

Sufi Experience and Symbolic Language

Prof. Magdy Mohamed Ibrahim

Professor of Islamic Philosophy & Sufism, Aswan University (Egypt)
magdy.mahammed@ymail.com

Abstract:

This paper explores the intricate relationship between the Sufi experience and its symbolic language. The research delves into two fundamental assumptions. The first assumption challenges the confinement of language interpretation within the bounds of the literal, urging exploration of deeper, abstract meanings. It posits that language must transcend visible boundaries to touch the unseen and extend into the realm of abstract concepts. The second assumption refutes the notion of constraining words to sensory realities, placing a strong emphasis on the importance of infusing words with meaningful content. Neglecting the task of imbuing words with semantic charges results in rendering language devoid of significance and stripping it of its pivotal element, namely metaphor. The Sufi surpasses the limits of the observable world, connecting with the unseen through moments of revelation. This connection communicates through symbols and signs, bridging the gap between surface expressions and deeper meanings. The Sufi adept utilizes a symbolic language of love, unity, and tolerance, speaking through hints rather than direct statements. The Sufi uncovers this symbolic language after experiencing heightened consciousness and perception beyond ordinary awareness. This research adopts an aesthetic analysis method to explore the Sufi experiences. In conclusion, this research uncovers how the power of emotion shapes the Sufi experience, opening language to abstract interpretations. It underscores the reception of meanings through "indications" and the extraction of meanings from open-ended words, transcending apparent meanings. This aligns with interpretive approaches to the Quran that hinge on "inspiration" and "deduction," both connected to symbolic language and imagination. The article contributes to understanding the intricate world of Sufism and its profound language of symbolism, revealing its potential to convey truths that go beyond the constraints of ordinary language.

Key Words: Sufism, Language, Symbolism, Experience.

Introduction

This study delves into the connection between the Sufi experience and its use of symbolic language. This relationship necessitates two assumptions that this research aims to verify. First, it is viewed as a limitation to confine language interpretation within the boundaries of the apparent only, without delving into the words to extract meanings that go beyond the literal, extending into the realm of abstract concepts. Language should transcend the limits of the visible and touch upon what lies beyond, reaching the unseen and unperceived, going beyond the tangible perception of the senses. The second assumption is based on the understanding that it is no longer viable to confine words solely to their sensory aspects without acknowledging the profound layers of meaning and significance they hold. Words should carry a semantic charge and convey meaning; otherwise, language becomes futile and meaningless, leading to the elimination of its most significant element, which is metaphor¹.

In the realm of the Sufi experience, the adept (*Arif*) transcends the limitations of the visible world. In a revelatory moment, they connect with the unseen and limitless, exploring what is beyond perception and imagination. Spiritual perception, inspired by imagination, shapes the Sufi's experience, allowing interpretation to establish a connection to the domain of symbols. This perception transforms sensory data into signs and symbols, revealing deeper meanings. In this context, the experience guides you, encompasses you entirely, and speaks to you in the language of symbols and signs beyond the surface expression of words. Within the realm of the Sufi experience, the adept reveals its unique symbolic language – the language of love, tolerance, and unity, a language that speaks through hints and indications rather than direct expressions. The Sufi adept, in their experience, unveils this symbolic language not within the depths of the experience itself, but after a state of extraordinary consciousness and perception beyond the ordinary and limited awareness.

To explore this concept, this study adopts the method of aesthetic analysis, well-suited for examining Sufi experiences. It places particular emphasis on semiotics as a tool for deciphering the symbolic language and unveiling concealed meanings. The research will focus first on the emotional and spiritual state experienced by individuals engaged in Sufism, often referred to as Sufi or mystical states which can vary widely and are deeply personal.

