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**Khalima KHABIBULLAYEVA<sup>a</sup>** 

<sup>a</sup>Junior Researcher in  
International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan  
E-mail: [halimahabibullayeva@gmail.com](mailto:halimahabibullayeva@gmail.com)

## A SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF THE SUFI TAFSIRS WRITTEN IN MAWARAUNNAHR

**Abstract.** *The article analyzes the formation and development of Sufi Qur'anic exegesis and its esoteric (ishari) interpretations based on historical sources. The study examines Najm al-Din Kubra's Ta'wilat Najmiyya, the esoteric commentaries continued by Simnani, as well as the methods of Qashani and other prominent Sufi exegetes through a comparative approach. It also discusses the theoretical foundations of ishari exegesis, the emergence of symbolic interpretation, and its influence on later generations of Sufi commentators.*

*The article further investigates major Persian and Arabic Sufi tafsirs produced in the region of Mawarannahr, including Khoja Porsa's Tafsiri Qur'on and Charxi's Tafsiri Charxi. Their manuscript copies, structure, stylistic features, and significance within the tradition of Sufi Qur'anic interpretation are examined in detail.*

*The findings show that ishari tafsirs first emerged within oral traditions and later developed into independent written works. Their primary aim was to interpret the inner meanings of Qur'anic verses in harmony with spiritual and ethical principles. The conclusion emphasizes the importance of Sufi tafsirs as a distinct school within Qur'anic interpretation, their impact on later exegetes, and their enduring scholarly value.*

**Keywords:** *Sufi exegesis, ishari tafsir, Ta'wilat Najmiyya, Najm al-Din Kubra, Simnani, Qashani, symbolic interpretation, Sufi hermeneutics, Persian tafsir, Central Asian Qur'anic commentary.*

## INTRODUCTION

WIn recent years, along with the development of Sufism, Qur'anic exegesis began to include interpretations of verses not only based on their apparent meanings but also

through esoteric meanings grounded in Sufi concepts. For instance, regarding verse 41 of Surah al-Rum, “Corruption has appeared on land and sea,” it is claimed that “land” refers to a person’s external limbs, whereas “sea” alludes to the heart and soul. Accordingly, they interpret the verse to mean that both the human body and spirit suffer harm as a result of the deeds they commit. Sufi exegetes cite Qur’anic commands to reflect (tafakkur), contemplate (tadabbur), take heed (tazakkur), and recite with deliberation (tartil) as evidence for undertaking allegorical (ishari) interpretation. Among such verses, they refer to Surah al-Baqarah, verse 219; Surah al-An‘am, verse 50; Surah Sad, verse 29; Surah Muhammad, verse 24; and Surah al-Muzzammil, verse 4.

Sufism developed extensively in Mawaraunnahr, and along with it, a number of Sufi Qur’anic commentaries were also produced. Among them is the exegesis *Ta’wilat Najmiyya fi al-Tafsir al-Ishari al-Sufi*. Its author is Ahmad ibn Umar ibn Muhammad Khiwaqi Khwarazmi, who was born in 540/1145 in the city of Khiwaq of Khwarazm. Eminent figures such as Najm al-Din Daya Razi (d. 654/1256), Majd al-Din Baghdadi (d. 616/1219), Sa‘d al-Din Hamawi (d. 650/1252), Sayf al-Din Bakharzi (d. 659/1261), and Baha’ al-Din Walad (d. 628/1231) were among his disciples and students.

According to Abdurrahman Jami in his *Nafahat al-UNS*, Najm al-Din, during his childhood, traveled to Egypt in search of knowledge. In Egypt, he studied under Ruzbahan Wazzan Misri (d. 584/1188). He then went to Tabriz, where he acquired both the exoteric and esoteric sciences from prominent Sufi masters such as Imam Abu Mansur Hafda, Shaykh Baba Faraj, ‘Ammar Yasir (d. 583/1187), and Isma‘il Kasri (d. 578/1183).

