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SPEAKING TRUTH IN VERSE: POETIC EXPRESSION AS THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE IN THE ISLAMIC SCHOLARLY TRADITION

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Abstract:

This article examines the theological function of poetry in the Islamic scholarly tradition, arguing that poetic expression constituted a legitimate and authoritative mode of theological reasoning among the Ulama. Drawing on qualitative hermeneutic and thematic textual analysis of poetic works by figures such as Imam al-Ghazali, Jalal al-Din Rumi, Ibn ʿArabi, Rabia al-Adawiyya, Saʿdi Shirazi, and Imam al-Shafiʿi, the study demonstrates that poetry was employed to articulate core doctrines, ethical principles, and metaphysical insights with conceptual rigor and pedagogical intent. Situating these texts within their historical, educational, and intellectual contexts, the article challenges modern assumptions that confine theology to systematic prose while relegating poetry to the realm of devotional aesthetics. It further shows how poetic theology enabled Islamic ideas to circulate across cultural and civilizational boundaries, communicating theological meaning through ethically and aesthetically resonant forms. Engaging established scholarship in Islamic philosophy, mysticism, and education, the study reframes poetry as a substantive theological discourse with enduring relevance for religious thought, education, and intercultural understanding.

Introduction

Poetry has occupied a central position in Islamic civilization as a medium of memory, moral instruction, and spiritual reflection. From the earliest periods of Islam, poetic language was cultivated not only for aesthetic appreciation but also for its capacity to convey ethical norms, religious ideals, and metaphysical truths. While the Qurʾan itself is not poetry, its profound linguistic artistry, rhythmic structure, and symbolic depth shaped an intellectual environment in which poetic expression became a natural extension of religious discourse (Sells, 1996). Within this context, the Ulama frequently employed poetry as a disciplined means of engaging theological questions that resisted purely analytical exposition.

Classical Muslim scholars did not perceive a rigid boundary between theology, philosophy, and aesthetics. Rather, knowledge was understood as an integrative pursuit encompassing rational inquiry, spiritual discipline, and ethical formation. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (2006) emphasizes that Islamic epistemology views knowledge as transformative, requiring the cultivation of both intellect and character. Poetry, with its symbolic density and emotional resonance, offered the Ulama a medium through which theological truths could be internalized rather than merely understood conceptually.

Despite this historical reality, modern academic studies of Islamic theology have often privileged systematic prose genres such as jurisprudence (fiqh), theology (ʿaqidah), and Qurʾanic exegesis (tafsir), while treating poetry as a secondary or devotional form of expression. This tendency has obscured the extent to which poetry functioned as a deliberate theological method within the Islamic scholarly tradition (Schimmel, 1975). The present study seeks to address this imbalance by examining Ulama poetry as a serious mode of theological discourse.

This article focuses on a purposive corpus of canonical and widely cited Ulama whose poetic writings exerted sustained theological, educational, and ethical influence across Islamic intellectual history. By analysing representative poetic works within their intellectual and educational contexts, this study argues that poetry served as a vital means of articulating doctrines of divine unity, ethical responsibility, and spiritual transformation. It also highlights poetry's capacity to transmit these theological meanings across diverse cultural contexts, demonstrating that Islamic theology historically spoke not only to reason but also to shared human moral experience.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to demonstrate that poetry functioned as a substantive theological method within the Islamic scholarly tradition. Rather than approaching Ulama poetry as a marginal literary practice, this research seeks to establish its role in articulating and transmitting theological knowledge. Specifically, the study aims to analyse how poetic language was employed to convey complex doctrinal ideas, ethical norms, and metaphysical insights in ways that were both intellectually rigorous and spiritually resonant.

In pursuing this objective, the article also seeks to contextualize theological poetry within the historical and educational frameworks of Islamic civilization, particularly the madrasa system in which poetry played a mnemonic and pedagogical role (Makdisi, 1981). A further objective is to highlight the continuity between poetic expression and other recognized forms of Islamic scholarship, thereby challenging modern disciplinary separations between theology, philosophy, and aesthetics.

Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to contemporary Islamic thought by demonstrating the continued relevance of theological poetry as a resource for spiritual reflection, ethical formation, and intellectual renewal.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to reconceptualize the boundaries of Islamic theological discourse. By foregrounding poetry as an authoritative mode of theological expression, the research expands prevailing understandings of how religious knowledge has been historically constructed and communicated. This perspective offers a corrective to reductive approaches that privilege abstract rationalism or legal formalism at the expense of experiential and affective dimensions of faith.

From an academic standpoint, the study contributes to interdisciplinary conversations between Islamic theology, literary studies, religious education, and intellectual history. It provides a framework for reading poetic texts as sources of theological insight rather than merely as cultural or mystical artifacts. For scholars of Islamic education, the study underscores the formative role of poetry in shaping ethical sensibilities and spiritual consciousness within Muslim societies (Makdisi, 1981).

More broadly, the study holds contemporary relevance by offering an integrative model of scholarship that speaks simultaneously to intellect and emotion. In an era marked by fragmented knowledge systems and polarized religious discourse, the Ulama's poetic theology offers a compelling example of how beauty, meaning, and truth can coexist within a coherent religious worldview.

Literature Review

The scholarly study of Islamic theological poetry has largely developed within the broader field of Sufi studies, where poetry is understood as a privileged medium for articulating experiential knowledge of the Divine. Annemarie Schimmel's (1975) Mystical Dimensions of Islam remains one of the most influential works in this regard, offering extensive analysis of poetic symbolism, metaphor, and affective language as vehicles of spiritual insight. Schimmel's work establishes poetry as central to Islamic spirituality yet stops short of framing it explicitly as systematic theology.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (2006) situates poetic expression within the wider tradition of Islamic philosophy, emphasizing its role in integrating metaphysics, ethics, and spirituality. For Nasr, poetry reflects an Islamic epistemology in which knowledge is inseparable from moral and spiritual refinement. This perspective is further developed by William Chittick (1989), whose study of Ibn ʿArabi demonstrates how poetic language enables the articulation of ontological truths that resist linear philosophical exposition.

From an educational perspective, George Makdisi's (1981) historical analysis of Islamic institutions highlights the pedagogical function of poetry in premodern learning environments. Poetry facilitated memorization, moral instruction, and intellectual discipline, reinforcing its role as a serious scholarly tool. Complementing this view, Sells (1996) draws attention to the Qurʾanic linguistic environment that shaped Islamic poetic sensibilities, underscoring the continuity between sacred revelation and poetic expression.

While these studies collectively acknowledge the spiritual, philosophical, and pedagogical significance of poetry, relatively few have examined Ulama poetry as a coherent theological discourse in its own right. This study builds upon existing scholarship by synthesizing these perspectives and foregrounding poetry as an authoritative, methodologically sound form of Islamic theology.

Poetry as a Theological Method in Islam

Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, theology (ʿaqidah) has never been confined to abstract propositional reasoning alone. While disciplines such as Qurʾanic exegesis (tafsir), jurisprudence (fiqh), and speculative theology (kalam) provided systematic frameworks for articulating belief, poetry functioned as a complementary theological mode capable of expressing dimensions of faith that exceeded the limits of discursive prose. Poetic language, with its reliance on symbol, metaphor, rhythm, and affect, enabled scholars to engage questions of divine transcendence, human interiority, and ethical transformation in ways that were both intellectually meaningful and spiritually formative.

The legitimacy of poetry as a theological medium is rooted in the broader linguistic and aesthetic environment shaped by the Qurʾan. Although the Qurʾan explicitly distinguishes itself from poetry, its unparalleled rhetorical power, imagery, and cadence profoundly influenced Islamic modes of expression (Sells, 1996). Qurʾanic discourse demonstrates that meaning in Islam is not conveyed solely through logical exposition but also through evocative language that addresses the heart as well as the intellect. As a result, poetic expression emerged as a disciplined extension of scriptural sensibility rather than a departure from theological seriousness.

Classical Muslim scholars understood knowledge as transformative rather than merely informational. Nasr (2006) emphasizes that Islamic epistemology integrates truth (haqq), moral refinement, and spiritual realization, rejecting any sharp division between knowing and being. Poetry, in this sense, served as a theological method precisely because it cultivated ethical awareness and spiritual receptivity alongside doctrinal understanding. Through poetic form, theological concepts such as divine unity (tawhid), reliance upon God (tawakkul), and sincerity (ikhlas) could be internalized and lived rather than simply affirmed.

