



THE IDENTITY OF LOVE IN EARLY OTTOMAN POETRY

ERKEN OSMANLI ŞİİRİNDE AŞKIN KİMLİĞİ

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Abstract

This article examines the central role and identity of love in early Ottoman poetry from the 14th to the late 16th centuries. In this period, love was not treated merely as a romantic or emotional experience, but as a metaphysical truth, a source of knowledge, and a mode of existence. Rather than focusing on the emotional states of the lover or the beloved, poets explored love as an independent and universal phenomenon with transformative power.

The study analyzes selected couplets from the divans of poets with diverse social and intellectual backgrounds—such as Yunus Emre’s mysticism, Mihrî’s female perspective, the sultanic voices of Avnî and Adlî, Fuzûlî’s intense emotionalism, and Bakî’s refined language—to reveal how love was conceptualized in their works. These examples demonstrate that love was understood not only as a personal experience, but also as a cosmic and spiritual reality grounded in Sufi metaphysics and the Neoplatonic theory of emanation (*sudûr*).

Although a shift toward a more emotional and worldly understanding of love emerged in the 18th century, early Ottoman poetry presents love as a sacred path to divine truth and the essence of poetic creation and human existence.

Keywords: Ottoman Poetry, Ghazal, 14th-16th centuries, Love, Essence, Characteristics.

Özet

Bu makale, 14. yüzyıldan 16. yüzyılın sonlarına kadar uzanan erken Osmanlı şiirinde aşkın merkezi rolünü ve kimliğini incelemektedir. Bu dönemde aşk, yalnızca romantik ya da duygusal bir deneyim olarak ele alınmamış; metafizik bir hakikat, bir bilgi kaynağı ve bir varoluş biçimi olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Şairler, âşık ya da maşukun duygusal hâllerine odaklanmaktan ziyade, aşkı dönüştürücü güce sahip, bağımsız ve evrensel bir olgu olarak tasavvur etmişlerdir. Çalışma, farklı sosyal ve entelektüel arka planlara sahip şairlerin divanlarından seçilmiş beyitleri analiz etmektedir. Yunus Emre’nin tasavvufi yaklaşımı, Mihrî’nin kadın bakış açısı, Avnî ve Adlî’nin sultan sesi, Fuzûlî’nin yoğun duygusallığı ve Bâkî’nin zarif dili gibi örnekler aracılığıyla, aşkın bu metinlerde nasıl kavramsallaştırıldığı ortaya konulmaktadır. Bu örnekler, aşkın sadece bireysel bir deneyim olarak değil, aynı zamanda tasavvufi metafizik ve sudûr (sudur) nazariyesine dayanan kozmik ve ruhani bir gerçeklik olarak da anlaşıldığını göstermektedir. Her ne kadar 18. yüzyılda daha duygusal ve dünyevî bir aşk anlayışına doğru bir yönelim gözlemlense de, erken Osmanlı şiiri aşkı ilahî hakikate ulaşmanın kutsal bir yolu, şiirin ve insan varoluşunun özü olarak sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Osmanlı Şiiri, Gazel, 14-16. yüzyıl, Aşk, Mahiyet, Özellikler.

Introduction

While defining Middle Eastern poetry, Atef Alshaer states that poetry can be considered the closest language to love, reflecting its universal and sincere nature (Alshaer 2022:5). In this understanding, poetry does not merely describe beauty, but also seeks to ignite love in the reader's heart and direct them toward beauty. Based on the metaphysical concept of *sudûr* (emanation), which forms the intellectual foundation of classical Turkish poetry, the universe came into existence by overflowing from God's own essence. In this framework, love is regarded as the most luminous and essential manifestation of that divine emanation (Bozkurt 2022: 69).

As a subset of Islamic poetry, classical Turkish poetry reflects Islamic aesthetics innately. In order to understand the aesthetics of classical Turkish poetry and its dominant subject, love, it is necessary to know the theory of efflux (*sudûr*) on which it is based. According to this theory that has ancient roots and was first systematically proposed by Plotinus (d. 270) and later developed by Farabi (d. 950) and Ibn Sina (d. 1037) the world was created by overflowing from God's own essence (Açıl 2022: 86-87). Commonly known is the fact that when it comes to love in Islamic or classical Turkish poetry, it is contemplated from two perspectives: divine and human love. The varieties of love, which have generally been known as two types since time immemorial, and which can be understood as three in recent studies (Coşkun 2020: 214), continued to be the main subject of Ottoman poetry for centuries and to gather other subjects around it. Before Ottoman poetry, the traces of divine (sufi) love began to be seen at very limited level in Turkish-Islamic poetry through Yusuf Has Hacib (11th century) work Kutadgu Bilig Ahmed Yesevi's (d. 1166) *Dîvân-ı Hikmet* (KB, 2017: 23). From the first examples of Ottoman poems to the last period, love was the foremost subject of the poetry. In the early period of Ottoman poetry, particularly between the 14th and late 16th centuries, love emerges as the primary and persistent theme. During this period, poets did not approach love merely as an emotion, but as a truth, a source of knowledge, and a mode of existence. The definition, nature, benefits, boundaries, and transformative power of love are frequently addressed in their ghazals. As Bozkurt emphasizes, in this conception of love, it is seen as the path and ultimate purpose by which human beings may reach God (Bozkurt 2017: 22). Thus, love is not primarily described through the states of the lover or the beloved, but is instead explored as a phenomenon in and of itself.

