittick offers a similar reading. Writing on "The Spiritual Path of Love in Ibn 'Arabī and Rumi," Chittick asserts that "God alone is lover and beloved... 'There is no god but God' [*Lā ilāha illā Allāh*]. In other words, 'There is no reality but the ultimate Reality,' and every lesser reality is rooted in God's unique Reality... 'There is no god but God' means that 'There is no love but God's.'"⁴ Although you can interpret Chittick's claim as Sufis' panentheism (Chittick himself resists the term and uses Unity of Being or *Wahdat al-Wujūd*), Chittick's focal point is obviously divine, far from a human-centric reading. Leonard Lewisohn, another advocate of the celestial reading of love/beloved, contends that "Rūmī's poetry belongs to a venerable and ancient tradition of mystical bacchanalian (*khamryya*) poetry in Islam, of which love, love's intoxication, and ecstasy are leitmotifs."⁵ Lewisohn claims that Rumi's poetry "is based on a meta-

² Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 342.

³ *Ibid.*, 344.

⁴ William C. Chittick, "The Spiritual Path of Love in Ibn al-'Arabi and Rūmī", *Mystics Quarterly* 19, No. 1 (1993), 9. www.jstor.org/stable/20717149.

⁵ Leonard Lewisohn, "Principles of the Philosophy of Ecstasy in Rūmī's Poetry" in *The Philosophy of Ecstasy: Rumi and the Sufi Tradition* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Inc., 2014), 35.

rational philosophy of ecstasy,” in which “all the metaphors” are used to describe a “antinomian” and “transcendental” experience.⁶ Lewisohn seems to put all attention solely on the spiritual and ecstatic definition of the love for the divine. These mainly divine-centric readings are in sharp contrast with the reading of those who argue for the human centrism of Persian mysticism.

Human-centrism of Persian Mysticism

Despite the belief of many in seeing the Khurāsānī school of Persian mysticism (on the atop of which sit Rumi and ‘Aṭṭār) as abstract and ethereal, Khurāsānī mysticism, in fact, has a very strong human-centric facet to it, not just as one side of many but as its basis and main principle. Considering the Human-centrism of Persian mysticism, Shīrīn Bayānī argued that the Persian “Ismā‘īlī tradition” was an influential source for Persian mysticism, most notably through “Shams” (Rumi’s Spiritual guru).⁷ In Ismā‘īlī cosmology, according to Bayānī, the origin of the world after God was first “The Intellect (‘*aql-i kul*)” and, then “The Self (*nafs-i kul*),”⁸ from which everything else emanated (a very Neoplatonic concept).⁹ Consequently, all humanity were parts of this capitalized Self (*nafs-i kul*). As Sa‘dī Shīrāzī, the renowned Persian poet contemporary to Rumi attested, “all human beings are limbs of One body (*banī ‘adam ‘a‘zāy-i yik piykarand*),” one body which is *nafs-i vāhidah* (The United Self), or *insān-i kabīr* (The Grand Human).¹⁰ Bayānī goes on to claim that in Ismā‘īlī ontology, “there is no belief in the heaven or hell. They see the heaven as the self (*nafs*) of a complete man and hell as the *nafs* of the man in ignorance.”¹¹ Congruently, Naṣīr Sāhib-Zāmānī offered a

⁶ Ibid., 36-37.

⁷ Shīrīn Bayānī, *Friend of Two Hundreds Creeds [Damsāz-i du Ṣad Kāsb]* (Tehran: Jāmī, 2005), 85.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ More recently, Shafique N. Virani argued that early Ismā‘īlī poets might have influenced some of the most renowned Persian poets like ‘Aṭṭār and Rumi not just in cosmology but also in form and poetic expressions. Shafique N. Virani, “Persian Poetry, Sufism and Ismailism: The Testimony of Khwājah Qāsim Tushtarī’s Recognizing God.” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Series 29*, no. 1 (January 2019): 17-49. DOI: 10.1017/S1356186318000494.

¹⁰ Sa‘dī Shīrāzī, *Rose Garden [Gulistan]*. ed. Sa‘īd Nafīsī (Tehran: Foroughī Books, 1962), first *bāb* (chapter), 10th *hikāyat* (story), line 10.

¹¹ Bayānī, *Friend*, 86.

human-centric interpretation of Persian Khurāsānī mysticism and Sūdābih ‘Amīnī noted that “human is the basis of Rumi’s cosmology” in which “there is no distance between the heavens (*‘arsh*) and the earth (*farsb*).”¹²

Perhaps, nothing can show human centrism of Persian Khurāsānī mysticism better than ‘Aṭṭār’s own allegory. The interesting point is that in ‘Aṭṭār’s *Conference of the Birds* is that the journey does not occur with one bird but thirty birds (thirty is *sī* in Farsi and ‘Aṭṭār cleverly chose the king of birds to be the phoenix, the *sīmurgh*, also the sum of the thirty birds, *murgh[s]*, of the story). In addition to human centrism, ‘Aṭṭār’s allegory illustrates the significance of human interactions. After all, the journey, although subjective, does not occur alone but in accompaniment with each other, the *sī murgh* (thirty birds) who, at the end of the story, turn out to be identical with the *Sī-murgh* (the Phoenix or the King of birds). The significance of human in Khurāsānī mysticism does not allow for a pure ethereal reading of the nature of the beloved.

