

Between Worlds: The Art and Challenge of Translating Death in Persian Poetry**Dr. Ali Rafiei**

Guest Lecturer

Birjand University, South Khorasan, Iran

Email: alirf44@gmail.com/ kr88nk@gmail.com**Abstract**

Persian literature and culture are deeply rooted in the idea of death. The readers are repeatedly reminded of death and the afterlife by Persian poets. This essay explores the difficult balancing act between linguistic precision and cultural quirks as it translates the profound theme of death in Persian poetry. Translators face linguistic and cultural difficulties as a result of the complex depiction of mortality in Persian literature especially in its poetic traditions. Persian poetry which includes philosophical reflections metaphors and cultural perspectives explores death in a variety of ways in both classical masterpieces and contemporary poetry. Examining the linguistic nuances and cultural settings that influence how death is portrayed in Persian poetry this abstract strives to highlight the difficulties of such translation effort. The article invites readers to recognize the artistry and confront the difficulties involved in translating the profound theme of death in Persian poetic expressions by illuminating how the essence of mortality is communicated across linguistic boundaries through a comparative analysis of a few chosen works and translators' perspectives.

Keywords: *Death, Poetry, Translation, Persian Literature***Introduction**

Translating death in literature, requires recognition of the complexity and depth of death as a subject and the challenges of delivering its various aspects across linguistic and cultural fields. Death is an omnipresent and ontological concept that has diverse cultural, religious and philosophical substance that ordain how it is represented in countless literary works globally. Translating this idea requires linguistic proficiency as well as a keen perception of the emotional and cultural connections relevant to death in the original language.

Literature predominantly uses death in metaphorical symbolic and culturally specific contexts. Translators must grasp the nuances of the original texts, emotional subtext, symbolic meaning and cultural significance as well as precisely preserving the literal meaning of death. Linguistic challenges like the proliferation of death-related metaphors, cultural terminology and expressions that might not translate authentically into the target language must be resolved during this process.

When translating death, it is also vital to account for cultural conceptions and convictions. Distinct societies have divergent perspectives and interpretations of death informed by historical events philosophical schools of thought and religious doctrines. Translators are tasked with grasping of these cultural idiosyncrasies in order to ensure a sophisticated and precise portrayal of the subject. Thereby, the concept of translating death in literature entails

upholding the fundamental nature of death in all of its notional cultural and emotional dimensions surpassing mere language translation.

In these circumstances, a successful translation demands a deliberate equilibrium between fidelity to the original text and the aptitude to elicit similar resonances and contemplations in readers from potentially different cultural backgrounds. Gunter Grass mentions “translation is that which transforms everything so that nothing changes” (Grass 147). In essence, translating death in literature is an intricate and layered procedure that exceeds words and encompasses the conveyance of emotional and cultural realms in order to capture the profundity and significance of this universal idea spanning languages and cultural divides.

Persian literature, with its profound history and cultural profundity, presents a particular repertoire of expressions concerning death which makes it difficult to translate the theme of death in Persian poetry. Various views on death are customary in Persian culture, commonly shaped by philosophical and religious traditions such as Islam and Sufism.

Persian poetry, recognized for its huge repository of metaphors, often uses allegory and symbolism to delve upon death. Since equivalent terms may not be present in the target language, this feature of Persian literature poses a challenge to translate these metaphors preserving their emotional aspects and close meanings. Persian poetry is usually written in particular rhythmic and rhyme patterns and it is yet another difficulty for translators. A fine calibration must be struck to communicate the thematic core of death while maintaining the music and melody of the poem, which every so often calls for creative strategies.

The concept of death is often considered as a metaphysical or spiritual journey in Persian poetry, especially in poetry infused with Sufi mysticism. Delivering philosophical themes and mystical elements of death frequently proves difficult due to a strong possibility of no exact equivalents in the target language. Saturated with a broad spectrum of philosophical, religious, and historical traditions, Iranian culture regards and theorizes death in a sophisticated and layered manner.

According to Mary Boyce, Zoroaster was the first to teach people the doctrines of the Judges about the actuality of heaven and hell, resurrection and universal judgment after death, and eternal life for the soul and newly united body. In Iranian culture, there are multifarious customs and traditions connected with funerals and death. After death customs in Iran commonly comprise different ceremonies that include washing the corpse, covering the body in cerements, and prayer. people commonly gather to offer soothing and emotional support to the grieving family. The vast Sufi tradition of Iran extends distinctive understandings on death. As mentioned by some Sufi scholars and poets, death gives an opportunity for supernatural journey, spiritual enlightenment and unity with the divine. Veneration for parents and familial connections are deeply cherished in Iranian culture.

