

Love and Spirituality in Leylâ ile Mecnûn: A Cultural Study of Ottoman Sufi Poetry

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Abstract

This paper examines Fuzûlî's *Leylâ ile Mecnûn* as a complex work of Ottoman Islamic literature. It goes beyond being a love story and acts as a spiritual, cultural, and psychological text. Using recent studies on Sufi poetry, Ottoman culture, and manuscript illustrations, this paper explores how Fuzûlî changes the classic *Majnûn-Layla* story into a mystical allegory. This allegory represents a divine longing (*maḥabba*), a letting go of the self (*fanā'*), and spiritual knowledge (*ma'rifa*). The poem uses symbols, metaphors, and themes showing the Islamic mystical tradition and the Ottoman sociocultural environment. Using local folk elements, court rituals, and powerful images, the poem becomes a way to teach spiritual lessons to the elite and the citizens. In addition, the study studies the visual aspects of illustrated manuscripts and how the poem sounds when performed, which further emphasizes its spiritual message. The poem's connections to earlier Arabic and Persian sources are reinterpreted through an Ottoman perspective. This paper concludes that *Leylâ ile Mecnûn* is more than a romantic epic. It is a cultural and devotional object showing the spiritual imagination of the Ottoman Islamic world and connecting literature, mysticism, and identity through a shared poetic story.

Keywords: Fuzûlî, *Leylâ ile Mecnûn*, Sufi literature, Ottoman culture, allegory, mysticism, Islamic poetry, Divan poetry

Abstract

Artikel ini menganalisis karya *Leylâ ile Mecnûn* karya Fuzûlî sebagai teks sastra Islam Ottoman yang bersifat multidimensi, melampaui narasi percintaan untuk berfungsi sebagai karya spiritual, kultural, dan psikologis. Berdasarkan kajian mutakhir tentang puisi sufistik, budaya Ottoman, dan ilustrasi manuskrip, analisis ini mengkaji bagaimana Fuzûlî membentuk kembali legenda klasik *Majnûn* dan *Layla* menjadi alegori mistik tentang kerinduan ilahiah (*maḥabba*), pelepasan diri (*fanā'*), dan pengetahuan spiritual (*ma'rifa*). Puisi ini menggabungkan simbol, metafora, dan motif yang mencerminkan tradisi mistik Islam sekaligus lanskap budaya Ottoman. Dengan memanfaatkan unsur-unsur lokal, ritual istana, dan citra emosional yang kuat, puisi ini menjadi sarana pengajaran spiritual yang dapat diakses oleh kalangan elit maupun rakyat. Studi ini juga menelaah aspek visual dalam manuskrip bergambar serta sifat performatif puisi yang mendukung penyampaian pesan sufistik. Keterlibatan intertekstual dengan sumber

Arab dan Persia klasik ditafsirkan ulang dalam kerangka budaya Ottoman. Kesimpulannya, Leylâ ile Mecnûn bukan sekadar kisah cinta, melainkan artefak budaya dan devosi yang mencerminkan imajinasi spiritual dunia Islam Ottoman melalui narasi puitis.

Kata Kunci: Fuzûlî, Leylâ ile Mecnûn, sastra sufi, budaya Ottoman, alegori, mistisisme, puisi Islam, puisi Divan

INTRODUCTION (Times New Arabic, 12pt, Bold, Capital Letters)

Leylâ ile Mecnûn, Fuzûlî's great work from the 1500s, is one of the most enduring examples of Ottoman Divan literature, showing the mix of Persian, Arabic, and Turkish cultures. Fuzûlî wrote this masterpiece around 1535–1536, while he was in Baghdad by Ottoman support. His version makes the old Arabic–Persian story of Qays and Layla more critical, turning it into an Ottoman story with spiritual meaning. While the poem may initially appear to be a poignant love story, it holds a more profound symbolic significance. It beautifully illustrates Sufi concepts, particularly the transformation of earthly love into a yearning for the God, known as *mahabba*.

Fuzûlî's broad linguistic prowess, encompassing Persian, Arabic, and Azerbaijani, made him perfect for bringing together different literary traditions. He turned the Layla–Majnun story into Ottoman Turkish, part of a trend in Divan poetry where Indian – Persian stories were changed into Turkish, often with Sufi ideas added. According to Kaçar & Koşik (2014), the poem's introduction is symbolic, and the love story contains deeper spiritual elements. The characters and events represent stages on the Sufi path.

