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## An Analysis of Transgressive Voice in Sufi Poetry

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### Abstract

The paper analyses the meaning of a sufi and his struggles against the status quo. It also investigates the use of female transgressive voice by the poets. Various examples would include myths of Heer-Ranjha and Sassi-Punnu. The paper investigates the writings of various sufi poets who used a female persona to project a non-conformist voice against the hegemonic structures.

**Keywords:** Transgression; female voice; non-conformism; patriarchal setup

### Article

Sufism (*Tasawwuf*) or Islamic Mysticism is an en route for inner awakening and enlightenment. It is the heart of Islam and it cannot be separated from Islam. It aims towards self-purification and the purification of the “heart” to reach a place very close to God. It is about the direct personal relationship with God that will lead to purification and beautification of soul. Sufism grew out of opposition against the established order. The sufi poets of Punjab, during the time of Bhakti movement, through their poetry transgressed the society that was oppressive and materialistic. They used the female persona to voice the concerns of the marginalized and the subaltern strata of the society. In my work, the focus is laid on the Punjabi sufi poetry which had deep social, political and philosophical implications.

The root word of Sufi is *Suf* that is wool referring either to the simple cloaks the early Muslim ascetics wore, or possibly to *Safa* – purity. The Sufi is the one who wears woollen cloak on top of purity according to Al - Rudhabari and it is sometimes viewed as their initial step towards the Sufi Order. Masood Ali Khan feels that the term is derived from *suffa* ( as in the English word, ‘sofa’ ) which means “bench”, for, so the story goes, the beggars who in the days of the Prophet sat on a bench, placed outside the Mosque at Mecca were called Sufis. They sat outside in silent protest against the sin of limiting the limitless, God, within the four walls of a house of clay. Quoting a couplet from Sachal, a contemporary of Shah Latiff:

We have seen the *Kaaba* in the heart of what avail, then, is it to go to Mecca ? (Khan & Rama, 17)

Sufis emphasised on the interior religion, personal experience and the efficacy of an inner mode of worship against the mindless performance of rituals. Shahabuddin Iraqi gave an account of what the twelfth century mystic philosopher, Imam Ghazali said regarding Sufism. (Iraqi, 55) He differentiated between the *ulama – i zahir* (externalist scholars) and *ulama – i batin* (saints or mystics) and said that while the former proceeded from knowledge to action, the latter proceeded from action to knowledge. (Nomani, 187) Ghazali stressed that true knowledge could be achieved only through personal experience, and that theological doctrines were proved, not by speculative methods, but by direct knowledge with which God flooded the heart. (MacDonald, 1899)

The seeds of Sufism were sown after the death of the blessed Prophet Muhammad (d. 632) when the Islamic codes began to take a shape and get crystalized. The Muslim rulers during that time, who had low spiritual knowledge, laid greater emphasis on the outer Islamic Law and orthodoxy – on outer conformity. The more they emphasised on the outer orthodox laws, more the need for the reverse arose. According to Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri the rise of the Sufism came with the need to pay more attention to the inner – inner nourishment and satisfaction and inner awakening – in order to balance the outer orthodox rituals and outer laws. (Haeri, 88-89) Some orthodox Muslims consider the Sufis to be fatalists, and therefore, they say that if the Sufi teachings are followed, then the society cannot progress. (90)

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri quoted a few lines as follows:

There are many people who are shocked by mysticism, and they mock it, calling it nonsense. These people are blinded by ignorance. By following the mystical way I came to understand the true nature of God’s revelations to Muhammad. (Ghazali: *Al - Munqidh Min Ad – Dalal*, 3) (87)

There are many Islamic scholars and rulers who have not tolerated Sufis and their teachings. The constant criticism against Sufis from within the Islamic community is that they focus only for inner development, are interested only in the unseen world and that they neglect the outer laws of the Islamic Law and renounce the physical world. There has been a constant conflict between Sufism and the Orthodox Islam, because of which Sufis have been victimised since the early history of Sufism: Mansur al – Hallaj was hanged in 922; Yahya Suhrawardi was killed in Syria in 1191; the works of Shaykh Ibn Arabi (d. 1240) were banned during his lifetime; Shaykh Ahmad ibn Ata’illah, the Shadhili Sufi master (d. 1309), was brutally threatened by Ibn Taymiyyah who was a firm enemy of Sufis; the great gnostic Mulla Sadra (d. 1640) was made an outcast for his teachings and ideas; Shaykh Moulay al – Arabi ad – Darqawi (d. 1823) was imprisoned; and in more recent times the ruler of Turkey, Kamal Atatruk (d. 1938), made all possible efforts to wash away the Sufi Orders and Sufi Sanctuaries from Turkey. (87)

