



**READING THE SYMBOLS IN RUMI'S *THE PHILOSOPHER
AND THE SKIPPER***

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Abstract

While Sufi literature is believed to be a powerful instrument in introducing a model of spiritual journey, the symbols in such type of literature are not always easy to digest. This paper aims to contribute to our understanding of the mystical content of Sufi literature with a particular focus on the symbolism representing the Sufism spiritual journey seen in a Sufi literary text written by Jalaluddin Rumi. This study was conducted using a semiotic approach as it embraces symbolism under its study area. Data are drawn from Rumi's "The Philosopher and The Skipper", a short story in a book titled "Tales from the Land of the Sufis". Data are analyzed qualitatively ranging from collecting the data through a careful reading to coding the text for description. The findings reveal that the four main stages of the spiritual journey are consecutively symbolized by ship (*shari'a*), swimming (*tariqah*), ocean (*ma'rifat*), and a gift (*haqiqat*). Other supporting symbols include 'Ali (*salik* and sublime spiritual position), philosopher (human intellect), Sam (*murshid*), sea voyage (*suluk*), the sailors (*tariqah* members), the skipper (*khalifah*), a small island (*zawiyah*), and empty object (*zuhud*). It is argued that effective and meaningful exploration of symbolism in Sufi literature might be best done through a semiotic approach.

Keywords: *Jalaluddin Rumi, semiotic approach, Sufi literature, symbol*

INTRODUCTION

Spirituality and mystical experience have been among the fundamental domains which many literary works have been centered upon. Sufi literature, which is based on Sufism, is no exception. Sufism, an Islam mystical tradition, has given birth to many mystical prose and poetry through the works of its prominent writers such as Rabia al-Adawiyya, Muhyidin Ibn Arabi, and Jalaluddin Rumi. Nevertheless, Sufi literature is not always easy to digest for it often requires deep contemplation (Rakhmat, 2000). This study assumes that one of the difficulties in understanding Sufi literature is its particular symbolism. Thus, the investigation of symbols, as a major literary device, in Sufi literature might help readers understand the spiritual and mystical messages in it.

Many studies in literary works suggest that symbolism is of paramount importance. Fadaee (2011) found that the authors of literary works, on the one hand, tend to use symbolism as figurative language to implicitly or indirectly convey their messages. Reader, on the other hand, is not always able to capture the the explicit messages unless they have relevant prior knowledge to understand the allegorical meaning or symbolic meaning of the work. Sandamali (2015) reported that symbolism in literary works might have its roots in religious teaching. Accordingly, the symbols found in the story of "The Old Man and The Sea" contain biblical influences where the character of Santiago is believed to symbolize Jesus Christ, and the character of Pedrico represents Saint Peter. Further, Sarah & Sakinah (2021) reported that symbolism found in Sufi literature is particular in nature. In Jalaluddin Rumi's poem "When I Died", for example, there are three distinctive symbols, namely death, resurrection, and immortality. All of those symbolize death as a step towards eternal love rather than a sad and scary moment. Meanwhile, Abbar (2023) revealed that a critical analysis of symbolism plays an important role in exploring and interpreting modernist literature. Critical analysis requires a reader to decode symbols within a text by constructing meaning based on his or her experience and cultural context. It holds that the author's intention should become irrelevant since the interpretation of symbols is entirely the subjectivity of the reader. Despite a wealth of articles on symbolism within literary

works, no thorough discussion had been made of “The Philosopher and The Skipper”, one of the most widely-read short stories written by the greatest mystic poet-philosophers in the Islamic world, Jalaluddin Rumi. The short story does not only present universal life lessons for general readers but also Sufism teachings for those who could uncover the symbols in it.

It is believed, then, that there is an urgent need for a study to fill the above-mentioned void by elucidating symbolism in Rumi’s “The Philosopher and The Skipper” seen from the Sufism perspective itself. This study is intended to fill the existing gap, and is guided by a research question: what symbols represent the Sufism spiritual journey in Rumi’s “The Philosopher and The Skipper”?

