

A COMPARATIVE-HISTORICAL AND ETYMOLOGICAL STUDY OF CERTAIN DEMONONYMS

Sapayeva Zuhra RakhimberganovnaTeacher of the Department of Foreign Philology,
Urgench State Pedagogical Institute,E-mail: sapayevazuhrahon@gmail.com<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20610997>

Abstract: This article explores the etymological origins and semantic development of the principal demonological terms used in the Qur'an and classical Islamic literature, namely Iblis, Shaytan, and Ifrit, from the perspective of comparative-historical linguistics. The research draws upon the studies of the orientalist scholar Arthur Jeffery and the Iranian linguist Mohammad Hasandoust to demonstrate that these lexemes are not purely Arabic in origin, but rather belong to a broader layer of borrowings derived from ancient Semitic languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Ethiopic) and Indo-European traditions (Greek and Middle Persian). The

article further examines the transformation of these terms into theological concepts within Islamic discourse and their later artistic reinterpretation in classical Eastern literature, particularly in the works of Nizami Ganjavi and Alisher Navoi.

Keywords: Qur'anic vocabulary, demononym, etymology, Arthur Jeffery, Iblis, Shaytan, Ifrit, Alisher Navoi, Nizami Ganjavi.

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqolada Qur'oni karim va mumtoz islom adabiyotida qo'llanilgan asosiy demonologik tushunchalar — Iblis, Shayton va Ifrit leksemalarining etimologik ildizlari hamda semantik taraqqiyoti qiyosiy-tarixiy tilshunoslik nuqtai nazaridan tadqiq etiladi. Tadqiqot sharqshunos olim Artur Jefferi va eronlik tilshunos Muhammad Hasando'stning ilmiy qarashlariga tayangan holda, mazkur leksemalarning sof arabcha emasligi, balki qadimgi semitik tillar (ibroniy, oromiy, efiop) hamda hind-yevropa tillari (yunon va o'rta fors/pahlaviy) bilan bog'liq o'zlashma qatlam ekanligini ilmiy asoslaydi. Maqolada ushbu demononimlarning islomiy tafakkurda diniy-teologik tushunchaga aylanish jarayoni hamda keyinchalik Nizomiy Ganjaviy va Alisher Navoiy asarlarida badiiy-estetik obraz sifatida talqin qilinishi ham yoritilgan.

Kalit so'zlar: Qur'on leksikasi, demononim, etimologiya, Artur Jefferi, Iblis, Shayton, Ifrit, Alisher Navoiy, Nizomiy Ganjaviy.

Аннотация: В данной статье исследуются этимологические истоки и семантическое развитие основных демонологических терминов, употребляемых в Коране и классической исламской литературе, а именно: Иблис, Шайтан и Ифрит, с точки зрения сравнительно-исторического языкознания. Исследование основано на трудах востоковеда Артура Джеффера и иранского лингвиста Мохаммада Хасандуста, которые доказывают, что данные лексемы не являются исключительно арабскими по происхождению, а относятся к более широкому пласту заимствований из древнесемитских языков (древнееврейского, арамейского, эфиопского) и индоевропейских традиций (греческого и среднеперсидского языков). В статье также рассматривается процесс превращения этих слов в религиозно-теологические понятия в исламском дискурсе и их последующая художественно-эстетическая интерпретация в классической восточной литературе, в частности в творчестве Низами Гянджеви и Алишера Навои.



Ключевые слова: кораническая лексика, демонологический термин, этимология, Артур Джеффри, Иблис, Шайтан, Ифрит, Алишер Навои, Низами Гянджеви.

Introduction. The comparative-historical analysis of Qur'anic demonological vocabulary demonstrates that such key notions as shaytan, iblis, and ifrit cannot be explained solely through the internal derivational system of Arabic. The prominent twentieth-century philologist Arthur Jeffery, in his influential studies, connected the etymology of these lexemes with ancient Semitic and Indo-European languages, critically reassessing traditional interpretations within Islamic philology.