However, from the 18th century onwards, a clear shift in this understanding becomes apparent. After the classical period, the concept of love begins to move toward a more worldly context. Love is increasingly depicted through the emotional states of the lover, the characteristics of the beloved, and the relationship between them. In this later literature, love ceases to be a metaphysical phenomenon and instead becomes a narrative of individual and often dramatic emotional experiences.

To this end, the paper analyzes selected couplets from the divans of poets with different social and intellectual backgrounds, such as, Yunus Emre (d. 1320-21) embodies mysticism, Mihri (d. 1506) provides a female perspective, Avnî (r. 1451-1481) and Adlî (r. 1481-1512) conveys the sentiments of sultan, Fuzûlî (d. 1556) expresses intense emotions and Bakî (d. 1600) excels in powerful wording. The framework of love is outlined through meticulously translated couplets from selected poets' divans, spanning the 14th to the 16th century. These couplets offer insight into how love was positioned and interpreted in the poetry of the time. They demonstrate that love was understood not only as a personal experience, but also as a metaphysical and cosmic phenomenon—offering readers a unique perspective on the depth and significance of love in early

Ottoman poetry.

Given that ghazal is a prevalent verse form, particularly addressing love in divan poetry, the selected couplets, except for the introduction, primarily originate from ghazals (Akün TDVİA: 2023). Although Ottoman literature encompasses various genres and forms, both in prose and poetry, the love ghazal takes precedence. It predominantly explores themes such as beauty, longing, separation, difficulty, and occasionally, union (Andrews 1985: 3-18).

The centrality of love in poetry has led to its treatment not merely as an emotion but as a complex and multi-layered concept; consequently, the definition of love and the vocabulary poets use to express it hold particular significance. The Turkish Language Association (TDK) defines ‘aşk as excessive love, the feeling of strong attachment, deep affection, and passion. The word is used in Turkish in several idiomatic expressions, such as “aşka düşmek” (to fall in love), “aşka gelmek” (great passion, to get carried away) (TDK 2023).

The word ‘aşk (‘aşk), originally comes from the Arabic root (عشق), which dictionaries usually define as excessive love, strong devotion, affection and attachment. Likewise, it has the meaning of giving oneself completely to the beloved, who is seen as loftier and more beautiful than everyone else. ‘Aşk is also defined as the ultimate level of love, the state in which love fully dominates the lover (Uludağ TDVİA: 2023), and is seen as the origin of existence and the reason for creation (Alıcı 2008: 119). It is also argued that the word is derived from “al-aşaka” (العشقة), the Arabic word for the ivy tree, which the lover resembles. As much as the ivy tree burgeons before withering away, the âşık (ardent lover) wilts and cuts off all her/his relationship with the world.

Love is referred to in the Ottoman poetry of the 14th-16th centuries with a variety of words, including ‘aşk (very strong love and devotion), *hub*, *muhabbat* (becoming worthy of the beloved by purifying oneself approach), *mihir* (love, friendship), *sevdâ* (passionate love) and *sevgü* (all kinds of love). At the first glance, these concepts seem interchangeable, but genuinely each one of them describes a different steps of love that has eight stages and between “*muhabbet*” and “*aşk*” can be cited as follows:

1. **Mawaddat:** Amity. Having the heart full of the feeling of longing for the beloved.
2. **Havâ:** Lovesickness: The type of love that makes one constantly shed tears.
3. **Hillet:** Close fellowship: Achieving serenity with love, the state of perfection in friendship.
4. **Mahabbet:** Affection: Trying to approach the beloved and be worthy of him/her by breaking oneself of one’s bad habits and adopting good ones.
5. **Shegaf:** Infatuation: The fiery love that burns the heart.
6. **Hüyâm:** Passion: The love which drives the lover crazy.
7. **Valah:** Folly: To get ecstatic or drunk while watching the beauty of loved one.
8. **Aşk:** Slavish love: The lover’s self-annihilation in the loved one; the disappearance of love; the state where everything becomes the loved one, and the loved one becomes everything.

As Alıcı sums up in his article, the difference between *muhabbet* and *aşk* can be understood based on the degree of dominance love has over the lover. If one can control the state of one’s heart, it is called *muhabbet*; however, if the state of the heart reigns supreme over the lover, then it is named is *aşk*. In *muhabbet* there is will, but in *aşk*, the will is lost (Alıcı 2008: 120). This loss of will and surrender to the overwhelming force of love is vividly illustrated in the following

couplet by the sultan-poet Adlî:

Gitdi 'aşk ile ihtiyâr elden

Dahı sabr itmege mecâl kamı (Adlî D. G. 138/5) (Bayram, 2009: 176).

With love, free will is gone, where is the strength to have patience now?

Having outlined the general meaning of love in Islamic literatures and its specific significance within Ottoman poetry, it is now essential to examine how the notion of love was conceptualized and articulated in the Ottoman literary tradition. One of the most consistent frameworks in Ottoman lyrical poetry is the triadic relationship between the lover (*âşık*), the beloved (*ma'şûk*), and the rival (*rakîb*). This structure allows poets to express the emotional complexity and dramatic tension inherent in love. In this configuration, the lover emerges as the central figure through whom longing, suffering, devotion, and transformation are most vividly portrayed.

Through the lover's emotional turmoil—marked by longing, suffering, and devotion—the essence of love is most effectively conveyed. This structure extends beyond individual poems to a broader typology of love, which includes divine, religious, and earthly forms. Despite thematic variations, each follows the same triangular pattern, highlighting the universality and coherence of this poetic model across Ottoman literary traditions.