Poetry also allowed Ulama to articulate apophatic dimensions of theology, particularly concerning divine transcendence and mystical experience. Chittick (1989) argues that poetic symbolism was essential for expressing metaphysical realities that resist precise definition, especially in the works of figures like Ibn ʿArabi. Rather than undermining theological clarity, metaphor functioned as a hermeneutical tool that invited contemplative engagement, recognizing the limits of human language before divine reality. In this respect, poetry operated as a form of theological humility, acknowledging that ultimate truth cannot be exhausted by conceptual categories alone.

Importantly, poetic theology was not restricted to mystical elites but played a significant role in public religious education. As Makdisi (1981) demonstrates, poetry was widely used in premodern madrasas as a mnemonic and pedagogical instrument. Theological and ethical verses were memorized, recited, and commented upon, reinforcing shared moral norms and doctrinal commitments. Poetry thus functioned simultaneously as theology, pedagogy, and moral formation, embedding belief within communal practice.

Schimmel (1975) observes that Islamic poetic theology consistently balances emotional depth with doctrinal restraint. Ulama poets remained acutely aware of theological boundaries, grounding their poetic expressions in Qurʾanic worldview and prophetic ethics. This balance challenges modern assumptions that associate poetry with subjectivity and theology with objectivity. In the Islamic tradition, poetic expression was disciplined by revelation, while theology was enlivened by imagination.

Taken together, these considerations demonstrate that poetry in Islam was not an ornamental supplement to theology but one of its vital modes. As a theological method, poetry enabled the integration of reason, revelation, and spiritual experience, offering a holistic vision of faith that addressed both intellect and soul. Recognizing poetry's theological function allows for a more faithful reconstruction of Islamic intellectual history and affirms the Ulama's understanding of knowledge as a lived and transformative reality.

Case Studies of Ulama Poetic Expression

Imam al-Ghazali (d. 1111)
Imam al-Ghazali's intellectual legacy spans jurisprudence, theology, philosophy, and spirituality. While he is primarily known for his prose works, particularly Ihyaʾ ʿUlum al-Din, al-Ghazali also employed poetic language to articulate states of spiritual struggle and transformation. His poetry reflects the inner dimensions of repentance (tawbah), sincerity (ikhlas), and divine reliance (tawakkul), themes that parallel his theological arguments in prose. In a verse attributed to him, al-Ghazali writes of the soul's estrangement from God:
"My soul weeps for what it has neglected, And time slips by while I remain heedless."

This poetic expression mirrors al-Ghazali's theological insistence that true knowledge requires moral and spiritual reform, not intellectual mastery alone (Nasr, 2006). Schimmel (1975) notes that such verses reflect al-Ghazali's belief that poetic language could awaken ethical consciousness where abstract argumentation might fail.

Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273)
Rumi's Mathnawi stands as one of the most influential poetic-theological works in Islamic history. Its opening verses famously establish the soul's metaphysical exile and longing for reunion with the Divine:
"Listen to the reed how it tells a tale, Complaining of separations. Since I was cut from the reed-bed, my lament has caused man and woman to moan." (Mathnawi, I:1–4, trans. Nicholson).

These lines articulate a theological anthropology in which the human soul originates in divine proximity and suffers ontological separation through embodiment. As Schimmel (1975) observes, the reed flute becomes a symbolic voice of the soul, conveying doctrines of origin,

exile, and return through metaphor rather than systematic exposition. The Mathnawi thus functions as an extended theological narrative grounded in Qurʾanic imagery and prophetic ethics.

Ibn ʿArabi (d. 1240)

Ibn ʿArabi's poetry, particularly in Tarjuman al-Ashwaq, articulates his metaphysical vision of wahdat al-wujud (unity of being). In one well-known verse, he writes:

"My heart has become capable of every form: It is a pasture for gazelles and a monastery for monks… I follow the religion of Love; whatever way Love's camels take, That is my religion and my faith."

