

Hafez Shirazi: The Representative of the Iranian World

By: Qazi Dr. Shaikh Abbas Borhany al-Waleed

PhD (USA), NDI, Shahadat al-Alamiyyah (Al-Hawzah al-'ilmiyyah, Najaf, Iraq), M.A, LLM (Shari'ah)

Musheer: Federal Shariat Court of Pakistan

Member: Ulama Council of Pakistan

Chairman: The Guardian Pakistan

Attorney at Law & Religious Scholar

Website: www.durrenajaf.com

Academia: <https://durrenajaf.academia.edu/QaziBorhany>

Contact for spiritual help: najafspiritualcenter@gmail.com

This article is based on notes prepared during my MA Literature class concerning Persian literature around 1980.

Abstract: *In Iran, poetry is not merely a literary form; it is a living part of everyday culture, shaping language, memory, ethics, and identity. Among Persian poets, Hafez of Shiraz occupies a singular place because his poetry continues to speak both to private spiritual life and to the wider cultural imagination of the Iranian world. This paper argues that Hafez represents the Iranian world in a uniquely comprehensive way because his Ghazals bring together its defining elements: mysticism, humanism, aesthetic refinement, critique of hypocrisy, remembrance of the pre-Islamic and Islamic past, and a persistent longing for freedom and inner truth. The "Iranian world" extends beyond the borders of modern Iran to a broader Persian sphere, including Afghanistan, China, Central Asia, and parts of the Indo-Pak Subcontinent, where Persian language and poetry historically shaped intellectual and social life. Within this world, Hafez perfected the Ghazal as a form capable of carrying multiple levels of meaning at once. His symbols-especially wine, the tavern, the beloved, and the Pir'e Mughan-allow his poetry to move fluidly between earthly love and spiritual longing, social criticism and mystical insight. Writing in the politically unstable and religiously contested environment of fourteenth-century Shiraz, Hafez challenged empty formalism and exposed corruption through irony, ambiguity, and lyrical mastery. At the same time, he preserved Iran's deep cultural memory by linking Islamic spirituality with echoes of the Zoroastrian and pre-Islamic heritage. The continuing centrality of the Divan of Hafez in Iranian life, from education and music to the practice of Fal'e Hafez, confirms that he is more than a canonical poet: he is a cultural guide, moral witness, and enduring voice of Iranian civilization. Through his poetry, the Iranian world speaks in its richest, most complex, and most memorable form.*

Keywords: *Hafez; Persian poetry; Iranian world; Ghazal; mysticism; Sufism; Pir'e Mughan; symbolism; cultural memory; Iranian identity*

Introduction:

In Iran, poetry is more than art-it is part of daily life. Iranians read, recite, and memorize poems at home, in schools, and at gatherings. Poetry is used to express wisdom, emotion, and identity. From Ferdowsi's great epic Shah Nameh to Rumi's mystical verses, Persian poetry has always been a mirror of Iranian thought and culture. Among all poets, Hafez of Shiraz holds a unique place. His poetry is read everywhere in Iran, and his Diw'an (collection of poems) is used not only for enjoyment but also for Fal'e Hafez-a tradition of opening his book at random to seek guidance. Because of this, Hafez is not only a poet of beauty and wisdom but also a living voice in Iranian everyday life. This paper argues that Hafez represents the Iranian world because his poetry combines its key elements: spirituality, love of beauty, criticism of corruption, memory of the past, and hope for freedom.

The Iranian World and the Role of Poetry:

The "Iranian world" is larger than modern Iran. It also includes regions where Persian culture and language shaped life-Afghanistan, Central Asia, and even parts of India. In these lands, Persian poetry was the main cultural and artistic form. In many societies, poetry is separate from daily life, but in Iran, poetry is woven into religion, philosophy, and ethics. People use verses in conversation, teaching, and rituals. Hafez stands out in this tradition because he took the short Ghazal form and turned it into the strongest and most flexible tool of Persian expression.

The Diw'an of Hafez Shirazi; the Voice of the Iranian World:

The Diw'an of Hafez is more than literature-it is part of everyday culture. People read it during Nowruz (the Persian New Year), or open it for fortune-telling - Fal'e Hafez. Children study it in school, and adults often memorize verses. Hafez's poetry appears in music, art, and casual conversation. This deep connection to everyday life makes him more than a poet-he is a cultural guide and companion to the Iranian people.