In particular, divine love, which constitutes the core of Sufi thought, plays a central role in Ottoman poetry. According to Sufi philosophy, love existed before creation, and the universe itself came into being as a manifestation of love. Within this metaphysical framework, the lover is often portrayed as a seeker on a spiritual path, attempting to unite with the divine beloved, while various worldly or egoistic obstacles act as rivals in this sacred journey. For Sufi kind of metaphysics of love by considering love as a concept without distinguishing between divine and human (Gazâlî 2008). Therefore, whether in the context of spiritual devotion, religious commitment, or earthly passion, Ottoman poetry consistently reflects a cosmos structured around love. This enduring poetic model not only reveals the emotional and philosophical depth of Ottoman literary culture but also affirms love's place as both the origin and the ultimate aim of existence and that's why it is immortal (Alıcı 2008: 121). Annemarie Schimmel, drawing on the views of some sufis, says that since the beloved has no end, love has no end.

The adventure between me and my beloved has no end / What has no beginning, has no end (Schimmel 2001: 139).

This notion of love's universality and permanence is further reinforced by Ahmedî, one of the earliest Ottoman poets, who emphasizes the eternal nature of love in his verse:

Dahı düzülmemişdi şehâ Meclis-i Elest

Kim itmiş idi cânımı 'aşkun şarâbı mest (Ahmedî D.G. 79/1)

O Shah, The Assembly of Elest had not yet convened /When the wine of love inebriated me.

Elest is an Arabic interrogation, "Am I not?"¹ that points to the verse describing the council of *elest* through the art of quotation. According to poetic tradition, "lovers" first became

¹ And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their progeny and made them bear witness concerning themselves, "Am I not your Lord?" they said, "Yea, we bear witness"—lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, "Truly of this we were heedless" Kur'an Araf 7/172. <https://archive.org/details/TheStudyQuranANewTranslationAndCommentaryBySeyyedHosseinNasr/page/n7/mode/2up>, accessed on 12.01.2024.

intoxicated with the goblet offered at this assembly, which is considered to have been held in eternity between God and the spirits (Şentürk 2022: 127). This couplet highlights love's intoxicating nature and its existence since eternity, even before the world was created. The poet emphasizes love's eternal and lasting nature.

This idea of primordial love is also echoed in earlier mystical poetry, such as in the verses of sufi poet Yunus Emre from 13th century:

Yaradıldı yir ile gök Muhammed dostlığına

Levlâk ana delîl durur ansuz yir ü gök olmadı (Y. Emre D. G. 386/7) (Yıldırım, 2018:158).

The earth and the sky were created for the sake of the friendship of the Prophet; Levlak (Redhouse, 1996) is a proof for him that without him there would be no earth and sky.

One frequently cited hadith in classical poetry is “lewlâke lewlâk lemâ halaktü'l-eflâk” (Had it not been for you, I would not have created the heavens), often used to express love and praise for the Prophet. In this couplet, the poet presents the Prophet's love as the reason for creation, emphasizing that love sustains the universe. Through this reference, love is portrayed as a cosmic force essential to existence—a view later echoed by poets like the 15th-century female poet Mihri:

Cur'a-i 'aşk-ı mecâzı nûş eyle sıdk ile

Tâ hakikatten yana yol bulasın mi'râclık (Mihri D. G. 77/2) (Arslan 2018: 92)

Drink a draught from metaphorical love with honesty/faith so that ascendance finds its way beside the truth.

In this couplet, the poet suggests that certain forms of love—especially worldly one—serve as the first step toward True Love. She encourages the reader to sincerely experience this metaphorical love as a means of spiritual ascent.

In Islamic culture—and particularly in Ottoman literature—love is not merely an emotion but a profound, multifaceted concept rooted in both spirituality and aesthetics. Grounded in the theory of *südûr* (emanation), love is seen as a cosmic force, a means to divine knowledge, and a central theme in poetic tradition. In the following sections, key couplets from the 14th to 16th centuries will illustrate how early Ottoman poets conceptualized love—focusing on its essence and distinctive characteristics.

1.Identity of Love in Early Ottoman Poetry

1.1.The Cosmos of Ottoman Poetry²

In classical Turkish literature, deeply grounded in the Islamic literary tradition, love is recognized as the *raison d'être* for the existence of the universe and is discussed in the context of the qudsi hadith which is known as “kanzan makhfiyyan”. It says “I was a hidden treasure, I wanted to be known and I created the universes” (Aclûni 2001: 155). The expression “I wanted to be known in this hadith is interpreted as “I loved to be known” in some narrations of the hadith. As it is revealed in *Hüsn ü Aşk* by Galib (d. 1799) love is the *raison d'être*, it is also the ultimate aim in

² The poetry is used for ghazal throughout the article.

this universe³. So, poets have also chosen poetry as a vehicle to reach this goal and express it in all its forms and genres in their poems.

Throughout the history of classical Turkish literature, every poet and poem either directly or indirectly expresses, portrays, and refers to love. Since love in Ottoman poetry is generally categorized into three main types—divine, religious, and mundane—it provides a comprehensive framework that allows poets to explore a wide spectrum of emotional and spiritual experiences (Coşkun 2020: 2015-216). As exemplified by the 15th-century Sufi poet Eşrefoğlu Rûmî (d. 1469), who composed a poem exclusively defining divine love:

Cihânı hîçe satmaktır adı 'aşk

Döküp varlığı gitmektir adı 'aşk

To sell the world for naught is called love. To spill [let go of] riches [existence] and go away [take one's way] is called love⁴.