The Controversies over Ḥāfiẓ’ Beloved: Earthly or Ethereal?

Controversies are not any less when it comes to Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ-i Shīrāzī, known by his pen name, Ḥāfiẓ, the renowned fourteenth-century Persian poet. Bahā al-Dīn Khurramshāhī, whose attempts have greatly contributed to the literature on Ḥāfiẓ, comments that “there is not a significant difference between Ḥāfiẓ’s earthly and humanly love with his celestial and mystical love.”¹³ Khurramshāhī also insists on the symbolic aspect of Persian classical poetry in general and of Ḥāfiẓ in particular. As Hillmann cites from Khurramshāhī, in addition to earthly and divine wine/beloved, Khurramshāhī also introduces “a third wine and a third beloved” in Ḥāfiẓ which is, in fact, “exemplary-figurative [*mesālī-kenā’ī*] wine and beloveds.”¹⁴ This exemplary-figurative beloved is “in the form of general nature or general intellectual abstractions,” which Ḥāfiẓ “designs and presents... with the help of the mind, memory, artistic ability and literary custom/convention and

¹² Sūdābih ‘Amīnī, “Meeting the Human of Rumi [*Didār bā ‘Insān-i Mowlānā*].” *‘Iṭlā’*. 2014. No page number available.

¹³ Bahā al-Dīn Khurramshāhī, *Ḥāfiẓ-Nāmih* Vol. 1 (Surāsh, Tehran: 2017), 36.

¹⁴ Micheal Hillmann, “The Translatability of Hāfez’s Love Ghazals,” *International Journal of Persian Literature* 3 (2018), 48.

tradition.”¹⁵ Hillman then notes that Ḥāfiz scholars are “not assuming that Hāfezian imagery may lead to ambiguous or ambivalent statements or levels of meaning.”¹⁶ There are many examples in which Khurramshāhī interprets Ḥāfiz’s love/beloved as ethereally mystical, but he also believes that the majority of Ḥāfiz’s *qaṣʿas* fall into the third category. Daryūsh Āshūrī, on the contrary, argues that both Sa’dī and Ḥāfiz’s mysticism is earthly due to the panentheistic nature of their cosmology, which he sees in contrast to the celestial nature of Khurāsānī mysticism from which Rūmī rose up. Āshūrī, however, has missed the human-centrism of the Khurāsānī mysticism, which I have already discussed.

On the other side of the spectrum, some scholars strongly argue for a purely or mainly earthly beloved in Ḥāfiz’s poetry, and the controversies are not any less regarding the gender of this beloved. ‘Alī Ḥaṣūrī asserts that Ḥāfiz was a non-mystic, and, thus, everything in his *Divān*, including his beloveds, refers to earthly and historical phenomena. Sīrūs Shamīsa takes a similar stand when unearthing Ḥāfiz’s beloved. According to Shamīsa, the beloved in Persian classical literature in general and in Ḥāfiz and Sa’dī in particular, is of a young, masculine, earthly nature. Shamīsa’s highly controversial study, in fact, drew attention to pederasty in the Persian pre-modern world. Additionally, Shamīsa describes a divine masculine beloved in Persian poetry briefly, although his main focus is on this masculine beloved as an earthly phenomenon, a *shābid* (a beautiful young boy).

Young Boys as Beloved, the Sublimated Masculine Erotic, or Feminine Divine?

Domenico Ingenito’s thorough study on Sa’dī reveals Sa’dī’s admiration of young men. Ingenito also illustrates that Sa’dī’s love of young men helped humans move to a higher, more spiritual plane. According to Ingenito, Sa’dī did not celebrate beauty for beauty’s sake but for elevating spiritually. Ingenito illustrates how “the sacred contemplation of the object of desire may actively mingle with the tensions, the frustrations, and the superior aspirations of the appetites of the body of the lyric subject.”¹⁷ Similarly, Zarrinkoob also writes

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Domenico Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty: Sa’dī of Shiraz and the Aesthetics of Desire in Medieval Persian Poetry* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2021), 153.

that the “object of love” in mysticism is often represented as “a male person,” which “is significant in itself because the Sufis pictured the supreme beauty with rather virile characteristics, i.e., strength and jealousy.”¹⁸ Zarrinkoob goes on to claim that “this conception was also a reflection of homosexual tendencies developed in the course of time in their own wandering life, for homosexuality was not uncommon among the Sufis of monasteries” who seem “to have had an inclination toward ‘Greek love,’... some of whom are specifically reported to have interest in the companionship of beautiful boys.”¹⁹ Thus, Zarrinkoob refers to the masculine beloved with the possibility of being both divine and earthly.