## METHODS

After receiving the “robe of spiritual initiation” (khirqat al-irada) from Shaykh Isma‘il Kasri, he returned to Egypt to visit his teacher Ruzbahan, and at his recommendation, he went back to Khwarazm in 580/1185. There, he established the Kubrawiyya order.

He was martyred in 618/1221 during the battle against the forces of Chinggis Khan. Najm al-Din Kubra authored several works, including *Usul ‘Ashara*, *Risalat Adab al-Dhakirin*, *Ruba‘iyyat*, and *Ta’wilat Najmiyya*. His *Ta’wilat Najmiyya* is considered

an ishari (allegorical) exegesis and is among the most esteemed commentaries written in this genre. Najm al-Din Kubra passed away during the process of composing his commentary, and his disciple, 'Ala' al-Dawla Simnani (d. 736/1336), completed the work. Najm al-Din Kubra authored the commentary up to verse 19 of Surah al-Dhariyat. From verse 19 of this surah to the end of Surah al-Tur, the tafsir is written in the style of Najm al-Din Kubra and constitutes four volumes. The fifth volume, however, was composed by 'Ala' al-Dawla Simnani, who titled it 'Ayn al-Hayat. Out of reverence, Simnani began by interpreting Surah al-Fatiha. Thereafter, he continued from Surah al-Tur to the end of the Qur'an, thus completing the work.

The language of the first four volumes is fluent and straightforward. The fifth volume, however, is written in a philosophical-ethical style that can be understood only by those well-versed in Sufi terminology. A reader of this commentary can clearly perceive the difference between the exegetical approaches of Najm al-Din Kubra and Simnani. Najm al-Din Kubra sometimes presents the literal interpretation of a verse, followed by its allegorical (ishari) meaning, saying: "The indication here is this and that." Since his symbolic interpretations are not framed through complex Sufi-philosophical principles, they are easier to comprehend.

For instance, he explains verse 8 of Surah al-Baqarah as follows: "Among the people are those who say, 'We believe in Allah and the Last Day,' though they are not believers." The allusion (ishara) in this verse pertains to those among the Muslims who are heedless and forgetful. They consider themselves true believers, yet in reality they are Muslims only by imitation and utterance. The Exalted Allah says: "The Bedouins say, 'We have believed.' Say: 'You have not believed; rather, say, "We have submitted," for faith has not yet entered your hearts.'" True faith is light. When it enters the heart, the truth becomes manifest to the believer.

The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings be upon him) said to Haritha: "How did you begin the morning, O Haritha?" He replied: "I began the morning as a true believer." The Prophet asked: "Every truth has a reality. What is the reality of your faith?" He said: "I began the morning with my soul having turned away from the world. I spent my night sleepless and my day thirsty. It is as if the Throne of my Lord were set before me; as if the people of Paradise were enjoying its blessings; and as if the people of Hell were screaming in its fire." Upon hearing this, the Messenger of Allah (peace

and blessings be upon him) said: “You have perceived the truth, so hold fast to it, O servant whose heart Allah has illuminated.”

He also interpreted verses by linking them to one another. Najm al-Din Kubra placed significant emphasis on the Arabic letters and derived symbolic meanings from them. He asserted that Arabic letters express the names and attributes of God and supported this claim with evidence from Qur’anic verses and prophetic traditions. At the beginning of his commentary, he enumerates the reasons why the Qur’an begins with the letter ba’, and he elaborates extensively on ten meanings and six interpretive aspects of this single letter in the phrase *bismillah*.

