

The Symbolic and Terminological Meanings of the Eye in Sufi Sources

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Abstract: This article examines the symbolic and terminological meanings of the frequently used image of the ‘eye’ in Alisher Navoiy’s lyric poetry within the context of Sufi sources. The distinctive features of this symbol are analyzed through illustrative examples.

Keywords: Alisher Navoiy, lyric poetry, the symbol of the ‘eye,’ Sufi meaning.



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INTRODUCTION

From the 11th century onward, Sufi doctrine occupied an important place in the lives and scholarly-creative activities of nearly all prominent poets, writers, and intellectuals of the East. This can be attributed to the fact that Sufism is, in the truest sense, a humanistic teaching. During the Soviet era, along with other national values that embodied universal human ideals, Sufism was subjected to repression: the study of Sufism and the Sufi literature that constituted a major part of national literary heritage was prohibited.

After our country gained independence, significant and exemplary work was carried out in the field of Sufi studies, as in other areas: literary scholars examined and published rare sources related to Sufism; the formation process, historical role, and contemporary significance of the Kubrawiyya, Yasawiyya, and Naqshbandiyya (Khwajagan) orders were revealed. In particular, Sufi literature is now being studied objectively, and scholars have extensively analyzed how Sufism, harmonized with humanistic ideas, contributed to the emergence of universal poetic masterpieces.

Sufi doctrine possesses its own distinctive terminology, and poets who created within the framework of Sufism adopted the style of allegory. Therefore, readers unfamiliar with logical principles such as truth, metaphor, simile, and allegory find it difficult to fully comprehend the poetry of classical figures like Umar Khayyam, Atoyι, Navoiy, and Fuzuli. Throughout the history of Sufism, many scholars compiled dictionaries and encyclopedias dedicated to explaining Sufi terms, which are of great importance for correctly understanding and analyzing Sufi literature.

In the first half of the last century, the eminent Russian orientalist Yevgeny Bertels, who conducted extensive research on Eastern literature, rightly recognized the significance of Sufism and stated: “Without studying Sufi literature, it is impossible to form an understanding of the

cultural life of the medieval Muslim East. Without knowledge of this literature, it is difficult to comprehend the East itself.”

According to the prominent Navoiy scholar N. Komilov, Sufi ideas constitute an integral part of universal human culture. The scholar notes that religion, philosophy, literature, art, and similar domains are branches of a majestic tree whose roots lie in the creativity, worldview, and intellectual discoveries of the people; throughout conscious history, humanity has sought and studied itself, creating countless myths, ideal heroes, theories, and doctrines—many of which converged in Sufism and were revitalized.

Experts assert that the main genres of Sufi literature include lyric forms such as rubai, ghazal, qit'a, tarjeband, and qasida, as well as epic forms like masnavi. In the works of most poets, worldliness and divinity—i.e., gnosis—appear intertwined. In the poetry of Sa'di Shirazi, Hafiz Shirazi, Kamal Khojandi, Abdurahman Jami, and Alisher Navoiy, worldly beauty is regarded as a continuation and material expression of divine beauty.

Thus, seeking purely religious or purely secular ideas in their works, or setting them in opposition, is incorrect. For these poets, the universe and humanity are one; spirit and body, existence and meaning are inseparable. The reality they celebrate is the manifestation and radiance of divine attributes, and the soul journeying from the divine manifestation toward the divine source is, for them, the most beautiful soul. Therefore, Sufi adepts and ordinary readers have understood these works differently, each according to their own level. Their poetry is multilayered, with every expression veiled in seven layers of meaning. For example, “beloved” may signify God, the Prophet, the spiritual master, or the loved one; “cupbearer” may refer to the same four concepts; “lip” may denote the master’s word or divine grace; “eyebrow” the boundary between the divine and material worlds; “waist” the image of the perfect human; “slender waist” the subtlety of that image; and “eye” the perfect human himself. Without grasping these symbols in detail, it is impossible to understand Sufi poetry.

In Sufi dictionaries, the term “eye” is defined as follows:

Ayn – eye, pupil; spring, fountain. In Sufi literature, it signifies the lights of attributes, the proximity of the heart, and the image or manifestation of a Sufi phenomenon in divine knowledge.

