

Transcending Otherness: Overcoming Obstacles in the Mystical Journey in Shabestari's *Rose Garden of Mystery*

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the distinguished Persian Sufi mystic Shaykh Maḥmūd Shabestari's *Golshan-e Rāz*, or *The Rose Garden of Mystery*. Adopting a hermeneutic approach, it scrutinizes the intricate spiritual journey towards divine realization delineated in Shabestari's poetry, utilizing qualitative content analysis of original texts and interpretations by scholars such as Lāhijī and Ibn Turka Iṣfahānī. The main question the paper addresses is this: "How can the spiritual journeyer overcome obstacles—particularly 'otherness'—and achieve unity with the divine Essence within the framework of Islamic mysticism, as interpreted through Shabestari's teachings in *Golshan-e Rāz*?" To answer this inquiry, the paper addresses pivotal questions concerning Shabestari's depiction of the spiritual journeyer's path, its stages and challenges, and the critical role of the human form in divine manifestation. The study underscores the necessity of overcoming duality and distinction, alluding to the transformative nature of the journey that necessitates self-purification and the cessation of otherness. Findings from this study provide an enriched understanding of Shabestari's thought, contributing to the discourse on Islamic metaphysics. It presents valuable insights into the spiritual journeyer's path, offering a comprehensive interpretation of the challenges, practices, and transformative experiences leading to divine realization and unity.

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Introduction

Shaykh Maḥmūd Shabestārī, a renowned Persian¹ Sufi from the seventh century Hijri, emerged as a pivotal figure in Islamic mysticism, significantly contributing to the field through his famous work, *The Rose Garden of Mystery (Golshan-e Rāz)*. Born in 687/1288 (H/CE) in Shabistar,² Iran, Shabestārī's pursuit of knowledge took him to Tabriz, where his educational journey began, later leading him to write extensively, his works often echoing the mystical teachings of Ibn 'Arabī—so prominent that, as Lewisohn (1999, 381) points out, “the *Gulshan-i Rāz* represented the culmination in Persian of Ibn 'Arabī's teachings.” Shabestārī's poems are intertwined with the poetic eloquence of Rūmī and 'Aṭṭār, an inspired poetry that is “characteristic of that heaven-sent love-madness (*furor amatoris*) described by Plato in the *Phaedrus*, which inspiration alone qualifies a poet's work for immortality” (Lewisohn, 1999, 382).^{3 4}

Shabestārī's *Golshan-e Rāz*, a response in poetry to a series of philosophical and mystical questions, is a detailed *roadmap* of the spiritual journey. This text captures the self's struggle with worldly desires, vividly detailing the stages, struggles, and growth experienced by the mystic, culminating in the self's ultimate union with the Divine. However, despite this profound contribution, a noticeable gap remains in the academic field's treatment of *Golshan-e Rāz*. While existing translations and interpretations of *Golshan-e Rāz* are vast, they predominantly approach the work from a literary perspective. Unfortunately, this standpoint often overlooks the intricate philosophical depth and mysticism that are hallmarks of Shabestārī's work. Thus, addressing this gap must be addressed by tracing and unraveling the embedded philosophical and mystical elements within *Golshan-e Rāz*. This task entails a critical analysis that enables a more comprehensive understanding of Shabestārī's perspective, providing intriguing insights that could fuel further scholarly exploration. For a critical examination of Shabestārī's understanding of the

¹ Shabestārī is often referred to as “Persian” in the context of his *nationality* and the language of his renowned *works*, which are in Persian. This usage of “Persian” mirrors a convention in English-language scholarship, acknowledging the significant influence of the Persian language and culture across different ethnic groups within Iran. It is crucial to note that Shabestārī was born in Shabistar city in the Iranian province of East Azerbaijan. His mother tongue was Azerbaijani. The labeling of Shabestārī as “Persian” reflects his work's *cultural* and *linguistic* context rather than his *ethnic* background.

² Shabestārī passed away in 720/1320 H/CE at the age of 33. However, some accounts suggest he died in 740/1339 H/CE.

³ For further reading on Shabestārī's biography and details about *Golshan*, refer to Algar (2012) and Lewisohn (1999, 379-382).

⁴ As Lewisohn (1999:386) points out, Shabestārī's thought stems from a philosophical tradition that Sufis, theologians, and philosophers endorsed. This tradition holds that knowledge can be gained through revelation derived from Scripture (*wahy*), reason (*'aql*), or unveiling (*kashf*), methods linked with theologians, philosophers, and Sufis, respectively. Although these methods might seem distinct, they are viewed as complementary. While Shabestārī primarily employs the Sufi approach of intuitive and experiential understanding, his method's foundation lies in this tripartite philosophical structure.

“self,” refer to (Rahbari Ghazani & Uysal, 2023a). Likewise, an exploration of Shabestari’s conception of “*tafakkur*,” which represents “contemplation and reflection” in the domains of mysticism and philosophy, see (Rahbari Ghazani & Topaloglu, 2023).¹

This paper rigorously analyzes Shabestari’s *Golshan-e Rāz* in pursuit of this goal. This strategy prioritizes *meaning* over *literary elegance*, making minor modifications to specific translations to enhance comprehension in English while maintaining the integrity of the original intentions. Furthermore, to enrich this research framework, elements of comparative analysis with works from other thinkers are incorporated. Finally, a profound exploration of spiritual exercises and philosophical concepts provides a multifaceted understanding of Islamic mysticism. Two authoritative commentaries on *Golshan-e Rāz* have been utilized to uphold intellectual rigor, namely, Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Lāhījī’s commentary titled *Mafātīḥ al-I’jāz fī Sharḥ-i Golshan-e Rāz* (2016) and Ṣā’īn al-Dīn Ibn Turka Iṣfahānī’s *Sharḥ-i Golshan-e Rāz* (1996). These works collaboratively form a robust foundation for the intricate investigation into *The Rose Garden*, shaping the intellectual underpinning of this paper.

