

Artistic Expression of Sufi Traditions in The Poetry of Nurullah Gench

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Abstract: This article presents a scientific and analytical approach to the artistic expression of Sufi traditions in the works of the contemporary Turkish poet Nurullah Gench. The study examines the issue of the relationship between the Sufi spiritual heritage of classical Turkish literature and modern poetry, and substantiates the role of Nurullah Gench's work as a poetic bridge that harmonizes these two traditions. The article analyzes, on the basis of examples, the Sufi concepts used in the poet's works—divine love, fanā (annihilation), faqr (spiritual poverty), and spiritual journey—as well as the symbolic images expressing them (night, fire, water, caravan, heart). In particular, through the poem "Su İsteyişime," the study reveals the poet's inner spiritual quest, his aspiration to draw closer to God, and how skillfully he expresses Sufi ideas through the means of modern poetic language. As a result of the research, the poetry of Nurullah Gench is evaluated as a unique body of work that continues, in a contemporary spirit, the tradition of great Sufi poets such as Ahmad Yassavi, Yunus Emre, and Jelaliddin Rumi, and that provides the reader not only with aesthetic pleasure but also with spiritual nourishment.

Keywords: Sufism, Nurullah Gench, modern Turkish poetry, symbolism, fanā, divine love, poetics.

Introduction: Classical Turkish literature is one of the poetic traditions that has been formed and developed over centuries. This literature is not only an art of eloquent expression, but also a reflection of the intellectual world, beliefs, and emotions of the past. Classical poetry possesses a strong aesthetic structure both in form and in content. The influence of this classical poetry has also been significant in later periods, and its traces are still felt in modern literature. In the poetic thought that developed after the Republican period, it is possible to encounter many poets who are directly or indirectly connected with classical literature. Yahya Kemal describes classical poetry as "our musical language" and emphasizes that it is an important source for modern poetry both in terms of form and content (Beyatlı, 1992, p. 45). Necip Fazıl Kısakürek is also one of the poets who introduced the Sufi atmosphere of classical poetry into the language of modern poetry and developed his poetic views in the tradition of poets such as Fuzuli and Sheikh Galib (Kısakürek, 1995, p. 142). In the period following the proclamation of the Tanzimat, debates between

the "old" and the "new" emerged in the field of poetry. While some writers defended the traditional poetic style inherited from the past, others adopted modern poetic views influenced by the West. At this stage, the issue of how to create harmony with tradition in poetry also became a subject of discussion. When the topic is approached not only within the framework of Turkish literature but also in the context of the general concept of poetry, T. S. Eliot's following idea about tradition is noteworthy: "Being faithful to tradition does not mean merely imitating the past; rather, it means inheriting the tradition, reconstructing it, and expressing it anew in the language of the present" (as cited in Tepebaşı, 2023, p. 838).

According to Eliot, although the concept of true poetry is grounded in the great works of the past, it requires their reinterpretation through a critical perspective. This plays an important role in understanding the aesthetic and intellectual approaches of many poets in modern Turkish poetry who create on the basis of tradition. This is especially evident in poets such as Nurullah Gench. He interprets classical poetry not

merely as a traditional form, but as a source that appeals to the intellectual and emotional world of the modern individual. Nurullah Gench's views on poetry harmonize the aesthetic values of classical divan literature with modern poetry, thereby functioning as a bridge between tradition and contemporary poetic expression.

