



Article

The Theme of The Nafs in Mystical Literature: Interpretations and Commentaries

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Abstract: This article examines the interpretations and commentaries of the concept of the nafs in mystical literature, taking as its basis the works of Abu Abdurahmon Sulamiy, Ibn Sina, Al-Qushayri, and Ali Hujwiri. The nafs is a central category that expresses the inner world of the human being, spiritual desires, and moral struggle, and in Eastern mystical thought it holds significance not only from an ethical perspective but also in philosophical and Sufi terms. The methodology of the article is based on the methods of historical-comparative analysis, hermeneutic interpretation, textual studies, and conceptual analysis. The results of the study demonstrate that the concept of the nafs appears in various forms of spiritual maladies, as a philosophical-psychological concept, and in the works of and as the central element of mystical spiritual wayfaring (suluk). Thus, the theme of the nafs has provided a comprehensive theoretical and practical foundation in Sufi literature for explaining the spiritual and moral perfection of the human being. The findings of this research make it possible to study Eastern mystical literature and Sufi thought more deeply, as well as to illuminate the concept of the nafs on a scholarly basis in contemporary spiritual and ethical studies.

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1. Introduction

Mystical literature in Eastern thought illuminates some of the most important themes related to the inner world of the human being and spiritual experiences. Within this framework, the concept of the nafs holds central significance in the process of self-awareness and the striving for spiritual and moral perfection. The concept of the nafs is present in the Qur'an and in hadith sources, and within Sufi thought a tradition has developed of interpreting it as the inner enemy of the human being, as sensual and heedless inclinations, and as a factor that distances the heart from the Truth. In Sufi literature, the theme of the nafs is not merely an ethical issue, but also a complex category from philosophical and mystical perspectives. The aim of this article is to determine the historical formation of the concept of the nafs in mystical literature, to identify its philosophical and Sufi content, and, on the basis of the works of Abu Abdurahmon Sulamiy, Ibn Sina, Al-Qushayri, and Ali Hujwiri, to analyze the interconnections and differences in their views [1].

This study makes it possible to illuminate the theme of the nafs more deeply and to interpret it from a modern scholarly perspective. The article also demonstrates the central place of the concept of the nafs in mystical literature, emphasizing its significance in the formation of spiritual and moral education and the concept of the perfect human being. By integrating Sufi and philosophical sources, the findings of the research provide a comprehensive analysis of the theme of the nafs [2].

Among ordinary people, the word nafs has been used in various meanings, and at times these meanings have reflected mutually contradictory senses. For example, one group understood the nafs as the soul, another group interpreted it as benevolence and sincerity, while yet another community understood it in the sense of the body or blood. The views of the Sufis, however, do not resemble any of these interpretations [3].

According to their general point of view, the nafs is the foundation of all evil and the source of sins. According to the conclusion of one group among the أهل of Sufism, the nafs is the nurse of sins, while according to another group's view, it is the cause of such evil traits as pride, envy, anger, and hostility. If sins are purified through repentance, evil moral qualities are eliminated through the disciplining of the nafs, that is, through spiritual exercise (riyāḍa) [4].

Struggling against the nafs is the beginning of all acts of worship and the perfection of all devotion. For the servant, there is no safer path than this toward the Truth. In this sense, the wise saying of our Sufi scholars, "Man 'arafa nafsahu faqad 'arafa rabbahu" ("Whoever knows his nafs knows his Lord"), has become the foundation of the Sufis' views regarding the nafs [5].

2. Materials and Methods

In this study, several scholarly methods were employed to determine the historical and Sufi interpretations of the concept of the nafs:

Historical-Comparative Method: The views of the thinkers (Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami, Avicenna, Al-Qushayri, Ali Hujwiri) were compared within the historical context of their works and the framework of their philosophical thought. This method made it possible to identify the stages of formation of the concept of the nafs, as well as the interconnections and differences between their views.

Hermeneutic Analysis: The hermeneutic method was applied to understand and interpret the symbolic and spiritual content in the texts. This allowed for an in-depth study of the artistic and Sufi interpretations of the concept of the nafs [6].

Textual Analysis Method: The terminology and concepts in classical works were analyzed. In particular, Sufi terms such as nafs, qalb (heart), and ruh (soul) used in the works of Abu Abdurahmon Sulamiy, Ibn Sina, Al-Qushayri, and Ali Hujwiri, were thoroughly interpreted, and their contextual significance was clarified.