In this research paper, the primary objective is to unpack the metaphysical teachings of Shaykh Maḥmūd Shabestari, as articulated in his *magnum opus*, the *Golshan-e Rāz*, and provide a nuanced understanding of the mystical journey toward divine realization. Utilizing qualitative content analysis and a hermeneutic approach, the paper critically examines Shabestari’s poetry alongside the interpretive works of Lāhījī and Ibn Turka Iṣfahānī, together with other scholars to decipher the intricate spiritual concepts embedded within his writings. The central question the paper aims to answer is this: “How can the spiritual journeyer overcome obstacles—particularly the impurity of ‘otherness’—and achieve unity with the divine Essence within the framework of Islamic mysticism, as interpreted through Shabestari’s teachings in *Golshan-e Rāz*?” To answer this inquiry, the paper sets off to decipher Shabestari’s exposition of the spiritual journeyer’s path, its stages, challenges, and the role of the human form in divine manifestation. The transformative journey from the natural “I” to the celestial “I” culminates in achieving unity with the divine Essence—a state where distinctions vanish, and only the Essence reigns.

The structure of this paper unfolds in several interconnected parts. After this introduction, there is a detailed examination of Shabestari’s teachings, beginning with his conceptual framework on the spiritual journey and the critical stages a journeyer encounters. The paper further explores Shabestari’s interpretation of the three certitudes—*‘ilm al-yaqīn*, *‘ayn al-yaqīn*, and *‘haqq al-yaqīn*—and their significance in the journeyer’s path. This section also highlights the dual challenges a journeyer must overcome in this quest, emphasizing the need for spiritual *purification*. In the subsequent sections, the paper delves into Shabestari’s teachings on the spiritual practices that facilitate the journeyer’s progression and the importance of a single-minded focus on the

¹ To further explore English-language secondary sources about Shabestari, consult Lewisohn (1995).

divine. The final part explores the significance of the human form as a locus of divine manifestation, as conveyed through Shabestari's poetry. The paper concludes with an interpretation of Shabestari's spiritual philosophy and its implications for understanding the spiritual journey toward divine realization, especially for the contemporary individual.

1. Overview of the Spiritual Journey

“Of what meaning is it to have a journey in me?” (Herawi, 2016, 287).¹² At the beginning of the *Golshan-e Rāz*, Shabestari (2016, 1-32) outlines the journey in search of “I” from the first point of creation to the last point of return. He discusses how, through the divine Breath, God created thousands of *designs*—i.e., the corporeal existents—from nothingness (i.e., from the quiddities, fixed entities, or *al-a 'yān-i thābita*) (4). A Breath from which the two worlds were created, and Adam's soul came into existence (2; 5). Shabestari tells us that the intellect and the capacity for distinguishing right from wrong appeared in the human being; with these, he understood the principles of everything (6). Then (7), “As a distinct entity, he espied himself / In contemplation, he queried, ‘Who, indeed, am I?’³

Haunted by this bewildering wonder, the human being *starts* a journey to find the answer. He travels from the particular to the universal and returns to this world (8). He ascends beyond determinations and manifestations toward their Source. Having united with the Friend, the Beloved, the One, he returns to this world to help the bewildered travelers who seek answers.

A journey in which he learns that the world is imaginal and that it is the One that appears in multiple manifestations (9). He realizes that through the divine Breath, the two worlds come into existence: A Breath from the divine Essence that brings multiplicity and manifestations and takes them back to their Source, a Center that hosts them in Its dazzling oneness (10-14). He learns about the circle of existence, a moving “point” that, because of its circulation speed, appears as a circle, the imaginal multiplicity that deceives the eyes with “otherness” (15-16).

He learns that prophets guide travelers to perfection (17). He sees that the Prophet Muhammad is at the forefront of the prophets (18), the first-last prophet in whose reality the Real manifests Himself most perfectly and from whose reality the world is created (19). The messenger whose reality as the *first* appeared in human form as the *last*, and through this wedding of the first and last points, the circle of existence was perfected (18-20), the prophet in whose light all humans walk

¹ Shabestari cites Herawi's questions in *Golshan-e Rāz*. This paper uses *line* numbers to refer to Shabestari's *Golshan-e Rāz*. These line numbers match those in Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Lāhijī's work (2016). However, the year of publication (2016) will *not* be repeatedly mentioned to avoid repetitiveness. Additionally, citations from Lāhijī's observations will be referenced using *page* numbers—again, without repeating the publication year (2016).

² Please note that, unless otherwise indicated, all translations presented in this paper are my own. The phrase “own translation” will not be reiterated throughout the text to maintain fluency and avoid redundancy.

³ Farsi: چو خود را دید یک شخص معین / تفکر کرد تا خود چیستم من

towards the Real (20-22). Next, the traveler learns that after the prophets, people walk behind the grand “knowers” (gnostics; *urafā*)—those who realize that there *is* but the Real—and that having reached certain stations, the knowers build roadmaps to guide the followers (23-24).