(1) The Emotional and Sufi/Mystical State

Sufis often seek to attain a state of spiritual closeness, love, and union with the Divine, and this journey can elicit a range of emotional and mystical experiences. Some of these states include:

1. *Annihilation (Fana)*: In this state, the Sufi experiences a profound sense of self-annihilation, where the ego and individual identity merge or dissolve into the Divine. It is a state of egolessness, where the Sufi feels united with God and loses a sense of separate self.
2. *Longing and Love (Ishq)*: Love is a central theme in Sufi poetry and mysticism. Sufis often describe intense longing and love for God, which can evoke strong emotional states, including passion, devotion, and yearning.
3. *Ecstasy (Nashwa)*: Sufis sometimes enter states of spiritual ecstasy during their devotional practices, such as chanting, whirling or meditation. Ecstasy is characterized by intense joy, euphoria, and a feeling of being in the presence of the Divine.
4. *Union (Ethad)*: This is the state of experiencing a profound sense of union with God. It's the culmination of the Sufi's spiritual journey, where they feel intimately connected with the Divine, transcending the boundaries of individuality.
5. *Remembrance (zikr)*: It is a practice of repetitive remembrance of God's name or attributes. It can lead to a heightened state of consciousness and emotional serenity, allowing the Sufi to feel God's presence more acutely.

6. *Desolation (Qafer)*: At times, Sufis may experience a state of spiritual desolation or contraction, where they feel distant from God or experience a sense of abandonment. This state is seen as part of the spiritual journey and is believed to lead to a deeper understanding of God's presence.

It's important to note that these states are not necessarily uniform for all Sufis, and experiences can vary greatly among individuals.

As discussed above, one example of symbolic language in Sufism is the concept of the "Beloved" or "Lover-Beloved" relationship. In Sufi writings, the Beloved is often used as a symbol for the divine, while the Lover represents the Sufi seeker's intense longing and love for God or spiritual enlightenment. For instance, consider the following lines from a prominent figure in Sufi literature, Jalaluddin Rumi,

The minute I heard my first love story,	لحظة سمعت قصة حبي الأول،
I started looking for you,	بدأت أبحث عنك،
not knowing how blind that was.	لم أدر أن ذلك عماء،
Lovers don't finally meet somewhere.	لا يلتقى العشاق في مكان،
They're in each other all along ² .	هم في أحضان بعضهم طوال الوقت.

In these verses, Rumi uses the concept of love and the Beloved as a metaphor for the spiritual journey and the seeker's quest for union with the divine. The symbolic language of love and longing expresses the profound spiritual connection that Sufis seek with the divine, emphasizing that this connection has always existed within them.

The language of Sufism, according to its discourse, was nothing but a language bound by its symbolism. However, we find some researchers, such as Walter T. Stace, who reject considering Sufi language as symbolic, meaning that it "transcends understanding" or "rises above reason. He argues this in the chapter he dedicated to "Sufism and Language" in his book "Mysticism and Philosophy"³. He presents a proposed theory while debating the denial of this notion. However, his philosophical debate over the symbolism of Sufi language does not negate the fact that the understanding of the Sufis collectively of the One

does not participate in the nature of understanding or abstract thought, as Platonistsstate.

The difficulty in understanding the words of the Sufis or grasping their intentions is due to the fact that Sufism involves unique states of consciousness that are challenging to express in ordinary language and do not belong to the common experience of people⁴.

The American psychologist William James did not err in his book "The Varieties of Religious Experience"⁵ when he attempted to define the general characteristics shared among different types of Sufism. He described one of these characteristics as "ineffability," meaning that these states of feeling are conditions that cannot be described or expressed. This is because these conditions are states of consciousness, making it difficult to convey their content to others in precise verbal terms.

Thus, addressing these aspects of the Sufi realm, particularly the use of language, reveals how words can be opened relying on the power of feeling in the effectiveness of the Sufi experience itself. It also shows that these are aspects that help us understand the reception of meanings by absolute "indication" and then extract meanings from the open word through indication, which is entirely different from what is implied by the near meaning of the word. This is what we mean by the metaphysics of open words⁶. Of these, we specifically refer here to the indicative interpretation of the Quran, which relies on 'suggestion' and 'deduction'⁷. It is worth noting that it has a connection to symbolic language as well as to the imagination.