Conceptual Analysis: The philosophical, ethical, and Sufi aspects of the concept of the nafs were studied at a conceptual level. This method allowed for a systematic illumination of the role of the nafs in human spirituality and moral perfection [7].

Criteria for Source Selection

The primary sources for this study include: Abu Abdurahmon Sulamiy, Ibn Sina, Al-Qushayri, and Ali Hujwiri,

Abu Abdurahmon Sulamiy : "Measures for the Training of the Nafs"

Ibn Sina : "Kitab al-Shifa" and other philosophical works

Al-Qushayri : "Risala al-Qushayriya"

Ali Hujwiri : "Kashf al-Mahjub"

3. Results

Sufism developed a distinctive doctrine aimed at understanding, recognizing, and overcoming the nafs [8]. The issue of training the nafs, one of the important directions of mystical knowledge, occupies a special place in the works of the early Sufis. In this regard, **Abu Abdurahmon Sulamiy (937–1021)** and his work “Measures for the Training of the Nafs” are recognized as key sources. This work describes the essence of the nafs, its types, methods of struggling with it, and the measures to address it, illustrated with examples from the chapters of the Qur’an and hadiths [9].

Abu Abdurahmon Sulamiy first explains the reason for writing this book. According to him, one of the shaykhs instructed Sulami to record the defects and maladies of the nafs [10]. Through this instruction, a comprehensive collection of knowledge about the nafs emerged. In the book’s section titled “The Steps of the Nafs”, he provides information about the three types of nafs also mentioned in the Qur’an: “Know that the nafs is divided into three: nafs al-muṭma’inna, nafs al-lawwāma, and nafs al-’ammāra” [11]. Sulamiy presents these three types and supports his discussion with examples from the Qur’an and hadiths.

What distinguishes this work from other books on the nafs is that it presents the training of the nafs step by step [12]. That is, rather than focusing on the ailments themselves, it emphasizes methods of remedy and provides practical measures for each defect. This feature allows the book to stand out from other Sufi treatises [13]. While many books present the nafs as a general concept, Sulamiy identifies its specific maladies and prescribes a separate method of training for each. Below, it is necessary to enumerate these specific defects one by one:

1. Thinking “I have attained salvation”;
2. Seeking comfort through tears;
3. Relying on other people;
4. Laziness in worship;
5. Actions performed without spiritual awareness;
6. Thinking “I have done good deeds”;
7. Forgetting the afterlife;
8. Rejecting the Truth;
9. Fears and obsessive doubts (waswās);
10. Always seeing the faults of others;
11. Indifference or negligence;
12. Arrogance or self-conceit;
13. Failing to organize one’s inner world;
14. Expecting reward for good deeds;
15. Worship performed without spiritual delight;
16. Idleness;
17. Considering oneself superior to everyone;
18. Excessive talking;
19. Going to extremes in praise or criticism;
20. Disliking what Allah commands;
21. Chasing excessive desires;
22. Attachment to the worldly life;
23. Ostentation (riyā) in worship;
24. Greed;

25. Avarice;
26. Ignorance;
27. Self-pity;
28. Revenge, hostility, and anger;
29. Beautifying one's outward appearance excessively;
30. Worrying about sustenance;
31. Committing many sins;
32. Always wanting to be noticed.
33. Chasing after joy and pleasure;
34. Worldly friendships;
35. Boasting about being pious;
36. Indulging in lust;
37. Being cautious of Satan's traps;
38. Pretending to be religious;
39. Wasting opportunities;
40. Stopping spiritual growth;
41. Considering oneself superior to everyone;
42. Negligence and laziness;
43. Outward showiness;
44. Wasting time;
45. Rebellion and anger;
46. Lying;
47. Stinginess;
48. Unlimited desires;
49. Loving praise;
50. Greed for wealth;
51. Envy;
52. Persisting in sins;
53. Laziness in worship;
54. Coveting property;
55. Befriending those who disregard religion;
56. Heedlessness;
57. Improper reliance (tawakkul);
58. Unsupported arguments instead of knowledge;
59. Expecting gratitude or acknowledgment;
60. Considering oneself superior;
61. Rudeness;
62. Ingratitude;
63. Failing to avoid doubtful matters;
64. Not recognizing one's own mistakes;
65. Being overly absorbed in miracles (karamat).