Here, the famous Iranian mystic philosopher Mullā Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī¹ (d. 1091/1681 H/CE) can help put this journey’s start and end into perspective. In *Provisions of the Journeyer*, or *Zād al-Sālik* (1992, 79-80), he writes that in worldly journeys, one has a starting point, destination, path, provision (*zād*), carriage, companion, and guide. The same applies to spiritual journeying. In the latter journey, the first waystation is “awareness” (awakening; *yaqza*); the distance is theoretical and practical perfections, i.e., morals; and the end is real perfection, uniting with the Real.² Similarly, in *ʿIrfān-i Islāmī* (2022, 29-33), Muḥammad Taqī Jaʿfarī Tabrīzī (d. 1998) writes, in spiritual journeying, the starting point is an awakening to the fact that the worldly life is not all there is to actualize human potentials and that she should journey from the *natural self* to the *human self* and from there to the *celestial (malakūtī) self*.

After establishing an overview of the mystical journey, it is now essential to delve deeper into the challenges that may obstruct the journeyer and explore how, according to Shabestarī, these impediments should be surmounted.

2. The Purification and Obstacles in the Spiritual Journey

Exploring the mystical journey makes it apparent that the process has challenges. “Purification” is central to overcoming these obstacles and progressing. Discussing Katib Çelebi (d. 1068 /1657 AH/CE), Demirli (2017, 180) articulates that purification of the heart can follow religious or philosophical doctrines. If pursued *religiously*, the practitioner is called a “Sufi.” However, if followed *rationally*, the person is called an “illuminationist,” or *ishrāqī*—which is used to name the followers of the mystical-philosophical school of Suhrawardī. Purification, or *tazkiya*, is underlined in the Quran, representing a transition towards happiness attained by individuals who *purify* their souls (Quran, 91:7-9). The purification of the heart is a fundamental concept in Islamic thought, adopted by both mystics and philosophers, albeit with certain nuances.

Among the mystics, one of the noteworthy advocates of the *tazkiya* is Ibn ʿArabī (638/1240 H/CE). His teachings, as elaborated in *The Seals of Wisdom* (2006, 522), regard the Quranic verse (38:75), *I have created Adam with My two Hands*, as symbolic of the dual constitution of Adam: the *external* form that embodies worldly realities, and the *internal* form imbued with the divine

¹ Born in Isfahan, Mullā Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī (1007/1598-1091/1681 H/CE) was a Persian philosopher, logician, poet, mystic, jurisprudent, *muḥaddith*, and Quranic commentator. Among his teachers are Shaykh Bahāʿī, Mullā Ṣadrā, Mīr Findiriskī, Mīr Dāmād, and Muḥammad Taqī Majlisī. Some of his prominent students are Mullā Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī, Sayyid Niʿmat Allāh Jazāyirī, and Qādī Saʿīd Qummī.

² The details of these stages and the path in between them, says Kāshānī, are elaborated in Khāwja ʿAbd al-Allāh Ansārī’s *Waystations of the Travelers* (Ansārī 1996).

Form. Ibn ‘Arabī highlights that the understanding of this profound, all-encompassing nature of the human being is beyond the grasp of human intellect and can only be revealed through divine *unveiling (kashf)*.

Deepening this line of thought, Ibn ‘Arabī, in his work *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (1999, V1, Book II, Chapter 3), underscores the critical function of the heart in knowledge attainment. He asserts that knowledge (*‘ilm*) is the heart’s apprehension of an entity, proportional to the degree inherent to the essence of that entity, irrespective of its existence or non-existence. In this context, he depicts knowledge as an intrinsic attribute that mandates the heart’s reception of entities. Consequently, the heart emerges as the knower in this dynamic, and the received entity is recognized as the known.

Linking this to the broader conversation about the heart’s role in Islamic mysticism, we can appreciate how this perspective enhances our understanding of the heart as a nexus for the reception and transmission of knowledge. In Islam mysticism, the heart—often termed the “intellective soul” or “rational soul”—plays a critical role. The heart, a mediator between spirit and soul, is where divine manifestations appear, and knowledge is distinguished (Lāhījī, 46). This dual capability of the heart to receive knowledge from the spirit and transfer it to the soul thereby signifies the pivotal role of the heart in mediating the receipt and transmission of knowledge. This observation adds another layer of depth to the concept of purification, suggesting that the purification of the heart not only aids individuals in their spiritual journey but may also unlock the divine unveiling required to comprehend the intricacies of existence.

In discussing the concept of purification, Ja‘farī Tabrīzī (2022, 238-239) posits that the degree of purity of the heart directly influences the *intensity* and *persistence* of divine manifestations experienced within it. As the heart is more thoroughly purified, it becomes a more potent vessel for receiving divine knowledge and manifestations. Thus, purification amplifies the heart’s capacity to both perceive and integrate divine knowledge, adding depth and nuance to the conversation around the role of the heart in Islamic mysticism.

