

An Analysis of the Causes of Multivalence in Hafez's Discourse: A Hermeneutic Approach

Saeed Saghe'i

Young Researchers Club, Hamedan Branch,
Islamic Azad University, Hamedan, Iran.

Hadi Khadivar

Department of Persian Language, Hamedan Branch,
Islamic Azad University, Hamedan, Iran.

Abstract. From the viewpoint of hermeneutics, texts are divided into open and closed texts. In contrast to closed texts, which are inflexibly structured, open texts are those which, according to Eco, are intended to lead to plural interpretations; these texts allow great freedom to the readers in the interpretation process and are preferred by intellectual people, since they, as opposed to common people, do not seek immediate pleasure from the text but try to go deep into the text and appreciate the miraculous power of such texts. The present paper is an attempt to show that Hafez's poems belong to open texts. Moreover, case studies on his poems, by means of a hermeneutic approach as well as the ideas of Eco and Bakhtin, will demonstrate that multivalence in Hafez's poems stems from general literary and linguistic factors, his own personality, and sometimes from issues related to the readers. The results of the paper are illustrated at the end of a paper through a tree diagram.

Keywords: Eco; Bakhtin; Meaning; Hermeneutics; Hafez.

1. Introduction

One of the most fruitful methods for analyzing texts, especially literary ones, is hermeneutics. Hermeneutics have been called the science of interpretation. It was first established by Saint Augustine and, later on, many scholars such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Ferdinand de Saussure, Northrop Frye, Vladimir Propp, and Umberto Eco were, directly or indirectly, came to engage in it. This approach is considered by its followers as a step away from traditional value judgments toward a more scientific literary criticism which can contribute to the analysis and categorization of texts and which, through its efficient analytical methods, enables us to investigate the meaning of texts.

In comparing the theories of communication studies with the ideas contained in old literary texts, hermeneutics can be used to decode and understand better the multiple layers of meaning in the texts. Such an interdisciplinary study is useful in that it allows us to establish a link between communication studies and literature.

The most notable literary production of Persian literature, one ventures to say, has almost always taken place in poetry and, therefore, Persian literature, with such great poets as Hafez, Sa'di, Molavi, Ferdowsi, Attar, Khayyam, and Nezami, can claim an unquestionably unique status in world literature. Hafez, more than any of these numerous poets, has found its way well through common people in Iran. Undoubtedly his poems are among the most ambiguous and multi-faceted instances of Persian poetry so that Iranians have an old tradition of having a *sortes* with Hafez when making difficult decisions. This is called "Faal" in Persian. Persian dictionaries define "Faal" as an art or method of learning about future happenings by virtue of interpreting a heard sentence or by chance opening of Quran or other books by great men such as Hafez or Molavi.

To decode this feature of Hafez's poems we can make use of hermeneutics and linguistics. In so doing we may understand why Hafez's words are so ambiguous and multi-layered and why they have not only decreased in power and effect over the centuries but also they have developed a wonderful characteristic which has caused Hafez to be called "Tongue of the Hidden".

2. Linguistic and Literary Factors

Some factors are generally related to linguistic and literary issues and are not specifically limited only to Hafez; rather they are at work for all other poets and writers in all ages.

a. Meaning Layers of Words

Words have different layers of meaning which can be at simplest divided into primary and secondary layers. The primary layer is related to denotation and the secondary layer has to do with connotations.

Certainly writers and poets make use of both layers in conveying their intended meanings to the reader, and Hafez, too, is not an exception. So, this is the first reason for multiple meanings in Hafez's poems. For instance, if the word "kheir" (meaning "good") is used, the immediate impression is the first meaning which is benevolence and kindness, but in deeper layers of meaning it is associated with good deeds, the Heaven, and ultimately with God.

Another instance is "the cup of wine" in the 11th line of Ghazal 5 in Hafez's Divan whose primary meaning refers to the reflection of one's picture in a cup of wine while its deeper meanings refer to the pure heart of a mystic that can reflect the pictures like a mirror.

The cup of wine is Sikandar's mirror. Behold
So that it may show thee the state of Dara's kingdom

b. Literary Devices

The second factor is the use of literary devices and techniques, such as irony, metaphor, simile, etc., which lead to increased beauty as well as ambiguity and multiple meanings. Hafez has employed a great deal of literary devices in a delicate and artistic manner. For example, in the following line, Hafez has used simile, likening his heart to a pinecone as well as to a willow and the stature of the Friend to a pine.

My pine cone-like heart is trembling like the willow,
In envy of the form and the pine-like stature of the Friend (Ghazal, 61)

There are numerous other examples of these literary devices. For instance, a literary device called "lhaam" (which is a sort of ambiguity) is central to Hafez's poems. This device causes a word to have more than one (denotative) meaning in a single context.