Simnani, however, does not refer to the outward (literal) exegesis of the verses. Because he interprets the verses entirely through theoretical and philosophical principles, understanding his symbolic allusions presents considerable difficulty. For example, he interprets verse 5 of Surah al-Rahman, “The sun and the moon are in a precise calculation,” as follows: the sun of prophethood and the moon of sainthood are situated in the sphere of the human constitution. These two revolve with precise measure around the axis of the point of the letter nun in al-Rahman within the circle of eternity and pre- eternity. This secret does not become manifest until one comprehends the form of the arc that appears in whiteness and blackness. The circle of pre- eternity is connected to eternity in a single direction through the string of the bow. Sainthood stands upright through the alif of the Supreme Name; and the secret of the letter sin, which gives rise to the greatest arrow, becomes apparent through the alif of the Name, the string of the waw, and the bow of the nun.

Numerous Sufi exegetes such as Isma‘il Haqqi Bursawi, Mahmud Alusi, and Nishapuri consulted and transmitted from Najm al-Din Kubra’s commentary. However, no exegete transmitted from the *tafsir* authored by Simnani, most likely due to its theoretical and philosophical mode of exposition.

Ta’wilat Qashani is another Sufi commentary. Its author, Shaykh Kamal al-Din ‘Abd al-Razzaq Jamal al-Din ibn Ahmad Qashani Samarqandi (d. 730/1330), has no known date of birth. Biographical information about him is scarce in the sources. He was born and raised in Qashan. He was a disciple of Nur al-Din ‘Abd al-Samad ibn ‘Ali Isfahani (d. 638/1241) and an ardent adherent of Ibn ‘Arabi and his doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud*. On this basis, he engaged in scholarly debates with Ibn ‘Arabi’s critic, ‘Ala’

al-Dawla Simnani, and, according to Jami, he prevailed in those debates. His works include *Lata’if al-A‘lam*, *Risala fi al-Qadar*, *Islaḥat al-Sufiyya*, *Sharḥ Fusus al-Ḥikam*, and *Ta’wilat Qashani*. Through Qashani’s commentaries, many of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas reached later generations of Sufis and became widespread.

Qashani’s *Ta’wilat Qashani* has been published separately in two volumes and also as marginal notes alongside the commentary ‘Ara’is al-Bayan fi Ḥaqa’iq al-Qur’ān by Abu Muḥammad ibn Abi Nasr Shirazi. In 1988, it was translated into Turkish and printed by Ali Rıza Doksanedi. Some scholars attribute this *tafsir* to Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240). In the introduction to the *Manar* commentary, Shaykh Rashid Rida (d. 1354/1935), quoting his teacher Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1323/1905), writes: “Because ‘Abd al-Razzaq Qashani was among the Batiniyya, he authored an *ishari* commentary in which he presented meanings that do not befit God and His Word, and in order to make it appear credible and benefit from the renown of Ibn ‘Arabi, he attributed it to him.”

Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahabi writes the following in his *Tafsir wa’l-Mufassirun*: “We do not accept the claim that Qashani belonged to the Batiniyya. Moreover, we have no doubt that the author of this *tafsir* *Ta’wilat Qashani* is not Ibn ‘Arabi but rather ‘Abd al-Razzaq Qashani. First, all manuscript copies attribute this commentary to Qashani. Second, according to the author of *Kashf al-Zunun*, the *tafsir* known as *Ta’wilat Qashani* titled *Ta’wilat al-Qur’ān* was written, according to the terminology of the Sufis, up to Surah Sad, and its author is Shaykh Kamal al-Din ‘Abd al-Razzaq Jamal al-Din Qashi Samarqandi. This commentary begins with the words: ‘Praise be to God, who made the composition of His Word the manifestation of His beautiful attributes...’. Third, in the introduction of the *tafsir* it is stated that Qashani’s teacher was Nur al-Din ‘Abd al-Samad ibn ‘Ali Isfahani, a shaykh who died at the end of the seventh century AH, specifically in 638 AH thus, it is impossible for him to have been a teacher of Ibn ‘Arabi.”

Qashani’s *Ta’wilat al-Qur’ān* combines theoretical Sufi exegesis with *ishari* (allegorical) interpretation. His exegetical method clearly demonstrates that his mystical outlook is aligned with the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabi. The remaining portion of the *tafsir*—namely, from Surah Sad to the end of the Qur’ān—is attributed to an unknown commentator.