Avval o'zung, oxiru mabayn o'zung,

Borchag'a xoliq, borig'a ayn o'zung. (Alisher Navoiyy)

In Sufi terminology, *insān-i 'ayn* refers to the “Perfect Man”; in Persian, it also denotes custom, ritual, and normative law. Within Sufi literature, it signifies ceremonies held among members of the *ṭarīqa*, such as sessions of *dhikr* and *samā'*.

Chashm (eye) – is interpreted as the capacity to contemplate the Divine in all things, a perceptive faculty regarded as a human attribute. In other words, it is the vigilant gaze of the seeker (*sālik*), who overlooks nothing, constantly discerning beneficial and harmful elements, and observing all states—good and bad—related to existence.

Chashm-i purkhumār – denotes the seeker’s inward journey; among the people of perfection, the unveiling of such states is well known.

Abru (eyebrow) – symbolizes the mystical inspiration poured into the seeker’s heart.

Through these symbols, the image of the seeker is vividly portrayed in the lyric poetry of Navoiy and Mashrab. The spiritual traveler on the path of the *ṭarīqa*—his emotions, longing for the Beloved, ecstasy and intoxication, joy at moments of union—are depicted. In Navoiy’s works, the central idea is the ascent (*'urūj*) of the human soul toward the Divine. The poet illustrates the suffering and stages of this journey through various artistic means. His *Khamsa* epics and *Lison ut-Tayr* are works that describe this ascent and mystical *mi'rāj*.

It is well known that many concepts in Sufism participate in the imagery of the eye—for example, the degree of insight (*basīrat*) of the spiritual master and disciple, and the unseen world (*‘ālam al-ghayb*). The sharpness and brilliance of human vision can be understood through the following parable:

“O son! If you open your eyes, you will see that both the water of patience and the fire of wrath come from the Truth. Place two fingers over your eyes: do you see anything? Though you do not see, the world still exists. The fault lies in the fingers of the ego. Return to yourself! Remove your fingers from your eyes and behold whatever you desire. Man is nothing but an eye; the rest is skin. Only the eye that can see the Friend deserves to be called an ‘eye.’ An eye that does not behold the Friend is better blind. Even if such a person were Solomon, an ant would surpass him.

Sweet and bitter cannot be discerned by the physical eye; the people of insight perceive them through the lattice of consequence. The eye that sees the ultimate outcome sees rightly. You say, ‘I see,’ yet true vision has clear signs. If you have seen the foam of the sea, you must be captivated so that you may see the sea itself. The foam reveals secrets, but the sea leaves one in awe. One may see a minaret but not the bird upon it; the falcon atop the minaret escapes the eye. Another sees a bird in flight but not the prey in its beak. He who looks with the light of God sees both the bird and its prey. One sees man adorned with patterns of clay, another sees him filled with knowledge and deeds. The body is a minaret; knowledge and worship are like birds—count them as you wish. The average person sees only the bird, nothing before or behind it. The feather is hidden in the bird, alive with it; the bird with a feather in its beak always throbs with life—neither temporary nor borrowed!”

Similarly, in Sufism, the unseen world strives to illuminate the human eye. When the veil of hope and fear is lifted, the unseen appears in all its majesty and beauty. The imagination of what is absent grows ever larger, but when the unseen manifests, imagination retreats.

Let us now examine the following couplet from Navoiy’s *ghazal*, included as number 227 in his *Navādir un-Nihāya* collection, which begins with the line “Zulfung ochilib orazi diljo‘ bila o‘ynar”:

Tong yo‘qki, ko‘zung bo‘lsa, ko‘ngul birla muloyib,
Majnunga ajab yo‘q agar ohu bila o‘ynar. [4.74]

At first glance, the depiction of the eye in the couplet may not seem to be the main purpose. In reality, however, the poet’s aim is precisely to evoke the image of the eye, though indirectly rather than explicitly. The meaning of the couplet can be interpreted as follows: “There is nothing surprising in your eyes playing with my heart, for Majnun’s play with the gazelle is equally unsurprising—it is natural.” From this, we understand that the poet conveys both the beauty, timidity, and playfulness of the beloved’s eyes, likened to those of a gazelle, and the Majnun-like state of the lyrical hero’s heart.