Elinde sükkeri ayruga sunup

Aguyu kendi yutmaktır adı 'aşk

To offer the sweets in one's hand to the other and swallow hemlock is called love.

Belâ yağmur gibi gökten yağarsa

Başımı ana tutmaktır adı 'aşk

If trouble poured like rain from the heavens, to keep one's head up [while it rains] is called love.

Bu 'âlem sanki oddan bir denizdir

Ana kendüyi atmaktır adı 'aşk

This world is like a sea of fire, to throw oneself into it is called love.

Var Eşrefoğlu Rûmî bil hakikat

Vücûdu fânî etmektir adı 'aşk⁵

Oh Eşrefoğlu Rûmî, know the truth! To make existence perish is called love.

Describing love as completely ridding one's heart of all that has to do with worldly life, sacrificing oneself for others, accepting one's fate bravely, and facing hardship with. Rumi's poem serves as both a depiction and a guide to divine love, outlining its principles through couplets that collectively embody its sacred essence. Another poet of the early time Kadî Burhaneddin (d. 1398) defines love as sacrificing oneself for the beloved:

Hûb cihânda çoh velî nâzûk ü dilrübâ gerek

Câna vidâ kıluban 'aşkına merhabâ gerek (KB.D. G. 14/1) (Ergin, 1980: 9)

³ See Victoria Rowe Holbrook, *The Unreadable Shores of Love Turkish Modernity and Mystic Romance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 145.

⁴ The translations of couplets belong to author (VSC).

⁵ Mustafa Kara, *Eşrefoğlu Rûmî*, (Ankara: TDV Yayınları, 1995) 131. For further information, see Mahmut Kaplan, "Eşrefoğlu Rûmî'nin Gönül Miracı: Adı Aşk", *Turkish Studies - International Periodical For The Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic* no. 13 (2013): 113-137.

The beautiful are many in the world, yet kind and charming they need be. One need takes leave of one's life and welcome [the beloved's] love.

In this couplet, love is portrayed as the vital force that brings completion and perfection to all things; in its absence, existence remains incomplete—thus, once again, love is framed as a divine and transcendent principle.

Karamanlı Aynî (d. 1490–94?) consciously prefers the Turkish word *sevgi* over the more commonly used Arabic-derived *aşk*. This choice is significant both linguistically and conceptually, as it shifts the focus from the intense, mystical connotations of *aşk* to a more sincere, human, and everyday experience of love:

Bildük bum kim zâhidâ ol büt-likânun sevgüsi

Sînende ger var ise îmândan dahî tatluymış (K. Aynî D. G. 232/3) (Mermer 2020: 553).

O ye the ascetic one! We knew that the love of the statue-faced in your chest, I assume it is, sweeter than faith.

1.2. How Does Love Come into Being: Sight or Sound?

It is commonly accepted that love is a matter of seeing and love is conventionally perceived as a phenomenon that originates through sight. However, in classical Turkish poetry, the idea that love begins through hearsay rather than seeing endured for centuries and can even be viewed as a reflection of divine love. Many two-character mesnevis—like *Hüsrev ü Şîrîn* and *Leylâ vü Mecnûn*—use this as a key narrative motif. Divans likewise show that this concept appeared steadily from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries (Alptekin Sarioğlu, 2024: 194).

One of the earliest Ottoman poets, Karamanlı Aynî, even alleges that love may occur by hearing. According to his couplet, to love by hearing is so common that no one is surprised:

Ne ta'n sevdümse vasfun işidicek

Düşer göz görmedin sevgü kulaga (K. Aynî D. G. 446/2)

What contestation would there be to me / loving (you) upon hearing your description!

Süleyman Çelebi (d. 1411), famous for his Mevlid, a genre about the birth of the Prophet, supports Karamanlı Aynî in this regard by saying love can start in the ears:

Didi kırk bin yıldurur kim yâ Emîn

'Aşkdur bana yime içmek hemîn

(It is said to Gabriel) O Emin! For forty thousand years, love was my food and drink continuously.

Nâgehân bir ün işitdi kulagum

Gitdi aklum bilmezem solum sağum

Suddenly my ear heard a sound; my mind went blank, I didn't know where to turn.

Yâ Muhammed diyüben çağırdılar

Bir sadâ birle ki yürekler deler

Saying oh Muhammad, they called out with a sound that pierces hearts.

O zamândan bilmezem kim n'olmuşam

Ol adun ıssına ‘âşık olmuşam

Oh, I do not know from that time what happened to me and I am in love with the owner of that name.

Yüregüm içinde eridi yagum

‘Âşık oldu görmedi kulagum

My heart melted and my ear felt in love without seeing (him).

Cenneti başuma ‘aşkı dâr ider

Gice gündüz işümi âh u zâr ider (Süleyman Ç. Mevlid 168-173) (Timurtaş 1990: 167-170).

His love makes (even) heaven narrow for me, and my work to weep and moan day and night.

While the initial spark of love may be ignited through the ear—through voice, words, and sound—it does not remain confined to what is heard. As emotional attachment begins to take root, the visual element becomes increasingly important. What is first sensed through language and tone soon seeks confirmation in the face, the eyes, and the presence of the beloved. Thus, love that begins with hearing naturally turns toward seeing, where it finds new dimensions and deeper resonance.