(2) Spiritual Perception and the Power of Imagination

Spiritual perception of symbols and signs is the driving force in the adept's experience. Interpretation is necessary to establish the adept's connection to the domain of interpretation. This domain is governed by the power of imagination, which shapes and precedes sensory perception. Spiritual perception transforms sensory data into symbols and signs.

Corban indicates, in his book *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*⁸, " that this witnessed perception is realized in the world of the exemplar, which considers witnessed imagination as its active member. It is the one that has been able, and still always manages to transform sensory data into symbols, and historical events into symbolic narratives. Therefore, emphasizing the hidden meaning requires interpretation. Interpretation requires mastery of perceiving manifestations, and it overshadows visible images with a witnessed function.

This mastery is specifically "the power of imagination" according to Ibn Arabi, and Sufis before and after him share this perspective. When the adept is connected through this mastery's horizon to the infinite openness, they become liberated from words and titles, transcending language in its entirety. They merge with the Absolute, acquiring knowledge that ordinary intellectual language cannot provide. They no longer concern themselves with the means or instruments, or with the linguistic means of communication. Instead, they are solely interested in what unveils the new language that corresponds to their experience and aligns with the discerning taste of mysticism⁹.

And the sovereignty of this attachment is conditioned by attributes that exist only in those who are specifically knowledgeable about God. Through this attachment, the adept understands what they understand from the book of God specifically through the sovereignty of total attachment.

There is no condition for the establishment of this sovereignty other than striving, determination, and will on one hand, and God's facilitation, which is the primary factor, on the other hand. This is based on "orientation." The adept, in their orientation with the "assembly of the heart" and their aspiration, intends nothing but the Truth. The intended meaning of orientation or the "assembly of the heart," as we mentioned in our book *The Act of Aspiration in Love and Will Among the Sufis*,¹⁰ is the presence and observation of the heart more than the images of worlds and beings. According to Ibn Arabi, the individual worshippers, who are the people of specialization, have an orientation that stems from

the strength of their sincerity in their deeds. This is the orientation of the "perfected," meaning that the servant does not make their aspiration and distinction in their worship of their Lord dependent on anything other than the Truth.

(3) Deeper than the Realm of Intellect

When one's aspiration transcends the common descent and the degrading decline, untouched by fatigue or dissent, the dominion of attachment emerges. It is marked by a sole condition: the revelation of mercy and individualized care, echoing the words of the scholar Imam "Mohammed Abdo" in his book "*The Message of Monotheism*"¹¹, within the chapter entitled "The Possibility of Revelation".

Among human souls, there are those with the purity of essence, rooted in their nature, prepared by divine effusion to connect with the higher horizon. They ascend from humanity to the highest peak, witnessing aspects of God's command that others, relying on reason and evidence, cannot comprehend or envision. These souls receive from the All-Knowing, the wise, knowledge and wisdom that far surpasses what any of us receive from educators. They then transmit this knowledge, teaching what they have learned and inviting people to what they have been entrusted with. This is a practice decreed by God for every nation and in every era, according to their needs. He, by His mercy, manifests it through those whom He chooses to bestow His care upon...

These are inspiring and enlightening words. In the words of Imam Mohammed Abdo, we first notice the possibility of some pure souls connecting with the higher horizon, which is the ultimate goal of human perceptions. Secondly, these souls bear witness to the command of God in a way that the people of reason and evidence cannot grasp or envision.

The matter must be deeper than intellect and more encompassing than all faculties of imagination combined. Here, it pertains to 'the

command of God,' with all the greatness, majesty, and omnipotence that it encompasses. Allow your imagination to run wild to show you that some human souls witness this matter. What witnesses they are! It's the witnessing of tangible evidence. However, there might be a distinction between 'seeing,' which involves insight, and 'observation,' which pertains to sight. During the act of witnessing, after the 'assembly of the heart,' or at its moment, these souls receive from the All-Knowing, the wise. knowledge and wisdom that far surpass what any of us receive from educators.

