

The God Motif as an Existential Strategy in Contemporary Azerbaijani Poetry

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Abstract: This article examines the God motif in contemporary Azerbaijani poetry as an existential strategy rather than a manifestation of religious revival or doctrinal belief. Departing from traditional moral-theological interpretations, the study argues that divine references in modern poetic discourse undergo a process of post-sacral resemanticization, whereby sacred language is refunctionalized to articulate inner conflict, ethical tension, and metaphysical uncertainty. The research is based on a qualitative analysis of selected poems by Ramiz Rövşən, Vaqif Bayatlı Odər, Səlim Babullaoglu, and Aqşin Yenisey, using functional-semantic analysis and comparative poetics as the primary methodological tools. The findings demonstrate that the God motif operates in three dominant functional roles: as an existential addressee invoked when human communication proves insufficient; as a psychological projection externalizing fear, guilt, and loneliness; and as an ethical reference point through which injustice, fate, and freedom are evaluated. The study shows a clear shift in contemporary Azerbaijani poetry from belief to dialogue, where God emerges as a discursive interlocutor embedded within the poem's aesthetic and linguistic structure. By reframing the God motif as a poetic construct rather than a theological assertion, the article contributes to literary scholarship by relocating the discussion from ideological interpretation to functional poetics and opens new perspectives for comparative research in Turkic and post-Soviet poetic traditions.

Keywords: *God motif; existential strategy; contemporary Azerbaijani poetry; post-sacral poetics*

1. Introduction: Research Problem and Relevance

In contemporary Azerbaijani poetry, references to God increasingly function less as markers of doctrinal faith and more as aesthetic devices for articulating existential experience. Rather than signaling a simple “return to religion,” many modern poems transform the divine into a flexible poetic instrument through which the speaker negotiates fear, injustice, loneliness, moral doubt, silence, and the limits of language. In other words, the God motif often operates through post-sacral resemanticization: sacred vocabulary and images are preserved, but their meanings shift

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from institutional theology toward individualized, psychologically charged, and philosophically open-ended inquiry.

From a literary-analytical viewpoint, this shift can be approached through the concept of motif as a recurrent semantic and structural element whose meaning emerges from variation across texts and contexts. Motif scholarship emphasizes that recurrence alone is not enough: what matters is how a motif is reworked creatively, gaining new functions in new poetic environments (Berlin, 1983). Likewise, studies of poetic meaning show that readers—and texts themselves—construct symbolic significance through strategies that may be explicitly religious, indirectly metaphoric, or deeply personal and non-confessional (Svensson, 1987). This perspective is especially productive for Azerbaijani poetry, where the God motif can simultaneously carry traces of mythopoetic heritage (Abbasova, 2023), Sufi unity discourse (Nazarova, 2023), and post-Soviet individual metaphysics—often within the same poem.

A key problem, however, is that existing discussion in local and regional criticism frequently treats the God motif primarily in moral or religious terms—as belief, piety, or “spiritual values”—without systematically analyzing how it functions as a poetic-discursive strategy. This creates a research gap: we lack a typology that explains *what the God motif does* in contemporary Azerbaijani poetic speech—how it structures address, organizes emotional intensity, enables ethical confrontation, or stages silence and absence as meaning. Similar gaps are visible in broader comparative scholarship: studies of “death of God” metaphors in poetry focus on cultural and stylistic consequences (Eguavoen & Efobi, 2025), while work on existential paralysis and poetic therapy foregrounds psychological states (Rasheed & Javaid, 2022) and modern existential angst (Rehman et al., 2025), yet these insights are not consistently translated into a functional model for the Azerbaijani case.

Research question.

How is God functionally reconstructed in contemporary Azerbaijani poetry?

Aim.

To identify the poetic, existential, and discursive functions of the God motif in contemporary Azerbaijani poetry by treating “God” not as a fixed theological content but as a dynamic poetic construct—an addressee, symbol, silence, ethical measure, or existential mirror (Berlin, 1983; Svensson, 1987).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The God Motif in Modern Literary Theory

This study treats the God motif as a poetic construct whose meaning is produced through discourse, symbolism, and readerly/interpretive strategies rather than assumed as a stable religious statement. Three theoretical lines are central.