The answer to the research question is believed to add the clarity of spiritual and mystical messages of Sufi literature, in general, and of the discussed story in particular. For this purpose, a theoretical lens of semiotic approach is used as it allows a reader to actively negotiate meaning in a literary text with a critical eye and to reveal the possible and plausible symbols within the text based on his or her relevant prior knowledge and experience.

Semiotic Approach

A story is generally written to offer a model of life, particularly through the messages it contains, which is ideal according to its author. The messages conveyed through fiction might have different effects from the same messages delivered through nonfiction writings (Nurgiyantoro, 2013). It is assumed that Sufism messages in the story of “The Philosopher and The Skipper” is related to an ideal life journey for a spiritual seeker. It deals with the four main stages in Sufism spiritual journey namely: *shari’a*, *tariqah*, *ma’rifat*, and *haqiqat*. In brief, *shari’a* is the exoteric part of Islam including the religious law that governs a Muslim’s obligation and prohibitions; *tariqah* refers to the spiritual path, exercises, and self-disciplined for an inward journey to the Divine; *ma’rifat* is the esoteric part or spiritual knowledge gained through a spiritual exercise rather than intellectual journey; and *haqiqat* refers to the ultimate truth obtained through direct experience with the Divine. The story of “The Philosopher and The Skipper” might contain multi-layered meanings that could be best revealed through a reader’s personal interpretation as suggested by the semiotic approach.

Semiotic approach primarily focuses on how signs are produced, how they interact with one another to generate meaning within the text, and how meaning is constructed across different semantic layers (Kalelioğlu, 2018), such as denotative layer and connotative layer. The meaning is supposed to be dynamic and multifaceted shaped by the reader’s perspective, as well as his or her cultural and ideological contexts. Post-structuralist semiotic approach, a key branch of semiotic theory, emphasizes the significance of multiple interpretations, encouraging readers to draw on their knowledge and experiences in the meaning-making process. It positions readers as central agents in the construction of meaning (Leone, 2024), who engage deeply with the text and play a key role in constructing diverse and nuanced interpretation of literary works.

Roland Barthes, a prominent figure in the post-structuralist semiotic approach, argued that the relationship between the signifier and the signified in a literary work, might never be singular or fixed but constantly shifts based on the reader’s interpretation of the signs found in the work. To support this, Barthes introduced several key concepts. One such concept is *myth*, which he defines as a second-order semiotic system which acts on a first-order semiotic system (Allen, 2003), highlighting how a literal meaning can acquire cultural significance, such as roses being seen as symbols of love or romance in certain cultures. Another important concept is *connotative system*, which also refers to a second-order semiological system constructed on the first denotative system (Griffin, 2012). Connotative meanings, which might include the emotional and cultural meanings attached to a literal sign,

are shaped by contextual and cultural factors. Barthes also introduced the the idea of *writerly texts (jouissance)* which refer to avant-garde texts (Allen, 2003). Such type of texts are open to multiple interpretations, where the reader plays an active role in constructing meaning from the symbols they encounter. Additionally, he discussed the term of *semantic code*, which refers to words, phrases, or images that might be better understood by implying their connotative meanings (Zaib & Mashori, 2014). This code facilitates a deeper interpretation of literary works by exploring the symbolic meanings of the elements of a text.

It becomes obvious that the active role and interpretive freedom of the reader are crucial in engaging with literary works. To effectively participate in the meaning-making process, readers might employ both efferent and aesthetic reading (Mart, 2019). Efferent reading involves focusing on the explicit information presented in the text, while aesthetic reading engages the reader's psychological responses, emotions, attitudes, and associations evoked by the text (Cox, 2012). The implementation of both efferent reading and aesthetic reading helps readers form inferences and interpretations more effectively. However, the freedom to analyze the text critically, informed by personal experience, cultural background, and subjective perspectives, might sometimes lead to a narrowed interpretation (Woodruff & Griffin, 2017). To avoid a constrained interpretation, a reader needs to justify his or her response with solid evidence from the text. Thus, reading the symbols in Rumi's "The Philosopher and The Skipper" requires active reader who applies both efferent and aesthetic readings while grounding his or her interpretations in textual evidence.