When we turn to Alisher Navoiy’s poetry, we encounter a rich variety of images. Among these, mystical and philosophical worldviews are also evident. The participation of the eye in such imagery represents one of the highest levels of meaning. Beneath the inner reflection of the symbol of the “eye,” we can discern the emergence of Sufi concepts.

Consider the following couplet:

Garchi qotil ko‘zidin o‘lsa, tirik
Tirilur no‘shi labidin ham o‘luk. [4, 123]

The meaning of the couplet is that if the eye kills the living, the lips revive the dead due to their life-giving quality. In other words, if the beloved’s murderous eyes condemn the lover to death, the lips restore life to the dead (the lover), or more precisely, the lips grant life through their vital

essence. From a Sufi perspective, the lips symbolize the sweet speech that descends from the spiritual realm through angels to prophets and gnostics, transferring to the heart during moments of inspiration and ecstasy. Sufis who seek the secrets of divine knowledge endure countless hardships; thus, they return to life through the sweetness of these words.

In the following couplet from Navoiy's ghazal, included as number 504 in the Badoe' ul-vasat collection, the symbol of the eye is also employed in a mystical-philosophical sense:

Ahd qildim, ishq lafzin tilga mazkur etmayin
Barcha elga fitna bo'lg'on, ko'zga maftun bo'lmayin
Har kishi nazzora aylar yuzni manzur etmayin. [4, 448]

This couplet may be understood as the lyrical hero's supplication: he prays not to be captivated by the eye that has deceived and ensnared all people, nor to gaze upon the face that none can resist. It should also be noted that the eye that deceives everyone with seduction may represent the material world (the ego), or the Absolute Spirit gazing through worldly beauty, or even the image of the Perfect Man radiating light from his face and eyes. In any case, the beloved's eye is undeniably seductive and deceptive, drawing everyone into infatuation. Love begins precisely with the gaze upon this enchanting face and eye—those eyes that never allow the poor lover a moment of peace. But if the face and eyes signify divine attributes—the marks of manifestation—why are they described as seductive and deceptive? The answer lies in the fact that, in the path of the *ṭarīqa*, the beloved's eye represents the degree of insight (*basīrat*), the sharpness of the heart's vision, and at the same time, the power that tests and tries the lover. Divine beauty shines in various forms, seeking a path to the heart. The eye is brilliance, wave, radiance, enchantment, and magic. It is also the source of the unseen, the fountain of mysteries. From a Sufi perspective, the couplet portrays the face and eye as symbols of divine beauty and, simultaneously, as the fountain of the Perfect Man. Therefore, to hide from these divine eyes and faces is tantamount to turning away from God. Better to burn in the fire of love and never be deprived of those magical eyes.

As seen in the example above, the interpretation of the eye is shaped through such details, which create a vast field of imagery. The eye is associated with tears, weeping, and the pupil (*mardum*). In this way, the image of the eye becomes increasingly consistent in Navoiy's ghazals. Moreover, it occupies one of the highest positions among the dominant symbols in the *Khazā'in al-ma'ānī* collection. This is no exaggeration, for even a single tear evokes numerous metaphors, such as: tear, tear-holder, flood of sorrow, sea, ocean, river (Tigris and Euphrates), storm, torrent, hail, rain, and so forth.

Kemadin har dam chiqib rangin su ko'zim qonidek,
Anda yor andoqki, mardum diydai purxun aro. [4;78]

According to the couplet, from the ship flows water as red as blood at every moment, symbolizing the tears of the lover's eyes, while the beloved aboard the ship resembles the pupil of an eye shedding bloody tears. Here, the combination of the pupil (*mardum*), the eye, and tears further enhances the symbolic quality of the eye.

The words *mardum* and *mardumak* are of Persian origin, meaning "person" and "pupil of the eye." In Arabic, the pupil is called *insān al-'ayn*. Thus, in Arabic as well, the words for "pupil" and "person" share the same form. When we look closely into a human eye, we see a reflection of ourselves—yet the image appears so small and altered that we perceive not ourselves but an unfamiliar figure, a generalized human. For this reason, calling the pupil *insān* or *mardum* is not mistaken, in our view.