In contrast, Leonard Lewisohn and Annemarie Schimmel argue for a beloved who is a divine feminine. Lewisohn introduces earthly beauty a “Mirror” reflection of the “Eternal Feminine” Divine Beauty (all capitalized), with Platonic and Neoplatonic roots.²⁰ Doing a substantial study on the “Feminine in Islam,” one thing that Schimmel explores is the feminine language of the mystical tradition. Schimmel claims that “Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, is permeated throughout with feminine traits, patterned the classical model of love for an unattainable woman.”²¹ Many examples of this “unattainable woman” you can find in Persian poetry-mysticism, mostly in the poetic expressions of the three poets under study.

The Uncertainty of the Beloved in Persian Classical Mystic Poetry: Historical, Philosophical, Translational, Linguistic, and Symbolic

All of the aforementioned controversies in the related literature only result in more confusion. To handle this confusion, this study analyzes the topic via five different but related approaches: historical, philosophical, translational, linguistic, and symbolic. Via these approaches, the current endeavor argues about the uncertain nature of the beloved in Persian mystic poetry.

¹⁸ Abdol-Hosein Zarrinkoob, “Persian Sufism in Its Historical Perspective.” *Iranian Studies* 3, No. 3/4 (1970), 169. www.jstor.org/stable/4310072.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Lewisohn, “Correspondences,” 210

²¹ Annemarie Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam* (New York & London: Continuum, 2003), 18.

1. Rumi and the Possibility of Beloveds as A Historical Figures: Ṭāvūs, Shams, and More

Whereas the literature has shown interest in both the earthly and ethereal aspects of Sa'dī and Ḥāfīz, when it comes to Rumi, almost all studies focus on the abstract divine aspect of his poetry. At best the literature repeats over and over again the love that Rumi had for his guru, Shams. Regarding the love relationship between Rumi and his beloved and guru, Shams, Zarrinkoob writes, “the astonishing love (*‘ishq-i ‘ajīb*) that was formed between Rumi and Shams will undoubtedly always remain a phenomenal spiritual mystery.”²² Although Zarrinkoob points to Shams’ “attractive appearance” (*ẓihāb-i ẓāhirī*), he sees it “irrelevant” to Rumi’s love for Shams and only credits “mystical” and “spiritual” attraction for such a love to form.²³ Even if Zarrinkoob is right, “mystical” and “spiritual” attraction are still very strong points of erotic attraction for many. The truth is, there is no evidence in any hagiographical writings and secondary literature that shows physical love between Rumi and Shams. Despite this, we know that Rumi and Shams spent rather long periods of solitude together, from which there is no information. Assuming that nothing physical happened between Rumi and Shams in those periods of solitudes, at best, there is a very high probability that the love of Rumi for Shams was some sort of sublimated erotic desire, which is responsible for the highly erotic and passionate sides of Rumi’s creations. The overlooked facet about Rumi’s beloved(s) in the literature, though, is the possibility of an undiscovered earthly feminine love amidst Rumi’s myriad of passionate lyrics.

According to Ṣāḥib-Zamānī, “Rumi knew music and played *rubāb* [a string instrument]” (Ṣāḥib-Zamānī sees Rumi’s expansive use of various rhythms to be enriched by his knowledge of and enthusiasm for music).²⁴ Both Rumi and Shams valued music tremendously. Rumi would have *samā‘* session not just for men. He would hold “women-only *samā‘* sessions” regularly.²⁵ Bayānī notes, “opening the door of his school (*madrisih*) to women [of every social class], Rumi made a huge difference” regarding mysticism and women

²² Abdol-Hosein Zarrinkoob, *In Search of Sufism in Iran* (Tehran: Amir Kabir Publication, 1980), 285.

²³ *Ibid.*, 286.

²⁴ Nāṣir Ṣāḥib-Zamānī, *The Third Script* (‘Aṭāī, Tehran: 2008), 173.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

who were not, prior to Rumi, allowed in mystic gatherings (*majālis*), teaching or whirling.²⁶ Among the women in Rumi's circle was a beautiful musician named Ṭāvūs (meaning peacock), who played the harp, *chang*. Whether before meeting Rumi and entering his circle, Ṭāvūs was a prostitute or a *kamīz*—maiden (house maidens lived with the family and provided sexual service to the owner of the house, and at times, their young adult sons too)—is not definitively clear. As Bayānī cites from one of the most reliable hagiographical sources on Rumi, Aḥmad 'Aflākī, Ṭāvūs “was an extremely sweet harp player (*changī-yi bib ghāyat shirīn-navāz*) with exceptionally pleasant voice (*bib ghāyat kbush āvāz*), beautifully dressed (*jāmih barāz*), enchantingly nice (*nikū dīruba*), and a rare [beauty] in the entire world (*nādirih-yi jāhān*).”²⁷ It seems that Ṭāvūs had everything for a man like Rumi to be attracted to (if not fall in love with).