Given Iran’s extensive history of hostilities and war the idea of martyrdom is deeply ingrained in Iranian culture. Martyrs are frequently glorified and commemorated for their deaths. Such assimilations are ample in Persian literature. Some Persian poets even consider death as a merry event. In Rumi’s verse, death is portrayed as a “wedding night” (*shab-e arusi*), a metaphor both culturally and theologically dense with meaning (Abbasi & Khosravi 56). Translating such imagery calls for finesse to intertextual references and the mystical worldview foundational to them, which may be foreign to target audiences. Death here is conceived as union, not an end, and English has no direct counterparts.

Denotative translation might retain imagery but cloud desired connotations, whereas substituting them with target-language equivalents carries the danger of diminishing cultural specificity. In Persian notably in formal or sympathetic contexts euphemisms are commonly applied as opposed to direct references to *Marg* (death). Statements such as *Dar-Gozasht* (passed away) and *be Rahmat-e-Khoda raft* (went to Gods mercy) have emotional and religious meanings that are missing in equivalents in neutral English like died. The Persian language which is spoken in Iran, Afghanistan (*Dari*), and Tajikistan (*Tajik*) shows regional anomaly in death terminology and phraseology. *Fot Kardan* (to pass away) is conventional in Iran, though *Wafaat Kardan* (from Arabic) is more common in *Dari* used in Afghanistan. These differences are tied to “Religious, historical, and sociolinguistic factors” (Windfuhr 74). Translators working for pan-Persian audiences must navigate these variations carefully.

Death in literature frequently appears in metaphorical symbolic and culturally particular ways. Translators have a heavy task at hand. They must understand the nuances of the original texts, emotional context, symbolic significance and cultural meaning to faithfully capture the meaning of the death. Linguistic challenges like the amplitude of death-related metaphors, cultural words and expressions that might not translate accurately into the target language must be dealt with during this process. Therefore, the concept of translating death in literature necessitates maintaining the essence of death in all of its conceptual cultural and emotional aspects going beyond simple language translation.

In these circumstances, a successful translation requires a careful balance between fidelity to the original text and the ability to evoke similar responses and thoughts in readers from potentially different cultural backgrounds. Simply put, translating death in literature is a complex and multifaceted process that goes beyond words and involves the transmission of emotional and cultural landscapes in order to preserve the richness and resonance of this universal theme across languages and cultural boundaries.

Death is often explored as a transcendent or spiritual journey in Persian poetry, especially in poetry influenced by Sufi mysticism. Conveying philosophical themes and mystical aspects of death can be difficult because these ideas may not have exact equivalents in other linguistic and cultural contexts. A delicate balance must be struck to convey the thematic essence of death while maintaining the music and melody of the poem, which often requires innovative solutions.

Persian poets often leave room for subjective interpretation when discussing death in their works. A nuanced approach to translating this subjectivity while maintaining fidelity to the original text and allowing for a wide range of reader interpretations is essential. Translators of Persian poetry, in addition to being bilingual and bicultural, must be sensitive enough to convey the spirit of death as it resonates in the original Persian poems.

The Concept of Death in Persian Poetry

Iran’s culture views and conceptualizes death in a complex and multidimensional way due to being influenced by a diverse range of philosophical, religious, and historical traditions. Iranian views of death, despite the fact that individual views may differ, are shaped by a number of overarching themes and beliefs. Islam is the most prevalent religion in Iran, and Islamic beliefs have a great influence on how people view death. According to Muslims, there is an afterlife in which individuals are judged based on their actions during this life. The emphasis on a moral life is one way in which this belief in an afterlife shape how people view death. However, Zoroastrians, before the arrival of Islam in Iran, espoused a different belief system

regarding death and the afterlife. Mary Boyce examines the beliefs of pre-Islamic Iranians in her book *Zoroastrians*:

There was belief in life after death for the individual, and according to its earliest form the disembodied spirit, the 'urvan', lingered on earth for three days before departing downward to a subterranean kingdom of the dead, ruled over by Yima (Sanskrit Yama) who had been the first king to rule on earth and the first man to die. (Gayo-maretan is the prototype of humanity rather than an actual man.) In Yima's realm the spirits lived a shadowy existence, and were dependent on their descendants still living on earth to satisfy their hunger and to clothe them. Offerings for this purpose had to be ritually made, at specified times, so that they could pass through the barrier of matter. (12-13)

The eyes of the dead are clearly on the world of the living. This theme is also present in modern beliefs. Rituals in the world of the living are performed according to specific predetermined instructions after death. Zoroastrian Iranians believe that rituals performed in the first three days after death are necessary to give the soul the ability to enter the underworld and to protect it from malevolent forces.

