

## The Concept of Love In Ahmad Ghazali's "Bahrul-Muhabba"

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**Abstract:** The article discusses "Bahrul-Muhabba", one of the most significant masterpieces of Ahmad Ghazali, a distinguished figure in Islamic thought and a unique figure in the history of Sufism. The central theme of Ahmad Ghazali's philosophical views is love and devotion to Allah. This is precisely what sets him apart in the history of Sufism. He explored and systematically studied issues related to divine love and passion, expressing his thoughts and perspectives in one of his most comprehensive works, "Bahrul-Muhabba" ("The Ocean of Love").

**Keywords:** sufism, generosity, tranquility, honor, majesty, dignity, divine mercy, equality, humanity, enlightenment, spirituality, knowledge.



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### INTRODUCTION

Love is one of the fundamental pillars of Sufism. Sufism can even be described as the knowledge of divine love. This is because Sufism seeks to attain divine wisdom, to know and recognize Allah's essence through His attributes. However, this cannot be achieved through reason, contemplation, or theoretical knowledge alone, but rather through an inner, hidden feeling, an inner spiritual insight – namely, through love.

In Sufism, love is a deep and intense devotion to God and is considered one of the most important aspects of the spiritual order (Tariqa). Love has been one of the key concepts that has preoccupied Sufis throughout history. Each Sufi has attempted to interpret it within the framework of their own thoughts and emotions. Regarding this, Ibn Arabi wrote: "People are divided into different groups in their attempts to define the essence of love for Allah. However, I have never seen anyone who truly comprehended its essence, and I believe it is impossible to do so".

Imam Ghazali said that a person who loves anything other than God does so due to ignorance and a lack of true understanding of Him [1]. In his view, for those with spiritual insight, there is no beloved other than God, and no one else is truly worthy of love. Knowledge ("ma'rifat") is the foundation of love, and it is like an endless ocean with no shore. "Ma'rifat" develops, expands, and flourishes through a long life, constant contemplation, and detachment from worldly ties. Ignorance and heedlessness are the roots of misfortune, whereas knowledge and "ma'rifat" are the sources of true happiness.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article explores the philosophical views expressed by Ahmad Ghazali in his work “Bahr al-Muhabba”, where he systematically presented his thoughts and provided the most comprehensive depiction of his perspectives on this subject. In studying his philosophical outlook, various scientific research methods have been employed, including analysis and synthesis, retrospective analysis, comparative analysis, generalization, the dialectical method, and synergetic approaches. Based on this methodology, the Sufi and philosophical views in “Bahr al-Muhabba” have been deeply analyzed, highlighting their humanistic aspects, humanitarian ideals, and their role in shaping principles for the moral and intellectual development of young individuals.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The process of human spiritual development is complex and multifaceted, having attracted the attention of many great thinkers throughout history. They have sought to study the challenges and patterns that arise in this process. Among such scholars, Ahmad Ghazali held a particularly significant place.

“Bahr al-Mahabba” (“The Ocean of Love”) – this work was published under this title in 1894 in Bombay. In 1900, it was republished in Delhi under the title “Ahsan al-Qasas” (“The Most Beautiful of Stories”). However, the work is also known as “Tafsir Surat Yusuf” (“Exegesis of Surah Yusuf”). The Orientalist Brockelmann refers to it as “Sirr al-’Alamin fi Tafsir Surat Yusuf” (“The Secret of the Worlds in the Exegesis of Surah Yusuf”). The book was also published in Tehran in 1894. Its full title is “Bahr al-Mahabba fi Asrar al-Muwadda” (“The Ocean of Love Filled with the Secrets of Friendship”).

The work “Bahr al-Muhabba” is based on Surah “Yusuf” from the Holy Qur’an. This surah, described as “The Most Beautiful Story”, primarily narrates the events in the life of Prophet Yusuf (Joseph, peace be upon him), the son of Prophet Ya’qub (Jacob, peace be upon him). The surah highlights various human qualities such as paternal and brotherly love, romantic devotion, the cunning of women, dream interpretation, generosity, and forgiveness.

The story of Prophet Yusuf (peace be upon him) is regarded as the most beautiful of all narratives in the Holy Qur’an and is referred to as “Ahsan al-Qasas” (“The Best of Stories”). In Sufi tradition, this Qur’anic story has been used to convey subtle meanings and symbolic references. This narrative has played a significant role in Sufi literature, particularly in sufistical poetry, inspiring the creation of refined poetic expressions. Poets and writers, drawing inspiration from this surah, have composed various epics under the theme of “The Story of Yusuf and Zulaykha”. Among the most notable works are those by Abdurrahman Jami, Fuzuli, Ferdowsi, Rabguzi, Durbek, and Balhi.

Furthermore, based on this Qur’anic story, allegorical and sufistical epics such as Jami’s “Yusuf and Zulaykha” were created. In the book “Mukashafat al-Qulub” (“The Unveiling of Hearts”), attributed to Abu Hamid Ghazali, love is described as follows: “Love is the inclination of human nature toward a delightful and pleasurable experience. The highest degree of love is called “Ishq”. True lovers spare nothing – not even their own lives – to attain union with their beloved” [2].

The story of Prophet Yusuf (peace be upon him) has been widely used in Sufi philosophy and literary works. For instance, in Mustamli Bukhari’s work “Sharh al-Ta’arruf li Madhhab al-Tasawwuf”, this story is interpreted in a profound philosophical and sufistical manner based on Qur’anic verses. Similarly, Shaykh Ahmad Ghazali’s “Bahr al-Mahabba” serves as a scholarly and artistic exegesis of Surah “Yusuf”. References to the narratives from the story of Yusuf can also be found in the ghazals of great poets such as Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi, Khwaja Hafiz Shirazi, Mawlana Abdurrahman Jami, and Hazrat Alisher Navoiy.

