

The conceptual metaphor of freedom in the poems of Wasef Bakhtari

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The purpose of this essay is to conduct a linguistic analysis of the conceptual metaphor of freedom in the poems of Vasif Bakhtari. Conceptual metaphor is one of the new trends in cognitive linguistics in which the concept of one domain is mapped to another domain and the concept of the second domain is understood through the first domain. Using this approach, the present study expresses the abstract concepts of freedom for readers in a simple and tangible way; because from Lakoff's point of view, metaphor is a way in which an abstract and mental conceptual realm is understood based on a sensory and known conceptual realm based on human socio-cultural experiences. The findings of the research clarify that Wasif Bakhtari, a famous contemporary Persian Dari poet from Balkh-Afghanistan, has mapped the domains of origin as cognitive structures, especially from his own experiences to explain more intangible concepts and the domain of destination, and has effectively expressed the concept of freedom, although in most cases he has not used the word freedom. Since no matter how much humans are deprived of something, they are equally fascinated and encouraged to obtain it. With the developments that have occurred in human life in recent centuries, the role of freedom in human social life has become more prominent and has become a subject of cultural, literary and social complexity. The research method is qualitative and data was collected from Bakhtari's poems and the conceptual metaphor of freedom in them has been identified and analyzed. These conceptual metaphors in Western poetry are mapped to areas such as bird flight, light, sun, life and living beings, wind, sea, and plants, and with the help of these areas, the abstract concepts of freedom are made sensory and understandable.

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Introduction

Freedom constitutes an ontological imperative and a foundational necessity for human growth, agency, and self-actualization. Within twentieth-century Persian literature—particularly in Afghanistan, where prolonged geopolitical turbulence, ideological conflicts, and the Marxist-Soviet occupation (following the 1978 coup) disrupted social life—freedom became the preeminent theme of modern resistance and persistence poetry (*She'r-e Moqāvēmat va Pāydāri*). Contemporary poets were compelled to articulate sociopolitical emancipation under severe censorship, frequently relying on symbolic and indirect linguistic devices. Among these figures, Mohammad Shah Wasef Bakhtari (1943–2023) stands out as a preeminent pioneer of contemporary Dari Persian poetry. Known for his sophisticated, symbolic, and philosophically dense diction, Bakhtari extensively conceptualized human liberty. Rather than addressing freedom solely through direct rhetorical assertions, his poetic discourse encodes freedom through intricate cognitive mappings. This study aims to conduct a cognitive-linguistic analysis of the conceptual metaphor of freedom in Bakhtari's poetry, uncovering how abstract sociopolitical and existential notions of liberty are mapped onto tangible, embodied source domains derived from human experience and sociocultural context.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical methodology anchored in the framework of Cognitive Metaphor Theory (CMT), originally formulated by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) and further developed by Lakoff and Mark Turner (1989). Within CMT, metaphor is understood not merely as an ornamental, rhetorical trope, but as a fundamental cognitive mechanism that structures human conceptual systems, thoughts, and actions. Metaphorical understanding operates via systematic mappings (*negāsh*) from a concrete, experiential “source domain” (*howzeh-ye mabda'*) to an abstract, less accessible “target domain” (*howzeh-ye maqsad*).

The corpus of this research comprises selected poetic works from Wasef Bakhtari's published collections. Through close textual analysis, instances where freedom functions as the target domain were extracted, categorized, and analyzed. The analytical process evaluates how concrete natural, biological, and physical source domains are mapped onto abstract sociopolitical liberty, even in lines where the explicit lexeme “freedom”

(*āzādi*) is deliberately omitted due to symbolic coding and stylistic defamiliarization.

Results

The textual and cognitive analysis reveals that Bakhtari systematically grounds the abstract concept of freedom in diverse experiential source domains, structured around six primary conceptual metaphors:

۱. **Freedom as the Flight of a Bird (*Parvāz-e Parandeh*):**

Birds are mapped as embodied symbols of the subjugated human spirit yearning for emancipation. Flight signifies the realization of freedom, while caged birds, bloody wings (*kabootarhā-ye khoonin-bāl*), forced migration, and silenced songs concretize political exile, imprisonment, censorship, and the trauma of lost or forgotten liberation.

۲. **Freedom as Light and the Sun (*Noor / Khorshid*):**

Light and solar imagery are mapped onto enlightenment, truth, and sociopolitical triumph over tyrannical darkness (*shab*). The rising sun (*āftāb-e sorkh*) conceptualizes revolutionary awakening and the dawn of freedom, whereas the eclipse, burial, or wounded corpse of the sun (*na'sh-e zakhmi-ye khorshid*) represents suppressed or exiled liberty under authoritarian regimes.

۳. **Freedom as a Living Entity / Life Itself (*Zendegi va Mojood-e Zende*):**

Freedom is conceptualized as an organic, dynamic being rather than an inanimate symbol. Bakhtari critiques superficial, stagnant representations (such as the *Statue of Liberty*), emphasizing that genuine freedom must possess vitality, growth, vulnerability, and the capacity for rebirth. Tyranny's execution of liberty is mapped as hanging a living being.

۴. **Freedom as the Sea (*Daryā*):**

The boundless expanse, depth, and dynamic waves of the ocean are mapped onto absolute, borderless freedom. Conversely, narrow, shallow streams (*jooybār*) and stagnant marshes (*mordāb*) symbolize political containment and captivity, illustrating the

tragic inability of trapped individuals (“stream fish”) to access oceanic liberation.

◦. **Freedom as the Wind (*Bād*):**

The wind serves as a source domain denoting uninhibited, boundaryless motion, fluidity, and unstoppable natural force. Its capacity to sweep across frontiers and alter atmospheric conditions conceptualizes the omnipresent, irrepressible character of freedom.

٦. **Freedom as a Precious Plant / Ear of Grain (*Giyāh / Sonboleḥ*):**

Freedom is conceptualized as a delicate, verdant plant or grain that requires sustained care, collective nurturing, and vigilance. Vultures and predators devouring green shoots embody oppressive forces attempting to extinguish emerging democratic and liberated impulses.

Conclusion

The investigation demonstrates that Wasef Bakhtari’s poetic discourse on freedom is deeply metaphoric and cognitive. By bypassing purely literal assertions and deploying conceptual metaphors grounded in birds’ flight, celestial light, organic life, boundless waters, wind, and botanical growth, Bakhtari renders the abstract, multi-faceted concept of freedom tangible, sensory, and emotionally resonant. These cognitive mappings reflect both universal experiential archetypes and the specific sociocultural trauma of twentieth-century Afghanistan under ideological tyranny and foreign invasion. Ultimately, the study confirms that in Bakhtari’s poetry, metaphor operates as an indispensable cognitive bridge between existential yearning and literary resistance, illustrating that freedom is conceptualized through the very structures with which humanity perceives nature and life.