According to Boyce, Zoroaster was the pioneer in instructing individuals about the existence of heaven and hell, resurrection, universal judgment post-mortem, and the concept of eternal life for both the soul and the newly reunited body. In Iranian culture, there exists a plethora of customs and traditions linked to funerals and death. The funerary practices in Iran generally encompass specific rituals that include the washing of the corpse, dressing the body in burial garments, and engaging in prayer. Mourners typically gather to provide comfort and emotional support to the grieving family members.

The extensive Sufi tradition in Iran presents distinctive insights regarding death. Some Sufi scholars and poets assert that death serves as a gateway for a transcendental journey, spiritual awakening, and communion with the divine. This is a common belief among Sufis and mystics in Iran and Islam. By overcoming or confronting death, Sufis and mystics attempt to reduce the fear and terror that death creates. They prefer spiritual immortality over material, earthly existence. True Sufis and mystics respect and value death rather than hate or blame it. Their fascination and love for death is based on religious stories and verses. Verses that most accurately depict the end of human existence on earth and life with the Almighty God. Persian literature and poetry use this mystical technique.

In Persian literature and art cypress trees, roses and nightingales are frequently used as symbols of death. These depictions often emphasize the cyclical nature of beauty and the everlasting essence of life. In Iranian culture, great importance is placed on honoring parents and maintaining familial connections. Ancestors are revered in Iranian culture and daily life revolves around remembering the dead including through yearly memorial services. The concept of martyrdom is ingrained in Iranian culture due to the country's long history of conflict and war. The deaths of martyrs are often remembered and honored. By associating death with concepts of bravery and sacrifice this viewpoint improves cultural understanding of death.

According to Shahpasandy (2019) Persian texts express death-condemning, death-glorifying, death-accepting and diverse viewpoints ranging from Sufi conceptions of death as liberation from the prison of the material world and reunion with the Beloved to Khayyāms' existential distrust (Shahpasandy 2). These viewpoints are not equivalent and the translators' decisions will always skew the works emotional and philosophical register.

Sufi philosophy views *Fana* (death) as fulfillment and *Baqa* (survival) as residing in the divine. Sufi literature, often frames death as union with the divine rather than an end. The metaphor of death as a wedding night (Shab e Arusi) in Rumi's verse has both cultural and theological connotations (Abbasi and Khosravi 98). Target audiences may not be familiar with intertextual allusions and the mystical worldview that underlies such imagery so translating them requires careful consideration.

In this context death is a union rather than an end and there are no precise English equivalents. Any response, whether loanword, gloss, or paraphrase, runs the danger of alienating the reader or domesticating the metaphysical oddity. Persian frequently combines holy, literary, and conversational levels to create a layered narration that is particularly difficult in translation when Anglophone norms of reception might impose pressure on texts toward lucidity and commercial spirituality, occasionally at the cost of cultural distinctiveness (Reyhani Monfared, 76).

Persian death lexicon abounds with Qur'anic, legal, and spiritual echoes: *Marg* (death), *Ajal* (appointed time), *Shahadat* (martyrdom), *Qiyamat* (Resurrection). Without paratextual backing, interpreting these as death, fate, martyrdom, or Judgment Day may be technically accurate but semantically poor because much of their power survives in ritualistic memory and practice in Death is also coded in symbolic analogies: the moth's immolation in flames, the reed flute's moan, dust and threshold, the nightingale and rose, wine and pub—each a conceptual constellation whose significance is determined by a web of associations. Giving the image without its network endangers losing the valence that makes death seem lovely, terrible, free, or nonsensical inside a given poem.

Voice and stance are as crucial as denotation. Rumi's ecstatic embrace of death, Sa'di's prudent acceptance, Bidel's portrayal of life as an "illusion" and the world as a "mortuary" or "trap-land" (Shahpesandy 5), and Khayyam's carpe diem skepticism create pragmatic cues intonations of address, exhortation, and consolation that shape what "death" means in context. As Shahpesandy notes, Sufi poets "Admire death and perceive it as liberation from the prison of the material world" while Khayyam "Views death as the end of man" (3), shaping fundamentally different rhetoric of mortality.