Love, transmitted from the ear to the eye, begins to influence the lover, and the heart gradually warms to the beloved. From this point onward, it is the beloved’s beauty and conduct that maintain a hold over the lover’s heart. At this stage, the eyes—or more specifically, the beloved’s glances—become the most powerful weapon. These glances, often referred to as *gamze*, both delight and wound the lover simultaneously. Each successive glance cast by the beloved further fuels the flames of love in the heart of the lover. In short, the act of the lover seeing the beloved marks the transition from mere affection to a deeper emotional attachment. With this look, the ivy seed called love begins to sprout (Nacar 2011:6). Kadı Burhaneddin reinforces this view in his verse, emphasizing that the inception of love is rooted in the gaze:

Evvel içendür gözüm ‘aşk kadehlerüni

Cârîdür anun için gözüme idrâr⁶-ı ‘aşk (K B. D. G. 74/3) (Ergin 1980: 29-30).

My tears are still flowing because my eye drank first the move of love.

1.3. Is Love Destiny?

In Ottoman poetry, love is not portrayed as a state reached through personal will or conscious choice; on the contrary, it is depicted as a destiny bestowed upon the individual. For this reason, human will plays no effective role—neither in entering into love nor in attempting to escape from it. Rather, love is understood to be entirely subject to fate. Consequently, it is impossible to escape from it.

Saldı belâ-yı ‘aşka kazâ vü kader beni

Kimdür ki mübtelâ-i kazâ vü kader degül (Ahmedî D. G. 391/3) (Akdoğan n.d: 450).

The tribulations of destiny gave me over to love. Who is the one not afflicted by destiny?

1.4. Why is it necessary?

⁶ In the couplet, the word *idrâr* is used with the meaning of “flow” not with the meaning of *urine*.

If love is discussed so extensively and considered inevitable, the question naturally arises: What does love provide to the human being? When discussing the effects of love, it is also necessary to address its benefits. On this matter, for centuries, Ottoman poets have explored this question by emphasizing the profound impact of love on the lover's inner world. Love is not merely an emotional experience; it is a transformative journey that shapes, refines, and elevates the soul. Ottoman poets generally maintain the view that, no matter how tormenting love may be, it remains indispensable, as it is regarded as essential for the spiritual and emotional maturation of the individual. If love is both a fated and inescapable condition—and simultaneously a state from which the human being cannot detach—then this transformative power explains why love is necessary for the human being.

Sen anı insâna teşbîh eyleme ey dil bu gün

Olmaya başında anun zerrece sevdâ-yı 'aşk (Hâletî-i Gülşenî 121/2) (Nacar 2011:47).

O heart! If someone doesn't have an greed of love at his head today, don't take him as human.

According to the couplet love serves to people to be human being in terms of being free from ego, being humble, being aware of weakness of himself and inadequacy.

A medical doctor and a poet from the 15th century, Şeyhî (d. 1431), also answers this question by defining love as aura that makes everything special, meaningful and sacred:

Kankı dimâg içinde ki 'aşkun hevâsı yok

Bin hac iderse Merve hakıyçün Safâsı yok (Şeyhî D. G. 95/1) (Biltekin 2018: 138).

Whoever does not have the passion of love in his/her mind, makes pilgrimage a thousand times, for the sake of Marwa his performance will have no Safa⁷.

'Âşikam diyende gerek 'ışk odından derd ola

Kişi kim gönünde derdi yohdur ol nâ-merd ola (Ahmedî D. G. 18/1) (Akdoğan n.d: 225).

Love is beneficial because it is a passion that spiritually fulfills the human being. Here in this couplet, love is the desire that makes everything perfect. Without it everything remains half or imperfect. Here, in this couplet Karamanlı Aynî lends his support to the argument:

Bildük bunı kim zâhidâ ol büt-likânuñ sevgüsi

Sînende ger var ise îmandan dahı tatluymış (K. Aynî D. G. 232/3) (Mermer 2020: 414).

O ye the ascetic one! We knew that the love of the statue-faced in your chest, I assume it is, sweeter than faith.

Zatî also emphasizes that one should not avoid love, for it brightens and enlivens the hearts:

Rûşen eyler dilleri ne için idem perhîz-i 'aşk

Âfîtâba zerre dimez zerre-i nâçîz-i 'aşk (Zatî D. G. 666/1) (Nacar 2011: 81).

Why should I abstain from the love that illuminates the hearts? Those who are incapable of love cannot even recognize the sun, even as a mere particle.

⁷ In allusion to the two small mountains of *Safa* and *Marwa* in Mecca, which are related to the rite of *Sa'i* (derived from the Arabic verb *sa'a*, to walk quickly, to strive) in Islamic pilgrimage. Performing *Sa'i* to *Safa* goes hand in hand with that to *Marwa*; they cannot be separated. One of the linguistic root meanings of *Safa* is purity and clarity.

Nev'î, expressing the greatness of his love, says that the smallest particle of the happiness his beloved brings him is as large as the sun:

'Aşkımı yazmag istesem noktası bir kitâb olur

Şevkümi söylesem eger zerresi âfâtâb olur (Nev'î D. G. 65/1) (Tulum 2003: 399).

If I want to write about my love, each dot of it will be a book. If I tell my enthusiasm, its particle will be sun.

Bir gidâ virmiş durur rûhına 'aşka Mihrî'nün

Görmez ol tâ haşre dek rûy-ı cihânda açlık (Mihrî D. G. 78/7) (Tulum 2003: 399).

Love has given Mihrî's soul such nourishment that she will never feel hunger again in this world until the Day of Judgment.

This reflects the idea that love is not just an emotion but a sustaining spiritual force—so fulfilling that it removes all worldly need or longing.

