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Sufi Vision in Jamal Assadi's *Wild Horses*: Mystical Symbolism and the Poetics of Spiritual Quest

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Abstract:

This study examines the manifestations of Sufi thought and mystical imagination in the poetry of Professor Jamal Assadi, with particular emphasis on his collection *Wild Horses*. The study argues that Assadi's poetic world is constructed through a complex symbolic system in which the visible world becomes a gateway toward the invisible, and the poetic experience transforms into a spiritual journey searching for meaning, freedom, and transcendence. The image of the horse, which occupies a central position in the collection, is interpreted as a metaphor for the restless human soul seeking liberation from earthly limitations and moving toward higher states of consciousness.

Through a close reading of the collection's major themes and symbolic structures, this article explores several Sufi dimensions in Assadi's poetry, including mystical love, the journey of the self, the relationship between human existence and the Absolute, the symbolism of light, silence, nature, and spiritual transformation. The study also situates Assadi's poetic vision within the broader tradition of Arabic mystical poetry, connecting his poetic imagination with classical Sufi concepts developed by figures such as al-Hallāj, Ibn al-Fāriḍ, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, and Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī.

The article concludes that *Wild Horses* represents a modern poetic manifestation of Sufi consciousness, where mystical experience is not merely a religious expression but an aesthetic and existential search for identity, freedom, and harmony between the human being and the universe.

Keywords: Jamal Assadi; *Wild Horses*; Sufism; Mystical Poetry; Symbolism; Arabic Literature; Spiritual Journey; Ibn 'Arabī.

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Introduction

Arabic poetry has historically maintained a profound relationship with spiritual experience. From the earliest expressions of ascetic poetry (*zuhd*) to the highly sophisticated mystical compositions of the great Sufi poets, poetry has functioned as a language capable of expressing dimensions of existence that ordinary discourse cannot fully capture. The Sufi poet does not merely describe reality; rather, he attempts to penetrate beyond its external forms in order to reveal hidden meanings and spiritual truths. Poetry becomes an instrument of unveiling (*kashf*), transformation, and communication between the human soul and the Absolute.

Within this long tradition, modern Arabic poetry has continued to inherit and reshape Sufi concepts, symbols, and modes of expression. Modern poets have often employed mystical imagery not necessarily as a direct religious statement but as an aesthetic and philosophical framework through which they explore alienation, freedom, identity, death, love, and the human search for meaning. The Sufi heritage has therefore remained a powerful source of inspiration for contemporary poetic imagination.

Professor Jamal Assadi's poetic work occupies a significant position within this modern mystical tendency. His collection *Wild Horses* presents a poetic universe characterized by movement, longing, and spiritual tension. The title itself introduces a fundamental symbolic structure: the horse as an image of vitality, freedom, rebellion, and continuous movement. The adjective "wild" suggests an energy that refuses confinement, a spirit that resists limitation and seeks an open horizon beyond ordinary existence.

The horse in Assadi's poetry may be understood as a representation of the human soul in its continuous search for perfection. Similar to the Sufi seeker (*sālik*) who travels through spiritual stations (*maqāmāt*) toward divine knowledge, the poetic horse moves across symbolic landscapes searching for a hidden destination. It is not merely an animal image but a metaphysical symbol representing the restless movement of consciousness.

The mystical dimension in *Wild Horses* emerges through several interconnected elements: the transformation of nature into a spiritual landscape, the elevation of love from a human emotion into a metaphysical force, the use of light and darkness as symbols of knowledge and ignorance, and the representation of the poetic self as a traveler between the visible and invisible worlds.

This study approaches Assadi's poetry through a Sufi literary perspective, arguing that his poetic language is deeply connected with the central concepts of mystical experience: longing (*shawq*), unveiling (*kashf*), unity (*waḥda*), spiritual travel (*sulūk*), and the search for the Absolute.