Bayānī also cites 'Aflākī that “due to the pleasing sound of her harp, ‘all lovers were captivated by her *chang*’... Ṭāvūs invited Rumi to her room a day. Rumi accepted [her invitation] and went [there] and ‘from the dawn of the day to the evening stood in praying and worship’ there”.²⁸ Every part of this quote seems logically believable except the last part. Why would Rumi want to say prayers in Ṭāvūs' room for an entire day? The most believable report would be that two musicians would play music together. Whether anything physical happened between Ṭāvūs and Rumi, we do not know. What we do know is that after this encounter, Ṭāvūs was “transformed,” joined Rumi's whirling circle and became such a mystic that “many of Konia's women became her followers.”²⁹ Whether it was earthly love or sublimated erotic, it seems that the mutual attraction worked very effectively. The point is, after all, Rumi, like Sa'dī, believed in the elevation that earthly love would bring; that “one can move toward all elevated stages even when loving a prostitute (*kharābātī*).”³⁰ This is not far from the image of Ṭāvūs before her transformation, of course.

A number of Rumi's poems illustrate very passionate descriptions of *tāvūs*, which is usually accompanied by musical imagery and/or dance, if not *chang* specifically. Some instances are

²⁶ Bayānī, *Friends*, 201.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 206.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 206-207.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 286.

qazals “189”, “3047” (with extremely erotic images), “1417”, “659”, and “212”. Interpreters and translators have univocally dismissed the *tāvūs* point in these poems. The reason, I assume, is, *tāvūs* which means peacock in Farsi, is much more favorable to Rumi scholars as a common noun (the bird with Qur’ānic interpretation in the garden of Eden) rather than a proper noun of address (a historical female persona). The former preserves Rumi’s sanctification and mystification (as what Rumi’s lovers expect from a character like him—which is, to me, the reason why ‘Aflākī described Rumi in prayers in Ṭāvūs’ room). The latter, though, opens an entire new door on studying Rumi’s beloved(s) and love lyrics.

Additionally, Rumi married twice (the second time after the decease of his first wife). Bayānī asserts that Rumi had some good ideas about marriage life, which “he put into practice best and was a role model” in this regard.³¹ According to Bayānī, Rumi knows women to be “beloveds” in addition to “wives” and a “ray of truth”; “no other man of intellect showed such kind of thinking [about women in Rumi’s time].”³² Bayānī also observes that Rumi “says, ‘women are called heart-soothing (*dilārām*); it means they soothe hearts (*dil bib vjy ‘ārām gīrad*)... one must go through *sulūk* with a woman and satisfy her desires... one must make love to one’s wife the way one does it with a prostitute beloved (*ma’shūq-i kharābātī*)’... Rumi’s ideas about marriage and wife are very important and up to date.”³³ As Bayānī observes, Rumi had a very loving relationship, particularly with his “second wife, Kirā Khātūn.”³⁴ With such kinds of historical information, to me, at least some of Rumi’s passionate love lyrics must be addressed toward Kirā Khātūn. It is highly probable. Shams, Ṭāvūs, Kirā Khātūn, or abstract divine all just add to the ambiguity of Rumi’s texts. After all, these assumptions are all speculations about which no one can be certain.

2. Philosophical Reasons for the Uncertainty of the Beloved in Persian Mystic Poetry

Exploring this subject philosophically, the best way one is to start is perhaps with Plato. Shīrīn Bayānī states that Plato and his

³¹ Ibid., 217.

³² Ibid., 215.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 216.

ideas were so important to the Persian mystics in general and to Rumi in particular that they counted a state of prophecy for Plato. According to Bayānī, Rumi and his circle would call Plato “*Aflāṭūn-i ‘Ilāhī*, the divine Plato,” which showed “great respect for Plato in the Muslims’ community” at Rumi’s time.³⁵ This observation illustrates the degree of Plato’s influence on Rumi and Persian mysticism. There are a few significant points in this regard about Plato’s philosophy. Firstly, in Plato’s hierarchy of love, it is first the love of Truth, then the love of men for men (or Greek love), and lastly, the love of men for women, which was mainly for reproductive purposes. The love of men for men was a desirable kind of love because men, and not women, were considered wise and knowledgeable, and, thus, male lovers could raise each other up in wisdom and in knowledge, something that the love for women could not offer. Greek love is congruent with Shamīsā’s argument about the male beloved in Persian poetry. There are for sure cultural specificities and differences, but male lovers were not uncommon in Medieval Persia. Moreover, in Plato’s philosophy, erotic love has a very specific role in perceiving true beauty. In his most mystical dialogue, *Phaedrus*, Plato introduces four kinds of madness, the fourth of which is ‘love madness.’ It is the madness that:

Someone shows when he sees the beauty down here and is reminded of true beauty; then he takes wings and flutters in his eagerness to rise up but is unable to do so; and he gazes aloft, like a bird, paying no attention to what is down below—and that is what brings on him the charge that he has gone mad.³⁶

The desire to rise up to the source of beauty, thus, has roots in erotic love, which is the reason that Plato considers erotic love to be a gift of gods.