2. Characteristics of Love

2.1. It is Hard and Requires Sacrifice

In Ottoman poetry, love has consistently been depicted as a complex and arduous phenomenon. Despite this, it often begins with an intense desire and enthusiasm, driven by longing and emotional impulse. Consequently, the inherent difficulties of love are either disregarded or deliberately overlooked at the outset. As previously discussed, this neglect of love's burdens is a recurring theme, particularly observable in the works of early Ottoman poets, who frequently illustrate the lover's entry into love without full awareness of its eventual trials.

As Ahmet Paşa declares, love seems easy in the beginning but later it is understood that it is not:

Rûzigâr âyinesinde sûret-i ahvâl-i 'aşk

Evvel âsân görünür sonra belâlar gösterür (Ahmet P. D. G. 40/2) (Tarlan 1992: 137).

In the mirror of time, the reflection of the states of love looks easy at the beginning, but later it shows afflictions.

Sultan poet Muradî (Murad third) supports that idea:

'Aşkı âsân mı sanursın ey Muradî bilmiş ol

Nakd-ı cân ile olur dâ'im hemân bâzâr-ı 'aşk (Muradî D. G. 684/7) (Nacar 2011: 63).

O Muradî! Do you think love is easy? Know that, the market of love is always set up by giving your life in advance.

The 14th century-poet Ahmedî (d. 1413) delineates the characteristics of love, describing it as hard:

Ahmedî terk eyle yâra cânı kim

'Aşk u cân sevmek be-gâyet serd ola (Ahmedî D. G.11/7) (Akdoğan n.d: 222).

Oh Ahmedî, leave your soul to the beloved because having love and loving oneself is onerous.

Ahmedî goes on to describe the features of love by depicting it as road:

Bu 'aşk yolu sa'bdur ol yola varmaga
Cân kıymetini bilmeyen evbâşî gözlegil (Ahmedî D. G. 406/4) (Akdoğan n.d: 457).

This road of love is indeed difficult to reach. Watch the ruffian who know not the value of the soul.

In the same vein, the poet goes on further, drawing a parallel between love and a book.

Ne müşkil 'ilmdür 'aşkun kitâbı
Ki irmez faysala faslı vü bâbı (Ahmedî G. 723/1) (Akdoğan n.d: 614).

How arduous a science the book of love is that its chapters and sections are never conclusive.

Shortly, Ahmedî insists that love is hard while he likens love many things.

Adlî, as a sultan and poet assimilates love to the religious law:

Sâkî-i devrân beni bir câm ile mest itdi kim
'Aşk şer'i men' kılmış muhtesib ta'zîrini (Adlî D. G. 137/3) (Bayram 2018: 175).

The cupbearer of the universe inebriated me with a cup. The law of love prohibited the police officer from chastising [me].

Love is like a drink that intoxicates a person, and since someone who is intoxicated is not in their right mind, they may be excused for certain wrongdoings.

Adlî tells of other peculiarities of love: Grief and mystery.

Degme etrâk ne bilsün gam-ı 'aşkı 'Adlî
Sırr-ı 'aşkı anlamağa haylice idrâk gerek (Adlî D. G. 63/7) (Bayram, 2018: 101).

The common rustics, how could they know the distress of love! To know the mystery of love, one needs much perception.

Here Adlî says the love can only be conceived by conscious people not by ordinary ones.

Furthermore, the sultan sees love as a claim fight for:

Bu gün ben da'vî-i 'aşk ile geldüm meydâne
N'ola tub eyler isem başumı ol zülf-i çevgâne (Adlî D. G. 129/1) (Bayram, 2018: 167).

Today, I have come to the [battle] field with the claim of love. It would come as no surprise if I make of my head a ball for the [beloved with] the "mallet" hair.

He says love is a polo game (kind of war) and when one attempts to play he or she takes a risk to be defeated or dead.

2.1. It Gives Pain

Love has many aspects; while it can be beautiful, it is also often difficult and painful. It brings with it the fear of loss—the more one loves, the greater the anxiety of separation, rejection, or betrayal. Even small misunderstandings or emotional distance can cause deep hurt. When feelings are not reciprocated or the relationship faces serious challenges, love can become a source of inner conflict and suffering. Love is not only hard by itself but also brings many pains to the lover.

‘Aşkun sanemâ çün yed-i kudret dile yazdı

Başuma belâ vü gam u hecrün bile yazdı (Mihri D. G. 198/1) (Aslan 2018: 154).

O statue [of beauty], just as the hand of power has written your love on (my) heart, on my head, it also has written tribulation, distress and even your desertion.

Poets frequently speak of the pain that love brings that never truly fades.

Mihnetinden aşkunun cân kurtara mı mürğ-1 dil

Kim benündür dâne-i fitne saçun dâm-1 belâ (Ahmedî D. G. 5/2) (Akdoğan n.d: 218).

*Can the bird of my heart escape the torment of your love,
When the bait in the snare of your trouble-spreading hair is none other than me?*

2.2. It Changes Habitual Manners

Love possesses such profound influence that it prompts numerous individuals even sultans to undergo radical transformations in their lives:

Nice şâhı itdi kul sultân-1 ‘aşk

Tâc ü tahtı kodurur fermân-1 ‘aşk (Cemâlî D. G. 198/1) (Nacar 2011: 20).

The sultan of love enslaved many sultans. The edict of love is powerful enough to make sultans leave the throne and the crown.

Niçelere bağladı zünnârını

Zühdi harmânın oda yakdı bu ‘aşk (E. Rumî D. G. 50/7) (Tatçı 2014: 83).

Love burned many people’s blend of asceticism and kept them from piety.