God as symbol (hermeneutic approach).

In hermeneutic traditions associated with Paul Ricoeur, symbol is not decorative; it is cognitively productive—it “*gives rise to thought*” by compressing complex experience into an interpretable

image. Ricoeur's work on symbolism and interpretation is useful here because it allows religious language in poetry to be read as symbolic mediation of guilt, suffering, finitude, and hope rather than a direct confession of doctrine (Ricoeur, 1970). In Azerbaijani poetry, this supports reading "God" as a symbolic node that condenses existential tension into a culturally recognizable sign.

God as absence/silence (existential orientation).

Existential readings highlight that the divine may appear most forcefully through absence: unanswered prayer, unreturned address, the felt distance between speaker and transcendent order. Research on existential and religious concepts in poetry demonstrates that poets often stage metaphysical claims not as certainty but as proofs attempted through language, where doubt and silence become part of the poem's epistemology (Olegovich, 2022). Contemporary discussions of existential paralysis, death, and resolve likewise show how poetry can function as a mode of working through crisis and meaninglessness (Rasheed & Javaid, 2022). In this model, "God" can become the name for the boundary of sense-making—where language reaches its limit and converts into questioning.

God as discursive addressee (dialogism).

Dialogic theory, especially in Bakhtin's account of discourse and address, enables a functional reading of God as an interlocutor constructed by poetic speech. In dialogic terms, the addressee is not merely a receiver; the addressee shapes genre, tone, and the ethical stance of the utterance (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984). When the poetic voice addresses God, it often simultaneously addresses society, the self, memory, fate, or history. This is why the God motif can serve as a discursive mechanism for ethical accusation, confession, irony, or pleading—without being reducible to institutional religiosity.

Together, these approaches support a core interpretive move: God \neq belief system \rightarrow God = poetic interlocutor, a symbolically dense addressee through which existential meaning is negotiated (Bakhtin, 1981; Ricoeur, 1970; Svensson, 1987).

2.2. Post-Soviet Context and the Azerbaijani Case

A second pillar of the framework is historical-cultural: the post-Soviet period brought a shift in the conditions under which religious language could circulate publicly.

Collapse of ideological atheism.

The late-Soviet and post-Soviet transition weakened institutional constraints on religious and metaphysical themes, allowing poets to reintroduce sacred lexicon into public discourse. Yet the crucial point is that poetic use of God-language does not automatically entail a return to orthodoxy. Instead, it often marks the emergence of a plural, individualized metaphysics—a personal negotiation with tradition, modernity, trauma, and globalization (Quliyeva & Babazade, 2025).

Rise of individual metaphysics rather than institutional religion.

In post-Soviet literary cultures, God motifs frequently become vehicles for identity work and philosophical reflection: they connect mythic memory, ethical anxiety, and modern cultural

hybridity. Azerbaijani cultural imagination retains deep mythopoetic and cosmological layers, which can persist beneath modern poetic forms (Abbasova, 2023). At the same time, Sufi concepts of unity and transcendence remain an available interpretive horizon that can be aestheticized in contemporary verse (Nazarova, 2023). Motif-oriented research on immortality and symbolic meaning-making further supports the idea that “God” motifs often function as semantic instruments for negotiating life/death boundaries and moral horizons rather than as fixed doctrinal claims (Babazadə & Qənbərov, 2025; Svensson, 1987).

Finally, the framework acknowledges that Azerbaijani poetry now develops within a global literary ecology: comparative pressures and international influences reshape poetic diction, self-positioning, and thematic choices (Quliyeva & Babazade, 2025). The “God motif as existential strategy” thus emerges not from a single source (religion, ideology, or tradition) but from the interaction of symbolic heritage, post-Soviet subjectivity, and contemporary discursive forms.

3. Methodology

3.1. Corpus

This study uses a purposefully selected qualitative corpus of poems (and poem-cycles) by four major contemporary Azerbaijani poets:

- Ramiz Rövşən
- Vəqif Bayatlı Odər
- Səlim Babullaoglu
- Aqşin Yenisey

The sampling logic is criterion-based: texts are included if they contain at least one explicit divine reference (e.g., *Tanrı* / *Allah* / *Tanrım*), or an unmistakable divine address (vocatives, apostrophes), and if the reference is functionally active (i.e., it shapes the poem’s stance, argument, or emotional trajectory), not merely ornamental.