However, purification of the heart is a demanding endeavor, as it necessitates the removal of obstacles and impurities that obscure divine illumination. Shabestarī (404) illuminates this issue poetically: “Until from yourself, you cast obstacles aside / Light within your heart’s home, cannot reside.”¹ What are these obstacles? Transitioning to the crux of these obstacles, one encounters a structured approach provided by Shabestarī, necessitating that the spiritual journeyer divests themselves of *four* primary impurities that constitute these obstacles. (i) The first category encompasses *physical* impurities related to one’s appearance, including uncleanliness in clothing and the environment. (ii) The second category extends into *behavior*, encapsulating *sins* and *evil temptations* as forms of *spiritual* uncleanliness (Shabestarī, 405). (iii) Following this, the third category invokes *moral* impurities (407), encompassing a broader spectrum of unethical conduct

¹ Farsi: موانع تا نگرسانی ز خود دور / درون خانه دل نایدت نور

that diverges from prescribed Islamic principles. This concept goes beyond physical cleanliness or specific sinful behaviors to address underlying character traits and habitual moral failings that are counterproductive to the individual's spiritual progress. (iv) Finally, the fourth obstacle lies in the realm of the *metaphysical*, referring to the impurity of "otherness" within the heart (408) (to elaborate). Thus, removing these impurities or obstacles, according to Shabestarī, is crucial in revealing the divine light within the heart, enabling the individual to progress toward spiritual fulfillment.

To understand these impurities better, let us examine three crucial concepts in Islamic mysticism and ethics: *murāqiba*, *muḥāsiba*, and *ta'dīl*. First, to dedicate themselves to spirituality, the journeyer should *protect* themselves against excessive desires and temptations. This principle is called "self-protection" (*murāqiba*, or *ṣiyānat* in Farsi), and it is what Shabestarī points to in (ii). Then, the journeyer should retrospectively *measure* their thoughts, intentions, and actions; this principle is called "self-assessment" (*muḥāsiba*). Relating to this fundamental tenet, Shaykh Nukhudakī Iṣfahānī¹ (d. 1361/1942) provides counsel to a spiritual journeyer (1998, vi). He recommends a daily ritual performed before the break of dawn to examine one's actions from the preceding day. If the journeyer has engaged in virtuous deeds, gratitude towards God is appropriate, acknowledging that these acts are manifestations of His Grace. Conversely, they should earnestly implore God's forgiveness if their actions have deviated from righteousness. Despite its apparent simplicity, this method of continual self-assessment demands a significant degree of commitment and introspection, making it a challenging practice. Nonetheless, the fruits of this labor are worth the effort, leading to self-improvement and spiritual growth.

The journeyer should complement the two principles with a more *active* one: "self-modification" (*amelioration*; *ta'dīl*), a principle that Ja'farī Tabrīzī (2022) explains as a process in which one eliminates what slows them in the path of perfection and incorporates what accelerates them (134-135); one acquires the *laudable* and dispels the *blameworthy*. This principle is what Shabestarī suggests in (i-iii). This principle shows that ethics and morality are excellent by-products of Islamic spirituality. A great mystic must be an outstanding moralist. Moral traits are the tools that take the human from their natural "I" to their celestial "I." Islamic spirituality is the path of perfection decorated and facilitated by ethics and morality.² Intriguingly, we see such

¹ In Fayḍ Kāshānī, M. M., Iṣfahānī, S. Ḥ. & al-Thānī, S. (1998), the Iranian mystic, Shaykh Ḥasan 'Alī Iṣfahānī, known as Shaykh Nukhudakī Iṣfahānī (v-vi) gives a journeyer a program that includes the following. Performing canonical prayers *on time*, practicing mindfulness when performing prayers, waking up before sunrise, giving charity, and pondering on the triviality of the material world. He then elaborates on what should be done before dawn. He suggests the wayfarer divide this time into four parts: (1) invoking God (i.e., active remembrance of God through His Names and Qualities; i.e., *dhikr*); (2) performing private liturgy (*duā*); (3) reciting the Quran; and (4) assessing the actions of the day before.

² Some spiritual traditions encourage excessive monasticism, asceticism, and even causing pain to the body to "free the soul from the prison of the body." Islamic mysticism rejects such an extremist approach. Instead, it introduces mild

constant self-monitoring and self-modification in other traditions, too. For instance, in *The Enneads*, Plotinus writes (1964, I, 6, 9):

Withdraw into yourself and look. If you do not as yet see beauty within you, do as does the sculptor of a statue that is to be beautified: he cuts away here, and smooths it there ... until he disengages beautiful lineaments in the marble. Do you this, too. Cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is overcast, labor to make all one radiance of beauty. Never cease “working at the statue” until there shines out upon you from it the divine sheen of virtue, until you see perfect “goodness firmly established in stainless shrine.” Have you become like this?

3. Transcending Otherness

Let us now turn to the last obstacle on Shabestari’s list: the impurity of “otherness.” Before examining *how* the journeyer should purify themselves, though, we must examine *what*, in Shabestari’s thought, causes otherness.

“Upon the ‘H’ in He-ness, an imagined line / Two eyes emerge when in sight it aligns” (Shabestari, 299).¹² This poem points to the divine Name, also a pronoun, *Hū* (He), which refers to the “undetermined Essence.” Underscoring the significance of this Name, Ṣadr al-Dīn Qunawī (673/1274 H/CE) articulates (2014b, 23) “He-ness” (Ipseity, *Huwīyya*) is the secret of Divinity; it transcends all *forms* and *attributes*. Qunawī astutely points out that *Hū* is the first word with which God invites His servants to Himself by saying (Quran, 112:1), “Say: *He*, Allah is One” (*emphasis added*).³

Intriguingly, in Arabic and Farsi, the letter “H” (هـ) in *Hū* (هو) and *huwīyya* are shaped like two circles connected with a line. The “H” can be considered a single circle divided by a *line*, turning it into two circles. According to Lāhījī’s (194) interpretation of Shabestari’s above verse, the *single* circle in *Hū* represents the “undetermined Essence”⁴ uncapturable by sense, imagination, or

asceticism and challenges, e.g., fasting for a whole month (in Ramaḍān) or performing prayer at dawn every day. For a critical examination of “asceticism” in Islam and Christianity—particularly through the lens of Rūmī and Meister Eckhart, please refer to (Rahbari Ghazani & Uysal, 2023b).