Forbearance is another name for love; those who do not know patience do not challenge with it.

Bî-nevâ ‘aşıkları bir perişân hâl ide

‘Akl ü sabrı hâne-i dilde komaz yağmâ-yı ‘aşk (B. Rahmî D. G. 95/3) (Nacar 2011: 39).
öö öööendes not leavethe felingsdu.ir hayaldir. Alemde ne varsa herşe aşktan ibarettirr do not permit it.eni, Muradi, Zati, Şu

Taking the mind and patience in the house of the heart, the plunder of love ruins the feelings of the unfortunate (deprived) lovers at the end.

In conclusion, love, once it takes hold of an individual, doesn’t leave them

unchanged; it compels them to alter their accustomed ways.

2.4. It is Spirit and Immortal

Love is all-encompassing; everything that is alive is embraced by love, and love resides within it. Yunus Emre says love is the soul of everything alive.

In the couplet below the poet says love is the soul of everything that is alive:

Hakikat her vücûdun cânı 'aşkdur

Ne cân kim cân içinde cânı 'aşkdur (Yunus E. D. G.90/1) (Tatçı 2005: 72).

Love is the essence of every being; even the soul within the soul is made of love.

To the 16th century poet Zâtî love remains eternal and indestructible, even if the mountains and stones are torn apart and the sky is shattered. Because, love is not material but spiritual, it is therefore eternal.

Tag u taş kopsa yirinden yire geçse tâk-ı çarh

Hey kıyâmet zâyil olmaz dildeki bünyâd-ı 'aşk (Zâtî D. G. 659/3) (Tarlan 1970: 163).

If the mountains and stones were torn from their places and the dome of the sky fell to the ground, the building of the love in the heart would not break out till apocalypse.

2.5. It is Value Above All Else

As Ottoman poetry developed within Islamic civilization and under the influence of Islam, knowledge was considered superior to everything, even to martyrdom, and the ink of scholars was favored even more than the blood of martyrs. Even the lovers who hide their love and sacrifice themselves for love are named 'martyrs of love'⁸. The one who offers his soul on this path is called a martyr of love (Mollahaliloğlu, 2023: 58).

Fuzûlî who has studied both Islamic and positive sciences, sees love superfluous goal and ideal for which everything must be sacrificed (Koçin, 2003: 398).

'İlm kesbiyle pâye-i rif'at

Hayâl-i muhâl imiş ancak

'Aşk imiş her ne var âlemde

'İlm bir kıl u kâl imiş ancak (Fuzûlî D. Muk.19) (Akyüz vd 1958: 485).

It is an impossible dream to promote with the gain of knowledge. Science is just a rumor, whereas everything in the world consists of love.

16th century poet Nev'î, defines divine love as a secret worship held in the heart.

Kimseler 'aşk neydügin bilmez

Nev'iyâ dilde bir 'ibâdetdür (Nev'î D. G. 88/7) (Ekici 2017: 33).

Nobody knows what love is. In fact, love is an act of worship in the heart.

Since love is a sacred and elevated state of being; only a few can truly perceive its

⁸ Ahmet Atilla Şentürk, "Aşk Şehidi", *Osmanlı Şiir Kılavuzu*, vol. 1 (İstanbul: (OSEDAM) Osmanlı Edebiyatı Araştırmaları Merkezi, 2016), 392. See also Michael Reinhard Hess, "Martyrdom in 'Îmâdeddîn Nesîmîs Türkic Divan: A Literary Analysis – Part II, *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, 107 (2017): 59-76.

essence, only those who fall in love can understand the love properly. If a person has disgraced himself for the sake of love, s/he cannot be called a lover:

‘Aşka düşenler bilürler hem yine ‘aşk derdini

‘Âşik ohurlar mı anı k’olmadı rüsvâ-yı ‘aşk (Nesîmî D.G. 215/2) (Ayan 1990: 206).

Those who fall in love, know the trouble of love. No one regards a person who isn't infatuated with love as lover.

Love is evaluated by only those who live it. Love is an ideal, a value for which one can afford to be embarrassed with.

2.6. It is an Incurable Sickness

To Ottoman poets, love is considered an illness that takes one's physical and emotional strength. Weakness is the first sign of it.

Derd-i ‘aşk artar ilâç itdükçe Bâkî şöyle bil

‘Âciz olmışdur etibbâ ana dermân itmede (Bâkî D. G. 414/7) (Küçük n.d: 257)

Oh Bâkî! know that the doctors were incapable of finding a cure for love sickness. As you give medicine, it increases.

Çâre-i bih-bûdumu sordum mu‘âliciden dedi

Derd derd-i ‘aşk ise mümkün değil sıhhat sana (Fuzûlî D. G. 22/3) (Koçin 2003: 402-403).

I asked the medicine giver about my health. He said that if it is lovesickness, there is no health for you.

2.7. Signs and Cures of Love

For many centuries, love was the central theme of Ottoman poetry, and whether it should be kept secret or expressed openly was also a subject of debate. While those who concealed their love were regarded as martyrs of love, there were also those who sought union by declaring their feelings openly. Nevertheless, even in the early periods of the Ottoman era, love -though not always confessed by the lover- often revealed itself through unmistakable signs and behaviors. Although the secrecy of love is often seen as virtuous, love eventually reveals itself and becomes known in one way or another. In particular, weakness and physical frailty are recognized as bodily signs of love:

Bîmâr-ı ‘aşka düşenün olur mı tâkati

Ey dil hemîşe böyledür ‘aşkun ‘alâmeti (Mihri D. G. 185/1) (Aslan 2018: 154).