Abu Abdurahmon Sulamiy identifies 65 maladies of the nafs and emphasizes that the remedies for them must first be sought within one's own inner "self." He then explains that by referring to examples from the Qur'an and the Hadith, one can be freed from these

evil traits. In particular, he states that “failing to recognize one’s own mistakes” is also a disease of the nafs, and the remedy is sincere repentance and seeking forgiveness from Allah. Repentance must be heartfelt so that the nafs does not repeat the same mistake [14].

Sulamiy supports his views by citing the words of Abu Usman and emphasizes the following: “Each time you commit a new sin, renew your repentance. Know that the Creator who made you from clay and insignificant water is aware. Humans are weak, make mistakes, remain heedless, and forget. The best course is to return to righteous deeds, seek forgiveness, feel remorse, and keep a broken heart!” [Sulamiy, 2024:120]. In the conclusion of the work, Sulamiy notes that he has highlighted some of the nafs’s maladies, and wise individuals, by observing these, will be able to understand the remaining defects on their own.

In Sulami’s works, the concept of the nafs is defined in terms of maladies, whereas in the writings of the physician (**Abu Ali ibn Sina, 980–1037**), it is expressed through perception, reasoning, and will. Known worldwide as “Avicenna,” Abu Ali ibn Sina, the author of *The Canon of Medicine*, places special importance on the topic of the nafs in his scholarly legacy. He produced significant works not only in medicine but also in philosophy, logic, and literature.

Although his work *Kitab al-Shifa* mainly discusses plants and animals, its sixth section, *Kitab al-Nafs*, is dedicated to the nafs. Influenced by Aristotle’s *De Anima*, Ibn Sina presents his ideas about the nafs in this book. In particular, he identifies three types of the nafs:

1. Vegetative (Nabati) Nafs – the nafs characteristic of plants;
2. Animal (Haywani) Nafs – the nafs characteristic of animals;
3. Human or Rational (‘Aqli) Nafs – the nafs specific to humans, considered the highest level [15].

In his work *An-Najot*, Ibn Sina explains that the purification of the nafs is the means of approaching the Divine Truth. He emphasizes that the nafs cannot be disciplined through force but can be guided to the right path through knowledge and wisdom. The scope of Ibn Sina’s scholarship is so vast that he produced works across various subjects and disciplines. Notably, in addition to prose works, he also composed poetic verses. His medical and philosophical poetry was particularly well-known during his time:

*O, nafs, that immerses itself in air and desires,
Die quickly, for your only protector is yourself.
Do not be deceived by the world, by wealth and pleasures,
Whoever takes an enemy for a friend will be captured...* [Ibn Sina, 1980:6]

The above quatrain belongs to Ibn Sina’s ethical and moral poetic legacy, in which the negative influence of the nafs on the human spiritual realm is artistically revealed. In the first verse, the state of the nafs is expressed through the word “immersed” (*gharq*), indicating total absorption. In the first and second lines, the nafs is interpreted not as a simple desire but as a force that completely dominates the human being. In the third line, the poet enumerates worldly blessings to show how they contribute to spiritual downfall. In the final line, the terms “friend” and “enemy” create an artistic contrast, emphasizing that the nafs, though appearing as a friend, is worse than an enemy. In short, resisting the deceptions of the nafs and avoiding attachment to wealth and worldly possessions is one of the main themes of the quatrain.

Ibn Sina also made significant contributions to prose literature. His famous story “Salomon and Ibsol” provides a clear example of this. In the work, Ibsol is described as follows: “God granted him (Ibsol) beauty and enchanting appearance. When the boy reached maturity, Satan turned his mother’s eyes toward him, and also attached her heart

to him. The wife became infatuated with him and could not contain her feelings" [Ibn Sina, 1973:54].

As Ibsol begins to act according to the impulses of the nafs and Satan, his mother tries to attract him through various schemes. However, the author portrays Ibsol as possessing such a strong will that he is able to resist every trick and deception. Ibsol, not wishing to put his elder brother — who raised him in the father's place — into difficulty, turns his attention to conquering other lands instead.