METHOD

This present study was conducted using a semiotic approach since the material object of the research, symbolism, is under the study area of semiotics (Pradopo, 2003). It specifically followed the post-structuralist semiotic approach, introduced by Roland Barthes, for it places the meanings within a literary text as something fluid and open to multiple interpretation. It also emphasizes the reader's role in the meaning-making process (Leone, 2024). A Muslim reader, like the researcher of this study, is likely to have relevant personal experience and ideological background that fits literary texts related to Sufism. Therefore, the researcher's interpretation of the text being studied could be seen as a personal and meaningful-meaning-making process that might enrich the interpretation of the text.

The data source of this research was a short story entitled "The Philosopher and The Skipper" written by Jalaluddin Rumi. The story was found in a Sufi literature titled "Tales from the Land of the Sufis" compiled by Bayat and Jamnia (1994). The data were obtained through a careful reading of the entire text, comprehending, identifying possible and plausible symbols, and constructing the meaning of the identified symbols from the lens of the researcher's personal experience and prior knowledge.

Data analysis was carried out qualitatively by adapting the steps proposed by Creswell (2012), namely: (1) collecting data through reading and re-reading the entire story of "The Philosopher and The Skipper"; (2) preparing data for analysis by marking the identified symbols, or connotative meanings, derived from the story. The identified symbols were connected to the researcher's prior knowledge and experience; (3) reading through the data by making an interconnectedness between the results of the efferent reading and the aesthetic reading; (4) coding the data using a simple numbering system; and (5) coding the text for description to determine the symbol's location in the data display.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study is aimed at finding and interpreting the symbols that are assumed to represent the stages of a spiritual journey from the perspective of Sufism. Prior to the

findings and discussion, literal and figurative synopses of “The Philosopher and The Skipper” are presented to guide a meaningful reading and exploration.

The story of “The Philosopher and The Skipper” centers on ‘Ali, a philosopher who is excessively proud of his broad knowledge. Sam, Ali’s friend, wishes to humble him. Sam then arranges for ‘Ali to go on a sea voyage so that ‘Ali would get a new experience. While on board, ‘Ali lectures the sailors and the skipper on philosophy. He criticizes the skipper for not knowing the topic and judges that half of the skipper’s life has been wasted. A storm hits the ship. In a dangerous situation, the skipper finds that ‘Ali cannot swim. Mirroring Ali’s previous arrogance, the skipper says that ‘Ali has wasted all of his life for not knowing how to swim. When the ship is sinking, ‘Ali is rescued by the skipper and the sailors. Humbled by the experience, ‘Ali stops boasting about his philosophical knowledge. A few years later, ‘Ali gives the skipper a painting of a ship in a storm, inscribed with a couplet that reflects the newfound humility he discovered as a result of the incident.

The following twelve symbols, found in the story of “The Philosopher and The Skipper”, explain the four stages of the spiritual journey and their supporting elements such as *murshid* (teacher), *khalifah* (teacher assistant), *zawiyah* (teaching setting), *salik* (disciple), and *suluk* (spiritual journey).

‘Ali (*Salik* and Sublime Spiritual Position)

‘Ali symbolizes two things namely a *salik*, which might be equivalent to a student or a seeker, and a sublime spiritual position. ‘Ali’s initial characterization foreshadows a reason for becoming a *salik*.

“‘Ali was a philosopher who thought he knew all there was to know. Everyone agreed that he had a broad knowledge of the sciences and the arts....”

(Bayat & Jamnia, 1994: 139).

‘Ali is an Arabic word that literally means ‘high or exalted’, and in personification is the name of the fourth caliph in Islamic history, ‘Ali bin Abi Thalib, to whom the title of ‘gate of knowledge’ (*babul ‘ilmi*) is attributed. ‘Ali bin Abi Thalib is regarded by the Sufis as the leader of divine wisdom that has given birth to various branches of *tariqoh* or spiritual brotherhood. Therefore, the character of ‘Ali in “The Philosopher and The Skipper” might symbolize a sublime spiritual position that a *salik* could strive for through the path of knowledge and the guidance of a *murshid*.