The orthodox Muslims were against the sufis because of their infidel and rebellious nature. There are two traits of a Sufi: first his spiritual chivalry (*jawanmardi*) and second, his 'infidelity'. Without the spiritual chivalry, a Sufi cannot be an infidel and hence, cannot be capable of becoming a lover (*ashiq*). A Sufi is infidel because he has the courage to discard the hegemonic socio-religious norms and forms. He cannot afford to be recognized and normative in the strict theological or educational sense of these terms. The character of a Sufi is that of a non-conformist who breaks stagnancy and its principle that helps it persist and prevail. Thus an infidel Sufi belongs to the category of those mystics who remain intoxicated with the love of God (*sahiban-i-sukr*). In this state of intoxication, love wins over intellect and reason. This condition of mind removes a distinction between faith and the sense of adherence of the norms of behaviour. This state of mind is "*kufri-tariqat*" (apparent infidelity brought about by the mystic search of God), which is yet much higher stage than the externals of Islam. (Singh & Gaur, 233) This theme of infidelity is visible in the poetry of famous Punjabi Sufi, Bulleh Shah (1680-1758):

*Bullia aashq hoyon rabb da, hoi mulamat lakh, log kafir kafir aakhdey,  
Tunu aakho aakho aakh* (Sital, 91)

Bullia (Bulleh Shah), you have become the lover of God, and reaped a thousand reproaches.

They go on calling you infidel, you keep on saying, 'Yes, I am.' (Puri & Shangari, 460)

The poetry of many sufis uses the persona of a female in order to convey the theme of infidelity and rebelliousness. The Punjabi sufi poets used the mask of the female voice to express the persona of love, eroticism, non-conformism and rebellion which is the counter- hegemonic voice of the marginalized and the suppressed – during the times when masculinity and martially were dominant politically as well as socially, and when women in general were excluded from the domain of knowledge and writing skills. Speaking and writing during the medieval times were under the monopoly of the 'powerful', the patriarchs. It was Shaikh Farid who for the first time wrote verses that expressed the pains and pangs of a woman. The female self of Shaikh Farid expressed his love for his divine Husband as well as his resentment against a social patriarch. He looked upon the oppressing political patriarchs as personification of death-grooms and identified himself (and the subjugated) with a bride who was feeble and helpless in the patriarchal setup. (Singh & Gaur, 242) Ishwar Dayal Gaur says that the female voice of the Sufis of Punjab was a 'new', indeed a 'revolutionary' way of conceiving or imagining themselves as female-lover of the He-beloved. (235) The poets sang the native myths of lovers like Sassi, Hir, Sohni, Mumal, Marvi, and Mira Bai. These myths became the metaphors for the polarities of gender, religious, socio-political, and economic hegemony according to Shemeem Burney Abbas. (85) These myths were used as an aesthetic device to speak of broader social, political, caste and gender issues.

Sassi gave the sufi poets to articulate their own conflicts and differences with the social values of their times. Her struggle with the world outside could be seen as her inner journey according to Annemarie Schimmel. (142) She became a symbol of strength against patriarchy. Her death in the desert is in fact her struggle to seek respite against social injustice. She tried to reclaim her love. In the sufi tradition she became a paradigm of moral courage and spiritual triumph. (Abbas, 86) While reading Shah Abdul Latif's *Risalo*, Shemeem Burney Abbas noted that Sassi was the epitome of the lover who seeks the beloved as though the beloved was the Divine Being. She also said that Sassi's voice gave the poetry an aesthetic dimension that involved the listener in an emotional bond with the speaker. (88) The poet sang of the mystic love through Sassi.

