



The Interpretation of Natural Symbols in Mystical Poetry

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Abstract

This article explores the evolution of the philosophy of nature and symbolic thinking in Eastern classical mystical poetry, focusing on “Gulshani Raz” by Mahmud Shabistari. The study aims to analyze how natural elements function not merely as aesthetic components but as symbolic vehicles expressing metaphysical and mystical concepts. Using a qualitative textual analysis method, the research identifies key symbolic patterns and philosophical interpretations of nature. The findings demonstrate that nature in “Gulshani Raz” embodies a dynamic system of symbols reflecting divine unity, ontological truths, and spiritual transformation. The study contributes to the broader understanding of eco-mysticism and symbolic cognition in classical Eastern literature.

Key words: philosophy of nature, symbolic thinking, mystical poetry, Gulshani Raz, Eastern literature, Sufism.

Introduction

Eastern classical mystical poetry represents a profound synthesis of philosophy, spirituality, and aesthetics, where nature is not merely depicted but interpreted as a symbolic manifestation of divine reality. One of the most significant works in this tradition is “Gulshani Raz” by Mahmud Shabistari, a 14th century Persian Sufi poet whose poetic discourse reflects deep metaphysical insights. The philosophy of nature in Sufi poetry is closely connected to the doctrine of wahdat al-wujud (unity of being), where all elements of the natural world symbolize aspects of the divine. In this context, symbolic thinking becomes a central cognitive mechanism through which poets articulate complex spiritual truths. As noted by scholars, “Sufi poetry transforms physical reality into metaphysical symbolism” (Schimmel, 1975). This study seeks to examine how the philosophy of nature evolves through symbolic structures in “Gulshani Raz”, highlighting the interplay between natural imagery and mystical meaning.

This research employs a qualitative, interpretative textual analysis of “Gulshani Raz”. The methodological framework is based on: hermeneutic analysis to interpret symbolic meanings within the text; comparative literature approach to contextualize Shabistari’s symbolism within broader Sufi traditions; conceptual analysis focusing on key philosophical categories such as unity, existence, and transformation. Primary textual excerpts from “Gulshani Raz” are analyzed to identify recurring natural symbols such as the garden, flower, nightingale, light, and water. These symbols are examined in relation to their philosophical implications.

In “Gulshani Raz”, nature is conceptualized as a mirror reflecting divine unity. The garden (gulshan) itself symbolizes the cosmos, where each element represents a manifestation of the Absolute. Shabistari writes that the

multiplicity observed in nature is, in essence, an illusion masking the underlying unity of existence. The flower, for example, is not merely a botanical entity but a symbol of divine (beauty). The multiplicity of flowers signifies the diversity of divine attributes, while their shared origin reflects unity. This aligns with the Sufi metaphysical framework where “the world is a shadow of the divine reality” (Nasr, 1993).

Symbolic thinking in “Gulshani Raz” functions as an epistemological tool. Knowledge of the divine cannot be attained through rational means alone but requires intuitive and symbolic understanding. Natural elements serve as signs (ayat) guiding the seeker toward spiritual realization. For instance, light symbolizes divine knowledge, while darkness represents ignorance. The transition from darkness to light reflects the spiritual journey of the seeker. This symbolic dichotomy illustrates the process of enlightenment, a key theme in Sufi thought.

The evolution of the philosophy of nature in Eastern mystical poetry can be observed in the increasing abstraction of natural symbols. In earlier poetic traditions, nature often retained its literal significance. However, in “Gulshani Raz”, natural imagery is fully integrated into a symbolic system. Water, for example, evolves from a physical element into a symbol of life, purity, and divine grace. Similarly, the nightingale’s longing for the rose represents the soul’s yearning for union with the divine. This transformation reflects a shift from descriptive to metaphysical poetry.

The philosophical interpretation of nature in “Gulshani Raz” also reveals an early form of eco-mystical thinking. Nature is not subordinate to humanity but is an integral part of the divine order. This perspective resonates with modern ecological philosophy, which emphasizes interconnectedness and harmony. As noted, “Sufi cosmology perceives nature as sacred and imbued with spiritual significance” (Chittick, 2007). Thus, the symbolic treatment of nature in Shabistari’s work anticipates contemporary ecological discourse.

The findings indicate that the philosophy of nature in “Gulshani Raz” is deeply intertwined with symbolic thinking and Sufi metaphysics. Natural elements are transformed into a sophisticated symbolic language that conveys complex philosophical ideas. This study highlights the dynamic evolution of symbolic thinking in Eastern mystical poetry, where nature serves as both a metaphorical and ontological bridge between the material and the spiritual. Compared to Western literary traditions, where nature often functions as a backdrop, Eastern mystical poetry elevates nature to a central epistemological and metaphysical role.

Furthermore, the integration of eco-mystical elements suggests that classical Sufi poetry offers valuable insights for contemporary environmental thought. The perception of nature as sacred challenges modern utilitarian approaches and promotes a more holistic worldview.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of the philosophy of nature and symbolic thinking in Eastern classical mystical poetry, as exemplified by “Gulshani Raz”, reflects a profound synthesis of aesthetics, spirituality, and philosophy. Nature is not merely depicted but interpreted as a symbolic manifestation of divine reality. Through the use of symbolic thinking, Shabistari articulates complex metaphysical concepts, transforming natural imagery into a vehicle for spiritual knowledge. The study demonstrates that the symbolic system in “Gulshani Raz” represents a mature stage in the development of mystical poetry, where nature and philosophy are inseparably intertwined. This research contributes to the understanding of Eastern literary traditions and opens new perspectives for interdisciplinary studies in literature, philosophy, and ecology.

Bibliography

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