Facing such lines of poetry, it is necessary to recognize the employed devices so as to understand the intended meaning.

c. Multiple Meanings of Words

There is an "lhaam" inherent in some words, which is also called polysemy; this can be the third factor that leads to multiple meanings. For example, the Persian word "shir" has as various meanings as "milk", "lion", and "water tap". Certainly poets, and also Hafez, are aware of these potentials and make use of them when they want to offer multiple interpretations of concepts.

For instance, in the following line, the word "moon" is the translation of the Persian "maah" which means both "moon" and "month". If it means "moon", then we find out that the poet likens his Beloved to moon; but if it means "month", we understand that it is now more than one month since the Beloved left the poet.

From the city, my moon went this week; to my eye a year it is:
The state of separation what knowest thou how difficult the state is? (Ghazal, 68)

d. Diachronic Changes

The fourth factor regarding linguistic and literary aspects is diachronic changes. According to thinkers such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Mikhail Bakhtin, words develop new meanings in the course of time which, sometimes, hugely differ from the original meaning. The Persian "mozakhraf", for example, meant originally "ornamented" but now refers to "nonsense" which is indeed not ornamented at all. In other words, the meaning of literary works changes over time or varies according to the socio-cultural milieu of the reader (Bakhtin, 1981: 272).

Interested in such plurality of interpretation, Bakhtin believes that it is a positive feature and engenders cultural dynamism and flexibility.

This sort of change is widely present in poetry, not least in Hafez. The poet uses a word with a meaning specific to his time while the meaning of the word changes over time.

In the curl of thy tress, my heart void of protection,
Ever said not: "Of my accustomed abode, recollection be." (Ghazal, 102)

In the above line, "void of protection" is the translation of the Persian "bi-hefaaz" which now means denotatively "without protection and shelter" and connotatively "shameless". However, this word in Hafez's time meant "unthankful" and it is most probably the meaning he intended.

e. Composing on Paper

Only after Hafez's deaths were his poems gathered together and, for this reason, some variations took place in a number of poems. This lack of writing and recording the poems by the poet causes the details, such as stresses or punctuations, not to be precisely specified. This can be illustrated in the second part of the following line from Ghazal 191 of Hafez's Divan.

Who is that one, who, by way of manliness, fidelity with me will make;
In respect of an ill-doer like me, once a good deed will make?

A change of punctuation in the original Persian text makes possible the following contradictory readings:

In respect of an ill-doer like me, once a good deed will make?

Or,

Instead of ill-doing, once a good deed will make as I do?

Therefore, we can see that by a small change in the place of a comma the ill-doer is turned into a good-doer.

3. Inspiring Sources

In addition to the linguistic and literary factors mentioned above, there is another group of factors influencing the multivalence of Hafez's discourse. These are the Holy Quran, previous poets, as well as the conditions of his time.

a. The Holy Quran

Although God's words in Quran are supposed to be comprehensible to people of all ages, Quranic verses do contain multiple layers of meanings. As a Quranic scholar who knew the whole Book by heart, Hafez was surely inspired by this multivalence of Quranic discourse. He expressly mentions this influence in the 9th line of Ghazal 319.

I learned to rise early in the morning and seek well-being

Like Hafiz, by virtue of the Holy Quran

b. Previous Poets

Hafez lived in 8th century A.H (14th century A.D) and had a remarkable knowledge of previous poets and had undoubtedly thumbed the literary texts of the past. One of these influential poets was Molavi (Rumi) who lived one century earlier than Hafez's time. Like Hafez, he was interested in Quranic and mystical ideas and wrote in a highly multivalent language. In fact, these two poets can be called, say, surrealists in that their poems are replete with plural meanings and they both composed poems mostly through their subconscious. Comparing their poems, one can probably infer that Hafez was influenced by Molavi. However, on a close inspection of the content by means of the theory of intertextuality, we find out that from many aspects Hafez is not inspired by Molavi. In any case, we cannot decisively assert that Hafez is influenced by Molavi in terms of content, since both poets lived in the same cultural milieu and whatever of this milieu had been available to Molavi was also available to Hafez. Consequently, it is not fair to think that Hafez was only influenced by Molavi; rather he was also inspired by numerous other texts and not merely those of Molavi. Nevertheless, it is highly likely that Molavi's mystical and multivalent discourse had some influence on Hafez.

c. The Conditions of the Time

The 5th century A.H (11th century A.D), i.e. three centuries before Hafez, is counted as one of the most disorderly and chaotic periods of Iranian History which saw a great deal of war and bloodshed. In the 8th and 9th century, i.e. Hafez's time, the general atmosphere was again relatively peaceful and organized, and, afterwards in the next three centuries, the country fell again into turbulent conditions.⁰

Although Hafez lived in a relatively stable atmosphere, he may have spoken ambiguously partly due to the remainder of the problems of previous centuries, the tyranny of the kingdom, as well as to the stereotypes and prejudices of the populace.