¹ The term *huwīyyat* is translated as “He-ness.” More common translations are “ipseity” and “identity”; however, “He-ness” fits better in the current discussion.

² Farsi: ز خطّ وهمی‌های هویت / دو چشمی می‌شود در وقت رویت

³ The Quranic translations employed throughout this paper are sourced from Seyyed Hossein Nasr, S. H., Dagli, Caner K., Dakake, Maria Massi, Lombard, Joseph EB, and Rustom, Mohammed (2015). I will not repeatedly attribute these translations to “Nasr et al.” as a reference point to maintain a concise and streamlined flow in the ensuing discussion. Instead, this footnote ensures that credit is duly provided and that any further use of Quranic translations can be understood as derived from this source.

⁴ Lāhījī writes (2016, 195), On the one hand, the Essence requires concealment and inwardness in the sense that relations and determinations annihilate in It; thus, It is named *al-Bāṭin*, the Hidden. On the other hand, It requires

intellect. The “H” designates the absolute Essence’s “determination,” and the line dividing the one circle into two symbolizes divine “Qualities” that determine the Essence (Lāhijī, 195). The commentator proposes an intriguing idea that the dual eyes of the “H” signify the dichotomy of unity and diversity, inwardness and outwardness, and “you” and “I,” all originating from divine Qualities. Consequently, the Qualities create an *illusion* of multiplicity from the One, underscoring the paradoxical nature of the Divine.

Ibn Turka Iṣfahānī interprets this poem differently. He (1996, 121) argues that the “H” in “Heness” represents “Reality and Essence,” and the imaginal line is “individual determination.” Because of individual determination on the one hand and Essence on the other, the philosopher contemplates the world through a *dual* vision: with one, he sees the possible existence, and with the other, he sees the Necessary Existence. The interpretation offered by Ibn Turka parallels the stance of Qunawī. According to Qunawī’s elucidation (2014b, 23), the letter “H” serves as a symbol for the notion of “Absolute Unity” (*al-Aḥadiyya al-Muṭlaqa*).¹

The interpretation of the *imaginal line* diverges between Ibn Turka Iṣfahānī and Lāhijī; the former regards it as *individual determination*, while the latter perceives it as representative of *Qualities*. However, a more nuanced reading of these interpretations would suggest that individual determination unfolds through Qualities, positioning Lāhijī’s viewpoint as more credible than Ibn Turka’s. This assessment contends that Qualities rather than individual determination is the decisive element.

As the discourse moves to the representation of “H,” another divergence emerges. Ibn Turka and Qunawī conceptualize “H” as *Essence*, whereas Lāhijī interprets it as the *determination* of the Essence. At first glance, these positions might seem contradictory. However, upon closer

expression and appearance in the sense that It accepts relations and attributes; thus, It is called *al-Zāhir*, the Manifest. In reality, appearance and inwardness are one.

¹ Delving into the mystical symbolism of the divine Name *Hū*, which in Arabic is constituted by the letters “H” and “V,” Qunawī (2014b, 25) elucidates a remarkable contrast in their vocalizations. The “V” vocalizes in a manner opposed to the “H.” The “V” emerges from between the lips, projecting towards the chest; it subsequently retreats to its origin point. The significance of this lies in the trajectory of the “H”—from the unseen realm to the visible world. This movement of the “H” is mandated by its innate nature, which necessitates its journey to commence at a beginning level. Conversely, the “V” follows a trajectory from the visible realm into the obscurity of the unseen.

From this perspective, both these letters encapsulate and embody the truths of existence on two levels—departure and arrival. The synchronization between them is akin to the beginning of a circle harmonizing with its end. Moreover, these two letters embody within them the essence of all sacred and spiritual letters, themselves the fundamental constituents of divine Names. When these elements combine in various configurations, depending on their respective positions, a myriad of spiritual phenomena manifest for the adepts of spiritual science as a direct consequence of their confluence. Such manifestations occur both in the physical and the non-physical realms.

Analogous to human breath forming the basis of all outwardly spoken letters, the Breath of the Merciful, in its outward form, underpins all the letters of existence. Furthermore, existence relies on this Breath of the Merciful, a breath that upholds everything, maintaining the stability of all. The ongoing interplay and interdependencies between these mystical elements serve as the core of divine nomenclature, as expounded by Qunawī in his profound treatise.

reflection, they can be seen as complementary aspects of the same construct. Lāhījī's interpretation is particularly noteworthy in this regard. Despite conceptualizing the two-eyed "H" as Essence's *determination*, he distinguishes the *single* circle of "H" as the "undetermined Essence." This reading not only aligns with the interpretations of Ibn Turka and Qunawī but also adds a new dimension to the understanding of "H." Lāhījī's delineation between the *single* and *double* eyes of "H" is an elegant refinement of the discourse on the divine Name, *Hū*. All three interpreters—Ibn Turka, Qunawī, and Lāhījī—conceptualize *Hū* with the single circle in mind. However, Lāhījī presents this interpretation with a degree of elegance that sets it apart. His use of "H" more aptly captures the element of "otherness and differentiates" between the two circles.