In the history of Sufism, ‘Ali bin Abi Thalib has been considered as the most important figure. He is the main inheritor of the Islamic esoteric teachings from whom Sufism transmission spreads. The stories of, or related to, ‘Ali bin Abi Thalib have served as the foundation and inspiration of Sufism itself (Mahendra et al., 2024). One point worth mentioning here is that the character of ‘Ali in the *The Philosopher and the Skipper* does not necessarily refer to the figure of ‘Ali bin Abi Thalib, yet it could be seen as another symbol illustrating the central role of ‘Ali bin Abi Thalib in Sufism.

Philosopher (Human Intellect)

Philosopher is viewed as a worldly attribute that represents human intellect (*‘aql*) capable of understanding sciences and art, and solving all issues in life. Human intellect tends to thirst for external recognition:

“Everyone agreed that he had a broad knowledge of the sciences and the arts, yet he insisted on bragging to one and all that he was the smartest man in town.”

(Bayat & Jamnia, 1994: 139).

Human intellect plays an important role in Islamic tradition. The prophetic tradition says that *ad-din 'aqlun la dina liman la 'aqla lahu* emphasizing that reasoning is required to carefully digest, understand, and practice the Islamic teaching. Nevertheless, without spiritual guidance, human intellect might encourage judgments of others, and lead to self-righteousness and arrogance. The spiritual guidance, in this sense, could be provided by a *murshid*.

The above finding supports the result reported by Dalhat (2015) stating that *'aql* plays an important role in the Islamic tradition because it facilitates reasoning, as one of the two admitted sources of knowledge. *'Aql* guides human beings to gather knowledge empirically through sense perception. Without *'aql*, a Muslim will find it difficult to understand and practice Islamic legal provisions (*shari'a*). Nevertheless, the knowledge gained from reasoning should not be superior to knowledge gained from the revelation of God.

Sam (Murshid)

Murshid is a teacher in a Sufi order whose main task is to guide the spiritual journey (*suluk*) of his students (*salik*). A *murshid* is like a doctor for his patients. While a doctor cures physical illness, the *murshid* treats spiritual issues (Anam, 2017). It is worthy of note that Rumi, the author of "The Philosopher and The Skipper", likes to use the sun, which is in Arabic called 'sam', as the most important symbol. 'Sam' might refer to Shams al-Din, Rumi's first teacher (Schimmel, 1982). Thus, Sam, in the story of "The Philosopher and The Skipper", might symbolize a spiritual mentor (*murshid*). It was Sam who felt 'Ali's arrogance was because he did not have a spiritual experience in depth. Sam then played the role of a *murshid* by encouraging 'Ali to take a spiritual journey on a sea voyage under the guidance of a *khalifah*. Sam believed that the journey should make 'Ali change for the better.

Sea Voyage (Suluk)

Sea voyage symbolizes *suluk* which literally means travelling the spiritual path of Islam in order to get closer to God.

"...Sam decided to encourage 'Ali to go on a sea voyage. Such a trip would show 'Ali other ways of life and expose him to difficulties that he would otherwise not experience."

(Bayat & Jamnia, 1994: 140).

A person who undergoes *suluk* is called a *salik* which literally means a seeker. *Suluk* involves a lifelong discipline of practicing the exoteric dimension of Islam (*shari'a*) as a required stepping stone to the esoteric dimension (*haqiqat*). In Sufi tradition, *suluk* might require the presence and guidance of a *murshid*. Rosidi (2024) reported that *suluk* is mostly carried out by considering the local context and cultural context possessed by *tariqoh* members. For example, *suluk* is held monthly in the first ten days of each month in which a *murshid* and the *tariqoh* members gather to perform the *tariqoh's* ritual.