4. Hafez's Personality

In contrast to the above factors, in which Hafez had only a secondary role as to the multivalence of his poems, there other factors stemmed from Hafez's personality for which Hafez himself is primarily responsible.

a. Tendency to Paradox

Hafez is canny and clever and likes to challenge the readers by apparently tricking them. He resembles Molavi who says:
That we were friends each one was satisfied

But none sought out my secrets from inside; (Masnavi, Book I, Section 1)

Thus, Hafez says:

Of the secret of my distraught heart, a friend,

Among high and low, none, I see. (Ghazal, 8)

And in Ghazal 363 he clearly declares that he speaks within the veil:

Friends! Within the veil, I utter speech:

It will be uttered with tales, also.

This is why he intentionally deceives the mind of superficial readers and is not afraid of doing so. His Divan is replete with poems which are obviously intended to express a meaning deeper than what the appearance shows.

For instance, take the word "wine" that is keyword in Hafez which has been always controversial among Hafez scholars. Wine is forbidden in Islam and there have been always hot debates as to why it is of such importance in Hafez and, generally, in a great part of Iranian mystical literature. But, given that Hafez considers Quran as the main motivation of his Divan and in some poems God becomes his Beloved, it seems almost impossible to think of his wine as something other than figurative.

Of course he tried to communicate also with common people and it has been the reason why people have been permanently intimate with Hafez over centuries. He himself says:

Openly I admit, with much joy and such glee;

Enslaved to your love, from both worlds I am free. (Ghazal, 317)

It is these very paradoxes that lead to multivalence of his discourse and make possible various interpretations of his poems.

b. Imagination

As mentioned earlier, Hafez resembles surrealists and possesses a profound faculty of imagination. His interaction with natural elements is so artistic and delicate that becomes easily believable for the audience. He is always in contact with all the winds. Saba Wind, for instance, brings him news from the Beloved as well as her scent, which reminds him of the Beloved.

My sole companion is the breeze & Northern Wind

Save the breeze, everyone, in befriending me shall fail. (Ghazal, 333)

In the morning breeze, your scent, whoever inhaled

A close friend these familiar words, in his ear hailed; (Ghazal, 243)

Furthermore, he is in contact with the morning bird, or nightingale, and various flowers. He converses with and consults them. Such degree of interaction which comes from his power of imagination is itself a cause of multiple interpretations of his poems.

Where are you O Wild Deer?

I have known you for a while, here. (Masnavi)

In the morning, the nightingale told a tale to the east wind,

Saying: for us what love for the face of the rose made. (Ghazal, 130)

He also makes use of his surrounding environment to realize his imaginations. Everything, from the shapes of natural elements through to the reflection of pictures in liquids, is part of his means to give an imaginative side to his mystical discourse. This feature is an inseparable side of Persian poetry and can also be found in previous poets. For instance, like his antecedents, he uses the shape of the petals of lily, which resemble human tongue, and calls it—which was called "hundred-tongued" by Molavi—a flower with ten tongues.

From the bird of the morning, I know not the noble lily,

What it heard, that, notwithstanding its ten tongues, silent it became. (Ghazal, 175)

c. Mental Assumptions

As any other individual, Hafez certainly had friends and acquaintances whom nobody else knew other than he himself and his close friends. Undoubtedly there were many cases in his life where he focused on specific issues or persons and spoke about them. Therefore, his poems could not have been separated from such assumptions. Whether he had a memory in childhood, fell in love with somebody in youth, established contact with a friend in the middle of his life, or selected a place to live in his old age, all this may have been represented in his poems while only he and a couple of his

close friends may have been aware of it. Instances of poems to prove this claim are not few but they are beyond the scope of our paper.

5. Factors Related to the Reader

Now we come to the role of readers in making multiple interpretations of Hafez’s poems. As Eco puts it, “The writer should keep it mind that the codes upon which he depends are those which the assumed readers of his work also share. Therefore, the writer has to predict an assumed reader”(Eco, 1984:7).

Hafez was well aware of this fact and, due to the abovementioned factors as well as to this latter factor, created a work which can be interpreted differently by every reader.