By analyzing these varied yet interconnected interpretations of Shabestarī's poetry and the pivotal role of the letter "H" in expressing otherness, we gain deeper insight into the spiritual journey articulated in Shabestarī's subsequent verses. In an elegant verse, Shabestarī writes (300):¹ "When 'H' in *Hū* merges with *Allāh*'s embrace / Neither traveler remains, nor any trace of the path's face." Because *Allāh* is the all-comprehensive *essential* Name, it encompasses all other divine Names. This constitution unites inwardness and apparentness, unity and multiplicity, and all the opposite Names and Qualities. When the *Hū*² joins with the *Allāh*, the two circles change into one circle. In Arabic and Farsi, unlike the "H" in *Hū*, the "H" (ه) in *Allāh* (الله) is shaped like a single circle. Shabestarī's poem articulates that arriving at the Essence, the Qualities—and thus distinctions and otherness, including the journeyer and the path—vanish, and only the Essence remains. "In the Presence of the Real, duality finds no room / Within that sacred sphere, neither 'I,' 'we,' nor 'you' bloom" (Shabestarī, 447).³ There is absolute Unity in the divine Essence, a Center that includes and dissolves all distinctions in Its dazzling Oneness (448). A Unity in which the otherness perishes, and *journeyer*, *journey*, and *way* become one (450). A Unity that the Quran (55:26-27) alludes to in this verse: "All that is upon it [the Earth] passes away. And there remains the Face of thy Lord, Possessed of Majesty and Bounty." However, to truly comprehend this state of ultimate union and dissolution of dualities, Shabestarī elaborates that the traveler must undertake a complex journey.⁴

Transitioning to the next concept, the journeyer is presented with two challenges (Shabestarī, 306). These steps are prerequisites for immersing oneself in this profound understanding of unity and the cessation of otherness. "To transcend beyond the 'H' of He-ness is the first task in sight /

¹ Farsi: نمائند در میانه رهرو و راه / چو های هو شود ملحق به الله

² This time, instead of "He-ness" (*huwīyya*), Shabestarī uses "He" (*Hū*).

³ Farsi (447): جناب حضرت حق را دویی نیست / در آن حضرت من و ما و تویی نیست

⁴ Interpreting Shabestarī's verse (300): "When 'H' in *Hū* merges with *Allāh*'s embrace / Neither traveler remains, nor any trace of the path's face," and building on Jāmī's thought, Whinfield (1880, 31) says, "The H of *Huwiyyat* (Divine Ipseity) is the phenomenon manifesting absolute Being in the visible universe. Thus we have duality 'I' and 'He,' but this duality is only imaginary, and vanishes as soon as 'I' and 'He' are united by the mystical union in Allah."

And the second, through the desert of being, one must write” (307).¹ To understand this line, the reader must be familiar with three terms: *knowledge of certitude* (*‘ilm al-yaqīn*), the *vision of certitude* (*‘ayn al-yaqīn*) and *real certitude* (*‘ḥaqq al-yaqīn*).

The *‘ilm al-yaqīn* is what one attains through rational thinking—logic and philosophy. This knowledge can get the journeyer to a certain point, after which the other two *certitudes* will help them progress, the *two steps* Shabestarī alludes to in the above poem. The first *step* (i.e., the second *certitude*), the *‘ayn al-yaqīn*, is to get past “otherness,” determinations that bring multiplicity. In their path, the journeyer gets to a point where the sources of otherness—i.e., the divine Qualities—vanish, and they “see” but the One. In the *‘ayn al-yaqīn*, through the inner eye (*baṣīrat*), the mystic contemplates unity in the mirrors of multiplicity (Lāhījī, 201), the oneness that unites the multiplicity of existents. *The mystic “sees” the Real in everything.*

Navigating the complexities of Shabestarī’s teachings, the journeyer must traverse through the second, more intricate *step*, which is associated with the third *certitude* or *‘ḥaqq al-yaqīn*. This step involves a transformative process, carefully expounded by Lāhījī (201): Engaging in an inward journey of purification, the journeyer strides across the desert of multiplicity. This is a metaphorical landscape of diverse existents that can distract or mislead the journeyer from their ultimate quest. By overcoming these trials and staying true to the path, the journeyer soars towards the “essential union,” or *‘ayn al-jam‘*, and into the realm of “Absolute Unity” or *ḥaḍrat-i Aḥadiyyat*. In this realm, the journeyer witnesses the dissolution and vanishing of their being along with all other existents, a phenomenon signifying the annihilation of duality and distinction. From the ashes of this metaphysical annihilation emerges “persistence after annihilation,” known as *baqā’ ba’d al-fanā’*. At this juncture, the journeyer attains a state where they *perceive themselves in every existing entity*.²

This enlightened state of being is synonymous with the station of *real certitude*, where absolute knowledge illuminates the journeyer’s path. According to Shabestarī, this station is the coveted destination of all journeyers and gnostics. It is the culmination of the spiritual journey, where all previous trials, lessons, and experiences coalesce into holistic unity and oneness.

Next, Shabestarī states (309; Lāhījī, 202), you are the all-comprehensive that, through the “journey in God” (*sayr-i fi-llāh*), reaches the station of Unity (Oneness; *Aḥadiyyat*), subsists in It, and sees all things as yourself. And you are the one that, through the “journey with God, from God” (*sayr-i bi-llāh ‘an-illāh*), descends to the multiplicity and appears as all entities. You are the all-comprehensive in unity and one in multiplicity. Through your ascent and descent, the circle of existence comes to completion (Lāhījī, 202-203).