To struggle against the nafs, he places himself on the battlefield. In this work, Ibn Sina depicts the interaction and conflict between the nafs and reason ('aql). The symbol of the nafs in the story is Ibsol's mother, while the possessor of strong reason is Ibsol himself. At the end of the story, the following words are conveyed on behalf of Allah: "Whichever of our friends we test in our presence according to the commands, if they remain patient, they will be duly rewarded" [Ibn Sina, 1973:55]. Through a hero possessing strong patience and willpower, Abu Ali ibn Sina demonstrates how to overcome the nafs. Ibsol is one such person. In short, in Ibn Sina's literary works, the nafs appears in various genres and takes on multiple forms.

In the works of Al - Qushayri (986–1072), a disciple of Abu Abdurahmon Sulamiy and a prominent Sufi scholar, the topic of the nafs appears in various forms, distinguishing his ideas from those of other authors. His famous work, *Risala al-Qushayriya*, contains Sufi perspectives and religious knowledge. The work is divided into three parts, in which Qushayri's philosophical reflections, religious knowledge, and theoretical views are thoroughly presented. In the introduction and the first part, titled *The Ranks of the Shaykhs*, the scholar provides information about the early Sufi masters and saints. The book contains the lives and creative activities of over 80 Sufi shaykhs, highlighting their views on Sufism and the nafs. Observations not found in the works of other authors are gathered in this book: "The best of actions is to act contrary to what the nafs desires" [Qushayri, 1978:70].

A key feature of *Risala al-Qushayriya* is that Qushayri presents Sufism not merely as a concept of spiritual experience, but as a systematic scientific-theoretical framework. The book contains unique aspects not found in other sources. These include:

1. Biographies and wisdom of famous Sufi masters;
2. Explanations of Sufi terminology (nafs, qalb, ruh, maqam, hal);
3. The system of spiritual stations (maqamat) and states (ahwal);
4. Methods for the training of the nafs;
5. Grounding Sufism in the Qur'an and Hadith.

Qushayri's *Risala* also shares certain similarities with the works of other authors. In particular, some sections of the work closely resemble *Kashf al-Mahjub*. For example, both works explain the fundamental concepts of Sufism, such as nafs, qalb (heart), ruh (spirit), ma'rifa (gnosis), maqam (spiritual station), and hal (spiritual state). Certain parts of the book are also similar to Sulami's *Measures for the Training of the Nafs*. Specifically, both works discuss the manifestations of the nafs, such as lust, anger, pride, and envy. What distinguishes Qushayri from other Sufi scholars, however, is that he explains the nafs as a theoretical and spiritual system, analyzing its ethical, mystical, and spiritual dimensions.

In the second section, titled "Sufi Terms and Concepts", Qushayri explains 28 key concepts of Sufism. When discussing the terms *fana* and *baqa*, he defines *fana* as the annihilation of negative traits, while *baqa* refers to the human attainment of virtues and perpetual existence [Qushayri, 1978:142].

In this same section, he explains that those who are annihilated from the nafs achieve eternity through repentance; those who are freed from worldly desires attain eternity through asceticism; and those who are completely annihilated from the nafs attain eternal existence through God's will [Qushayri, 1978:143]. In the second section of the book,

Qushayri clearly presents his views on the nafs. In particular, he defines the nafs and the ruh, stating that the nafs is the center of bad habits, while the ruh is the center of good habits. When discussing the concept of repentance (tawba), he identifies three meanings: first, feeling remorse; second, firmly resolving not to repeat what Allah has forbidden; and third, striving to correct past mistakes [Qushayri, 1978:175]. The second section of the Risala also includes a chapter on struggle (mujahada). In this chapter, evidence-based guidance on how to combat the nafs is presented. To overcome the nafs and reach the level of the righteous, Qushayri states that every person must follow six stages:

The six stages are:

1. Close the door of comfort and open the door of hardship;
2. Close the door of pride and open the door of humility;
3. Close the door of ease and tranquility and open the door of effort and labor;
4. Close the door of sleep and open the door of wakefulness;
5. Close the door of hope and open the door of poverty;
6. Close the door of fame-seeking and open the door of preparation for death.

Following this chapter, the Risala includes a section titled "Aspects of the Nafs Whose Vices Are Difficult to Perceive" [Qushayri, 1978:181], which discusses the hidden sins of the nafs. Qushayri addresses ostentation (riya) and pride (kibr), stating that the belief of being righteous is the worst hidden manifestation of the nafs. He uses worship (ibadat) as an example, emphasizing that prayers should be performed to purify the heart, not to show off to others. Qushayri provides evidence that the inability to recognize one's own faults leads to the heart becoming blind. In summary, in Qushayri's work, the nafs is clearly shown as the source of the worst human vices.