At this point, the state of receiving and transmitting transcends words, and its meaning cannot be imagined. It's the 'assembly' without 'distinction.' Ordinary human perception cannot fathom its essence because it is a state where language completely vanishes, replaced by silence and speechlessness. This is what is meant by the 'paralysis of thought and expression,' the 'absence of ordinary awareness' ¹².

Language has no role or place here. The whole matter is pure 'metaphysics, an emergence of higher consciousness and the disappearance of ordinary consciousness. The knower and the known are one, the witness and the witnessed are one, the describer and the described are one, the wayfarer and the way are one. Reaching the One is a stance where neither describer nor described remains, neither wayfarer nor way, neither knower nor known, as expressed by Ibn Sina in his '*Pointers and Admonitions*' ¹³.

(4) The Absence of Ordinary Language in the Stages of Witnessing

For the Sufi adept in the presence of witnessing, there is no need for expression through 'evidence' because they are in the realm of the implied. Through the path of the sovereignty of attachment, they attach themselves¹⁴. Language disappears just as the Sufi disappears, and words fade away just as the Sufi fades away¹⁵.

Before witnessing, words are merely a means, letters are nothing more than signs, and language is a place of connection to be followed. When witnessing occurs, the knower of the known becomes independent of knowledge. They become free from language and its letters, from the

sign and its representation, from the structure and its form, from the mould and its symbols, from the tongue and its chants. This is as explained by Ash-Sha'rani in his commentary on the '*Matbuwliyah*'¹⁶. This is because the presence of witnessing the Truth is a presence of bewilderment and silence, where the one experiencing it becomes independent of words, as they are in the position of signs. When the assembly with the implied is achieved, the Sufi becomes independent of evidence in their Sufi experience.

But this witnessing does not last. It is just a "revealing moment", like the sudden lightning as described by Al-Ghazali¹⁷; it is a moment of connection followed by separation, a gathering that quickly disperses, intoxication followed by sobriety, absence accompanied by presence, and annihilation that necessitates existence. So, when the Sufi returns from the experience of witnessing and wishes to convey the knowledge and wisdom received from the All-Knowing, the Wise One, he returns with heightened consciousness, making a subtle indication.

His speech is a meaningful glimpse, his discourse is concise, and his knowledge is allusions, with meanings far removed from the apparent word. The Sufi points to meanings through hints, not through explicit words. He disregards the near word to let the hint take its place, which is a distant and enigmatic meaning. He stretches the word until it reaches the hint, shedding meaning into it, just as a tear sheds from a drowsy eye. He conceals the indication and hides it within the words because, at that moment, he becomes the meaning itself, all of it is concealed, and it is all a secret, mystery, and ambiguity.

The meanings of his words become 'ambiguous to outsiders,' as described by Al-Qushayri¹⁸. His language becomes symbolic, his knowledge becomes hints, and his discourse becomes a language emanating from his experience. The Sufi comprehends from God with the faculty of connection what can only be grasped by a "mystical recognition," where understanding is complete as it distances itself from the surface of the word and the image. In this respect, there are two aspects; one is that the spiritual power of the knower is connected to God

without fatigue or interruption, and it gains knowledge after acquiring its perceptual means. The other aspect is that this acquired power can only be obtained through divine assistance when it is God's will to bestow the gift of knowledge upon the servant. In the first aspect, it is the effort of the servant, and in the second aspect, it is a divine gift from the Lord.

Perhaps this effort cannot be made without God's assistance; it is a gift upon a gift when precision is desired, and we obtain from it the essence of realization. It is referred to in the Holy Book as "light upon light." This is the light of divine guidance in understanding the scripture and the light of success in knowing the essence of light.

