

# Appendix: On the Symbolism of Religious Poetry

## On the Symbolism of Religious Poetry<sup>1</sup>

### ***In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful***

Persian poetry is rich in symbolism, which may be shocking to one unfamiliar with its conventions. In the Arabic language, Sufis had already used the metaphor of intoxication for mystical experience, and of the union of lovers for the presence of God. These themes were expanded upon in Persian, and elements of pre-Islamic Persian culture were introduced to symbolize the interiorization of faith. When the Sufi poet 'Attar describes himself as a Zoroaster, he does not mean that he had abandoned Islam, but rather that there was a dimension of Islam which might appear so strange to one who was merely superficially a Muslim that it could be imagined to be a different religion.

When Hafiz speaks of the hair of his beloved, he is interpreted as indicating the grace of God which emanates multiplicity, just as the strands of hair are a multiplicity. One cannot, however, simply replace the symbols of Persian poetry by their prosaic equivalents in mystical theology, for this would destroy the poem. Persian poetry derives its excitement from the impossibility of disentangling all the images, from the nagging doubt that something unorthodox lurks within it, and from the invitation of the poet to the reader to become an insider, one who sees through the apparently heretical images to the purity of the poet's meaning.

Persian poetry is the most perfect expression of the multiplicity of levels of meaning which lies at the heart of Iranian culture. Persian poetry must not be read as a puzzle to be decoded, but as an unsolvable enigma. The poetry of Imam Khomeini (may his soul be sanctified) trades on the use of the standard symbols of classical Persian mystical poetry. The apparent heterodoxy is sharpened by the position of the poet as an exoteric religious leader. Even though we know he had nothing to do with worldly wine, there is something shocking in the fact that such a person should talk about wine at all. Some have also questioned whether Islamic law does not prohibit the use of the language of love, '*ishq*

in Arabic and adopted in Farsi, with reference to Allah, the Exalted.

‘*ishq*’ literally means extreme love, as has been mentioned in the standard dictionaries of classical Arabic. Sometimes it has been defined as “exceeding the limits of love”. One must not assume, however, that this refers to physical passion and carnal desires, for the expression has a more general meaning, and a profusion of love with respect to anything may be called ‘*ishq*’.

Love is one of the most elevated sentiments of the heart, which in its pure essence, according to the Muslim mystics and philosophers, is free from the incidental impurity of the carnal soul. If in some cases love accompanies such impurities it is not necessary that at all stages it should do so. The mystics of Islam, the ‘*urafa*, even go so far as to say that it is incorrect to use the term ‘*ishq*’ for the physical passions, because passion is only something that happens to accompany love in some cases. Since love is not to be confused with passion, which is not included in the literal meaning of ‘*ishq*’, if ‘*ishq*’ is used for carnal desire it must be understood as a figurative use of the word if it is allowed at all.

Thus, the mystics reverse the claim made by many Western as well as Eastern commentators on mystical poetry, that the language of love is applied to God only figuratively. Such commentators assume that the literal meaning of such language is for something physical, but by attending to the meaning of the words used we see that love must be understood as something essentially spiritual.

One might object that if love is not to be interpreted as necessarily physical, neither must it be interpreted to be essentially spiritual, but should be neutral with regard to the material and the spiritual. A moment’s reflection, however, suffices to realize that whatever is considered to be of such a nature that it may or may not have a physical aspect must be regarded as spiritual, for it is the nature of spirit to be contingently associated with the body in this way.

The mystics and philosophers for centuries have taught that the demands of the carnal soul are ever perishing and evanescent. What is called ‘carnal love’ originates from the sexual instinct, and it must not be confused with the reality of the spiritual sentiment. Carnal love is like the other animal instincts. ‘*ishq*’, however, is said to become a part of the human nature itself and not to perish.