One of the major representatives of 11th-century Sufi literature, **Hujwiri (approx. 1009–1072/1077)**, gives the concept of nafs special importance, as it manifests in several forms in his work. He interprets the nafs not only as human desires and wishes but also as the main obstacle on the path of perfection. First, he touches upon the origin of the word "nafs," mentioning that it also has meanings such as "soul," "courage," "body," and "blood." Later, he presents the concept of nafs in his work with various semantic facets. Hujwiri describes the nafs as the soul itself. In this regard, the nafs is depicted as a force opposing the soul's ascent towards divine truth. For instance, while discussing spiritual poverty, Hujwiri emphasizes that true poverty is not about worldly riches but about renouncing the desires of the nafs [Hujwiri, 2004:24]. Another important manifestation of the nafs in the work is excessive pride and attachment to the self. Through behaviors such as considering oneself superior to others, hypocrisy, and pride in one's deeds, the characteristics of the nafs become even clearer [Hujwiri, 2004:21]. Hujwiri states that one can draw closer to God by disciplining and purifying the nafs. He differentiates between the terms knowledge (ilm) and gnosis (ma'rifat). According to him, ordinary knowledge can be acquired through intellect, but gnosis is attained through the purity of the heart and good deeds. In this process, the nafs wraps the heart with a "veil." The term "veil" directly relates to the title of the work. That is, the greatest barrier between the human and the Divine in the work is often the nafs itself.

In the work "Kashf al-Mahjub", it is stated that a person must first know oneself and awaken the inner "self." The reason is that a person who knows oneself will recognize God. In the work, the following statements are attributed to our Prophet: "He who knows himself knows his Lord." That is, by acknowledging oneself as transient, a person recognizes God as eternal; by acknowledging oneself as submissive, one recognizes God as All-Powerful; by acknowledging oneself as a servant, one recognizes God as Master. Therefore, a person who does not know oneself is protected from knowing everything [Hujwiri, 2004:194].

4. Discussion

The analyses show that the concept of nafs in mystical literature has developed as a complex spiritual-philosophical category. In Sulamiy, the nafs appears as a means of moral purification and spiritual discipline, while in Ibn Sina, it acquires a philosophical-psychological meaning. Qushayri and Hujwiri, on the other hand, present the nafs as a central concept on the path of mystical practice and gnosis. The results also show that each thinker interpreted the methods of restraining and purifying the nafs from their own perspective. These views were later developed in Eastern mystical literature, including the works of Alisher Navoiy and Jalal al-Din Rumi, through artistic symbols. The study also creates a theoretical foundation that unites the philosophical, moral, and Sufi layers of the nafs theme and can be applied in modern spiritual and ethical research.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study show that in mystical literature, the theme of nafs manifests as an important theoretical and artistic category in illuminating human spiritual perfection, inner purification, and the ideal human being. In Sufi sources, the nafs is interpreted as one of the most complex layers of the human psyche, and its various forms, levels, and effects on human life are thoroughly analyzed. Based on the analyses, it becomes clear that representatives of mystical thought evaluate the nafs not only as a negative concept but also as an inner force that can be purified through discipline and spiritual journey. This process is a key factor in freeing a person from carnal desires, worldly lusts, pride, envy, heedlessness, and selfishness, thereby achieving spiritual maturity. In particular, the issue of struggling with the nafs is highlighted in Sufi literature as one of the most important stages in understanding oneself and drawing closer to the Divine.

Moreover, the mystical sources studied within the scope of this topic have shown that, alongside certain similarities in the interpretation of the concept of nafs, the authors also have individual perspectives. While some thinkers interpreted the nafs as a moral and spiritual obstacle, others understood it as a means of inner discipline and a test leading a person to perfection. This further highlights the depth of content and the spiritual-philosophical richness of mystical literature.

In conclusion, it can be said that in mystical literature, the theme of nafs is one of the central issues of artistic and philosophical thought, and its interpretations and commentaries serve as an important theoretical source in illuminating the human psyche, spiritual perfection, and the idea of the ideal human being.

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