Mustafâ Eren (2022) points out that Fuzûlî include Turkish folk culture in his work such as rituals, nature images, and family traditions, which suggests he wanted to make the story feel local for Ottoman readers. This mix of folk, court, and spiritual elements makes Leylâ ile Mecnûn a unique cultural object, portraying both the social realities of the Ottoman Empire in the 1500s and spiritual beliefs.

Besides the symbolic and cultural meanings, the poem's outline also made it impactful. Fatma Şeyma Boydak (2022) shows how pictures of Layla and Majnun in illustrated versions added to the symbolism of the text, reinforcing the spiritual meaning through images.

These ideas show that Leylâ ile Mecnûn transcends its narrative form. It is a cultural and spiritual combination: a teaching text for Sufi followers, a literary work for the Ottoman

elite, and a folk tale connected with community traditions. The important status which is shown by manuscript copies, mentioned in literature, and used in Sufi teachings, proves how much it influenced Ottoman cultural identity.

This paper uses a combined cultural and literary way of looking at Fuzûlî's *Leylâ ile Mecnûn*. It places the poem in which Sufi poetry, Ottoman Divan literature's use of symbols, and the larger cultural setting all come together. Based on the background of the study, the researcher study how the poem works simultaneously as a spiritual guide, a work of art, and an artistic object.

A key part of this is Sufi literary theory. It sees the poem as a love story and a symbolic guide to spiritual knowledge. Fuzûlî shows Majnûn's strong desire and his choice to be alone as a symbol of *fanâ*, which is the Sufi idea of losing one's ego. Modern studies say that Layla and Majnûn are metaphors for the soul (*sâlik*) searching for God's presence (*maḥabba*). Even the poem's introduction hints hidden, more profound meanings.

Moreover, observation of Ottoman Divan tradition's use of symbols helps us understand how Fuzûlî uses common poetic images, such as the nightingale, rose, desert, and wilderness, to convey multiple layers of meaning. These symbols utilize familiar cultural contrasts and connections (like world/garden, lover/beloved, ascetic/dervish) to convey worldly and spiritual ideas. This method is based on the symbolic nature of Ottoman poetry, which relied on these contrasts.

Cultural studies give us more insight by situating *Leylâ ile Mecnûn* within the sociocultural context of Ottoman society. Fuzûlî's use of Turkish folk images, such as ceremonies, rural settings, and even hunting scenes, shows that he intentionally made a widespread Islamic story local. According to Eren (2022), these changes connect with local people, strengthening the poem's cultural place. Boydak's study of the poem's manuscripts (2022) also shows that the small pictures that go with the text help to visually support the Sufi allegory, linking images and words in a unified spiritual message.

An examination of *Leylâ ile Mecnûn* from this perspective reveals its nature as both a text and a cultural record that has been inscribed repeatedly over time. It uses many traditions, but its mix of them is uniquely Ottoman. The poem shows the process that Osman Sacid Ari

(2019) described: Ottoman poets took in and changed Persian-Sufi ideas (like those of Hâfiz) into their poetry, keeping the mystical beauty while adding local creativity.

The Sufi metaphor theory uses Sufi symbols, Divan signs, and cultural history to show how Fuzûlî's poem expresses Ottoman Islamic values. It is not just a beautiful and religious work. It is also a cultural guide that uses poetic language and familiar images to share spiritual meanings, such as love for God, letting go of oneself, and mystical wisdom.

The Analysis section, which closely examines the poem's symbols, cultural expressions, and allegorical structure. Besides the basic ideas from Sufi thought and Ottoman poetry, this paper also looks at semiotic mysticism, especially regarding Divan poetry. Sufi poets, like Fuzûlî, often used language as a symbolic system. In this system, every word, image, and idea becomes a sign (*âyah*) that points to a truth that cannot be fully expressed. According to Tuba Işık (2021), this use of language is like what we see in the Qur'an. In the Qur'an, signs of God are part of creation, and so they are also part of poetic creation. In *Leylâ ile Mecnûn*, this is shown by how natural things such as the desert, animals, and nightingales are not just scenery in the poem. They also act as spiritual signs in a larger picture of the universe. Fuzûlî creates a text with many layers that rewards spiritual interpretation.

As Aydın (2022) suggests, emotive theology is also essential. This idea says that emotional expressions, like sadness, longing, and madness, are valid ways to express theological ideas in Islamic literature. In this view, *Majnûn*'s suffering is not a sickness but a devotion. His madness is not a higher state of *ḥāl*, a Sufi moment of being absorbed in the divine. From this perspective, Fuzûlî's story makes human emotion as important as mystical evidence. The poem becomes a way of understanding love through a broken heart, rather than through scholarly arguments.