3.2. Analytical Methods

Three complementary methods are combined:

1. Qualitative textual analysis

Close reading is used to track how divine references operate within the poem’s situation of speech (speaker, addressee, conflict, and resolution).

2. Functional-semantic analysis

Each God reference is coded for *function* (e.g., appeal, accusation, confession, consolation, irony) and for *semantic load* (religious-sacral vs. post-sacral existential meanings).

3. Comparative poetics

The same functional categories are applied across the four poets to identify author-specific patterns (e.g., mystical presence vs. ethical confrontation) while maintaining a shared typology for comparability.

3.3. Coding Criteria

Each poem is examined using four operational criteria:

- **Mode of address:** direct apostrophe (“Tanrım”), indirect mention (“Tanrı”), or implied addressee (ellipsis, silent interlocutor).
- **Emotional tone:** lament, tenderness, revolt, irony, serenity, etc.
- **Function of the God reference:** existential addressee, psychological projection, ethical reference point (see Section 4).
- **Linguistic markers:**

interrogatives (rhetorical questions), negation, silence/ellipsis, irony markers, oppositions (fate vs. freedom; justice vs. suffering), and intensifiers.

To increase robustness, the analysis treats the line/stanza as the primary unit (micro-level) and the **poem** as the macro-unit (global function).

4. Functional Typology of the God Motif

This article proposes a three-part typology that explains what the God motif *does* in contemporary Azerbaijani poetry (not what it “should mean” theologically).

4.1. God as Existential Addressee

Core idea: God is addressed when no human addressee is sufficient—the poem constructs a transcendent “You” to carry unbearable questions.

Typical textual signals

- frequent rhetorical questions
- apostrophe/vocative address (*Tanrı* / *Tanrım*)
- emphasis on silence (unanswered address, suspended meaning, ellipsis)

Illustrative pattern

A single divine address can turn the poem into a “courtroom” of existence: the speaker speaks *to God* because the human world cannot answer.

4.2. God as Psychological Projection

Core idea: “God” functions as an external screen for inner states—fear, guilt, loneliness—so the poem becomes a form of inner monologue rather than theology.

Typical textual signals

- self-address blended with divine address
- confessional tone
- God referenced as a space where private pain is displaced outward (a coping mechanism)

Analytical note

Here, divine language is post-sacral: it keeps sacred vocabulary but uses it to express the psyche.

4.3. God as Ethical Reference Point

Core idea: God is invoked as a moral yardstick—a measure for injustice, fate, freedom, responsibility, and the value of human suffering.

Typical textual signals

- accusatory or evaluative vocabulary
- contrasts (justice vs. reality; fate vs. choice)
- irony or provocation aimed at moral hypocrisy

This is the most “public” function: God becomes a rhetorical tool for judging the world.

5. Author-Based Case Studies

5.1. Ramiz Rövşən: God as Witness to Pain

Ramiz Rövşən often uses God language in a compressed, emotionally minimal manner: the divine appears as a boundary where love, fate, and endurance collide. A representative line frames the divine as an unbreakable tether:

“Kim qırar Tanrıya bağlı bir simi?!”

Functionally, God here is less “doctrine” than existential addressee: the line performs a question that is not meant to be answered by humans; it dramatizes a limit of agency (who can break what is tied to God?).

5.2. Vaqif Bayatlı Odər: God as Mystical Presence

In Vaqif Bayatlı Odər, God frequently becomes a cosmic authorial force—love, light, and transcendence fuse into a neo-mystical poetics. A key excerpt explicitly equates ultimate meaning with “God-poetry”:

“ən son şeir Tanrı şeiri...”

Here, God functions primarily as an ethical–metaphysical reference point and a mystical horizon: the poem suggests that existence culminates not in law or fate, but in a divine-written poetic order.

5.3. Səlim Babullaoglu: God as Abstract Philosophical Category

Səlim Babullaoğlu tends to abstract the divine into a philosophical register—God appears as a conceptual space for forgiveness, distance, and the pursuit of a “cleaner” horizon. For instance:

“Tanrı günahları bağışlayan yer...”

