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Image Schemas of the Evil Inclination in the First Chapter of Jami's Silsilat al-Dhahab

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Abstract

Cognitive semantics is one of the major approaches in contemporary semantic studies. Within the cognitive semantic framework, meaning is understood as the product of lived experience, mental structures, and the linguistics system. One of the most important conceptual mechanisms in this field is image schemas, or mental spaces, through which abstract concepts are organized into perceptual and comperehensible structures. This cognitive capacity gains particular significance in mystical language, ehich is concerned with expressing intuitive and trans-material experiences. The present study aims to provide a cognitive reading of the *nafs* (self/soul) by examining the image schema associated whit this concept in the first book of *Masnavi-ye Silsilat al-Dhahab* by Jami. In this analysis, the *nafs* is examined both as an inhibiting factor on the path of spiritual wayfaring and as an active force within the ontological structure of the human being. This research has been conducted using a descriptetive-analytical method, adopting a cognitive linguistic

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approach and based on library data. The findings indicate that the cognitive representation of the *nafs* in this work is formed through three primary schemas: force, containment, and path. Among these, the force schema plays the most significant role in conceptualization. The novelty of this research lies in its cognitive analysis of the concept of the *nafs* and in proposing a framework for studying mystical concepts based on image schema theory.

Keywords: *Jami's Silsilat al-Dhahab, image schemas of the nafs, force schema of the nafs, containment shema of the nafs, path schema of the nafs.*

1. Introduction

One of the three dominant paradigms in contemporary linguistics—alongside the formalist and functionalist approaches—is **Cognitive Linguistics**, which has emerged as a major theoretical framework over the past few decades. Cognitive Linguistics regards language as a means of uncovering the structure of the human cognitive system (Golfam & Yousefi-Rad, 2002, p. 50). Within this framework, language is investigated as a cognitive phenomenon through which the relationship between language, the human mind, and individuals' socially and physically embodied experiences can be explored. Accordingly, linguistic analysis is grounded in human experience, patterns of perception, and the ways in which individuals conceptualize the world around them. From the perspective of Cognitive Linguistics, language constitutes an integral component of the broader human cognitive faculty, with cognition occupying a central and indispensable position in linguistic inquiry.

Persian mystical literature represents one of the richest and most significant domains for the representation of existential and spiritual experiences within the Islamic intellectual tradition. Among its central anthropological concepts, the notion of the *nafs* (the self or soul) occupies a pivotal position in the writings of Muslim mystics, where it is consistently discussed in relation to spiritual wayfaring (*sulūk*), inner purification, and the ontological development of the human being. Because mystical experiences are inherently abstract and ineffable, Sufi authors predominantly communicate them through figurative and image-based language. Recent developments in Cognitive Linguistics have demonstrated that abstract concepts are fundamentally grounded in embodied human experience and are structured through cognitive mechanisms derived from lived experience. Among these mechanisms, image schemas constitute one of the most fundamental conceptual structures, playing a crucial role in organizing and conceptualizing abstract meanings.

Building upon this theoretical perspective, the present study identifies, examines, and analyzes the cognitive representation of the concept of *nafs* in the first book of Jāmī's *Silsilat al-Dhahab*. The principal contribution of this research lies in its systematic analysis of this concept through the framework

of image schemas and in explaining how these schemas organize and structure mystical experience within the text. More specifically, this study argues that the concept of *nafs* is represented not merely at the lexical or semantic level but, more fundamentally, through underlying cognitive structures that shape and organize mystical conceptualization.

1-1 Research Questions

This study seeks to address the following research questions: (1) Through which image-schema patterns is the concept of the *nafs* conceptualized and represented in the first book of *Silsilat al-Dhahab*, particularly with regard to the depiction of its attributes, functions, and various manifestations? (2) What cognitive and semantic roles do these image-schema patterns play in the construction and communication of mystical experience? (3) What is an image schema, and how does it emerge within the framework of cognitive linguistics? Moreover, which types of image schemas are employed in the conceptualization of the *nafs* in the selected corpus, how frequently do they occur, and what conceptual meanings and cognitive implications does each image schema encode?