Also, the idea of transcultural literary adaptation helps us understand how *Leylâ ile Mecnûn* fits into the Ottoman intellectual world. Recent studies by Kara & Demirtaş (2023) demonstrate how Ottoman authors carefully adapt ideas from Arabic and Persian literature to fit Ottoman-Turkish culture and language. Fuzûlî's Turkish version of an Arabic-Persian story

shows this movement of literature. Existing stories are translated and changed to express a uniquely Ottoman spiritual view.

Finally, this framework is supported by reader-response mysticism. This concept asserts that literary works such as *Leylâ ile Mecnûn* were intended to provoke profound reflection and spiritual contemplation, rather than merely eliciting intellectual appreciation. The Ottoman audience in the 16th century, who were familiar with Sufi teachings and poetic customs, would have expected the text to have many layers of meaning. This observation aligns with Sedat Yazıcı's 2020 findings that Divan poetry was written to encourage thoughtful re-readings, with each layer revealing new meaning based on the reader's inner state.

The conceptions of semiotic mysticism, emotive theology, transcultural adaptation, and reader-responsive hermeneutics provide a comprehensive framework for the analysis of *Leylâ ile Mecnûn*. We can regard it not just as a great piece of literature, but as a living spiritual work that was part of and shaped by the Ottoman Islamic imagination.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a cultural and literary approach, combining the study of texts, the analysis of signs and symbols, and the writing of cultural history. The primary source, *Leylâ ile Mecnûn*, will be closely examined using specific text parts. This examination will be supported by interpretations from recent academic research published in the last ten years. Further insights will be gained through manuscript study and cultural analysis..

Using this approach, the study seeks to demonstrate that Fuzûlî's work is not just romantic poetry. It is a living cultural record that reflects and influences Ottoman Islamic values. It embodies an ideal of spiritual love that is integrated within both communal experience and mystical tradition.

DISCUSSION

Fuzûlî's *Leylâ ile Mecnûn* goes beyond typical love poetry by acting as a complex text with spiritual, cultural, and psychological meanings. The story of Majnûn's intense love for Layla becomes a way to present Sufi allegories. Majnûn's choice to live in the desert, madness, and eventual spiritual change show important Sufi ideas, *maḥabba*, *fanā'*, and *ma'rifa*.

Encyclopedia.com explains that while Layla and Majnûn are first drawn to each other physically (“their youthful impulses are for physical intimacy”), being forced apart helps them to “comprehend love as an emanation of the soul”, a common Sufi idea. In Fuzûlî’s version, Majnûn’s longing is shown not just as emotional pain, but as a symbol of wanting to unite with God. Hacı Sağlam (2021) examines Fuzûlî’s employment of desert and solitude imagery, analysing how these are interwoven with symbols derived from the Qur’an and prophetic traditions. The study demonstrates that such motifs construct a spiritual landscape reflecting inner mystical states, which are contextualized and adapted for the Ottoman audience.

Besides spiritual symbolism, the poem is strongly connected to Ottoman cultural ways. Studies by Mustafa Eren (2022) show that Fuzûlî cleverly includes local customs, tribal meetings, rural settings, and village celebrations. These details link the legendary story to the real lives of his audience, connecting formal Sufi theology with everyday experiences. This does two things: it gives credibility to the mystical message by placing it within familiar cultural forms, and it ensures that both educated and regular people understand the poem. For example, Majnûn’s madness could be seen not only as divine inspiration but also as an extreme form of social exclusion, an emotional crisis that shows both spiritual seeking and social rejection.

This cultural aspect of the text is enhanced in illustrated manuscripts. Boydak’s 2022 research into miniature paintings in copies of *Leylâ ile Mecnûn*, found in places like the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and the Topkapı Palace Museum Library, shows that the illustrations do more than show scenes; they also deepen the poem’s spiritual meaning. Layla is often depicted with bright light or in a glowing garden, visually representing her role as a symbol of divine presence. Majnûn, on the other hand, is portrayed praying or surrounded by desert animals, highlighting his spiritual transformation. Boydak points out a strong connection between the words and the images, noting that the artist and poet reflect each other in the most “striking parts of the story,” combining visual storytelling with Sufi allegory. This combination turns the manuscript into a complete spiritual experience, simultaneously engaging ~~speech and sight~~ auditory and visual senses.