Form intensifies meaning. Persian prosody, mono-rhyme, and *Radif* generate ritual cadence—mourning, admonition, or trance—that English cannot replicate directly. Affect is recalibrated by decisions about lineation alliteration and stress patterns. Depending on prosodic mimicry or reinvention the same death can feel either ecstatic or elegiac. Deliberate ambiguity is also common. One word can simultaneously invoke mystical spiritual and legal registers when discussing death. Over-clarifying in English can close the poem's interpretive aperture; under-translating can estrange readers. Here, introductions, notes, and glossaries become part of the meaning-making apparatus.

Cultural memory saturates death imagery and tone. Shia martyrology, Qur'anic eschatology, and mourning practices inflect even seemingly secular poems. In Anglophone reception, universalist mysticism is often privileged, trimming these contextual anchors and altering the ethical texture of death in the target text. As Reyhani Monfared (2024) argues, the global passage of Persian literature is conditioned by "Power dynamics" that sort "Marginalized hybrid texts" for acceptance within Western literary circles, affecting how culturally embedded themes like death are re-voiced in translation (Monfared 112).

Micro-readings illustrate these tensions. In Khayyām's Rubaiyat, "Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend, / Before we too into the Dust descend"—the "dust" gains depth when heard against Qur'anic creation and return; domesticated hedonism loses this eschatological undertow. In Sufi verse, the "Wedding night of union" as a metaphor for death can be rendered as "ecstatic union," which transmits doctrine but risks cliché; leaving *fana* untranslated preserves strangeness at the cost of accessibility. Sa'dī's counsel that "Life and death are two faces of the same coin; make a good name before you go" reorients death from metaphysics to social memory, an ethical economy that a flat "be virtuous" would erase.

Cognitive sociolinguistic studies show that death is often framed through source domains such as personification, destruction, captivity, and journey in Persian (Sharifi Moghaddam and Tahmasbi). For example, *Az in Donya Raftan* (to leave this world) conceptualizes death as a departure, while *Dam-e Marg* (trap of death) frames it as an act of capture. While substituting them with equivalents in the target language runs the risk of diluting cultural specificity, literal translation may preserve imagery but obscure intended connotations.

2. Euphemistic and Politeness Strategies

In Persian euphemisms are often used in place of direct references to Marg (death) particularly in formal or contexts.

In order to maintain cultural fidelity, the translator must choose between maintaining the religious framing and rendering it more secularly for wider accessibility. Persian phrases pertaining to death frequently have discursive purposes beyond denotation such as expressing fatalism evoking humility or strengthening ties within the community. (Pishghadam et al. 43).

Persian phrases referring to death frequently contain intertextual allusions to hadith mixed with classical poetry or verses from the Quran. In literature sermons and obituaries for instance the phrase every soul shall taste death *Kullu nafsin dā'iqat al mawt* (21:35) is used. "Each option has an impact on authority and emotions; thus, translators must choose between translating directly keeping the Arabic or using a proverb that is culturally equivalent" (Agha Golzadeh and Pourebrahim 86). Speakers adjust the intensity of their emotions for example *Khaak Sepordan* "to consign to the soil" or *Qatl e Fāj' e Bār* which means catastrophic killing.

The emotional charge and register must correspond with the communicative goal but English frequently lacks comparable gradations. As a coping strategy Persian folklore occasionally makes ironic or humorous allusions to death. The use of death lexicon for exaggeration satire or solidarity is demonstrated by phrases like *Marg bar...* (death to...) and *Az khande Mordan* (to die of laughter) in political slogans. In cross-cultural settings literal translation runs the risk of being misunderstood.

3. Reflections on Mortality: Sa'di Shirazi and Jalal al-din Rumi

As discussed earlier, Persian poetry is full of idea of death. In the following section, few excerpts from Sa'di Shirazi and Jalal al-din Rumi with their respective English translations by Edward Rehatsek, G.M Wickens, Reynold A. Nicholson and Coleman Barks are provided to examine the approach of different translators to the theme of death. The shift in tone, cultural framing and register is analyzed and an English translation is also provided by the author,

3.1. Sa'di — *Bustan and Gulistan*

In *Gulistan*, Chapter Seven, on Education Story 18, Sa'di writes:

فارسی:

مرد درویش که بار ستم فاقه کشید// به در مرگ همانا که سبکبار آید.(گلستان، باب هفتم در تاثیر تربیت، حکایت ۱۸)

Here Sa'di depicts a Dervish as person whose sufferings during lifetime has made him ready for afterlife. He is spiritually ready and his trials have purified him.