1. Sufism and the Arabic Poetic Tradition

Sufism has always considered language both a limitation and a possibility. The mystical experience, according to many Sufi thinkers, exceeds ordinary human expression; nevertheless, the poet attempts to approach this ineffable reality through metaphor, symbol, paradox, and imagination. Therefore, Sufi poetry developed a unique language in which ordinary words acquire deeper spiritual meanings.

For example, the symbols of wine, the beloved, the journey, the night, the light, and the desert became central images in mystical poetry. These symbols were not restricted to their literal meanings but represented inner states of consciousness. The beloved could symbolize divine beauty, wine could represent spiritual ecstasy, and the journey could symbolize the movement of the soul toward knowledge.

The Andalusian mystic Ibn 'Arabī developed one of the most influential philosophical foundations of Sufi poetry through his concept of the unity of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). According to Ibn 'Arabī, existence represents a continuous manifestation of divine reality, and the world is a mirror reflecting the attributes of God.¹ This vision profoundly influenced later mystical poets, who viewed nature and human existence as signs pointing toward a deeper spiritual truth.

Similarly, Rūmī transformed mystical experience into poetic movement. His poetry presents the human soul as separated from its original source and constantly longing for reunion. The famous image of the reed flute in the *Mathnawī* symbolizes the soul's cry of separation and its desire to return to the origin.²

Assadi's poetry can be read within this tradition of symbolic spirituality. His poetic images do not remain within the boundaries of physical reality; rather, they open toward metaphysical questions concerning existence, freedom, and the relationship between humanity and the universe.

2. The Title Symbol: The Wild Horses as a Mystical Metaphor

The title *Wild Horses* immediately establishes a symbolic framework for understanding the entire collection. In literary traditions, the horse has always represented power, movement, nobility, and freedom. In mystical literature, however, the horse often acquires additional meanings related to the journey of the soul and the struggle between spiritual aspiration and worldly limitation.

The “wild” horse represents a force that cannot easily be controlled. It symbolizes an inner energy that refuses passive existence and searches for a higher state of being. From a Sufi perspective, this image corresponds to the spiritual seeker whose soul remains dissatisfied with ordinary reality and continuously moves toward transcendence.

The mystical seeker is described in Sufi literature as a traveler whose path requires courage, patience, and liberation from attachments. The horse in Assadi’s collection embodies this movement. It runs beyond geographical space toward symbolic and spiritual horizons.

Thus, the horse becomes a metaphor for poetic consciousness itself. The poet, like the horse, refuses stillness. He moves through memories, dreams, emotions, and metaphysical questions. Poetry becomes the field where this spiritual movement takes place.

The image also suggests freedom. In Sufi thought, true freedom is not merely political or social independence; it is liberation from the domination of the ego (*nafs*) and material attachments. The wild horse therefore represents the soul attempting to escape imprisonment and recover its original purity.

3. Mystical Love and the Transformation of Human Experience

One of the most essential characteristics of Sufi poetry is the transformation of love from a purely human emotion into a metaphysical experience. In classical mystical thought, love (*ḥubb*) represents the fundamental force that connects existence with its divine origin. The Sufi does not perceive love merely as a relationship between two individuals; rather, love becomes a spiritual energy through which the human being discovers the hidden dimensions of existence.

In the poetry of Jamal Assadi, particularly in *Wild Horses*, love appears as a dynamic and transformative experience. It is not a passive feeling but an active journey that changes the identity of the poetic self. The lover is not simply waiting for the beloved; he is moving toward a state of spiritual awakening. Love becomes a form of knowledge, because through love the self discovers realities that cannot be reached through rational thought alone.

This understanding corresponds with the classical Sufi distinction between intellectual knowledge (*‘ilm*) and experiential knowledge (*ma‘rifa*). While ordinary knowledge depends on external observation and rational analysis, mystical knowledge emerges through direct spiritual experience. As Annemarie Schimmel explains, Sufi love represents a movement beyond the boundaries of the individual self toward union with a greater reality.¹

In Assadi’s poetic universe, love frequently functions as a bridge between the human and the cosmic. The beloved is not restricted to a physical presence but becomes a symbol of beauty, perfection, and the eternal search for meaning. This symbolic dimension places his poetry within the wider tradition of mystical expression, where the beloved represents the hidden source of existence.