Fuzûlî’s *Leylâ ile Mecnûn* is part of a long history of similar narratives. Ibrahim & Iskandar (2021) note that Fuzûlî uses some of the same structural elements as Persian versions, particularly those attributed to Nizami. However, Fuzûlî focuses more on spiritual pain than on romantic love. Dialogue and inner thoughts are pivotal in his works, drawing attention to the

self and nurture an intense longing for divine connection. Fuzûlî uses familiar storytelling methods to teach spiritual lessons, combining old forms with new religious meanings.

The poem's psychological complexity also adds to its spiritual meaning. Yusuf Ersin's (2024) analysis suggests that Majnûn's madness is not just from God. Instead, it starts with societal rejection. His family's rejection causes a spiritual crisis, leading to spiritual growth. Similarly, Yakar (2021) notes that Fuzûlî often uses images of animals and nature, such as nightingales, gazelles, and dunes, to represent Majnûn's inner feelings. This use of metaphors connects human suffering with spiritual trials and tribulations, suggesting that spiritual growth often comes from emotional struggles.

Together, these aspects show how *Leylâ ile Mecnûn* works as a mix of spiritual, cultural, and psychological elements. The poem's structure systematically combines mystical teachings through allegory, cultural acceptance through local customs, visual symbols in manuscripts, and human psychology. While Majnûn is driven crazy by love, his experience is turned into a step toward the Sufi path. His isolation is not an escape but a spiritual adjustment. Layla's unattainability reflects the unreachable divine, and her bright presence connects her to the idea of the Beloved (*ḥabīb*).

Also, the formal style of the manuscript, with detailed miniatures and careful calligraphy, shows that the poem is both spiritual literature and a cultural symbol. The illustrated pages were intentionally used for teaching, making reading a form of worship. This design ensured that *Leylâ ile Mecnûn* was shared in courts, religious schools, and local folk ceremonies. The recital of the poem in these ceremonies could evoke romantic and sacred feelings.

In this way, Fuzûlî's masterpiece had a wide impact on diverse audiences. It taught Sufi teachings to those seeking them, delighted the nobility with its sophisticated art, and resonated with the broader public by giving local folk symbols deep spiritual meaning. Majnûn's desert was characterized by personal suffering and universal longing. Layla's image was a constant reminder of God's presence, accessible through sight and poetry.

Leylâ ile Mecnûn, therefore, goes beyond its origins. It is no longer just a tragic love story but a new version that reflects the Ottoman Islamic worldview. Through spiritual metaphor, cultural connection, visual storytelling, traditional structure, and psychological

realism, Fuzûlî created a poem that teaches, inspires, and confirms spiritual identity. The work remains a great example of how Ottoman Divan poetry expressed complex ideas about love, identity, mysticism, and culture, and why the legend of Majnûn is still a timeless way to understand Islamic mysticism.

Another essential thing about Fuzûlî's Leylâ ile Mecnûn is how it sounds and how it was performed. The poem was meant to be read alone but recited in public, at spiritual meetings (*meclis*), and in fancy court settings. The rhythms, rhymes within lines, and repeated phrases contributed to an appealing and memorable auditory experience. This focus on performance shows its importance in oral literary culture, where poetry was enjoyable and a spiritual reminder. Because of this, Leylâ ile Mecnûn became a shared memory, passed down through the years not just in writing, but through sound and shared experiences. Recent studies like Akçay (2021) show that reciting Divan poetry was a physical activity, often with gestures, music, or pauses for thought, strengthening its teaching power and emotional effect.

This performance aspect also lets the poem mix personal reflection with community worship. When people heard Majnûn's cries of sorrow, they could relate to his longing, understand his madness in their way, and grasp the deep spiritual ideas without the necessity of undergoing extensive theological education. The poem made mysticism more available to everyone, presenting complex Sufi ideas through beautiful poetry, familiar cultural references, and emotional connection. This quality has helped it stay influential both in and outside the Ottoman world.

CONCLUSION

Fuzûlî's Leylâ ile Mecnûn is a vital cultural and spiritual work that goes beyond being just a love story. The poem uses hidden meanings, symbols in words and pictures, and references to other works to show the nature of Ottoman Islamic society and teach mystical lessons. The story of Majnûn, which seems to be about a man driven crazy by love he is unable to attain, actually has a deeper purpose: to show the Sufi path to uniting with God.