Indeed, according to Yavuzer (2019), "Nurullah Gench's poetry operates around two main centers of thought: one is Islam, and the other is the Turkic culture that has encountered Islam. In the poet's understanding of Turkish identity, traces of an ancient tradition that has upheld the banner of Islam and has never ceased striving in this path are clearly visible. This concept frequently appears in his poems and merges with the Muslim-Turkish identity" (p. 336). Nurullah Gench's poetry stands out distinctly among works written in the religious-Sufi direction within modern Turkish literature. In his poems, numerous ideas — such as religious concepts, Sufi perspectives, purity of the heart, spiritual perfection, patience, trust in God (*tawakkul*), divine love, and the attainment of truth — are expressed in a unified artistic and philosophical form. The present study aims to examine the artistic expression of Sufi traditions in Gench's poetry and to analyze how these traditions are rendered through modern poetic language and symbolic imagery.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a literary-analytical method. The primary research material consists of selected poems by Nurullah Gench, with particular focus on "Su İsteyişime" as a representative text. The analytical approach combines close reading with intertextual analysis, tracing the Sufi conceptual framework embedded in the poetic imagery and language.

The theoretical foundation of the study draws on classical Sufi terminology — including *fanā*, *faqr*, *ma'rifa*, and *haqiqa* — as defined within the Islamic mystical tradition, alongside T. S. Eliot's concept of tradition and its reinterpretation in modern poetry. Secondary sources include scholarly works on classical Turkish literature, Sufi philosophy, and modern Turkish poetic thought. The symbolic images in Gench's poems are identified, classified, and interpreted in light of both classical Sufi symbolism and modern literary aesthetics, allowing for a holistic understanding of the poet's artistic world.

RESULTS

In the poet's poetic world, human life is interpreted as a spiritual journey. In this journey, a person renounces the attractions of the external world and strives toward the inner world — purity of the heart, inner awareness, and closeness to the Divine. This constitutes the

fundamental idea of Sufism. Nurullah Gench expresses Sufi ideas not through direct imitation of great Sufi poets, but in harmony with their spirit, rendering them artistically through modern expression and imagery. For example, in his poems, he depicts divine love through the image of a burning passion. This love is portrayed as an infinite love for God and as the servant's devotion to the Beloved Lord (Genç, 2019, p. 68):

In the poet's work, love is not merely an emotional experience but also a means of spiritual purification and inner awakening. According to him, a person can attain spiritual elevation only through divine love. The symbol of "night" (*gece*) frequently appears in his poems. This symbol generally signifies ascetic discipline, contemplation, reflection, solitude, and communion with God. It is precisely at night that the human heart awakens, distancing itself from the turmoil of transient life and turning toward eternity.

Reflecting on the use of symbols, Quronbekov (n.d.) states: "The purpose underlying these elements is to call humanity to reflection, to contemplate more deeply their way of life, to continuously explore the mysteries of existence, and to pursue knowledge. Indeed, the use of symbols, parables, images, and metaphors aims to liberate humanity from superficial thinking, from drawing hasty conclusions, from blindly believing what others say, and from the mire of ignorance" (p. 23). In Nurullah Gench's poetry, the Sufi concept of "becoming ephemeral" (*fanā*) — that is, considering oneself nonexistent and renouncing the ego — is also evident. As Haqqul (1991) notes, "the path of *fanā* is the culmination of 'the servant's journey toward God.' This state is often associated with self-annihilation, completion, and, more precisely, with death" (p. 27).

Lexically, *fanā* means "extinction" or "cessation." In Sufism, it signifies the elimination of negative traits from the servant's heart. *Faqr* represents a higher stage following *fanā* and denotes the level of spiritual perfection. To attain the reality of *faqr* is, in essence, to reach a state close to perfection. According to Haqqul (1991), the valley of *faqr* and *fanā* is the ultimate goal of both the spiritual seeker (*sālik*) and the poet, because the one who annihilates oneself in the love of God is never turned away from the Divine presence. In the valley of *faqr* and *fanā*, everything visible within the eighteen thousand worlds possesses only form; it lacks both meaning and essence. In other words, "spiritual poverty consists in annihilating everything that exists and abandoning all that has been annihilated" (Haqqul, 1991, p. 27). The nightingale — that is, the spiritual seeker — reaches its ultimate goal in the valley of *faqr* and *fanā*. Furthermore, in Nurullah Gench's works,

there are numerous lines that allude to the verses of the Qur'an and the meanings of hadith. Their artistic interpretation endows the poetry with spiritual power. His poems contain many symbolic images such as gözyaşı (tears), ateş (fire), çile (suffering), kervan (caravan), gönül (heart), ay (moon), gece (night), güneş (sun), and gül (rose), through which spiritual anguish, longing, patience, and love are expressed. In particular, he uses the image of the "caravan" as a symbol of the spiritual journey. Every human being is a traveler in this caravan, and the destination is the ultimate truth.