Building upon Plato, Plotinus also recognizes “the true nature of bodily beauty” as “the starting point for an ascent.”³⁷ In Neoplatonism, there are no such concepts as creator or creations; but the universe is an emanation or procession of the first cause. As such, Neoplatonism considers “the universe” to be “a living being,” with the presence of the noumena lurking beneath all the physical

³⁵ Ibid., 262.

³⁶ John M. Cooper, et al, *Plato: Complete Works* (Hackett Publishing, 1997), 527.

³⁷ Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, Vol. 1 (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), 47.

phenomena. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* contends that “the Neoplatonic scheme of emanation” is used “by Sufis.”³⁸ For instance, many of Rumi’s poems are illustrative of the concept of emanation, such as “Don’t serve me wine, serve me the essence from which wine emanated/that which its emanation brought to existence each phenomenon” (*Miy mayāvar zān biyāvar kib miy az viy jūsh kard/’ānkāb jūshash dar vijūd ’āvard har mowjūd rā*).³⁹

It is crucial to note that the essence of creation from which God has created everything in the Persian mystics’ cosmology is love. It is that which all is created from and that which all will return to, in which love, beloved, and lover all become one. This love, which is the essence of everything in the cosmos, can of course take various erotic forms, both earthly and transcendental, a heritage of Neoplatonism in Persian mysticism. Despite Plato, in Plotinus, “erotic love has an ambit both more cosmic and more transcendental.”⁴⁰ Plotinus, in fact, “speak[s] of a supreme reality in which seeker and sought become truly one,” in which “He is at once lovable, and love, and love of himself.”⁴¹ In this “more cosmic and more transcendental” cosmology, “the erotic One remains the source for all that is,” and “the whole universe is essentially erotic in the sense that its being is marked by passionate striving for return to the Source.”⁴² Rumi also sees everything to be the essence of love: “God has created me from the essence of love/I am the same love if death mashes me” (*Marā ḥaq ’az mey-i ’ishq ’afaridast/Hamān ’ishqam agar margam bisāyad*).⁴³ This is how erotic love is not only not blamed but also encouraged, as an earthly beloved would be a divine manifestation, on the one hand, and the wings to rise up to the truth, on the other hand.

In addition to Neoplatonists, Islamicists also put emphasis on the Unity of Being of Persian mysticism based on the Qur’ānic and Islamic teachings, with the difference that they do not seem to put the emphasis on erotic love at all. These Islamic assertions are usually

³⁸ “Mysticism in Arabic and Islamic Philosophy”. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 7 Mar. 2009. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/arabic-islamic-mysticism/>

³⁹ Mowlavī (Rumi), *Dwān-i Shams [Kulliyāt-i Shams-i Tabrizī]* (Tehran: ‘Ābān Publication, 2009), “134” line 7.

⁴⁰ McGinn, *The Foundations*, 47.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Mowlavī, *Dwān*, “683” line 8.

based on a Qur'ānic verse, which states: "God is the Light of the skies and the earth (*Allāh-u Nūr-i Alsamāwāt-i wa Al-'arḍ*)" (al-Nūr 35). This verse deals with the concept of light, which permeates all the cosmos, also a Zoroastrian concept, which, Ibn-i 'Arabī developed later. Zarrinkoob believes that "Ibn-i 'Arabī's illumination philosophy is the utmost manifestation of Neoplatonic philosophy" in the Islamic world.⁴⁴ According to Zarrinkoob, "Illumination is a kind of Neoplatonic philosophy that has been merged with the ancient Persian religion."⁴⁵ Ibn 'Arabī, thus, was claimed by all the Zoroastrians, Neoplatonists, and Islamic scholars. Islamicist William Chittick states, "Ibn 'Arabī explains that all creaturely love derives from divine love"⁴⁶ and that "All creatures are nothing but God's self-manifestation. They must see themselves and all things in the divine context and recognize God in and through the created world."⁴⁷ Leonard Lewisohn states, "inspired by Ibn 'Arabī's theory of divine self-manifestation or theophany," Ḥāfiẓ describes "how God's beauty 'showed itself forth' (that is: theophany = *tajallī*) in two distinct manners... 'theophany of the divine Essence' (*tajallī-yi dhatī*)... (and) the 'theophany of the divine Attributes' (*tajallī-yi ṣifati*)," the second of which is "the level of 'the holy emanation.'"⁴⁸ Lewisohn continues that "all creation thus serves as a mirror reflecting God's Beauty and Love according to Ḥāfiẓ's metaphysic," while during the second *tajallī*, "Love emerges from its invisible, purely intelligible condition, appearing in external phenomena, permeating every aspect of existence. Both through the love of human beings for one another... and through that love which human beings have for God."⁴⁹ Instances of the concept of *tajallī* in Persian mystical/classical poetry are numerous. One is when Ḥāfiẓ states, "Both worlds are just one ray of his face / I have told you [all that is] hidden and [all that is] visible" (*bar du 'ālam yik furūq-i rūy-i 'ūst / guftamat piydā-u pinbān nīẓ ham*).⁵⁰ The point that I would like to make here is that all the aforementioned philosophical aspects of Persian mysticism, whether