Waris Shah made the Hir-Ranjha myth popular. Hir challenged patriarchy, the clergy and issues of the socio-economic caste system. According to Ishwar Dayal Gaur the Punjabi sufi poetry was an avant-garde literary movement that brought about the marginalized female voice in the forefront. (Singh & Gaur, 236) The lovers died but their struggle, their suffering and pain were a metaphysical triumph according to Shemeem Burney Abbas. The female resentment was transformed into a rebellion. She became a way to describe the esoteric knowledge of the soul. Her beloved assumes spirituality and sublimity that transcended the Divine. It is to be noted that in sufi practices *isq-e-majahi* (personal love) is transformed into *isq-e-haqiqi* (divine love) according to Shemeem Burney Abbas. (94)

The Punjabi sufi poets were socially literary activists who could perceive connections between social commitments and literature and Ishwar Dayal Gaur linked this to the new historicism's dialogic relationship between history and literature. (241) Bulleh Shah in his poetry spoke on the behalf of the marginalized strata of the society and elevated the voice of those females who were looked down upon as 'polluted' by those who believed in caste taboos:

*...main choretri aan sachey sahib di sarkaron / kazi janey hakim janey  
pharag khati begaron...* (Jagtar, 158)

...I am sweeperess in the service of the true Lord./ Let the *qazi* know! Let the judge mark! / I am free from all forced labour... (Puri & Shangari, 340)

Also Fard Faqir (1720-1790) in his treatise *Kasabnama Bafindgan*, talked about the ill treatment meted out to the artisans by the ruling elite.

...by force they take them to work without fearing God, / Fard, the sufferer's sighs will fall on them one day... (Krishna, 106)

In sufi poetry even the narratives of the male musicians had a female speaker. The musicians play with syntactic and semantic structures of the languages to speak as though they were females as noted by Shemeem Burney Abbas. (110) The male musicians sometimes even sang in the falsetto to impersonate a female voice, as is done by the *faqirs* or the musicians at Shah Abdul Latif's shrine at Bhit Shah. Islam is a male-dominated religion the mosque is an area restricted for male activity and women participated in the rituals very little. Thus the important spheres of religious and spiritual participation for women were the Sufi shrines. The audiences at the shrines came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. Women came in large numbers. The sufi poetry is a culture that is passed through the word of

mouth and is an oral culture. The sufi poetry saw the participation of women as mystics in sufi practices, as creators of sufi poetry, women influenced male Sufis in their roles as mothers , daughters , nurses and mentors and also as ethnographers and patrons of sufi mystics, such as Mughal princess Jahan Ara, daughter of Shah Jehan.

*Qawwali* and *Sufiana-kalam* are the two ways in which the sufi poetry is sung. *Qawwali* is essentially a male genre and consists of a team of five to twelve musicians who take turns in singing a single narrative and they sit during the performance with a lot of instruments. *Sufiana-kalam*, on the other hand, has solo musicians singing with a minimal instrumentation and the participation of women is significant in this mobile indigenous mystical tradition. Both of these make a spiritual experience available to the people in the vernacular language idiom that they understand. They add music to the Quranic texts, the *hadith* and the wisdom of Sufis which helps them to teach the core of the religion without the mediation of a clergy and Sufism in this way led to the spread of Islam in a way very different from that of the conformists.

Sufism in India was an essential part of the Bhakti movement. Both of them intersect each other in their philosophies and approaches and have Divine love as their foundation. Hindu-Muslim culture synthesis took place between the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries. It was during that period when the concept of *Nirgun*-bhakti became popular and the same idea was seen being expressed in the sufi poetry during this time. The mingling of these two traditions took place in the democratic stratum and was very different from the orthodox Hinduism and Islam. The use of a female narrator to revolt against the hegemonic structures established by the clerics was also seen during the Bhakti movement in the poetry of Mirabai and the poetry addressed to Lord Krishna through the voice of *gopis*. The Hindu tradition perceived women as innately closer to then intimacy and naturalness of spirit that was the purpose of *bhakti* to cultivate. These two were the countermovement against the established orders.

While concluding I would like to say that the sufi poetry spoke for the time in which it was written. The poets were socially, spiritually and politically aware of their time. They did not write poetry just for poetical mysticism but their poetry depicted the humane and liberal side of their character. Every non-conformist, free- thinker and who can connect with the God without any mediation is a Sufi in the true sense. The word Sufi is not just restricted to Islam but it is also used for the one who has the moral courage to transgress the hegemony of the powerful and the tyrants. The basic thought underlying the concept of Sufism that is of free will holds true even today. The various aspects of Sufism still influence people and the key word behind it – love will always prevail.

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