These are just a few examples, and there are many more like them. They represent some of the contexts we have cited as evidence supporting the assumption we made in the introduction, that there are words that are open to interpretation, permitted by symbolic representation in the experience of the knower to the extent allowed by the spirit of linguistic metaphor. It permits the language of Sufi discourse in the same way, throwing from the path of symbolism to "beyond" after pointing to the perceptible and its connotations from the very first encounter.

It becomes clear from the above that the elevated Sufi consciousness, always occurring in a state of annihilation, within the midst of the Sufi experience, and communicating in the language of discourse, conveys sensory stimuli and connotations into symbolic language. It gradually transforms the language with the power of the imagination into signs and symbols.

(5) Secrets of Sufi Writing

In the introduction to this research, we presented two premises: firstly, that the language, including metaphors, does not stop at the boundaries of the apparent but extends beyond it to what lies behind and surpasses it. The second premise is that language does not confine itself to the limits of sensory experiences alone. When we open the hidden connotation of a word and do not limit it to sensory reality, it points to meanings that are metaphysical and hidden. As Ibn Jinni (d. 392 AH)

said, the majority of language, as evidenced by the usage in the characteristic expressions, is metaphorical. Its implication is expansive, not restrictive and it goes beyond sensory reality and transcends it.

What further confirms the validity of the previous premises is the secrets of Sufi writing itself. Indeed, the most remarkable aspect of Sufi writing is that if it does not originate from within oneself, it lacks the taste of mysticism. Any writing in any field is easier than this type of writing. All you need to do is to conceive the idea and then formulate it without the effort of aligning oneself between the self and what is said. However, Sufi writing is not subject to the scrutiny of the conscience, which causes it to lose its flavour. The difference between the writing of the adept and that of non- adept is that the former writes while knowing what he is writing, and his contentment resides within himself. As for the non-adept, he does not have mystical experiences and knowledge gained from such experiences. So, he is infiltrated by showing off, and he is subjected to the self's ambitions, which can undermine him.

Conclusion

The Sufi symbol is equivalent to imagination. Expression and indication are like soul and body; separating them is impossible. The relationship between expression and indication is like the relationship between the apparent and the hidden; the apparent aspect of expression is what it signifies in terms of linguistic context.

The hidden aspect of indication is what it symbolizes in terms of a divine language. Thus, while those focused on the apparent stop at the expressions and their meanings given by the power of situational language, we find the adepts delving into the meanings of existence and divinity conveyed by the language of indication. In this sense, they have taken symbolism as a means to express a language that is neither ordinary nor conventional but rather a higher language. If you were to ask about the reason for using symbols and indications, there is no stronger justification or persuasion than the rulings of the Sufi experience and its premises. Symbolic expression is the only one that

corresponds to the Sufi state that cannot be accommodated by ordinary expressions, nor can it be articulated by common words.

The Sufi state imposed the existence of an imagination that has no equivalent in terminological situational language. It can only be unveiled in the existence of such experience. The experience leads to the elevation of the spiritual state, which is certainly heart-dependent and does not address the intellect; it addresses deep emotional consciousness. In this respect, a counterpart of creative imagination emerges if it desires to express its world and does not find a regular verbal language like situational language and terminology to convey it. Therefore, it resorts to symbolism and takes symbolic indication, not ordinary expressions, as a means of expression. This also highlights the idea that such experiences defy easy description. In conclusion, the Sufi experience and symbolic language are intricately intertwined, representing a profound and unique way of expressing spiritual insights and mystical states. Arabic language, the language of metaphor, there is no doubt about that, as it has surpassed the boundaries of perceptible images through metaphoric expressions to abstract meanings. Our understanding of these abstract meanings is not limited if we connect them to the power of emotion and the richness of the inner being with the effectiveness of spiritual activity. This surpassing, or "transcendence," or going beyond, is what we mean; contrary to logical positioning, with "metaphysics of open words," based on simplicity of vision, visualization, and comprehension.

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