⁴⁴ Zarrinkoob, *In Search*, 152.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴⁶ Chittick, "The Spiritual," 8.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁸ Lewisohn, "Correspondences," 217.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Ḥāfiẓ, "363" line 6.

it be due to the influence of Neoplatonic philosophy of emanation or the Pre-Islamic Zoroastrian or Islamic philosophy of light/love, create the possibility of imagining a lover or beloved who can be earthly as a divine manifestation or divine in essence, who, according to Zarrinkoob is “intrinsically precious and worthy of worship.”⁵¹

As I have already noted, in more recent studies of Persian mysticism, scholars have noticed human centrism in the cosmology of Persian medieval poets. Nāṣir Ṣāhib-Zamānī offers a thorough analysis of the humanist aspects in the cosmology of Rumi and his guru, Shams. Congruently, Sūdābih Amīnī points out the significance of human encounter in Rumi’s cosmology in love throughout the path of self-development, *sulūk*. ‘Amīnī contends that Rumi, in *Dīvān-i Shams*, places the subject’s “encounter with the self” as the focal point.⁵² Considering the significance of the self and its development in the journey of *sulūk*, I would like to add that there is also a possibility of reading the beloved of Persian mystic poetry as the self of the poet. Reading the beloved as the self, in an ecstatic state of consciousness when the poet is in conversation with the self, one would make great sense of many of Rumi’s poems articulated in the state of wonderment (*maqām-i ḥīyrat*). In *ghaṣal* “1759”, Rumi describes his own self entirely in wonderment. The last line says: “(Since) the moment I saw Shams-i Tabrīz / I am such a rare sea, a gem mine, and a treasure” (*Shams-i Tabrīz rā chu dādāman / nādirih baḥr-u ganj-u kān kih manam*).⁵³ Here, even Shams-i Tabrīz, Rumi’s passionately loved guru and beloved does not matter anymore, but it is the self of the poet that is the object of poetic description in a very hyperbolic manner.

Ultimately, there is no way to agree about the nature of the beloved in Persian mystic poetry as one fixed phenomenon when approaching it philosophically. This beloved can be the divine essence, it might be a feminine or masculine human being here on the earth, it could be an imaginary phenomenon, or it could even be the self of the poet. The more you indulge yourself in this topic, the more you are convinced that the spirit of Persian mysticism in this regard is a constant spirit of uncertainty. This is because the philosophical

⁵¹ Zarrinkoob, “Persian,” 168.

⁵² ‘Amīnī, “Meeting,” no p. #.

⁵³ Mowlavī, “1759” last line.

ontology that forms its basis is absolutely inclusive, resisting any rigid norm or rule.

3. Poetics and Uncertainty: the Semiotics of Persian Classical Mystic Poetry and its Symbolic Aspect

Regarding the poetics and the semiotic aspects of Persian poetry and language, there are scholars like ‘Alī Ḥaṣūri and, to a great extent, Sirūs Shamisā, who argue for a mainly (or even purely) earthly and historical reading of Persian poetry in general, and Ḥāfiẓ and Sa‘dī in particular. These scholars question and reject the celestially symbolic aspect of the poetry under discussion. However, there is no way that such claims can be true. According to Zarrinkoob,

The descriptions of the object of love and of debauchery in Persian poetry is symbolic, and with all these symbols, Sufi poetry became essentially a symbolic literature in which God is called the beloved, spiritual ecstasy the wine, and the Sufi cloister the tavern. Such symbolic language has found explanations in a celebrated didactical poem of Shaykh-i Shabistari (d. 1320), who explicitly points out that in Sufi language, ‘to become a haunter of the tavern is to be set free from self’ and states that when the gnostics speak of wine, tavern, and sweetheart, these are all ‘symbols of the one reality, who in every form is manifested in his glory.’⁵⁴

Shaykh Maḥmūd Shabistari, to whom Zarrinkoob refers, was contemporary to Rumi and a century prior to Ḥāfiẓ and Sa‘dī. Shaykh Maḥmūd wrote an entire book of verse to decode the symbols and signs of Persian mystic poetry, the semiology of mysticism in fact. Regarding these symbols, Leonard Lewisohn observes that “Rumi was well-aware that the terms of this antinomian lexicon in the classical Sufi tradition had profane as well as sacred connotations, invariably handling the ambiguity between the two with impeccable panache” and that “Rumi makes full use of the ambivalence of imagery and meaning” of it.⁵⁵ The point is that one cannot simply claim that because the earthly aspect of Ḥāfiẓ and Sa‘dī is very strong, one can entirely reject their mystic aspect as Ḥaṣūri does. These poets are the heirs to a tradition and have not been born in an isolated box. The philosophy of Persian mysticism, its ontology in general, and its panentheism or Unity of Being in particular, on the one hand, and the

⁵⁴ Zarrinkoob, “Persian,” 170.