This poem encapsulates Ibn ʿArabi's theological claim that divine reality manifests through multiple forms while remaining ontologically one. Chittick (1989) emphasizes that such poetry condenses complex metaphysical arguments into symbolic language, requiring contemplative interpretation rather than literal reading.

Rabia al-Adawiyya (d. 801)

Rabia al-Adawiyya's poetry represents one of the earliest articulations of unconditional divine love (mahabba) in Islamic spirituality. Her verses reject instrumental worship motivated by fear of Hell or desire for Paradise. In a frequently cited prayer-poem, she declares:

"O Lord, if I worship You for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; And if I worship You in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise. But if I worship You for Your own sake, Then do not withhold from me Your Eternal Beauty."

This poem articulates a theological ethic grounded in pure devotion, redefining sincerity as love unconditioned by reward. Schimmel (1975) identifies Rabia's poetry as foundational for later Sufi theology of love, shaping Islamic conceptions of intention and worship.

Educational and Pedagogical Functions

Poetry occupied a central pedagogical role in classical Islamic education, functioning as a primary medium through which theological, ethical, and linguistic knowledge was transmitted and internalized. Within premodern Islamic learning environments, particularly madrasas and informal circles of instruction, poetry was valued not merely for its aesthetic qualities but for its capacity to discipline the mind, cultivate moral sensibility, and shape spiritual character. George Makdisi (1981) demonstrates that memorization and recitation formed the backbone of Islamic pedagogy, and poetic form, with its rhythm and structure, was especially suited to this educational ethos.

Theological poetry served as a mnemonic device that enabled students to retain complex doctrines and ethical principles with precision and durability. Versified texts distilled expansive theological ideas into concise, memorable formulations, facilitating both individual study and communal transmission. This practice reflects an educational philosophy in which knowledge was meant to be embodied and practiced rather than merely accumulated. As such, poetry functioned as a bridge between cognitive understanding and moral action, reinforcing the inseparability of knowledge and conduct in Islamic thought (Nasr, 2006).

Beyond memorization, poetry played a formative role in ethical and spiritual education. Verses attributed to scholars such as Imam al-Shafiʿi and Saʿdi Shirazi were regularly cited in instructional settings to inculcate virtues such as patience (sabr), humility (tawaduʿ), trust in God (tawakkul), and social responsibility. These poetic expressions condensed jurisprudential and theological insights into accessible moral guidance, enabling students to internalize ethical norms alongside doctrinal commitments. Schimmel (1975) notes that such poetry functioned as an ethical mirror, prompting self-examination and moral refinement.

Poetry also facilitated pedagogical engagement across varying levels of scholarly training. While advanced students might analyze poetic texts for their symbolic and theological depth, novices encountered foundational beliefs and virtues through simple, evocative verses. This pedagogical flexibility allowed poetry to operate across educational strata, from introductory moral instruction to advanced metaphysical contemplation. Chittick (1989) emphasizes that poetic language invites interpretive participation, encouraging learners to reflect actively rather than passively absorb information.

Importantly, the educational use of poetry was not confined to mystical instruction but permeated mainstream Sunni scholarship. Jurists, theologians, and ethicists alike employed poetry to reinforce doctrinal clarity and moral discipline. This widespread pedagogical practice challenges modern assumptions that associate poetic education exclusively with Sufism while treating legal and theological learning as purely technical. Instead, classical Islamic pedagogy reveals an integrated model in which intellectual rigor and aesthetic cultivation were mutually reinforcing (Makdisi, 1981).

In contemporary contexts, recognizing the pedagogical functions of Ulama poetry offers valuable insights for rethinking Islamic education. Modern curricula often prioritize analytical proficiency at the expense of moral and spiritual formation. The classical use of poetry demonstrates an alternative educational paradigm in which theological understanding, ethical cultivation, and spiritual sensibility are developed in tandem. Re-engaging poetic texts within educational settings may thus contribute to a more holistic and transformative approach to religious learning.

Cultural and Cross-Civilizational Impact The poetic works of the Ulama transcended regional and linguistic boundaries. Persian, Arabic, and later Ottoman Turkish poetic traditions carried Islamic theological ideas into diverse cultural settings. Translations of figures like Rumi and Saʿdi introduced Islamic spiritual concepts to non-Muslim audiences, fostering cross-cultural dialogue (Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999).