According to Bakhtin, when we read a text, an encounter takes place between, on the one hand, the signs and objective meanings of the text and, on the other, the signs and subjective meanings in the reader’s mind. There is a borderline where this encounter occurs in form of a dialogue and this is where the text is produced as a reciprocal statement by the reader. Meaning is not something only in the words on a paper; rather it is communicative and depends upon the interaction between reader and text.0

Therefore, the reader is always interacting with the text and this causes the text to be dynamic and related to current issues.

On chance opening of and having sortes with Hafez’s Divan, an ill reader who seeks healing understands the poems in a different way from a person who is on the verge of marriage or is waiting for some good news.

If I became desire-gainer and happy of heart, what wonder?

Deserving, I was; and me, these as alms they gave. (Ghazal, 183)

Both of them, due to psychological pressures, seek different interpretations and, since each finds his desired meaning, they call Hafez “Tongue of the Hidden”.

Regarding all of the above factors which are related to the multivalence of Hafez’s poems from a hermeneutic perspective, a tree diagram can be drawn as following with four main branches and 11 subcategories.

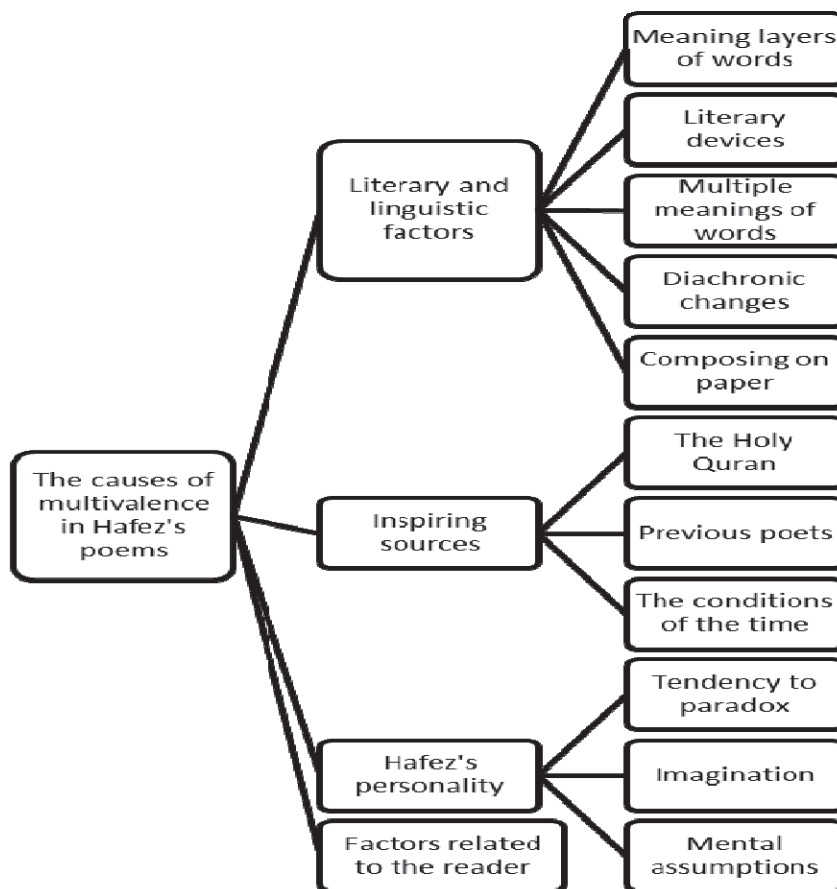


Fig.: The causes of multivalence of Hafez’s discourse from a hermeneutic approach.

6. Conclusion

Having studied the four main factors and their 11 subcategories under the light of hermeneutics, we understood that Hafez's poems are among open texts. According to Eco (1984: 9), closed texts are inflexibly structured and, although they can be read variously and offer infinite semantic possibilities, their internal codes generally act to limit alternative interpretations. In contrast, open texts are intended to create plural interpretations and, on facing such texts, readers are notably free in the interpretative process.

Given this, a reader of Hafez is an audience who can understand its various codes as far as his abilities allow and, then, treats his poems as a labyrinth of myriad subject matters.

This is why Hafez's poems, after several centuries, is still miraculously powerful and remain, through the development of interpretations in the course of time, among the most wonderful and charming Iranian poems. He rightly says about his poems and other great Persian poems that:

Life-givers, are the lovely ones, Persian-prattling:

O Saki! this news, give to the old men of Fars. (Ghazal, 5)

Like Bakhtin and other thinkers, Eco believes that, in contrast to common people who seek immediate pleasure of the text and do not take their time to interpret its different meaning layers, intellectuals prefer to think over the skills of the author and to see, decode, and specify how such texts as Hafez's poems come to possess these unique features.

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