## RESULTS

Regarding verse 29 of Surah al-Baqarah, “Then He turned to the heaven and fashioned them into seven heavens,” he offers the following interpretation: “He made the heavens seven layers as perceived by ordinary people. The eighth and ninth layers of the heavens are the Kursi and the ‘Arsh. By ‘heaven’ is meant the world of spirituality. The first heaven is the realm of the faculty of the soul (quwwat al-nafs), the abode of angels, and the world of jinn. The second heaven is the world of the soul (‘alam al-nafs). The third is the world of the heart; the fourth, the world of the intellect; the fifth, the world of the innermost secret (sirr); the sixth, the world of the spirit (ruh). The seventh is the hidden world that represents the secret of the spirit, distinct from the inner secret of the heart.”

He does not give attention to the literal meanings of the verses, but confines himself exclusively to their ishari (symbolic) meanings. For example, concerning verse 6 of Surah al-Ma’idah, “O you who believe! When you rise for prayer, wash your faces and your hands up to the elbows, wipe your heads, and wash your feet up to the ankles,” he interprets it as follows: “When you rise from the sleep of heedlessness and prepare yourself for prayer—for true supplication and for turning toward the Real—then cleanse the essence of your heart with the purifying water of conduct, moral discipline, and the beneficial rulings of the Shari‘ah, which remove the base qualities of the lower self. Guard yourselves from lusts and vile traits, even as far as your rights and personal interests.”

They also interpreted the persons, places, and events in Qur’anic narratives through allusive and symbolic meanings. For example, they interpreted verse 42 of Surah Taha – “Go, you and your brother, with My signs, and do not falter in remembering Me” – as follows: “O Moses, go forth. You are the heart, and your brother is the intellect. Do not be negligent in conveying My proofs and explanations to the commanding self (nafs al-ammara).” Here, Prophet Moses is likened to the heart, Aaron to the intellect, and Pharaoh to the commanding self.

“Tafsiri Qur’on” is an exegesis authored by Khoja Porsa Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Mahmud Hafiziy Bukhari, a renowned Sufi of the Naqshbandi order and a disciple of Khoja Baha’uddin Naqshband. He was born in 756/1355 in Bukhara and studied in its madrasas. He learned jurisprudence from Abu Tahir Muhammad ibn

Muhammad ibn Hasan Tahiriy. In 1407, he built a library called “Dar al-Fuqaha” in the lower Dehqon district of Bukhara and headed it himself. Due to this library, 144 manuscript sources on creed, jurisprudence, and Sufism have survived to the present day.

## DISCUSSION

In 822/1420, Khoja Porsa set out for Hajj. During the journey, he visited cities such as Nasaf, Chaghaniyan, Termez, Balkh, and Herat. The scholars and shaykhs of these regions showed him great respect and served him with honor. While performing the Hajj rites, he fell ill and was unable to complete the final circumambulation (tawaf) independently; it was completed with the assistance of his companions. Afterwards, he traveled to Madinah. Having visited the Messenger of God, he passed away there on the 24th of Dhu al-Hijjah of the same year and was buried beside the grave of al-‘Abbas, may God be pleased with him.

The number of Porsa’s works is close to twenty; among them are “Tafsir Qur’on,” “Fasl al-Khitab li-Wasf al-Ahbab,” and “Tahqiqat.” Seventeen of his manuscripts are preserved in the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan. Among these is a manuscript copy of “Tafsir Qur’on” written in the author’s own hand, catalogued as No. 2180. The first three pages were written by Abdurrahman Jami (d. 898/1492). The tafsir is in Persian and was copied in 815/1412 in naskh script. It contains commentary on eight surahs: al-Fatiha, al-Qadr, al-Bayyina, al-Zalzala, al-‘Adiyat, al-Qari‘a, al-Takathur, al-‘Asr, and al-Humaza. This tafsir is considered a Sufi-allusive (ishari) exegesis and is among the earliest Persian tafsirs written in Mawaraunnahr. According to a note on the first folio, the tafsir was presented as a gift to the Emir of Bukhara, Sayyid Bahadur Sultan ‘Abdulahad (d. 1328/1910). It was first kept in the library of Muhammad Daniyalbiy Otaliq and later in the library of Muhammad Sharif Sadr Ziyo.