In "The Philosopher and The Skipper", *suluk* is presented through the sea voyage where 'Ali, a new *salik*, met the members of a Sufi order within a certain period of time. Further, *suluk*, symbolized by the sea voyage, should be seen as a recharging process because, as it has been touched upon previously, *suluk* is basically a practice that needs to be done throughout life. This assumption is coherent because at the of the story, readers might discover that it took a long time for 'Ali to figure out the Sufi wisdom that he wrote under the framed painting. It indicates that even since his first sea voyage, 'Ali continued recharging his spiritual journey.

The Sailors (*Tariqah* Members)

It was clearly depicted that on the sea voyage 'Ali was not only accompanied by the skipper, a symbol of the substitute *murshid*, but also by the sailors.

Once at sea, 'Ali talked philosophy with the sailors. The skipper listened patiently for a while without saying a word, but finally he interrupted to complain that he was bored by this talk.

(Bayat & Jamnia, 1994: 140).

The sailors represent *tariqah* members consisting of some seekers coming together in the same Sufi order. More than three centuries ago, Trimmingham (1971) reported on the Sufi order, known as *tariqah*, as a way of spiritual discipline such as *Khalwatiyya*, *Shadhiliyya*, *Qadiriyya*, and *'Alawiyya*. Nowadays in the Indonesian context, more than forty Sufi orders have been incorporated in an organization called *Jam'iyah Ahl al-Thariqat al-Mu'tabarah al-Nahdliyyah* (JATMAN) which is engaged not only in Sufism, but also in nationalism, political and cultural movement (Umar, 2021). It seems clear that *tariqah* members could be symbolized variously such as by the name of the Sufi order or by the name of an organization. Thus, different texts and contexts might present different symbols of *tariqah* members.

The Skipper (*Khalifah*)

The skipper represents a *khalifah* whose main roles are to assist and to substitute the original spiritual mentor (*murshid*). As a representative of the *murshid*, a *khalifah* would carefully examine the spiritual issues faced by a *salik* and would figure out the best ways to help the *salik's* spiritual journey. In doing so, a *khalifah* needs to take care every one taking a spiritual journey under his guidance.

"The skipper and several sailors were preparing to jump into the open sea and take their chances swimming. It was then that the skipper remembered 'Ali. He asked one of the sailors to find him."

(Bayat & Jamnia, 1994: 141).

It is obvious that the skipper did not give the same treatment to everyone on the ship, yet he wished for the same safety for everyone from the storms. A *khalifah* then might play a similar role to that of a doctor who would give different therapies for different problems. In the story, the skipper, a symbol of *khalifah*, gives different treatment to 'Ali, a symbol of *salik* with a particular problem, in comparison to the sailors. Thus, through the character of the skipper, a reader could see that both *murshid* and *khalifah* would care deeply about their students although on the surface level, they might seem to treat their students differently. Caring and guiding are basically the nature of a *murshid* and a *khalifah*.

The Ship (*Shari'a*)

McCaughan (2001) found that in early human history, a ship has been the symbol of various things such as disaster, life, power, discovery, fertility, faith, and the afterlife. It was in the medieval times that the symbolization of a ship or voyaging ship began to be associated with spiritual meaning.

The ship or the vessel, in Rumi's "The Philosopher and The Skipper", symbolizes the Islamic legal system (*shari'a*) which is derived from Qur'an, prophetic tradition (*hadith*), Islamic scholars' consensus (*ijma'*), and analogical reasoning (*qiyas*). The fact that the story says "The skipper ... kept busy steering the ship" (Bayat & Jamnia, 1994: 140), shows that a *murshid* masters *shari'a*, makes *shari'a* the foundation of communication and relationships, and utilizes *shari'a* as the basis for navigating the ocean of *ma'rifat*.

It was clearly portrayed in the story that the ship was not to be abandoned or destroyed. Instead, it should be maintained because it is the only instrument to take a sea voyage. It implies that any spiritual journey in Sufism should be based on the Islamic legal system. Therefore, a *murshid* and *khalifah* are supposed to master Islamic law well.