Translation Approaches:

- **Edward Rehatsek (1888)** renders this with a prose translation:

“A dervish who carries only the load of poverty Will also arrive lightly burdened at the gate of death.”(183-18)

Here, Rehatsek renders a literal translation and keeps a blind eye on interpretive translation, He avoids Sufi teachings and metaphor of death as liberation.

Francis Gladwin (1813), in *The Gulistan or Rose Garden: By Musle-huddeen Sheik Saadi, of Shiraz*, goes for a slightly freer translation:

“The Durwaish who bears the burden of poverty will enter the gate of death lightly loaded.”(324)

Like rehatsek, Gladwin keeps the term “Durwaish” which shows cultural and spiritual depth. However, Gladwin notes the archaic version of dervish which could be hard to read for modern readers. On the other hand, Gladwin omits *Setam* (ستم) which is central to the idea of a comfortable afterlife for a Dervish and losing such key word reduces the ethical weight of the story.

Translation by the Scholar: A Dervish shaped by pain and grief/ comes to the death's door as thin as a leaf.

Here the metaphor maintains the Persian poets original meaning by implying a calm and serene journey toward the afterlife.

3.2. Jalal al-Din Rumi: *Divan-e-Shams and Ghazals*

Rumi famously calls death *Aroosi Abad* (Eternal Wedding), symbolizing the soul's union with the Divine. For instance, in *Divan-e-Shams, Ghazals, Ghazal no.833* he states”

فارسی:
مرگ ما هست عروسی ابد // سیر آن چیست هو الله احد (دیوان شمس، غزل ۸۳۳)

Translation Approaches:

- **A. J. Arberry** keeps the mystical tone:

“Our death is our marriage with eternity/What is the secret? God is one.” (120)
Arberry preserves the theological metaphor and Quranic resonance, keeping the diction elevated.

- **Coleman Barks** (late 20th c.) recasts it in contemporary spiritual idiom:

“Our death is our wedding with eternity/ What is the secret? God is One.” (105)
Here, Islamic and Sufi specificity is replaced with universalist spirituality, making it accessible to a broad audience but losing intertextual depth.

- **Scholar's Translation:**

Death for us is an everlasting wedding/Its mystery, Huwa Allahu Ahad.

The translated couplet by the scholar keeps the Arabic in the target language otherwise foreignize it so that a trace of the original language is present for teaching.

فارسی:

از جمادی مردم و نامی شدم/ وز نما مردم به حیوان برزدم/ مردم از حیوانی و آدم شدم/ پس چه ترسم کی ز مردن کم شدم
(مثنوی معنوی، دفتر سوم، بخش ۱۸۷)

Translation Approaches:

- **A. J. Arberry** (1949) offers a close translation:

I died as a mineral and became a plant/ I died as plant and rose to animal/ I died as animal and I was Man/ Why should I fear? When was I less by dying? (Arberry 66)

This keeps the paradox intact, reflecting Sufi belief in spiritual continuation.

- **Barks** transforms it:

I died as mineral and became a plant/ I died as plant and rose to animal/ I died as animal and I was human/ Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?(Barks 95)

- **Scholar's Translation:**

I died a lifeless stone, and grew as green/ I died to growth, and rose as beast unseen. I died from beast, and human form I won. Why fear then death? Each death made me more than one.

This translation attempts to maintain both semantic fidelity (the sequence inanimate → plant → animal → human) and convey the music and poetic allure into English. The phrase “more than one” at the end refers to both evolution and existential enrichment after each death.

Conclusion

Translating death-related expressions from Persian is a complex interpretive process that touches on discourse analysis, religious studies, sociolinguistics, and metaphor theory. In addition to lexical equivalency, translators need to consider intertextual resonance, cultural semiotics, and pragmatic appropriateness. Persian conceptions of death as noted by Sharifi Moghaddam and Tahmasbi embody both mystical optimism and pessimistic fatalism a duality that defies being reduced to a single narrative frame. Cultural literacy genre awareness and language proficiency are all necessary for successful translation.

Death is seen in both Sadi and Rumi as a moral mystical and rhetorical turning point rather than just an end. The methods used by translators vary from adaptive domestication reshaping metaphors for contemporary audiences to philological fidelity which preserves Persian imagery religious framing and register. The result is that English readers may encounter radically different “deaths” in these works from the intimate embrace of a Sufi's Beloved to the stoic acceptance of a moralist's fate.

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