2. Literature Review

In contrast to the **formalist approach** to linguistics, which maintains a separation between the system of linguistic rules and other human cognitive processes, and the **functionalist approach**, which views language as inseparable from other mental processes, **Cognitive Linguistics** argues that linguistic inquiry should be fundamentally grounded in **meaning** and should account for the role of human cognition in language. As Deyrūn (2018, p. 117) observes, Cognitive Linguistics regards language as an inseparable component of human cognition, whose functioning is integrated with other cognitive faculties and governed by the same underlying cognitive principles. Within this framework, **Cognitive Semantics** defines meaning as being rooted in conventionalized conceptual structures. Accordingly, semantic structures, like other domains of cognition, represent mental categories that human beings construct through their embodied experiences (ibid., 2018, p. 367). From this perspective, semantic analysis occupies a central position in linguistic inquiry, making **meaning** the primary focus of linguistic investigation within Cognitive Linguistics (Golfām & Yūsefī-Rād, 2002, p. 51).

Research in Cognitive Semantics on meaning and conceptual processes has consequently focused on a number of fundamental cognitive mechanisms and conceptual structures. Among the most significant of these are **Conceptual Metaphor**, **Image Schemas**, **Mental Spaces**, **Categorization**, **Viewing Frames**, and other conceptual mechanisms that underlie human cognition and linguistic meaning. These constructs provide the theoretical foundation for

explaining how abstract concepts are conceptualized, organized, and communicated through language.

2.1 Image Schemas

One of the fundamental conceptual constructs in Cognitive Linguistics is the notion of **image schemas**. The theory of image schemas was first introduced by **Mark Johnson** in his 1987 book The Body in the Mind (Dādvar Kāshānī & Mūsavī Jarūkānī, 2022, p. 163). At its core, the concept of a schema refers to a cognitive framework that provides the background necessary for interpreting experiences, personal events, situations, and linguistic expressions. As Fotūḥī (2012, p. 161) explains, a schema is essentially the background against which experiences, personal events, situations, and linguistic elements acquire meaning. It consists of an associative network of knowledge stored in memory and may therefore be regarded as a form of cognitive repository.

To illustrate this process, consider an event that an individual experiences. After some time, this experience becomes mentally stored as a cognitive pattern or schema. When a similar situation is encountered in the future, the previously established schema is automatically activated, allowing the new experience to be interpreted and organized in light of prior knowledge. Schemas therefore function as cognitive frameworks through which individuals perceive and interpret reality. Schemas may be likened to cognitive lenses through which human beings view the world. These cognitive structures begin to develop in the earliest stages of life through embodied interaction with the surrounding environment and are continuously shaped by accumulated experiences. Consequently, they influence the formation of personality, patterns of behavior, and modes of interpretation, whether in constructive or detrimental ways, ultimately determining how individuals perceive, understand, and respond to the world around them.

Human beings constantly engage in activities such as moving, eating, sleeping, and perceiving their environment. Through these embodied interactions, they develop fundamental conceptual structures that later serve as the basis for reasoning about more abstract phenomena. As Ṣafavī (2003, p. 98) observes, an image schema is a conceptual structure that emerges in language through our experience of the external world. In other words, an image schema is a conceptual configuration grounded in embodied experience, arising from human interaction with physical objects and perceptual engagement within three-dimensional space (Ḥoseinī & Morteżāʾī, 2022, p. 94). Image

schemas are therefore products of embodied experience and of human cognitive engagement with existence, action, behavior, and everyday interaction in the physical world. They possess both **generality** and **recurrence**, enabling them to function as stable conceptual patterns across diverse contexts. Indeed, the primary conceptual system of the human mind is founded upon a relatively limited set of experiential concepts that arise directly from embodied experience (Āsiyābādī et al., 2012, p. 146). From the perspective of Cognitive Linguistics, image schemas function as cognitive maps that facilitate the comprehension of abstract concepts, reasoning, conceptualization, and meaning construction. Cognitive linguists assign particular significance to image schemas because they constitute the most fundamental level of cognitive organization underlying conceptual metaphors. Consequently, image schemas are regarded as **the primary structural layer upon which conceptual metaphors are built** (Dādvar Kāshānī & Mūsavī Jarūkānī, 2022, p. 163).

Among the most prominent image schemas are:

- **Containment Schema**
- **Path Schema**
- **Force Schema**

3. Methodology

This study employs a **descriptive–analytical** research method. In the first stage, all verses related to the concept of the *nafs* (self/soul) were identified and extracted from the selected text. Subsequently, these data were classified according to the major image-schema patterns established in Cognitive Linguistics. Finally, the semantic and cognitive functions of each image schema were analyzed within its textual context in order to determine how mystical experience is conceptualized through the linguistic structure of the work.