⁵⁵ Lewisohn, “Principles,” 37.

symbolic aspect of Persian lyrical tradition, on the other hand, have provided these poets with the unique opportunity to create constant poetic ambiguity. As a result, any attempt to essentialize their poems in one way or another is a crime to their poetry and legacy.

Moreover, when Shamīsā argues about a mainly earthly masculine beloved in Persian poetry, his approach is reductive. There are many instances of the points that Shamīsā intentionally overlooked, I believe, in order to prove his point. One example is when Shamīsā distinguishes two words in the medieval period Persian language to refer to one's hair: *gīsū* and *zūlf*. Shamīsā states that whereas *gīsū* was a term to refer to the hair of women, *zūlf* was used for men. Giving many examples of *zūlf* in Persian poetry, Shamīsā tries to overlook the possibility of an earthly feminine beloved. This is despite the fact that the proof to show the use of the term *gīsū*, and thus the description of a female beloved, is just a google search away. One instance is, "Do not use perfume in our assembly as / each moment there is a nice scent of your *gīsū* in our nose" (*dar majlis-i mā 'aṭr mayāmiẓ kib mā rā / bar lahẓih zi gīsū-yi tu kbush būy mashām 'ast*).⁵⁶ These delicate matters are lost not only in translations due to inevitable linguistic and cultural differences but also for a modern Persian reader. The majority of native Farsi speakers are not aware of these medieval etymological specificities. Furthermore, if we consider the possibility of these terms being used symbolically, they enhance the fluidity and unsteady nature of this masculine or feminine presumably divine beloved, and if they are used to describe a human beloved, it will leave the reader wondering whether 'all' these poets were bisexual. Both of these cases and many more examples will only add to the uncertain nature of the beloved in Persian classical poetry.

4. Uncertainty of the Beloved: Translational and Comparative Studies

To shed more light on the uncertain nature of the beloved in Persian poetry, it is helpful to approach the topic via comparative and translational studies. As I have already noted, Persian mystic poetry is ambiguous due to its symbolic nature. One more feature that adds to this already ambiguous poetics is some linguistic features of Farsi, such as its typography and its gender-neutrality. In this regard, Amir Sedaghat, who has performed a thorough exploration of Rumi's translations in the Anglophone and Francophone worlds, illustrates

⁵⁶ Ḥāfīz, "46" line 5.

that opting for gender-specific pronouns, namely the masculine *he/him* or the possessive *his* in the quasi-totality of English and French translations in Western languages to refer to “the beloved” of Rumi’s poetry has distorted the otherwise gender-neutral original text. Moreover, Sedaghat shows how most translations tend to accentuate the solely divine nature of Rumi’s *beloved* by systematically capitalizing lexical and syntactical elements referring to the object of love (*He, Beloved, Him, etc.*), despite the total absence of such graphic aspects in Persian typography. This reveals most translators’ adherence to a reductionist idea that all imagery of love and passion prevailing in Rumi’s poems is solely in metaphorical reference to spiritual love only, giving it a predominantly religious undertone. This textual phenomenon is in tune with a general ideological tendency that Sedaghat calls the *Islamization* of Rumi’s mystic discourse, which consists, among others, in presenting Rumi’s Beloved as a patriarchal masculine God. While Sedaghat does not reject the possibility of such an interpretation among a myriad of others, he asserts that this is not what Rumi’s original text offers as the only possible reading of a fixed message. Rumi’s text, according to Sedaghat, is full of mystery and ambiguity due to the linguistic characteristics of the original language and their subtle use in the poetic discourse with the aim of blurring the rigid boundaries between the spiritual and the mundane.⁵⁷

Whereas I have not studied this phenomenon in Ḥāfiẓ and Sa’dī, the instances that I have noticed have pretty much the same issues. Although part of the problem might be inevitable and due to differences in intrinsic linguistic features, portions of it are intentional and due to ideological essentialism. This imposed essentialism distorts Persian mystics’ panentheism or Unity of Being, converts Persian mystics’ human-centric ontology to Islamic monotheism, diminishes all the inclusivity and uncertainty of the beloved in Persian poetry, and represents the beloved of Persian poetry as the God of Abrahamic religions, a masculine He. The gender distortion of the beloved is perhaps the most significant aspect of the changes that occur in transferring the poems from national to world literature,

⁵⁷ Amir Sedaghat, “Le soufisme de Roumi reçu et perçu dans les mondes anglophone et francophone: Étude des traductions anglaises et françaises.” [Rūmī’s Sufism received and perceived by the English and French-speaking worlds: A Study of Translations]. 2 vols (PhD diss., Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris 3, 2015), ch.3, 117-154. Available at: <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-01579400/document>.

particularly with the possibility of self-Orientalization of Iranian scholars, reading the poems through the eyes of their western counterparts. However, the beloved of Persian classical lyrical poetry by no means has a fixed gender or nature in the original poems.