The Sufi poet often experiences love as both joy and suffering. Separation (*firāq*) becomes necessary because longing intensifies spiritual awareness. The absent beloved creates a state of continuous searching, and this searching becomes the essence of the mystical path. Similarly, in *Wild Horses*, longing appears as a creative force that produces poetic expression.

The restless movement of the “wild horses” can therefore be interpreted as the movement of the lover’s soul. The horses run because the soul itself is never completely satisfied with the limited world. Their movement reflects the eternal human desire to reach a higher state of existence.

4. Light and Darkness: The Symbolism of Spiritual Awakening

Light occupies a central position in Islamic mystical symbolism. The Qur’anic verse known as the “Verse of Light” (*Āyat al-Nūr*) provided Sufi thinkers with a profound symbolic foundation for understanding divine presence, knowledge, and spiritual illumination. The human journey toward truth was often described as a movement from darkness (*ḡulma*) toward light (*nūr*).

In Sufi literature, light does not simply refer to physical brightness. It represents inner revelation, divine knowledge, and the awakening of consciousness. The enlightened heart becomes capable of perceiving realities hidden from ordinary vision.

Assadi’s poetry in *Wild Horses* reflects this symbolic tradition through his attention to images associated with illumination, openness, and transcendence. Light functions as an aesthetic and philosophical element. It suggests the possibility of overcoming existential uncertainty and discovering harmony between the individual and the universe.

The contrast between light and darkness in mystical poetry is not merely a contrast between positive and negative states. Darkness often represents the necessary stage before revelation. The seeker must experience confusion, loneliness, and spiritual absence before reaching illumination. Therefore, darkness becomes part of the journey rather than simply its opposite.

This dialectic appears in many Sufi texts. Al-Ghazālī, in *Mishkāt al-Anwār (The Niche of Lights)*, interprets light as a symbol of divine knowledge that illuminates the human intellect and heart.² Similarly, Ibn ‘Arabī views existence itself as a continuous manifestation of divine light.

Within this framework, Assadi’s poetic images can be interpreted as expressions of a spiritual search. The poet does not describe external landscapes only; he transforms landscapes into inner spaces where illumination occurs.

5. Nature as a Mystical Landscape

Nature in mystical poetry is rarely an independent external reality. For the Sufi poet, nature is a book filled with signs (*āyāt*) pointing toward a greater truth. Mountains, rivers, birds, flowers, and skies become symbolic languages through which the universe reveals its hidden meanings.

This approach derives from a fundamental Sufi idea: creation is a manifestation of divine beauty. The world is not separated from spirituality; rather, it is a mirror reflecting divine attributes. Ibn ‘Arabī’s philosophy particularly emphasizes that every existing thing carries a sign of the Absolute.

In *Wild Horses*, nature appears as a living participant in the poetic experience. It is not merely a background for human emotions but an active spiritual space. Natural images communicate states of the soul and participate in the construction of mystical meaning.

The horse itself belongs to this natural symbolic world. It represents the connection between human energy and cosmic movement. Its running suggests harmony with the rhythms of existence. The horse does not merely travel through space; it travels through states of consciousness.

This relationship between human beings and nature reflects a major characteristic of Sufi aesthetics: the dissolution of boundaries between the self and the universe. The individual does not exist as an isolated entity but as part of a larger cosmic order.

6. The Mystical Self and the Journey of Inner Transformation

The central figure in Sufi poetry is the traveler (*sālik*), the individual who begins a spiritual journey toward self-knowledge and divine awareness. This journey requires transformation because the seeker must overcome the dominance of the ego (*nafs*) and discover a deeper identity.

Assadi’s poetic self in *Wild Horses* can be examined through this Sufi model. The speaker is not a fixed identity but a constantly changing consciousness. The poetic “I” searches, questions, remembers, and moves between states of uncertainty and revelation.