Accordingly, the analysis is conducted at three complementary levels:

1. **Textual Level:** The scope of the analysis is limited to the **first book of Jāmī's *Silsilat al-Dhahab***.
2. **Conceptual Level:** The study focuses on the concept of the *nafs* as one of the fundamental concepts in Islamic mystical anthropology.

Theoretical Level: The analysis is conducted within the framework of **Cognitive Linguistics**, with particular emphasis on the theory of **Image Schemas**.

4. Results

This study has sought to examine the various **image schemas** through which the concept of the *nafs* (self/soul)—particularly the **commanding self (*al-nafs al-ammārah*)**, the destructive inner force that urges human beings toward evil—is conceptualized in the first book of Jāmī's *Silsilat al-Dhahab*. The findings demonstrate that image

schemas play a crucial role in the **objectification of abstract concepts**, enabling highly abstract notions, especially mystical and theological concepts, to be represented in more concrete and cognitively accessible forms. This function is particularly significant in mystical discourse, where many concepts transcend direct sensory experience. The results indicate that image schemas, especially those associated with the concept of the *nafs*, perform a fundamental role in meaning construction and conceptualization within the text. They provide a cognitive framework through which mystical experience is linguistically encoded and conveyed in Classical Persian literature.

The analysis further reveals that **Force Schemas** constitute the most frequent and dominant image-schema pattern employed by Jāmī in representing the *nafs*. This predominance reflects the poet's understanding of the *nafs* as an active and obstructive force that prevents spiritual salvation and hinders the seeker's progress along the mystical path. The *nafs* is portrayed as an internal power inclined toward evil and moral corruption, ultimately leading the individual to spiritual loss and destruction. Jāmī's emphasis on the extraordinary power of the *nafs*, extending beyond ordinary human will, is deeply rooted in Islamic mystical teachings, where the *nafs* is regarded as one of the most formidable existential obstacles confronting the spiritual wayfarer (*sālik*). Accordingly, the seeker is required to wage a continuous struggle (*mujāhadah*) against the *nafs* through self-purification (*tazkiyah*), overcoming this inner adversary before attaining nearness to God and eternal spiritual fulfillment. The second most prominent category consists of **Containment Schemas**. These schemas attribute corporeality, spatiality, and embodied existence to the *nafs*, thereby rendering an otherwise abstract spiritual concept cognitively tangible. Such representations may also reflect Jāmī's conception of the *nafs* as possessing an eschatological or quasi-material dimension. By conceptualizing the *nafs* as an entity with spatial and bodily properties, the poet enhances its perceptibility for the reader while simultaneously emphasizing its constant and inseparable presence within human existence, a force that requires perpetual vigilance throughout one's lifetime.

Path Schemas occur with considerably lower frequency. Their relative scarcity further underscores the predominance of the force dimension in Jāmī's conceptualization of the *nafs*. Rather than emphasizing movement or progression, the text primarily portrays the *nafs* as a powerful constraining force that impedes liberation, spiritual advancement, and escape from its domination. The *nafs* and its various

manifestations occupy a central position within Jāmī's mystical worldview and constitute one of the most recurrent themes in his poetry. This centrality is reflected in a rich network of conceptual representations, including the *wicked self*, the tyrannical self, the merciless self, the serpentine self, the commanding self (al-nafs al-ammārah), the inner enemy, and the innately hostile self. Each of these conceptualizations highlights a different aspect of the *nafs* while collectively demonstrating Jāmī's remarkable ability to construct diverse cognitive and metaphorical representations of a single abstract mystical concept. These varied depictions reveal both his imaginative linguistic creativity and his profound concern with illustrating the existential dangers posed by the *nafs* to the spiritual seeker. Moreover, these representations reflect Jāmī's practical affiliation with the **Naqshbandī** mystical tradition, in which continuous struggle against the *nafs* constitutes an indispensable stage of spiritual discipline. Through these conceptualizations, Jāmī not only expounds a central mystical doctrine but also encourages readers and seekers alike to engage in self-purification as the essential prerequisite for traversing the path toward divine proximity. Finally, the findings of this study provide a foundation for future comparative research on the cognitive analysis of fundamental concepts in Islamic mysticism across other works of Classical Persian literature. They also contribute to the further development of interdisciplinary scholarship at the intersection of **Cognitive Linguistics** and **Persian mystical literature**.

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