The poem is about turning earthly love into a symbol of the soul's desire for God. This is achieved through the use of Sufi metaphors, especially those related to *maḥabba* (divine love), *fanā'* (the loss of self), and *ma'rifa* (spiritual knowledge). Fuzûlî uses familiar ideas from Arabic and Persian literature but gives them an Ottoman twist. As Hacı Sağlam (2021) points

out, using the desert, isolation, and madness as symbols comes from the Qur'an and prophetic stories and reflects Sufi spiritual ideas. Fuzûlî's employment of this technique results in creation of a mystical world that is both recognizable and symbolic, representing the journey from the self to God through suffering and relinquishment.

The manner in which Fuzûlî incorporates Ottoman cultural elements into the poem is of significant consequence. Mustafa Eren (2022) has shown that the story references village customs, tribal events, hunting scenes, and ceremonial gatherings. These details do more than add decoration; they connect the story to the daily life and symbolic world of Fuzûlî's audience. The poem functions as a cultural object that addresses both educated and common people. It is a sophisticated piece of Divan poetry and a meaningful text for Ottoman society. This ability to be both accessible and profound, local and universal, is one of the poem's most impressive qualities.

Also, the visual aspect of *Leylâ ile Mecnûn* plays a pivotal role in conveying its thematic content. Illustrated versions of the poem, studied by Fatma Şeyma Boydak (2022), show Layla and Majnûn not just as characters, but as symbols of human and divine states. Layla is shown in bright clothing, surrounded by nature or light, emphasising her role as a symbol of the Beloved. Majnûn is demonstrated in the wilderness, often praying or thinking deeply, highlighting his status as a sufi in training. Combining words and images adds another layer of symbolic meaning to the poem. It turns the manuscript into a complete work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) where poetry, calligraphy, and miniature painting convey Sufi truths.

Intertextuality is another essential feature that makes the work more complex. Fuzûlî's version is part of a long tradition of stories about Majnûn and Layla. However, his version differs because he focuses on spiritual destruction instead of romantic love. As Ibrahim and Iskandar (2021) note, earlier versions like Nizami's focus on poetic romance. Fuzûlî places significant emphasis on the themes of suffering, longing, and the arduous nature of attaining spiritual enlightenment. This change shows a broader shift in Ottoman literature. They wanted to keep and change the old traditions to fit new artistic and religious ideas.

Leylâ ile Mecnûn also address psychological truths that persist in their relevance to the present day, transcending the mere use of words and images. People used to see Majnûn's madness as religious. But now, it is seen as a mix of social isolation, emotional pain, and

spiritual awareness. Yusuf Ersin (2024) explains that *Majnûn*'s separation from his family and tribe reflects the feeling of being lost that people on a spiritual journey often experience. His madness is not a fall into chaos but a sign that he is moving towards an unseen reality. This reality is beyond standard rules and expectations. Similarly, Yakar (2021) shows how nature is used emotionally and symbolically to reflect the stages of spiritual growth. The empty desert, the lonely gazelle, the mourning nightingale, all represent the seeker's inner world.

Together, these ideas show that Fuzûlî's poem has many layers. This text is not merely a romance, a work of mystical writing, or a cultural text. It encompasses all these characteristics simultaneously. Fuzûlî uses allegory to express the main Sufi idea that earthly experiences, when understood correctly, point to something beyond themselves. Every action of *Majnûn*, every look from Layla, and every line of poetry works within this system. Here, what is visible becomes a path to what is invisible.

Also, the poem has a significant teaching role in the Ottoman Islamic tradition. It teaches readers through imagination, not direct explanation. Readers or listeners are asked to empathize with the character *Majnûn*, perceiving the world through his lens and experiencing his profound sorrow. By doing this, they can start their spiritual journey. The poem does not preach; it acts. It shows the Sufi path through story, song, and symbol, not technical terms.

In the contemporary era, *Leylâ ile Mecnûn* maintains its significance as a literary work. The text demonstrates the capacity of literature to serve as a medium for the amalgamation of personal sentiments and spiritual vision, tradition and innovation, form and experience. It reminds us that spiritual wisdom can be shared through beauty. It also shows that cultural identity can be expressed through metaphor. It also shows that when individuals are filled with longing, their hearts can become a space where we experience a divine connection.

In short, Fuzûlî's *Leylâ ile Mecnûn* lasts because it shows how love can lead to truth, not just because it tells a love story. The poem uses Sufi allegory, cultural meaning, visual symbols, references to other texts, and complex psychology to speak to people then and now. It is like a literary and spiritual mirror where readers of all ages can see their desires, pain, and maybe their journey to something bigger.

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