Swimming (*Tariqah*)

It is worthy of note that the culmination of the spiritual experience is like a pearl at the bottom of the ocean. A *salik* who is already on the boat needs a method to retrieve the pearl. The method is known as *tariqah* which in the story is symbolized by swimming. Therefore, the swimming activity represents *tariqah* or the ritual that must be taken by a *salik*, with the guidance of a *murshid*, to obtain the pearl of *haqiqat* lies at the bottom of the ocean of *ma'rifat*. From the perspective of the *murshid* in the story, *tariqah* is of paramount importance. Without *tariqah*, or the ability to swim, a human being might have wasted all of his or her life no matter how smart and rich they are.

“The skipper hollered, “Do you know how to swim?”

“No!” ‘Ali shouted back.

The skipper shook his head. “What a shame, for all of your life has been wasted, not having such knowledge.””

(Bayat & Jamnia, 1994: 141).

Tariqah, in the broadest sense, refers to the second stage of Sufism spiritual journey. In the specific sense, it is a practical method related to the way and configuration of *dhikr* (mystical exercises) compiled by the *murshid*, also known as *shaykh*, to guide their disciples. The mystical exercises are diverse in nature. The *Naqsabandiyah tariqah*, for example, emphasizes *dhikr* in the heart (*khafi*), while the *Qadariyah tariqah* is identical to *dhikr* chanted out loud (*jahar*) (Rahmah, 2012). Thus, the word swimming found in the story of *The Philosopher and the Skipper* is a symbol that has more than one meaning. It can be seen as one of the four stages known in Sufism, and it also can be viewed as a Sufi order which might include *Naqsabandiyah*, *Qadariyah* or *Qadiriyya*, *Khalwatiyya*, *Shadhiliyya*, *Alawiyya*, and others. Otherwise, it could specifically refer to *Mawlawiyah*, a Sufi order founded by Jalaluddin Rumi himself (Emroni, 2015).

A Small Island (*Zawiyah*)

“Even when they cast anchor alongside a small island for a change of pace, ‘Ali, who didn’t know how to swim, did not take advantage of the calm waters to ask his sailor friends for swimming lessons. Neither did he care to ask any questions about their life at sea.”

(Bayat & Jamnia, 1994: 140).

The phrase ‘a small island’ in the above excerpt symbolizes a *zawiyah* (also known as *ribath* or *khanqah*) a place where the spiritual travelers deepen their knowledge, under the guidance of a *murshid*, of how to worship and get closer to God. ‘Ali, the main character in the story, should have learned how to swim (*tariqah*) when he was on the small island (*khanqah*).

Emroni (2015) observed the differences between *khanqah*, *ribath*, and *zawiyah*. Accordingly, *khanqah* refers to a place of learning with loose rules; *ribath* is a place that is generally attended by the elderly and the poor; and *zawiyah* is a learning setting with a small scale of disciples and tends not to have certain rules in it. Based on these differences, the symbol of ‘a small island’ might be best interpreted by *zawiyah* for it is a learning place for a small scope.

Ocean (*Ma'rifat*)

While *shari'a* serves as the foundation of the spiritual journey, *tariqah* becomes the prerequisite knowledge that logic can accept, and *ma'rifat* is the understanding gained through direct interaction. In this sense, ocean symbolizes *ma'rifat* which requires a *salik* to dive into it. The ocean depicted in the story is not always easy to dive into because of the storms, strong winds, heavy rain, and giant waves. It implies that being in the *ma'rifat* stage, a *salik* is faced with a variety of tests that may prevent him from obtaining the pearl of *haqiqat*.

The finding of this study reveals that symbolism in Sufi literature might be different from that of the 'conventional symbol' (Klarer, 2004, p.32). While in another study, the ocean is presented as the symbol of purity, holiness, and innocence (Fadaee, 2011), in "The Philosopher and The Skipper", ocean represents *ma'rifat*, a certain level of spiritual knowledge marked by a characteristic termed as '*ainul yaqin*'. Sufism recognizes three levels of knowledge about the truth, namely '*ilmul yaqin*', '*ainul yaqin*', and '*haqqul yaqin*'. The first level, '*ilmul yaqin*' refers to knowledge obtained by reasoning process; the second level, '*ainul yaqin*', refers to knowledge gained through direct perception; and the highest level, '*haqqul yaqin*', refers to knowledge obtained by internalizing the intellectual knowledge and the sensory observation. As the ocean symbolizes a particular level of knowledge in Sufism, it might be deemed as private symbol that might be best understood through such particular perspective as Sufism.