In Navoiy's ghazals, the Persian meanings of the eye appear in forms such as *chashm*, *dāda*, *chashm-i fattān*, *dāda-yi giryān*, *chashm-i purkhūn*, and *chashm-i purkhumār*.

In Navoiy's ghazal beginning with "Jong'a chun dermen..." the mystical-philosophical qualities of the eye are also discussed:

Ko'ngluma qilsam g'azab, ayturki: 'Ko'zdindur gunah,

Ko'rmayin ul tushmadi bizga bu ishning tuhmati.'

Ko'zga chun dermenki: 'Ey tardomani yuzi qaro,

Sendin o'lmish telba ko'nglumning balovu vahshati!'

Yig'lab aytur ko'zki: 'Yo'q erdi mango ham ixtiyor,

Kim ko'rindi nogahon ul sho'hi mahvash tal'ati.' [4; 172]

The brief meaning of the ghazal is as follows: one day, the lyrical hero dies and asks his soul, body, heart, and mind about the cause of his death. In the cited couplets, when he angrily interrogates his heart, the heart defends itself, saying: "The fault lies with the eye; had it not seen the beloved, this accusation would not have fallen upon us." The hero then reproaches the eye: "O wet-hemmed, black-faced one, the calamity and terror that befell my mad heart came from you!" The eye weeps and replies: "I had no choice either, for suddenly the moon-faced beauty appeared before me." In short, the soul claims that the body fell ill; when questioned, the body blames the heat of the fire in the breast, while the breast attributes its affliction to the spark of love in the heart. The heart, in turn, blames the eye. Yet the eye was not at fault, for when the radiant beauty appeared, it gazed involuntarily.

The general conclusion from the ghazal is that the manifestation of Absolute Beauty causes love to encompass the human faculties, the heart, and the entire being. This beautiful beloved is undoubtedly a divine epiphany. Once this light, this magnetic radiance, settles in pure hearts, it begins to flow through their veins, captivating their senses, thoughts, and spirit entirely, and the lover burns in longing to journey from the manifestation of Beauty to its source. Moreover, the depiction of divine love through human faculties is no accident. Here, the eye is one of the instruments that reveal divine love. For Alisher Navoiy, both the love of manifestation ("metaphorical love") and the love of the source ("true love") are intended simultaneously; the poet does not oppose these two concepts, though he does not deny their distinction:

Netti jon topsam visolingdin labingning xolidek,

Ko'z-u zulfingdin necha mast-u parishoning bo'lay. [4; 85]

The notable aspect of this couplet is that the eye, lip, mole, and tress together create an image of divinity. The lover envies the mole on the beloved's lip, for the mole is in the embrace of union—together with the Beloved. "Would that I, too, could find life through union, rejoice, and attain my desire, though I am intoxicated by your eyes and distraught like your tresses," says the lover. In Sufi thought, the mole symbolizes the point of unity, that is, the attainment of universality through contemplation of the visible world and the perception of the essence of divine beauty. In this ghazal, however, the mystical meaning of the mole merges with its literal sense as a mark of human beauty. In other words, reality and symbolism, divine meaning and worldly meaning, are fused. Hence, the lover wishes to become the mole, to reach union and affirm unity. The eye's intoxication of the lover signifies his ecstasy and loss of self upon beholding the beloved's beauty. In general, the eye reflects the essence of the human being, and interpersonal influence occurs through the eye. Therefore, the beloved's eye possesses the power to captivate the lover's heart. The tress (zulf) symbolizes disorder and separation. The tress veils the face (the face being essence and source), serving as a curtain. It also alludes to the multiplicity of the material world, which is a realm of separation and suffering. The dervish who comprehends and transcends the world, unveiling the face, attains God. [4; 94]

In conclusion

In summary, when we examine the meanings of the eye in its Sufi interpretation, it is essential to note first that the contemplation of the Divine in all things occupies the foremost position. This contemplative capacity is described as a visual faculty (*basarī sifat*). In other words, it signifies the seeker's vigilant gaze, which overlooks nothing, constantly discerning beneficial elements and observing all states—both good and bad—through perceptive qualities.

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