Below is an overview of the etymological background of the principal demononyms. Classical Muslim lexicographers such as al-Raghib and al-Zamakhshari derived the word *iblis* from the Arabic verb *balasa* (بَلَسَ), meaning “to despair” or “to lose divine mercy.” However, Western orientalists, especially Arthur Jeffery, regarded this explanation as an example of “folk etymology.” Jeffery argued that the true origin of the word lies in the Greek term *diabolos* (“slanderer” or “accuser”). According to him, the term most likely entered Arabic not directly from Greek, but through Syriac intermediary forms. Referring to the studies of the German scholar Theodor Nöldeke, Jeffery observed that the Christian usage of *diabolos* as a designation for Satan underwent phonetic and semantic adaptation before appearing in the Qur'anic form *iblis*. Likewise, D. S. Margoliouth noted that the Qur'anic image of *Iblis* functionally resembles the “accuser” figure in Christian tradition, supporting the theory of its foreign linguistic origin.

Two major hypotheses exist regarding the origin of the term *shaytan*: one links it to the Arabic root *shatana* (“to become distant”), while the other associates it with *shāta* (“to burn”). Arthur Jeffery reviewed these interpretations while also emphasizing ethnographic evidence. Drawing examples from pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, particularly from the works of the Jahiliyyah poet Tarafa, he pointed out that the word *shaytan* had once been used with the meaning of “serpent.” This usage reflects the ancient mythological connection between snakes and malevolent spirits among Semitic peoples. Jeffery further argued that the formation of *shaytan* as a specialized religious term was significantly influenced by the Ethiopic (Ge'ez) word *saytan*. Referring once again to Nöldeke's *Neue Beiträge*, he explained that the Qur'anic motif of devils being “stoned” or expelled corresponds closely to the Ethiopic verb *ragama*, meaning “to curse” or “to drive away.”

The word *Ifrit*, appearing in the Qur'anic account of Prophet Solomon in Surah al-Naml, is often interpreted in traditional Arabic lexicography as deriving from *afr* (“dust” or “soil”), implying immense physical strength. Arthur Jeffery, however, proposed an alternative explanation, tracing the term back to the Middle Persian (Pahlavi) verb *āfrītan* (“to create”). Referring to the studies of K. F. Folders and Y. Hess, Jeffery concluded that the Pahlavi form *afrit* originally denoted a “created being” or “creature.” The same root survives in modern Persian in the verb *āfaridan* (“to create”). Thus, according to this interpretation, *Ifrit* should not be associated with dust or earth, but rather with the ancient Iranian concept of a supernatural created entity.

Modern etymological research, especially the works of Mohammad Hasandoust, strongly supports Jeffery's hypothesis concerning the Iranian origin of *Ifrit*. In his comprehensive etymological dictionary, Hasandoust examines the historical development of the Persian verb *āfaridan* (“to create”) and reveals its connection with ancient mythological notions of demons and supernatural beings. According to his findings, the Middle Persian form *āfrītan* derives from the Old Iranian root *brī-* meaning “to cut,” “to shape,” or “to form.” The scholar traces various historical and dialectal forms of this root across Iranian languages: Old Iranian *ā-brīta-* and *ā-brīna-*; Middle Persian forms such as *'pwr* and *'fwr* found in Manichaean texts; the Parthian form *frīdan*; and related Khwarezmian variants. Semantically, the original idea of “cutting” evolved



into the broader notion of “giving shape” or “bringing into existence,” a development comparable to Arabic verbs such as *fatara* (“to split open → create”) and *bara’a* (“to carve → create”).

Particularly significant is the semantic specialization of *āfrīt* into the meaning of a demonic or supernatural being. Evidence from *Tarikhi Bal’ami* demonstrates this shift clearly through the statement: “The first being created by God Almighty was the *Dev* (evil spirit).” This indicates that in ancient Iranian imagination the concept of the “first created being” became directly associated with *devs* or *ifrit*-like entities. Such linguistic and historical evidence reinforces Jeffery’s argument that *Ifrit* originated not from Arabic but from Iranian demonological traditions connected with the idea of a supernatural created being.