Hafez's reputation reached far beyond Iran. In Europe, Goethe admired him so much that he wrote the West-östlicher Divan in his honor. In America, Emerson praised Hafez as a poet of wisdom and universality. Yet even when admired abroad, Hafez remained deeply Iranian in his language, symbols, and themes. His global fame shows that Persian culture carries universal meaning. Hafez represents the Iranian world because his poetry includes all of its essential qualities:

Mysticism: the search for Rabb through love.

Humanism: celebrating beauty, joy, and dignity.

Criticism: exposing hypocrisy and injustice.

Memory: linking Iran's ancient and Islamic traditions.

Cultural centrality: living in everyday Iranian life through his Divan.

Through these, Hafez speaks for both the struggles and hopes of the Iranian people.

Hafez's Time - 14th-Century - Religion and Mysticism:

Hafez lived in a time of political struggle. After the Mongol invasions, Iran was divided into small kingdoms. Shiraz, his hometown, often changed rulers. Some rulers supported poets, but power was unstable, and corruption was common. This shaped Hafez's view of life: that power is temporary, and rulers often fail to live up to justice. Religious life in Hafez's time was divided. Strict scholars focused on laws and rituals, while Sufis emphasized love, freedom, and closeness to Rabb. Hafez knew both traditions. His poems show his knowledge of Islam and the Qur'an, but he often mocked hypocrisy among religious leaders. Instead, he valued honesty, love, and inner truth.

Symbols in Hafez's Poetry - Wine and the Tavern:

The Ghazal is a short poem about love, often emotional and lyrical. Before Hafez, it was already popular through poets like Sa'di. But Hafez perfected it, filling it with multiple layers of meaning. One of his key tools was ambiguity. A verse about wine might mean literal wine, spiritual joy, or even rebellion against religious restrictions. Because of this, his poems could speak to mystics, ordinary people, and critics of authority all at once. Although Islam forbids wine, Hafez used it as a symbol. In his poetry, wine means freedom, joy, and divine love. The tavern becomes a place of truth, away from hypocrisy and false authority.

i. Spiritual Guidance: The "Pir'e Mughan" is a symbol of spiritual leadership and wisdom, offering guidance and knowledge to those on the spiritual path.

ii. Divine Wisdom: The term can evoke the wisdom of the ancient Magi, who were associated with astronomy and spiritual understanding, fitting into Hafez's mystical themes.

iii. Wine as Divine Truth: In many of Hafez's Ghazals, the figure of the "Pir'e Mughan" offers the wise advice to drink wine, which symbolizes the intoxicating experience of divine love and spiritual truth, helping the seeker to find Rabb.

iv. A Path to the Beloved: By heeding the counsel of this spiritual elder, Hafez suggests, one can find the path to union with the Beloved (Rabb) and escape the superficiality of conventional religious practices.

The Beloved Pir'e Mughan:

Pir'e Mughan is a Persian term meaning "Old Man of the Fire-Temple," referring to an ancient Zoroastrian priest who officiates at a fire temple. In the poetry of Hafez, the figure of the "Pir'e Mughan" represents a wise, spiritual guide, particularly in the context of the Zoroastrian understanding of love and the search for the divine. This figure dispenses spiritual wisdom and insight, often through the metaphor of wine, symbolizing divine intoxication and enlightenment. The beloved can mean a human lover or spiritual master. This double meaning lets readers find both romance and spirituality in his verses. Hafez often mentions the Zoroastrian magus as a wise guide. Since Zoroastrianism is Iran's ancient pre-Islamic religion, this symbol connects Iran's past

with its Islamic present. Through this, Hafez keeps alive the deep cultural memory of Iran. Hafez uses the Pir'e Mughan to critique superficial rituals, urging seekers to look for deeper truths.

Mysticism and Humanism in Hafez:

Hafez writes about love as the main path to truth, following Sufi ideas. But unlike some mystics who ignore the world, Hafez also praises life's joys-music, friendship, beauty, and nature. This balance of spiritual and worldly love shows the Iranian view of life: spirituality does not reject earthly pleasures but sees them as part of a full human journey.

Hafez as a Critic of Society:

Hafez was not only a mystic but also a critic. Many of his poems attack corrupt leaders and false religious teachers. He used humor and irony to expose their hypocrisy. He also reminded rulers that power is temporary. By using symbolic language, he could criticize without direct punishment. This indirect critique through art has been a strong tradition in Iranian culture.