The journey motif is one of the oldest structures in mystical literature. The seeker moves through stages, including repentance (*tawba*), patience (*ṣabr*), love (*maḥabba*), knowledge (*ma‘rifa*), and finally spiritual realization.³

The horses in Assadi’s collection symbolize this continuous movement. They reject stagnation and represent the inner force pushing the self toward transformation.

The mystical journey is therefore not geographical but existential. The poet does not travel from one place to another; he travels from one state of being to another. Poetry becomes the record of this transformation.

7. Symbolism and the Language of Mysticism in *Wild Horses*

Mystical poetry depends heavily on symbolism because ordinary language cannot fully express spiritual experience. The Sufi poet therefore creates a symbolic system where words carry multiple layers of meaning.

Assadi’s poetic language demonstrates this symbolic tendency. Images are not limited to direct description; they function as signs opening toward philosophical and spiritual interpretations.

The horse, light, journey, love, and nature form interconnected symbolic networks. Each symbol strengthens the others and contributes to the construction of a unified mystical vision.

The importance of symbolism in Sufi poetry lies in its ability to unite opposites: the visible and invisible, the human and divine, movement and stillness, absence and presence. This structure creates a poetic world where contradictions become complementary rather than opposing forces.

In this sense, *Wild Horses* can be understood as a modern continuation of the Sufi poetic tradition, while maintaining its own contemporary voice and aesthetic identity.

8. Jamal Assadi and the Classical Sufi Heritage: Continuity and Transformation

The mystical dimension in Jamal Assadi's poetry cannot be understood separately from the long history of Arabic Sufi literature. Although *Wild Horses* belongs to modern Arabic poetry, its symbolic structures reveal a deep connection with the spiritual legacy developed by classical Sufi poets and philosophers. Assadi does not reproduce traditional Sufi poetry; rather, he transforms its concepts into a contemporary poetic language concerned with existence, freedom, identity, and the human search for meaning.

The relationship between Assadi's poetry and classical Sufism is based primarily on shared spiritual questions rather than direct imitation. Like the great Sufi poets, Assadi presents the human being as a traveler searching for an unknown but deeply desired reality. The poetic self is characterized by longing, movement, and a continuous attempt to overcome the limitations of ordinary existence.

This aspect recalls the poetry of Al-Hallaj, whose mystical experience was based on the intense desire for union with the Absolute. Al-Hallaj's famous expression "Ana al-Ḥaqq" was not simply a statement of personal identity but represented the extreme point of mystical annihilation (*fanā*) in which the individual self disappears before divine reality.¹

Similarly, Assadi's poetic world explores the tension between the individual self and the larger universe. The self is never completely satisfied with its physical boundaries; it seeks expansion and transformation. The image of the wild horse symbolizes this spiritual desire for liberation.

The connection with Ibn al-Farid is also significant. Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry, especially his *Tā'īyyat al-Kubrā*, presents love as a mystical path leading toward divine realization. Love is not merely emotional attachment but a force that transforms the lover into a seeker of eternal beauty.²

Assadi's treatment of love follows a similar symbolic pattern. Love becomes a movement beyond the self, an energy that connects human experience with universal meaning.

The influence of Jalal al-Din Rumi may also be recognized through the emphasis on movement and spiritual transformation. Rūmī's poetry is built upon the idea that existence is a journey toward the source. The soul resembles the reed separated from its original place, constantly expressing its longing for return.³

In *Wild Horses*, movement functions in a similar manner. The horse does not simply run; it represents the eternal movement of consciousness toward fulfillment.

9. The Poetics of Freedom: The Wild Horse as an Existential Symbol

One of the most important dimensions of *Wild Horses* is the relationship between mysticism and freedom. In Sufi thought, freedom has a profound spiritual meaning. The truly free individual is not the person who possesses unlimited external choices but the person who liberates himself from internal chains.