The main stages of Sufism — sharia, tariqa, ma'rifa, and haqiqa — are artistically reflected in his poetry. He accepts sharia as the foundation, promotes the attainment of ma'rifa through tariqa — that is, through ascetic discipline, patience, and devotion — and ultimately presents haqiqa as the final stage, achieved through sincere understanding of God.

In the poet's works, Sufi ideas are expressed not only as theoretical concepts but also as lived experience. He conveys his own emotions — joys and sufferings, hopes and disappointments — within his poems. This makes his poetry vivid, sincere, and impactful. In particular, themes of supplication to God and devotion are conveyed through artistic means (Genç, 2019, p. 68):

"Diz çöküp dua ettim geceler boyu / Gözlerim yaş, kalbim paramparça" ("Kneeling, I prayed throughout the nights / My eyes in tears, my heart shattered")

These lines reflect the state of a servant who is afflicted yet hopeful. Such poems not only provide aesthetic pleasure but also inspire the reader toward spiritual perfection. Nurullah Gench's poem "Su İsteyişime" ("To My Desire for Water") depicts inner searching and spiritual awakening through the imagery of love and absence (Genç, 2019). The poem conveys a powerful meaning, particularly by employing the life-giving quality of water to symbolize the rebirth of love and life. This theme, which frequently appears in many of Gench's poems, attracts the reader's attention. The opening lines of the poem are as follows:

bir su ver, dirileyim kuruyan köklerimde
bir köprü kur çıldıran nehirlerin kalbine

In these lines, water is presented as a symbol of life, vitality, and spiritual renewal. The poet emphasizes that without essential elements such as love and devotion, life comes to an end, and he seems to ask his beloved for the water of life. As in Islamic tradition and many other cultures, water is used here as a symbol of life, blessing, and divine mercy, thereby deepening its metaphorical meanings. Nurullah Gench interprets water as a means of both physical and spiritual renewal.

With a tone of supplication, the poet asks that the water of divine mercy be granted to his "dried roots," expressing a desire for revival and renewed life. The second line points to an inner conflict, suggesting the need to build a bridge toward the heart of turbulent rivers. Here, the "unrestrained rivers" symbolize love, and the poet indicates that he is deprived of such blessings. This condition reflects not only an outward but also a profound inner state of distress and suffering. At the same time, it represents the uncontrollable emotional waves within the lover's inner world. The poet's desire to "build a bridge" reflects his search for harmony and balance within himself.

In the subsequent lines of the poem, the poet portrays the intensity of the suffering caused by love and the need for water as a means of salvation from this pain:

ben ki, toprak altında bir devim, kurtar beni
okunu çek bağrımdan; yandı cânım, bir su ver
ölü bir tenden bile perişânım, bir su ver
ağlıyor ateşimin gölgesinde, Neruda

These lines are imbued with a powerful emotional state, as the poet portrays himself as a "giant beneath the earth." This image reflects an inner struggle between power (symbolized by the giant) and confinement (being buried beneath the earth). Although the "giant" embodies strength and potential, being "beneath the earth" signifies the inability to manifest this power. Here, the giant represents a human being who possesses the energy of life but is spiritually buried due to the absence of love and distance from divine mercy. Through this expression, the poet cries out for inner awakening and salvation. In this passage, he employs the rhetorical device of repetition through the repeated use of the phrase "bir su ver" ("give me water").