5. Agency of the Subject and Uncertainty: the Developmental Path Related to the Language of Persian Mystic Poetry

A question that arises now is why this much uncertainty? Why is that the Persian mystic poets knowingly and consciously used all these linguistic, symbolic, philosophical, ontological, and poetic characteristics to create ambiguity? It seems to be a very clever and conscious choice. The reason behind this choice can illustrate these poets' agency when employing uncertainty regarding how they present the nature of their beloveds in their poetry. To answer this question, I would like to take a brief look at the historical development of Persian love mysticism-poetry.

Post-Islamic Persian mysticism started to take shape during the first few centuries after Islam came to Iran. Some scholars see Persian mysticism as a Persian reaction against Islam's essentialism, and some argue that the role of mysticism was to soften the strict rules of religion. Whatever it was, the two sides of religion and mysticism have always been in tension. It is also the case that historically, the best Iranian thinkers have also been its best poets, and of course among these poets, there were figures like Khayyām with little or no mystical tendencies. However, religious essentialism and prejudice have tortured poets with or without mystical beliefs.

Among the first thinkers who was tortured was Abū Manṣūr Ḥallāj, the mystic poet and teacher. As famously known, Ḥallāj was slaughtered to death due to claiming, "I am The Truth (*Anā al-Ḥaqq*)," a highly panentheistic mystic claim, as soon as the 10th century.⁵⁸ On the other end of the spectrum, there was the skeptical and existentialist Khayyām, who was also sentenced to death based on the Islamic rule of *takfīr*, death penalty for non-believers, in the 12th century. By the time the heritage of thinking and expressing one's thought reached the thirteenth-and-fourteenth-century Persian poets, Rumi, Ḥāfīz, and Sa'dī, these poets were well aware that there was a huge price to pay if they directly expressed what they meant. For

⁵⁸ To read more on the *takfīr* and hurt of the Sufis, please refer to Zarrinkoob's *Arzish*, 193-194.

direct panentheistic claims or for expressing disbelief, for the love of women out of the marriage context, or for homosexual acts, for all of these thoughts or tendencies, they might have had to pay a huge price, as huge as their lives. It was how, ultimately, these poets created a language full of symbols, signs, and ambiguity in order to be able to speak and breathe in the space of uncertainty so that no one could accuse them of anything, neither of earthly erotic sexual love outside marriage in any form nor of any panentheistic claim or expression of disbelief. This way, they were able to stay safe and live the life of their desire, choosing and praising their own beloved.

Concluding Remarks

For all of the above reasons, one cannot conclude for certain whether the beloved in Persian classical lyrical poetry is of celestial or terrestrial nature, masculine or feminine. This is because, as argued, a structural, exclusive, and essentialist reading of this beloved is problematic at multiple levels. One particularly significant point is that the study of beloved, the object of love, in Persian classical mystic literature illustrates the nature of the subject, the lover/poet, and that is agency. It was in the spirit of constant uncertainty that the classical mystic Persian poets were able to have agency upon choosing their object of love with liberty without explicitly expressing the true nature of their beloved. It was in this spirit of uncertainty that they were able to live their authenticity and remain safe from the danger of religious and political fanaticism, having agency over their lives.

Agency of the subject is crucial in the studies of modernity, as the modern subject is known as active agent.⁵⁹ Also, as Talal Asad argued, “the religious” and “the secular” cannot be viewed as rational successors but as multi-layered historical categories, which are continuously formed and re-formed by each other.⁶⁰ Asad’s claim opens doors for exploring what is associated with the religious to understand the modern. It is, thus, crucial to understand the agent nature of the subject, not only for the sake of Persian classical poetry itself but also for the impact/influence it has had on forming the modern subject. This is a topic with lots of potential for future

⁵⁹ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003) and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁶⁰ Asad, *Formations*, 99.

research, which is also a central theme of the PhD dissertation of the author of the present work. Moreover, the relation between the impact of classical Persian poetry, modern Persian poetry, agency of the subject, and the aesthetics and poetics of modern Persian poetry needs further exploration. It is also a question that the author has addressed in the case of Forough Farrokhzad (a modern Persian woman poet) and explored the aesthetic of desire, the relation between classical mystic poetry and Farrokhzad's poems, the nature of Farrokhzad's beloved(s), and the feminine path of individuation.⁶¹ The potentials for future research in this area are numerous and highly timely, of course.

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⁶¹ Mahdich Vali-Zadeh, “The Aesthetic of Desire and the Feminine Path of Individuation: The Case of Forough Farrokhzad.” *Anthropology of the Middle East* 16, No. 2 (2021): 110-127. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ame.2021.160206>.

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