¹ Farsi: یکی از های هویت درگذشتن / دوّم صحرای هستی در نوشتن

² Similarly, Whinfield’s (1880, 31-32) analysis confirms the interpretation that the two stages mentioned in line 307 correspond to the spiritual stages of *fanā’* (annihilation) and *baqā’* (subsistence).

Moving to the implications of this journey, it becomes evident that the transformation from the earthly to the divine demands a disassociation from the physical realm. Divine Grace is the catalyst for this transformative journey, encouraging the journeyer to detach from the confinements of the corporeal world and ascend towards higher planes of existence (Shabestari, 329). Underscoring this ascension, Ṣadr al-Dīn Qunawī notes (2014a, 29), “Whichever path a seeker may journey, provided that their aim is God ..., they are the possessor of ascension; hence, this seeker’s journey is also an ascension.”

A critical way to purify the heart of the impurity of otherness is through the “expulsion of stray thoughts,” or *nafy-i khawāṭir* in Farsi. This meditative practice, essential to the journeyer, *dismisses thoughts not centered on God*. Upon the journeyer’s resolve to practice *nafy-i khawāṭir*, stray thoughts and distractions intensify. Regardless of their magnitude, these distractions can obstruct the journeyer’s progress. Consequently, the journeyer is tasked with dispelling these thoughts.

This world, while alluring, merely acts as a prison inhibiting the soul and distracting it from seeking nobler realities in the higher realm. The journey requires sincere *repentance* (Shabestari, 330), not merely from sins but *from indulging in anything other than the Real*. As detailed by Sayyid Muḥammad Maḥdī Baḥr al-‘Ulūm (d. 1212/1797 H/CE) in His treatise of *Seyr va Sulūk* (2007, 173-180), the Beloved, the Divine, tolerates no other in His presence. The “eye” that sees *others* is incapable of perceiving Him. This principle signifies the importance of maintaining a single-minded focus on the divine throughout the journey.

Given the unruly nature of the human mind, mastering *nafy-i khawāṭir*, this form of mental control, is initially daunting. However, the journeyer should persist in their effort to attain this mindfulness and meditation, commencing with short, intermittent sessions and gradually expanding to more extended, concentrated periods of meditation. However, *nafy-i khawāṭir* alone is insufficient; it is but the initiation of the process. Baḥr al-‘Ulūm (2007, 173-180) analogizes this practice to *dusting a house*. While a necessary step, it is only preparatory; the home must also be *decorated* to host the Friend, with *dhikr*, or the practice of “remembrance,” being the decoration inviting and accommodating the divine presence.¹ The journeyer should employ *dhikr*—i.e., the mindful repetition of specific divine Names and Qualities during meditation—to shield against the contamination of otherness, enabling a unified focus on the divine. Intriguingly, Baḥr al-‘Ulūm (2007, 173-180) initially offers the contemplation of a *physical object* as an efficient technique for

¹ Further illuminating the concept of *dhikr*, William Chittick (2019, 63) provides a profound understanding. He postulates that what demands remembrance is “Trust,” an obligation that human beings inherently bear simply by their existence. In other words, the subject of remembrance extends to the ultimate reality, the real (*ḥaqq*). This truth encapsulates the straightforward fact of God’s continual activity and omnipresence within the soul’s realm. According to Chittick, remembering God in His ceaseless activity and omnipresence is tantamount to recognizing Him as He is. This understanding culminates in the realization that the only thing holding authentic reality is the Real, that is, the Divine. Thus, Chittick reinforces the essence and significance of *dhikr* as the constant remembrance of the sole Reality.

nafy-i khawāfir. By focusing on an object and meditating on the Divine through *dhikr*, the journeyer can establish a controlled and continuous attention towards the Divine, dispelling anything that is not Him.

The journeyer gradually cultivates mastery over his thoughts, rejecting any thought not of God. This accomplishment marks a significant milestone in the spiritual journey, establishing mental control and fostering a consistent focus on God, thereby purging the heart of the impurity of otherness.

Returning to Shabestari's poetry, we gain insight into the spiritual journey. First, he (401-402) contends that the journeyer may foster a closer relationship with God by performing "supererogatory prayers," or *nawāfil*.¹ This act of devotion aids in the purification of the heart from otherness. Consequently, the journeyer may find himself in a "praiseworthy station" where the divine Essence hears and sees through him. Shabestari's perspective connects with a verse from the Quran (17:79), stating, "And keep vigil in prayer for part of the night, as a supererogatory act for thee. It may be that thy Lord will resurrect thee in a praiseworthy station." Here, as Lahiji explains (294), the term "praiseworthy station" refers to the "Muhammadan station," symbolizing the station of "perfect union" (*jam' al-jam'*) and "subsistence after annihilation."² According to Shabestari, one powerful method to reach this station is through supererogatory prayers, a practice emphasized in Islam. These prayers serve as a spiritual catalyst, propelling the journeyer closer to union with the divine Essence. Following this exploration of the journeyer's personal spiritual growth through supererogatory prayers, we can delve deeper into the broader philosophical implications of Shabestari's poetry, particularly regarding the human form in the divine manifestation.