The line is not a doctrinal statement; it acts as a semantic anchor for an imagined moral topology (“a place” where guilt can be processed). In typological terms, this supports psychological projection (guilt, purification) and also an existential addressee (God as the only site where the inner burden can be carried).

5.4. Aqşın Yenisey: God as Provocation

Aqşın Yenisey often pushes God-language into sharper, more confrontational territory—where irony, rebellion, and ethical pressure dominate. One example frames “tanrı” within the logic of secrecy and exposure:

“Torpağa açılacaq tanrı bilən bu sirrlər,”

Functionally, God becomes an ethical reference point (“God knows” as ultimate witness) while also enabling provocation: the poem pressures the moral structure of reality by implying that hidden truths will be revealed beyond human control.

6. Discussion

The findings support the claim that the God motif in contemporary Azerbaijani poetry is increasingly de-institutionalized, individualized, and aestheticized. De-institutionalization means that divine vocabulary (*Tanrı/Allah*) is frequently detached from doctrinal instruction and relocated into the poem’s personal scene of speech; the divine is activated not as theology but as a semantic resource that helps the speaker name inner conflict, limits of agency, or ethical shock. This aligns with motif theory: a motif’s cultural origin does not predetermine its later meaning, because modern poetic creativity reshapes inherited elements into new functional roles (Berlin, 1983).

Individualization is visible in the predominance of *I–You* structures: the poem often constructs God as a discursive partner for questions that cannot be safely or effectively addressed to humans. In this sense, the most important shift is from belief → to dialogue. “Dialogue” here is not necessarily religious prayer; it is a poetic mode of address that enables interrogation, complaint, confession, irony, and unresolved questioning. From a meaning-construction perspective, this is also expected: contemporary poems frequently produce significance through symbolic strategies and open interpretability rather than through fixed referential content (Svensson, 1987).

Aestheticization means that “God” becomes part of the poem’s artistic architecture: it shapes tone, rhythm of questioning, and the logic of contrast (justice/injustice, fate/freedom, presence/absence). In this role, God functions simultaneously as:

- a **linguistic device** (vocatives, rhetorical questions, negation, ellipsis; intensifiers and evaluative lexicon);

- an **existential strategy**, allowing the speaker to externalize fear, guilt, or loneliness and stage meaning-seeking under conditions of uncertainty (Rasheed & Javaid, 2022; Rehman et al., 2025);
- a **poetic stabilizer in chaos**, providing a “last address” when social language fails, and offering a symbolic frame for moral evaluation and metaphysical doubt (Berlin, 1983; Svensson, 1987).

Finally, the Azerbaijani case is strengthened by its cultural layers: mythic worldviews (Abbasova, 2023) and Sufi unity discourse (Nazarova, 2023) remain available as symbolic reservoirs, while contemporary literary development increasingly occurs in global interaction, encouraging new thematic intensities and discursive forms (Quliyeva & Babazade, 2025). The God motif, therefore, should be understood as a **post-sacral poetic mechanism**: it preserves sacred signifiers but redirects them into existential, psychological, and ethical work.

7. Conclusion

This article argues that God in contemporary Azerbaijani poetry is not religious dogma and not a mere cultural ornament, but a functional poetic construct. Across the analyzed corpus, God is reconstructed as (i) an existential addressee, (ii) a psychological projection, and (iii) an ethical reference point—three roles that explain how divine language actively organizes poetic meaning rather than merely reflecting belief.

The main contribution is methodological and conceptual: it moves interpretation from ideology → to poetics, showing that the “God motif” should be studied through its discursive functions, its linguistic triggers, and its role in structuring existential experience (Berlin, 1983; Svensson, 1987). This functional approach also avoids reductive readings that treat divine references as either simple religiosity or simple secularism; instead, it captures the hybrid, post-sacral nature of modern poetic meaning-making.

Future research should extend the typology in two directions:

1. a comparative Turkic perspective (e.g., Azerbaijani–Turkish–Kazakh poetic discourse) to test whether similar post-sacral functions recur across related literary systems;
2. a broader post-Soviet comparison, examining how ideological rupture and cultural memory shape the divine as interlocutor, silence, or ethical measure in neighboring poetic traditions (Quliyeva & Babazade, 2025).

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