The work is not only a scholarly exegesis but also a supreme example of literary artistry. The author draws deeply insightful lessons from the story of Yusuf and Zulaykha, presenting a wise saying relevant to each section. At the end of each discourse, he included profound poems, illuminated by the essence of divine love.

On the first page of the Arabic edition of the work, published in Bombay in Hijri 1319 (1901 CE), it is written: “This book is “The Ocean of Love Filled with the Secrets of Friendship”, an exegesis of Surah Yusuf. It belongs to the godly scholar, the wise and eternal sage, the ocean of truths and the treasury of subtleties, the Sheikh of the Gnostics – Shaykh Muhammad Ghazali, may Allah have mercy on him”.

At the top of the second page, it is written: “Even if this book were sold for its weight in pearls, the seller would still suffer a loss”. Indeed, this work is spiritually invaluable. The author refers to the Qur’anic phrase “Ahsan al-Qasas” (“The Most Beautiful of Stories”).

Many scholars attribute this esteemed book to Imam Muhammad Ghazali. However, it is not listed among the well-known works of Imam Abu Hamid Muhammad Ghazali. According to “The World Encyclopedia: Collected Sources”, this book is attributed to his brother, Ahmad Ghazali. Indeed, the numerous love-themed poems included in the work also serve as evidence that it was written by the poet and scholar Ahmad Ghazali.

In the chapter on the “Pillars of Union” (“Visal”) in Ahmad Ghazali’s “Bahr al-Muhabba”, he stated that knowing the paths to attaining union lies in practicing “taqwa” (abstaining from actions that lead to sin) at all spiritual stations. According to him, “taqwa” is the garment of the hearts and the fear of Satan.

It can be observed that this perspective of the scholar aligns with the views of the renowned Indian philosopher Sri Aurobindo. According to Aurobindo, spiritual suffering is one of the most powerful means of purifying the human heart. In his work “The Synthesis of Yoga”, Aurobindo wrote: “Some people, fearing the sufferings of life, become indifferent, but for the beloved servant of the Creator, enduring pain and affliction with patience is the only path to attaining union with Him. The sorrows and hardships of human life are veiled obstacles, and only those who overcome them ultimately reach divine union. In doing so, they free themselves from all sorrow and suffering, which then transform into inner feelings of peace and tranquility” [3].

In Ahmad Ghazali’s “Bahr al-Muhabba”, another pillar of “Visal” (Union) is “knowledge” (“ilm”). While discussing the virtue of knowledge, he emphasized that scholars are granted high ranks both in this world and in the Hereafter. The ranks in this world include: honor, majesty, dignity, love, high status, adherence to “Sharia”, virtue, trustworthiness, composure, worthiness of praise, and greatness. The ranks in the Hereafter include: divine gifts from Allah, value and beauty, Allah’s pleasure, the vision of Allah’s essence, immense rewards, numerous virtues, divine mercy, blessings, intercession, the increase of goodness, and even higher ranks.

From this, it is evident that, in Ahmad Ghazali’s view, there is nothing more honorable and gratifying than the pursuit of knowledge. The scholar supported this idea with the Quranic command “Read”, and specifically references verse 9 of “Surah Az-Zumar”: “Say, “Are those who know equal to those who do not know?” This verse clearly establishes that those with knowledge and those without it can never be equal.

According to him, knowledge grants a person honor in this world and dignity in the hereafter. This implies that whoever seeks success in this world, the hereafter, or both must pursue knowledge.

In the mentioned verse, Allah equates the testimony of knowledgeable individuals with that of the angels, highlighting the esteemed status of scholars in His presence. Conversely, the Quran criticizes ignorance.

In this work, the scholar reflected on envy, emphasizing that an envious person is distant from Allah's mercy and can never attain greatness. According to him, an envious person is a denier because they do not accept Allah's divine decree. Furthermore, he stated that an envious person is akin to a polytheist, as they bear the sin of polytheism by rejecting what their Creator has granted. Such a person lives in sorrow and dies in grief. They are spiritually impoverished and humiliated in the presence of Allah [4]. Ghazali continued his views by stating that a backbiter is characterized by two traits: when in your presence, they praise you, but in your absence, they speak ill of you. Based on this, he concluded that an envious person is one who denies blessings and is among those who will not be forgiven on the Day of Judgment.

According to Ghazali, the highest rank is reserved for those who practice patience. Whoever remains patient will be saved from the bitterness of death. Whoever is patient will attain victory. In this regard, the scholar cited the following words of Hazrat (peace be upon him): "Patience at the moment of calamity is better than the world and everything in it. The reward for patience is none other than paradise. Every deed has a measured and limited reward, but the reward for those who are patient is limitless and immeasurable" [4].

According to Ghazali's reflections, a believer is like a mosque:

- The heart is like its lantern,
- Love is like the light of the lantern,
- Trust in Allah (tawakkul) is like the chains of the lantern,
- The mouth is like the mosque's window,
- The lantern is hung at the door of the mosque.

If the tongue reveals what is in the heart, these lights emerge through the window of the mouth and reach the Divine Throne (Arsh).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Sufi and philosophical perspectives in Ahmad Ghazali's work "Bahrul-Muhabba" have been deeply analyzed, highlighting their relevance to human qualities, humanitarian ideals, and their role in shaping the principles of raising morally upright youth. Additionally, this enlightening book, which brings light to the hearts of its readers, provides insights for lovers of wisdom on topics such as envy, knowledge, oppression, the principles of union (visal), love, and divine passion.

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