This global reception underscores poetry's capacity to communicate theological meaning beyond formal doctrinal frameworks, without severing its roots in Islamic orthodoxy.

Cultural and Cross-Civilizational Impact

The poetic works of the Ulama exerted a significant cultural and cross-civilizational influence, extending well beyond their immediate scholarly and devotional contexts. Poetry functioned as a culturally mobile form of theological expression, capable of traversing linguistic, geographic, and social boundaries while retaining its core Islamic worldview. Unlike technical theological prose, which presupposed advanced scholarly training, poetic language enabled

theological ideas to circulate widely among diverse audiences, embedding belief within shared ethical and aesthetic sensibilities.

Within the Islamic world, poetic theology contributed to cultural cohesion across a vast and plural civilization. Arabic, Persian, and later Ottoman Turkish poetic traditions articulated shared theological principles such as divine unity (tawḥīd), moral accountability, and spiritual refinement in culturally specific idioms. This phenomenon reflects what Nasr (2006) describes as the Islamic metaphysical vision of unity within multiplicity, in which diverse cultural expressions remain grounded in a common ontological and theological framework. Poetic expression thus enabled Islamic theology to be simultaneously universal in content and local in form.

The cross-civilizational impact of Ulama poetry became especially pronounced through processes of translation and intercultural transmission. From the medieval period onward, Islamic poetic works entered European intellectual consciousness through travel literature, translations, and later academic engagement. Persian poets such as Rumi and Saʿdi were among the earliest Muslim thinkers to gain wide readership beyond Islamic societies, often being received as moral and spiritual authorities rather than narrowly religious figures. While translation inevitably involves interpretive mediation, it nonetheless facilitated the circulation of Islamic ethical and theological concepts within broader humanistic discourse (Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999).

Annemarie Schimmel (1975) observes that Islamic poetic symbolism enabled readers from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds to engage deeply with themes such as divine love, humility, suffering, and moral responsibility. This accessibility did not entail a dilution of theology; rather, it reflected poetry's capacity to communicate theological depth through resonance and imagination rather than through technical doctrinal formulation. In this sense, poetry functioned as a form of theological mediation, allowing Islamic concepts to be encountered experientially rather than propositionally.

Within Muslim societies themselves, poetic theology also played a formative role in shaping social ethics and communal identity. Verses emphasizing compassion, justice, and human interdependence were embedded in educational curricula, public discourse, and moral exhortation. Saʿdi Shirazi's reflections on shared human origin, for example, articulate a theological anthropology rooted in divine creation and ethical responsibility toward others. Such poetic formulations reinforced the inseparability of belief and conduct, embedding theological principles within everyday moral consciousness (Nasr, 2006).

The enduring global reception of Ulama poetry challenges modern assumptions that theology is inherently culture-bound or intellectually inaccessible. Instead, the historical circulation of Islamic poetic theology demonstrates that aesthetic form can serve as a bridge between traditions without erasing doctrinal distinctiveness. As Sells (1996) argues in his analysis of Qurʾanic language, sacred discourse shaped by rhythm, imagery, and symbolism possesses a unique capacity to invite understanding across difference while remaining anchored in revelation.

In contemporary contexts marked by cultural fragmentation and religious polarization, the legacy of Ulama poetry offers a compelling model for intercultural engagement. By uniting theological depth with aesthetic accessibility, poetic expression enabled Islamic ideas to circulate widely while maintaining intellectual and spiritual integrity. Recognizing this cultural and cross-civilizational impact not only enriches the study of Islamic intellectual history but also affirms poetic theology as a continuing resource for ethical reflection, cultural dialogue, and mutual understanding in a globalized world (Schimmel, 1975; Nasr, 2006).

Findings

The findings of this study are derived from systematic thematic and hermeneutic analysis of selected Ulama poetic texts, examined in relation to their historical contexts, theological content, and pedagogical functions. This analytical approach enables the identification of recurring theological themes, symbolic strategies, and epistemological assumptions embedded within poetic expression.