Hafez's First Ghazal - Key Themes:

i. Beginning with Ease, Ending with Trial:

Love feels simple at first but soon reveals hardship - the lover's journey is filled with longing and struggle.

ii. Beauty and Wound:

A single glimpse of the Beloved's mystery inspires both delight and heartbreak, showing desire's double edge.

iii. Impermanence of Union:

Even moments of joy are fleeting, as life constantly moves forward; union always carries the shadow of parting.

iv. Trusting the Pir'e Mughan:

The seeker must follow the true guide, even when his advice defies religious convention, for inner truth surpasses outward law.

v. Peril of the Seeker:

Those who stay on shore cannot understand the danger and ecstasy of love's storm - risk is essential for spiritual discovery.

vi. Scandal and Secret:

The lover's yearning may lead to disgrace, but the secret of love is universal, always present in human gatherings.

vii. Final Surrender:

Hafez closes with counsel to remain ever-present with the Beloved, letting go of worldly distractions for true union.

viii. Arc of the Poem:

The Ghazal traces the seeker's mystical journey: from sweet beginnings, through hardship, peril, and rebellion, into scandal, and finally toward surrender and divine presence. It's a miniature map of the Sufi path of love.

First Ghazal of Hafez Shirazi:

*Alā yā ayyohā-s-sāqī, adir ka'sā va nāvilhā
Ke 'eshq āsān namūd avval, valī oftād moshkel-hā*

*Come, O cupbearer, bring the wine and pass it around;
For love seemed easy at first, but then came the hardships.*

Interpretation: The journey of love - whether earthly or divine - begins sweetly, seductively simple. But soon the lover discovers its trials: separation, longing, jealousy, annihilation of self. Hafez sets the tone: joy and sorrow are inseparable.

*Be būy-e nāfe-ī kākhar sabā zān torreh bogshāyad
Ze tāb-e ja'd-e moshkīnesh, che khūn oftād dar del-hā*

At last, perhaps, the morning breeze will loosen a knot of those dark tresses, releasing a musk-like scent;

But oh - what blood has fallen in hearts from the twist of those perfumed curls!

Interpretation: The beloved's beauty - the veiled truth - may reveal a single hint (like the faint musk escaping a knotted sachet). Yet the very mystery of that beauty has shattered countless hearts. Desire is both promise and wound.

*Marā dar manzel-e jānān che amn-e 'eysh chon har dam
Jaras faryād mīdārad ke barbandīd mahmel-hā*

How can I rest in the house of the Beloved,

When at every moment the caravan bell cries: "Pack up the loads — we must move on!"

Interpretation: Even the joy of union is transient. Life is a caravan always on the move; every meeting carries within it the seed of parting. The lover knows peace cannot last — impermanence rules.

*Be mey sajjāde rangīn kon garet pīr-e moghān gūyad
Ke sālek bī-khabar nabovad ze rāh o rasmi manzel-hā*

Stain your prayer rug with wine, if the Magian Elder tells you so;

For the traveler on the path is never ignorant of the way and its stations.

Interpretation: Trust the true master, even when his advice breaks conventional rules. Outward religion may forbid wine, but inner truth sometimes requires the breaking of form to reach the essence. Hafez praises authentic guidance over rigid piety.

Shab-e tārik o bīm-e mowj o gardābī chenīn hāyel

Kojā dānand hāl-e mā sabokbārān-e sāhel-hā

A dark night, the fear of waves, a whirlpool so terrifying -

How could those light upon the shore ever know our state?

Interpretation: Those who risk nothing - who live safely, comfortably, detached - cannot fathom the lover's storm, the seeker's peril, the heart lost at sea. Spiritual passion is for the bold.

Hame kāram ze khodkāmī be badnāmī keshīd ākhar

Nehān key mānad ān rāzī ke az ū sāzand mahfel-hā

All my acts of self-seeking led at last to infamy;

How could that secret stay hidden - the very one around which all gatherings form?

Interpretation: My pursuit of pleasure brought scandal, yet love's truth can never stay buried. The great mystery - desire, yearning, the Beloved - is the hidden center of every human circle, the silent topic of every gathering.

Hozūrī gar hamī-khāhī, az ū ghāyeb masho, Hāfez

Matā mā talqa man tahwā, da' ad-donyā wa ahmelhā

If you desire presence with the Beloved, O Hafez, never be absent from Him;

Whenever you meet the one you love, leave the world aside - neglect it completely.

Interpretation: The final counsel: stay with the Beloved, turn away from distractions, let go of the world's noise. True love requires undivided attention; only then can the union be real.

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