The following line — "okunu çek bağrımdan; yandı cânım, bir su ver" ("Draw your arrow from my chest; my soul is burning — give me water") — depicts the arrow of love that has pierced the lover's heart. This "arrow" represents the sweet yet painful effect of love. The arrow is a frequently used motif in classical literature, symbolizing love that penetrates the heart and the suffering it causes. The poet expresses this suffering not as physical pain, but as a spiritual and emotional "burning." Through the phrase "yandı cânım," the burning and anguish of the heart are conveyed. By saying "bir su ver," the poet openly expresses his need for mercy, consolation, love, and divine compassion. Here, water functions not merely as a means of physical survival, but as a source of spiritual revival and purification. The line "ölü bir tenden bile perişânım"

reveals the poet's inner state in a deeply dramatic tone. By stating that his condition is worse than that of a lifeless body, he portrays himself as a being who, although physically alive, is spiritually dead and ruined. The final line — "ağlıyor ateşimin gölgesinde, Neruda" — adds an artistic and philosophical dimension to the poem. The mention of Pablo Neruda, the famous twentieth-century Chilean poet, is particularly significant. Neruda's works often express themes of love, suffering, political protest, and human struggle. By stating that even Neruda weeps in the shadow of his "fire," the poet intensifies the depth of his own suffering through powerful hyperbole. This can be interpreted not only as an expression of personal anguish, but also as an attempt to universalize it. The poem "Su İsteyişime" is one of Gench's works in which Sufi themes and symbolic expressions are skillfully presented.

DISCUSSION

In Nurullah Gench's poetry, the spirit of great Sufi poets such as Ahmad Yassawi, Yunus Emre, and Jalaluddin Rumi can be felt. Like them, he aims to cultivate the soul by expressing inner suffering and reflections through words. In this respect, his poetry provides the reader not only with aesthetic pleasure but also with spiritual nourishment and a sense of inner awakening. However, what distinguishes Gench from his predecessors is his capacity to speak simultaneously to two cultural worlds — the classical Islamic East and the modern West. His reference to Pablo Neruda alongside traditional Sufi imagery signals a poet who is deeply rooted in his own tradition yet fully aware of the universal dimensions of human suffering and longing.

The analysis of "Su İsteyişime" demonstrates that Gench does not merely reproduce classical Sufi motifs, but transforms them into living poetic experience. Water, fire, night, and the arrow of love are not decorative elements borrowed from the divan tradition — they are reactivated as carriers of contemporary spiritual meaning. In this sense, Gench's approach aligns closely with Eliot's understanding of tradition (as cited in Tepebaşı, 2023): not imitation, but living inheritance and creative renewal.

Furthermore, the poem reveals that Gench's Sufism is not abstract or theological, but deeply personal and experiential. The recurring cry of "bir su ver" is at once a lover's plea, a mystic's supplication, and a universal human longing for divine mercy. This multilayered quality is precisely what gives his poetry its enduring resonance and places it within the broader continuum of world mystical literature.

Nurullah Gench's poetry thus represents the modern artistic expression of Sufi ideas — reviving the ancient

philosophy of Sufism in the spirit of modern literature, calling the reader to reflection, and harmonizing Sufi concepts with poetic mastery through expressive language and symbolism, providing spiritual nourishment to the human soul.

CONCLUSION

Nurullah Gench occupies a distinct place in modern Turkish poetry as a poet who revitalizes Sufi tradition with a new spirit. In his poems, Sufi concepts such as divine love, fanā, and spiritual journey are expressed in harmony with the experiences of modern individuals. Through symbolic images such as water, fire, and night, the poet vividly portrays the human need for God and the process of spiritual searching. His engagement not only with classical Sufi tradition but also with Western literature demonstrates the breadth of his poetic vision. In this respect, the works of Nurullah Gench can be regarded as a unique phenomenon that continues, in a contemporary spirit, the Sufi poetic tradition initiated by Ahmad Yassawi, Yunus Emre, and Rumi, providing readers with both aesthetic pleasure and spiritual nourishment.

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