Intense love, wherever, it is found, can be correctly designated by the word ‘*ishq*’. For example, one may speak of the word ‘*ishq*’ of the mother for her children or their love for her; one may speak of even higher stages of ‘*ishq*’ for the most lofty human sentiments, like ‘*ishq*’ for knowledge or ‘*ishq*’ for service to society, and all are correct. Hence, the application of the word ‘*ishq*’ to God in such poetry as that of Hafiz or Imam Khomeini, or in the writings of the mystics should not be viewed with suspicion and must be considered perfectly permissible from a religious point of view. Furthermore, in the noble Qur'an it has been said:

**“Those who believe have intense love for Allah” (*wal-ladhina amanu ashaddu hubban lillah*)  
(2: 165).**

Intense love is nothing but ‘*ishq*’, as has been reported in the dictionaries. This word also occurs in

*hadiths*. *Kulayni*, for example, narrates from the sixth Imam, peace be with him, that he said:

“The Prophet (s) said, ‘The best of people is one who loves (*ishq*) worship, embraces it, loves (*hubb*) it with his whole heart, and occupies his body with it, and prepares for it, and he does not care whether he has comfort or trouble in this world.’”

The use of the word ‘*ishq*’ in this *hadith* provides positive proof that the meaning of ‘*ishq*’ is not restricted to passionate affairs, nor even to material affairs. Of course, the application of the term, Beloved (*ma’shuq*), for God as a Name is forbidden and is considered incorrect by the scholars of Islamic law, for the divine Names are fixed (*tawfiqi*). One should only consider terms to be Names of God when this is expressly indicated by God Himself through the revelation to His prophets. This is different, however, from the use of such a term not as a Name of God, but as an adjective when it is not intended as a Name of God, as in poetry and mystical expressions, and as such it poses no difficulty from the point of view of Islamic law. The meaning of ‘the Beloved’ and ‘Friend’ is also found in the following *hadith qudsi*:

“When a servant is occupied completely with My service I will make his desire and pleasure to be remembering Me. Whenever I make his desire and pleasure to be in remembering Me, he will love Me and I will love him, and when he loves Me and I love him, I will remove the veil from that which is between Me and him.”

There are several other *hadiths* like this in which the word ‘*ishq*’ or its cognates appears. Shaykh Abu'l-Muhsan Husayn ibn Hasan Jorjani in his *Tafsir Jala'al-Adhhan wa Jala'al-Ahzan*, known as *Tafsir-e-Gazor*, commenting on the significance of the letters *Ha Mim 'Ayn Sin Qaf*, says that some say that this ayah is about the dignity of the Prophet, may the peace and blessings of Allah be with him and his progeny. “*Ha* is the pool (*hawd*) of entrance, *Mim* is the kingdom (*mulk*) of expanse, ‘*Ayn* is the love (*ishq*) of the Worshipped and the highness (*'uluww*) of limitlessness, *Sin* is the visible brilliance (*sana'*), *Qaf* is his standing (*qa'im*) in a praiseworthy position (*maqam*) and his nearness (*qurbat*) to the generosity of the worshipped...” in which sentence the phrase ‘*ishq*’ for the Worshipped is mentioned.

Some object to the use of the word ‘*ishq*’ because it is not used in the Qur'an, but there are many words which are current among legal scholars of Islam that are not used in the Qur'an, such as the word *ijtihad*, the use of which is unproblematic, and on this matter there is no disagreement. Hence the use of the ‘*ishq*’ by the mystics and poets should not be a source of any doubts about religious propriety.

The method of poetry involves taking liberties with language, and using images, sounds and rhythms, and other techniques, such as allusion to the writings of earlier poets. All of this is to be found in the poetry of Imam Khomeini, may Allah pour light into his grave, as well. Sometimes allusion is made to shocking behavior, or there may appear to be an apparently disrespectful attitude displayed for the mosque or the seminary, but disrespect and indulgence of sinful behavior are far from the poet's intention, which, if one looks below the surface, can be seen to be the expression of intense love for Allah.

1. Reprinted from A Jug of Love, op. cit., pp. 27–32. (Eds.)

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