Shabestari's understanding of spiritual journeying and the human-divine connection is encapsulated in these lines (284): "Acclaim to the First, the Essence of the Last it became / Acclaim to the Inward, the Essence of the Manifest it came."³ This poem evokes the human form as a divine manifestation, the culmination of the grand Name, *Allāh*. Lahiji (183) offers an interpretation that aligns seamlessly with the essence of this poem:

¹ In the Islamic context, "supererogatory prayers," or *nawāfil*, are non-obligatory acts of worship with substantial spiritual merits. Emphasized in Islamic jurisprudence, they help foster a closer bond with God, purify the heart, and propel individuals toward divine union. Through their transformative potential, these prayers are considered to compensate for shortcomings in obligatory prayers. They epitomize a spiritual catalyst in a journeyer's path to the divine. This multifaceted role underscores the spiritual significance of supererogatory prayers in facilitating spiritual growth within the Islamic spiritual tradition.

² Lahiji's interpretation of the term differs from most Quranic commentators. As Nasr (2015, 718) explains, many commentators consider "a praiseworthy station" in this verse as "a reference to the Prophet's power of intercession in the Hereafter ... or to his being seated near the Throne and carrying the "Banner of Praise" (*liwā' al-ḥamd*) on the Day of Resurrection"

³ Farsi: زهی اول که عین آخر آمد / زهی باطن که عین ظاهر آمد

The human form is regarded as the locus of manifestation for *Allāh*. And, *Allāh* is its Spirit and Reality and Interior. The verse “Acclaim to the First” is understood as the Divine Presence, or *ḥadrat-i ulūhīyya*, which appears as the essence of the last—the human being. The human, the final stage in the order of existents, embodies the reality of the Divine Presence and manifests it in physical form. In this context, the human entity emerges as the primary locus of divine Essence and Qualities, acting as the pivot through which the circle of existence is completed. From this reality standpoint, the human form is, metaphorically, “first.” However, considering the manifestation and completion of the universal principles, or *aḥkām-i kull*, through the human form, it is deemed the “last.” In this manner, the last point of the circle of existence is connected back to the First. It should be noted that Lāhījī, here, is not specific about what he means by “completion of the *universal principles* or *aḥkām-i kull* through the human form.”

Thus, this poem and its interpretation emphasize the central role of the human form in the manifestation of divine Essence, suggesting a continuum that completes the circle of existence, where the first and the last intertwine.

Conclusion

This paper set out to elucidate the teachings of the Persian Sufi mystic Shaykh Maḥmūd Shabestarī, with a focus on his primary work, the *Golshan-e Rāz*. Its primary aim was to interpret the spiritual journey towards divine realization as depicted in Shabestarī’s poetry, elucidating the path’s various stages and challenges and underscoring the critical role of the human form in divine manifestation. The central question addressed, “How can the spiritual journeyer overcome obstacles—particularly ‘otherness’—and achieve unity with the divine Essence within the framework of Islamic mysticism, as interpreted through Shabestarī’s teachings in *Golshan-e Rāz*?” proved instrumental in guiding the research and shaping the conclusions.

The research findings effectively demonstrate the transformative nature of the spiritual journey, which necessitates self-purification and the cessation of otherness. It illuminates Islamic spiritual practices, such as *nafy-i khawātir*, highlighting their capacity to foster an exclusive focus on God and enhance the journeyer’s progression. The research emphasizes a metaphysical continuum that completes the circle of existence by exploring Shabestarī’s conceptualization of the human form as a locus of divine manifestation. These insights collectively reinforce the study’s thesis and support the conclusion that achieving unity with the divine Essence requires a rigorous spiritual journey characterized by single-minded focus, continuous self-purification, and transcendence of duality and otherness.

To envision a world where the paper’s arguments are implemented, we could expect a profound shift in individuals’ spiritual perspectives and attitudes toward life. Adopting the principles embedded in Shabestarī’s teachings, individuals may embrace a path that compels them to transcend their physical existence, conquer internal obstacles, and realize a divine union that

imbues life with profound meaning. Conversely, a failure to embrace these principles may lead to continuing the status quo characterized by superficial engagement with life and a lack of spiritual fulfillment.

For the contemporary individual, the study's findings offer invaluable insights. In today's fast-paced world rife with distractions, Shabestari's teachings may provide a roadmap to tranquility and spiritual peace. The expulsion of astray thoughts unlocks spiritual potential and cultivates a profound composure conducive to a contemplative life. Such a life brings peace amidst chaos and offers a sense of purpose often missing in contemporary existence. Setting off to transcend the spiritual journey's obstacles—encapsulating impurities of appearance, behavior, morality, and otherness—gives individuals a valuable purpose that transcends the mundane. This spiritual endeavor ultimately infuses their lives with meaning and brings them closer to the divine, filling an existential void with a sense of divine unity.

Future research could delve deeper into Shabestari's teachings by examining their relevance in the context of modern psychological concepts such as mindfulness and meditation. It could also explore how Shabestari's teachings relate to the works of thinkers like Ibn 'Arabī and Rūmī—whose thought is echoed in Shabestari's writings—and to other spiritual traditions, offering comparative analyses that further enrich our understanding of spiritual journeying. Moreover, empirical studies examining the impact of implementing Shabestari's teachings on individuals' spiritual well-being and life satisfaction would be valuable to the discourse.

In conclusion, this paper has offered a nuanced understanding of Shabestari's thought, contributing to the discourse on Islamic metaphysics and providing a comprehensive interpretation of the spiritual journey toward divine realization. It offers a window into the profound spiritual wisdom embedded in Shabestari's poetry and presents *a way of life* that could transform contemporary individuals' spiritual and mundane existence.

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