Several manuscript copies of this tafsir are preserved in Turkey in Ayasofya (No. 84), Sahib Ali Pasha (No. 113), and Sulaymaniya (No. 63) libraries as well as in the Beyazid State Library (No. 3262), and in Iran at the Juma al-Majid Center (No. 606545).

According to A. B. Khalidov, Porsa authored more than one hundred volumes of tafsir. In contrast, Khoja Khalifa, in his “Kashf al-Zunun,” states that Porsa’s tafsir was written only for the juz’ of “al-Mulk” and “al-Naba’.”

The author is Ya‘qub ibn Usmon ibn Mahmud ibn Muhammad Ghaznavi Charxi Sarzi, who was born in 1363 in the village of Charx near the city of Ghazna. Biographical information about him in the sources is limited. He received his initial education in Charx, then continued his studies in Ghazna, Herat, Bukhara, and Egypt. He was one of the disciples of Baha’uddin Naqshband and served as his third khalifa. Although he learned the teachings of the tariqa and the etiquettes of dhikr from Naqshband, he also kept company with Farid al-Din ‘Attar and attained spiritual maturity in his presence. In the final years of his life, he lived in the village of Khalg‘atu near Dushanbe and passed away there in 1447.

He authored more than ten works, among the most renowned of which are *Fara’id-i Manzuma*, *Tafsiri Charxi*, *Risala-yi Qudsiyya*, *Risala-yi Abdaliyya*, and *Risala-yi Unsiyya*.

*Tafsiri Charxi* became widespread and well-known throughout the region of Mawarannah. Twenty-seven manuscript copies of the work are preserved in the Manuscript Collection of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan. These manuscripts date to the 16th–17th centuries. The commentary begins with *Surat al-Fatiha* and continues from *Surat al-Mulk* to *Surat al-Nas*, comprising commentaries on a total of forty-nine suras.

**The author explains the reason for composing the work as follows:**

“A group of friends and brethren asked me to write a commentary in the Persian language on *al-Fatiha* and from *Surat al-Mulk* to the end of the Book so that both the learned and the common people may benefit from it.”

In writing the commentary, the author made extensive use of numerous *tafsir* works and Sufi literature. To distinguish his own views from those of other commentators, he employed the phrase “in faqir meguyad” (“this humble one says”). Poetry is frequently used to reinforce interpretive points. In some passages, he cites by name the poets Ibn Farid, Sa‘id Kabuli, and Ḥakim Sana‘i Ghaznavi, while in other places verses are quoted without attribution. This suggests that the unattributed poems may belong to the commentator himself. His mastery of poetry and the absence of these verses from other literary sources support this conclusion.

## CONCLUSION

Although the allegorical interpretation of the Qur’anic verses beyond their apparent meanings was rare in the 1st–2nd/7th–8th centuries, in later years, oral-style

tafsirs began to emerge in written form as independent commentaries. A chronological study of Sufi tafsirs shows that among the widely circulated and recognized works, the following are particularly significant: Sahl al-Tustari's *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim*, Abu Abdurrahman al-Sulami's *Haqa'iq al-Tafsir*, Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri's *Lata'if al-Isharat*, Abu Sa'd Shihab al-Din al-Ulusi's *Ruh al-Ma'ani fi Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim wa al-Sab' al-Masani*, and Isma'il Haqqi al-Bursawi's *Ruh al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*.

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