After entering the Islamic cultural sphere, the lexeme *Ifrit*, originally rooted in Iranian mythology, underwent a distinct semantic transformation. As noted in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Qur’anic verses, hadith literature, and narratives concerning the *Mi’raj* consistently describe the *ifrit* as belonging to the category of *jinn* (*mina al-jinn*). Consequently, it came to be understood not as a separate species but as a particularly powerful and cunning class among the *jinn*.

Islamic and Arabic mythological traditions frequently portray *ifrits* as beings created from fire, connected with the underworld, and functioning as guardians of hell or close servants of *Iblis*. They are also associated with ruins, abandoned places, and deserts, eventually developing into the broader literary image of a “spirit of place” (*genius loci*).

This mythological layer later evolved into a vivid literary symbol within classical Eastern literature. In the poetry of *Nizami Ganjavi*, the *ifrit* appears as a terrifying and destructive force comparable to a dragon:

“A turbulent and dangerous *ifrit*,
Rushing toward destruction like a dragon.”

In this context, the *ifrit* symbolizes not only physical monstrosity but also inner evil and chaos.

Alisher Navoi employs the same image in a philosophical and didactic sense, emphasizing the contradiction between outward beauty and inner corruption. Describing the deceptive charm of worldly life, he writes:

“Do not seek marriage with the bride of this world,
For though she appears a fairy at first, in the end she becomes an *ifrit*.”

Here, the term *ifrit* no longer functions merely as a demonological character but rather as a metaphorical representation of ugliness, moral corruption, and destructive evil.

Based on the etymological and lexical-semantic analysis of these demononyms, several conclusions may be drawn:

1. The principal demonological terms of Islamic tradition (*iblis*, *shaytan*, and *ifrit*) are not solely products of Arabic linguistic development. Instead, they emerged through the interaction of ancient Semitic (Hebrew, Aramaic, Ethiopic), Indo-European (Greek and Persian), and pre-Islamic religious traditions. Arthur Jeffery’s comparative-historical method provides a more convincing explanation of their origins than traditional folk etymologies.

2. *Mohammad Hasandoust*’s etymological research strongly confirms Jeffery’s theory regarding *Ifrit*: the word derives not from the Arabic notion of dust or earth, but from the Pahlavi verb *āfrītan* (“to create”) and the noun *āfrīt* (“created being”). Historical evidence from *Tarikhi Bal’ami* further demonstrates that the term later became associated with supernatural or demonic entities.

3. Over time, these demononyms experienced a three-stage semantic transformation: first, their original lexical meanings (“accuser,” “created being,” “one cast away”); second, their development into specific supernatural figures within the Qur’an and hadith tradition; and third,



their symbolic reinterpretation in classical literature, where they came to represent human vice, temptation, and absolute evil in metaphorical form.

References

1. Jabborov, N. Maoniy ahlining sohibqironi. Tashkent: Adabiyot, 2021.
2. Jo'rayev, M., & Narziqulova, M. Myth, Folklore, Literature. Tashkent, 2006.
3. Radloff, W. Die alttürkischen Inschriften der Mongolei. St. Petersburg, 1894.
4. Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. Metaphors We Live By. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.
5. Karimov, M. O'zbek tilida mifologik birliklarning lingvomadaniy tahlili. Tashkent: Fan, 2020.
6. Kövecses, Z. Metaphor: A Practical Introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
7. Sharipova, D. "Cross-cultural aspects of translating mythological and demonological lexicon (English-Uzbek perspective)." *Philology Issues Journal*, 12(3), 55–61, 2019.
8. Vorkachev, S. G. Antropotsentrizm v yazyke: Kulturno-semanticheskiy aspekt. Volgograd: Peremena, 2004.
9. Allan, K., & Burridge, K. Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
10. Nurmatova, Z. "O'zbek xalq og'zaki ijodida demonologik obrazlarning lingvokulturologik o'ziga xosliklari." *Til va adabiyot jurnali*, 3(2), 88–95, 2022.