Can the ailing one who has fall in love ever have any strength. O ye heart, this has ever been the sign of love.

The signs of love are sorrow in the heart, tears in the eyes, and a fire in the chest. These are the symptoms that arise with love:

(Nûn) nem var dahi ‘aşkunda budur tahsîlüm

Dilde gam dîdede nem sînede âteş her bâr (Mihri D. G. 17/25) (Aslan 2018: 50).

What I've learned from your love is nothing but sorrow on the tongue, tears in the eyes, and fire burning in the chest every time.

Besides the body signs, sign of love in the mind is the surrender of one's will:

‘Aşk ile kaldum ta‘na sevgüli n’itdün bana

Vardı bu gönlüm sana nice sini sevmeyüm (K. Aynî D. G. 364/4) (Mermer 2020: 500).

O dear, what have you done to me that I am stupefied with love. This heart of mine reached you [found you after a journey]; how can I not love you?

In conduct, love reveals itself through actions that one would not dare take—were it not for love—actionâs that often lead to disgrace.

‘Âşık olan kişiye zâhir olur sevdâyılık

‘Aşka uyup niçe eyledün rüsvâyılık (K. Aynî D. Mur. VI) (Mermer 2020: 221).

To the one in love [the one whose heart is filled with aşk], love becomes conspicuous. You complied to [followed] aşk and brought oodles of disgrace.

2.8. The Cure for it Patience or Journey

Love is both an inevitable condition and an incurable illness. Even though the lover may not wish to be reed from this affliction, remedies are sometimes suggested. When we look at early poets of Ottoman, it becomes clear that the common remedies were either to patiently endure the cruelty of the beloved or to leave the place in order to avoid witnessing their indifference. Ahmedî, one of the poets of this era, presents a remedy for love through one of his couplets.

Sabr gerek bu zülfe sayd olana

Çünkü sevdâya sabr oldu devâ (Ahmedî D. G. 15/9) (Akdoğan n.d: 224).

Patience is needed for the one captivated by this tress, For patience has become the only remedy for love.

Ahmet Paşa says that his advice to the lover “either endure or depart” has now become a well-known proverb:

Kıldım belâ-yı ‘aşk ile ben mübtelâ sefer

Meşhûrdur ki ‘âşika yâ sabr u yâ sefer (Ahmet P. D. G. 73/1) (Tarlan 1992: 154).

Because I was struck by the troubles that come with love, I set out on a journey. It is well known that a lover must either endure with patience or go on a journey.

For Mihrî, the only cure for love is reunion with the beloved.

Bir tabîbe ben didüm bîmâr-ı ‘aşka çâre ne

Didi dilber vashıdur anun devâsı özgedür (Mihrî D. 31/7) (Aslan 2018: 67).

I asked a physician, ‘What is the cure for the sick of love?’ He said, ‘Its remedy is different: it’s union with the beloved’.

When a lover grows weary of the unchanging circumstances, they feel so helpless that, in the end, only two paths remain: union or death. Mihrî summarizes this beautifully:

Reh-i ‘aşkunda ‘ömür geçdi mülâzımlığ ile

Ya gel öldür ya kabûl eyle beni bendelige (Mihrî D. 175/6) (Aslan 2018: 142).

On the road of your love, life [my lifetime] elapsed in traineeship /Either come kill me, or accept me in slavery [among your slaves].

Conclusion

In early Ottoman poetry, love stands not merely as a theme, but as the central axis around which poetic thought, language, and cosmology revolve. Far from being confined to romantic or emotional expression, love was treated as a metaphysical principle and an existential reality—an ontological force rooted in the theory of *sudûr* (emanation) and Sufi metaphysics. Within this intellectual framework, poetry became a vehicle to explore the essence of love, often independent of the states of the lover (*âşık*) or the beloved (*ma'sûk*), and instead focusing on love as a universal and self-sustaining truth.

This study has aimed to analyze love in its own terms and through its poetic definitions, emphasizing its inherent nobility and complexity. Rather than reducing it to emotional states, early Ottoman poets articulated love through a rich vocabulary—*ışk*, *muhabbet*, *mıhr*, *sevda*, *sevgi*—without strictly differentiating among them, thereby portraying love as a single, multifaceted reality. Poetic expressions depict love as difficult to attain, endure, or resolve, thereby exalting it as a privileged and rare experience reserved for the few who can comprehend and embody it. The difficulty of love, its irresistible allure, and its boundlessness confer upon it a unique power that elevates both the subject and the poetic act.

By interpreting love through similes, metaphors, and symbolic language, poets established it as both a spiritual path and a mode of being. The triadic structure commonly found in lyrical poetry—lover, beloved, rival—served as a symbolic representation of the soul's struggle toward divine union. Love was thus not only expressed but also lived, taught, suffered, and celebrated through poetry, becoming the reason for poetic creation and self-immortalization.

In this sense, early Ottoman poetry may be read as a self-explanatory dictionary of love, in which poets define, theorize, and glorify love as a cosmic and existential force. The subsequent centuries saw an expansion in metaphorical language and increased focus on the emotional states of lovers. Yet, it was in the early period that the essence of love was most directly addressed, with poets insisting on its inevitability, necessity, and sublime nature.

Ultimately, love in early Ottoman poetry emerges as an eternal and uncontainable phenomenon—at once a source of divine knowledge and human transformation. Through it, poets not only articulated a personal truth but contributed to a timeless literary tradition in which love remains both the origin and the aim of existence.

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