Sufi writers frequently describe the ego (*nafs*) as the greatest obstacle preventing human beings from reaching spiritual truth. Liberation requires overcoming selfish desires and transforming the inner self.

The wild horse in Assadi's poetry embodies this concept of freedom. It rejects confinement and represents a force that refuses submission. Its wildness is not chaos; rather, it is a higher form of authenticity. The horse follows its own spiritual rhythm, moving toward a horizon beyond ordinary restrictions.

This symbolism gives the collection a universal dimension. The horse becomes an image of every human being searching for dignity, identity, and spiritual independence.

The poetic freedom found in Assadi's work is therefore both aesthetic and existential. The poet frees language from conventional limitations, while the human soul seeks freedom from existential imprisonment.

10. Mystical Aesthetics and the Unity of Opposites

A fundamental characteristic of Sufi aesthetics is the ability to reconcile apparent contradictions. The mystical vision does not separate completely between joy and sorrow, presence and absence, life and death, or darkness and light. Instead, these opposites become stages within a unified spiritual experience.

In *Wild Horses*, this principle appears through the interaction between movement and stillness. The horse runs continuously, yet this movement leads toward an inner silence. The journey outward becomes a journey inward.

This paradox is central to Sufi thought. The seeker travels far in order to discover what was always present within the self. The external journey reveals the internal reality.

The same principle appears in the relationship between absence and presence. The experience of absence intensifies awareness of presence. The distance from the beloved increases longing, and longing itself becomes a form of spiritual connection.

Through these symbolic structures, Assadi's poetry achieves a mystical aesthetic based on depth, ambiguity, and openness to multiple interpretations.

11. Conclusion

This study has examined the Sufi dimensions in Jamal Assadi's *Wild Horses*, demonstrating that the collection represents a significant example of contemporary Arabic mystical poetry. Through its symbolic structures and spiritual imagination, the collection transforms traditional Sufi concepts into a modern poetic experience.

The central symbol of the wild horse expresses the restless movement of the human soul searching for freedom, knowledge, and transcendence. The horse represents the poetic self that refuses limitation and continuously moves toward a higher state of consciousness.

The themes of love, light, nature, journey, and transformation reveal a poetic vision deeply connected with the Sufi heritage. However, Assadi's poetry does not merely repeat classical mystical ideas; it reinterprets them through modern existential concerns.

The mystical experience in *Wild Horses* is therefore both spiritual and literary. It represents a search for meaning through imagination, symbolism, and poetic creation. The collection demonstrates that Sufism remains a living source of artistic inspiration capable of expressing contemporary human concerns.

Ultimately, Assadi's poetry confirms the continuing vitality of the mystical tradition in Arabic literature. The journey of the wild horses is, in essence, the journey of the human soul itself: a journey from limitation toward freedom, from darkness toward illumination, and from separation toward unity.

Footnotes

1. Al-Hallāj's mystical thought and his concept of divine union have been widely discussed in Sufi studies. See: Massignon, L. (1982). *The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*. Princeton University Press. Naamneh, M. (2026). *Mysticism and anthropomorphism: Studies in mysticism, logic, and literature*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya. Ibn al-Fāriḍ's mystical poetry represents one of the highest expressions of Arabic Sufi love poetry. See: Homerin, T. E. (2001). *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint: Ibn al-Fāriḍ, His Verse, and His Shrine*. University of South Carolina Press. See: Assadi, J. Na'amneh, M. Sindawi, K. (2025). "The Concept of Barzakh in the Muhyiddin ibn Arabi", *Journal of Posthumanism* (5).
2. Rūmī's concept of spiritual movement and return to the divine origin is central to his *Mathnawī*. See: Nicholson, R. A. (1925–1940). *The Mathnawī of Jalālu'ddīn Rūmī*. Luzac. Assadi, J., & Naamneh, M. (2011). The mask of Farīd al-Dīn al-ʿAṭṭār in modern Arabic poetry. *Majma*, 5. Al-Qasemi Academic College.
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