A Gift (*Haqiqat*)

It has been touched upon previously that *haqiqat* is the last stage that a *salik* should undergo in his or her spiritual journey or *suluk*. In the stage of *haqiqat*, a *salik* experiences what he or she has understood (*haqqul yaqin*) in the stage of *ma'rifat*. The following excerpt might best portray the *haqiqat* stage within the story.

"A few years after the incident, 'Ali presented a gift to the skipper, who was now a close friend of his. It was a framed painting of a ship in a stormy sea.

(Bayat & Jamnia, 1994: 141).

The gift, in the above excerpt, symbolizes 'Ali's arrival at the *haqiqat* stage. 'Ali has now obtained an experience-based spiritual understanding after a quite long time. One point worth mentioning here is that a *haqiqat* level obtained by a seeker (*salik*) should be consulted with or validated by the *murshid*. The absence of a *murshid's* validation may lead to a fake achievement.

Empty Object (*Zuhud*)

'Empty object', presented in the last lines of the story, symbolizes the attitude of *zuhud*, a key concept in Sufism suggesting its practitioners purify their hearts by living a simple life and reducing their desires for material possessions, status, and wealth. It is believed that a *salik's* relationship with God, the creator of the universe, would become closer through the detachment of worldly attributes.

A couplet was inscribed beneath the picture:

Only empty objects remain on top of the water.

Become empty of human attributes, and you will float on the ocean of creation."

(Bayat & Jamnia, 1994: 141).

Hafiun (2017) reported that *zuhud* is a prerequisite for the attainment of a high degree in the sight of God. *Zuhud* is an attempt to let go of the sense of ownership of the

world, instead of abandoning all the world affairs. *Zuhud* suggests making the world as a means to achieve a better life in the afterlife.

Rumi's "The Philosopher and The Skipper" depicts a roadmap for a spiritual journey that consists of four stages: *shari'a*, *tariqah*, *ma'rifat*, and *haqiqat*. It was found that the first stage, *shari'a*, was symbolized by a ship or vessel. A spiritual traveler like 'Ali needs the ship of *shari'a* to sail the ocean of *ma'rifat*. The second stage, *tariqah*, was symbolized by swimming lessons. A spiritual traveler, known as *salik*, needs *tariqah* to dive into the ocean of *ma'rifat*. The third stage of *ma'rifat* was symbolized by the ocean. A *salik* is supposed to jump off the ship and dive to the bottom of the ocean to find the pearl of spiritual enlightenment. The fourth stage of *haqiqat* was symbolized by a gift, which refers to the discovered spiritual enlightenment. In undergoing these four stages, a *salik* might need a mentor or *murshid*; a mentor's assistant or *khalifah*; and a place for learning Sufism teaching known as *zawiyah*, *ribath*, or *khanqah*. Regardless of authorial intent, the researcher, based on his relevant prior knowledge and experience, assumes that the twelve symbols are rooted in the Islamic religious teaching. They have connotatively portrayed the four spiritual stages widely accepted in Sufi tradition.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study highlights the intricate use of symbolism in "The Philosopher and The Skipper", where words, phrases, objects, and actions serve as symbols that enrich the text's artistic beauty and challenge the reader's intellectual engagement. The analysis reveals that symbols in Sufi literature often carry multiple layers of meaning, which might be uncovered through more digging and deeper reflection. Furthermore, the study emphasizes that symbolism in Sufi literature must balance conventional meanings, rooted in established Sufi concepts, with personal interpretations shaped by the reader's own knowledge and experiences. Involving both conventional and personal meaning ensures a rich and meaningful reading experience. This study suggests the use of a post-structuralist semiotic approach to meaningfully explore the depth of symbols within Sufi literature.

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