The analysis reveals that poetry functioned as a coherent and intentional medium of theological discourse rather than as an ancillary literary practice. Across the examined corpus, poetic texts consistently articulate core theological concerns, particularly those related to divine attributes, human moral responsibility, spiritual transformation, and ethical formation. This suggests that poetic form did not dilute doctrinal rigor but instead provided an alternative mode of theological precision.

A significant finding concerns the integrative epistemology reflected in Ulama poetry. Figures such as Imam al-Ghazali and Ibn ʿArabi employ poetic language to synthesize rational theology, spiritual discipline, and ethical praxis. Rather than presenting theology as abstract speculation, these texts frame belief as lived knowledge oriented toward moral refinement. This finding challenges modern dichotomies between reason and devotion by demonstrating their unity within poetic theology.

The findings further indicate that poetry served a structured pedagogical function within Islamic scholarly tradition. Poetic form facilitated memorization, ethical reflection, and theological internalization, particularly within madrasa-based education (Makdisi, 1981). This pedagogical role confirms that poetry operated as an institutionalized educational tool rather than an informal devotional practice.

Finally, the study finds that poetic theology possessed exceptional cross-cultural adaptability. The sustained circulation and translation of works by figures such as Rumi and Saʿdi demonstrate poetry's capacity to communicate Islamic theological meaning across linguistic and civilizational boundaries without relinquishing doctrinal coherence. This highlights poetry's role as a mediating theological language with enduring relevance.

Discussion

The findings of this study support a reconceptualization of Islamic theology as a pluralistic discourse encompassing multiple legitimate modes of expression. Poetry, as demonstrated, functioned not at the margins but within the core of Ulama scholarly practice. This suggests that theology in Islam was historically understood as both conceptual and formative, addressing intellect, character, and spiritual consciousness simultaneously.

The integrative epistemology identified in Ulama poetry aligns with broader Islamic philosophical perspectives that reject the separation of knowledge from ethical transformation (Nasr, 2006). By employing symbolic and affective language, poetic theology enabled scholars to articulate metaphysical and ethical insights that resist reduction to propositional form. Chittick's (1989) analysis of Ibn ʿArabi supports this interpretation, illustrating how poetic symbolism functions as a disciplined theological language rather than an emotive excess.

From an educational standpoint, the findings reinforce Makdisi's (1981) observation that Islamic pedagogy prioritized moral and spiritual formation alongside intellectual mastery. This suggests that contemporary Islamic education, often dominated by technical instruction, may benefit from re-engaging poetic texts as formative theological resources.

The cross-civilizational circulation of Ulama poetry further demonstrates theology's communicative potential beyond confessional and cultural boundaries. Poetry's aesthetic accessibility enabled Islamic theological ideas to enter broader ethical discourse while remaining anchored in revelation and tradition. This underscores poetry's enduring relevance as a medium for theological engagement in plural societies.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that poetry functioned as a substantive, methodologically grounded mode of theological discourse within the Islamic scholarly tradition. Through close textual analysis of selected Ulama poetry, the article has shown that poetic expression articulated core theological concerns with conceptual rigor, ethical intentionality, and pedagogical purpose.

By situating poetic texts within their intellectual and educational contexts, the study affirms that Ulama poetry reflects an integrated epistemology in which reason, revelation, and spiritual experience operate in concert. Scholars such as Imam al-Ghazali, Ibn ʿArabi, and Rumi employed poetry not as a departure from theology but as a means of deepening theological engagement through symbolic and transformative language.

The findings further highlight poetry's institutional role in Islamic education and its capacity for cross-civilizational theological communication. Taken together, these insights contribute theoretically to Islamic intellectual history by reframing poetry as a core theological method, methodologically by demonstrating the value of hermeneutic textual analysis, and historiographically by recovering a neglected dimension of Ulama scholarship.

In an era of fragmented knowledge and polarized religious discourse, the Ulama's poetic theology offers a compelling model of scholarship that unites beauty, meaning, and truth. Re-engaging this tradition affirms poetry's enduring role as a theological medium capable of fostering ethical reflection, spiritual depth, and intercultural understanding.

Acknowledgements

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