

## **Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia**

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**Lecture 30**

**Sufi Mysticism and Poetics II**

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. We are discussing our module 6, Sufi Mysticism and Poetics. So we were talking about the different lyrics, you know, the dohas, the gīts and the Persian ghazals written by Amir Khusrau, composed by Amir Khusrau. So there are some of the themes that keep coming back in Sufi lyrics. Allusion to Holi, the celebration of Holi festival, which is a pan-Indian festival is very much available and very common in Sufi lyrics. So this is another case in hand which goes on to show how the South Asian avatar of Sufi cult has mingled deeply with the local tradition and is especially influenced by the Bhakti tradition that engendered, that originated in South India.

So allusion to the festival of colours or Holi comes back recurrently in Sufi lyrics. During the Holi celebration, individuals in a community play with each other and they sprinkle colours as a way of sharing their joy and ecstasy, and this festival is mainly a harbinger... So they sprinkle colours on to each other as a way of sharing joy and mirth, and Holi as a festival mainly celebrates the onset of the spring season, onset of spring. So a Qawwali composition based on the trope or the theme of Rang is very common.

A Qawwali composition called Rang or colour based on Amir Khusrau's composition has been sung by Shankar Shambhu Qawwal. So this is a Qawwali singer. A Qawwali singer is called Qawwal and Shankar Shambhu Qawwal has sung this Qawwali based on the theme of Rang, where both the speaker and the addressee are women. It is part of a feminine discourse, where colour is being talked about, colour is being celebrated. The daughter is the speaker who is expressing her ecstasy, her joy through the symbolism of colour.

So the entire mystical rhapsody is transmitted in the female voices where the daughter is the speaker and the mother is the listener. This is how the song goes. The Rang in Qawwali therefore, like I was saying, is a common trope in the South Asian Sufi context and it marks the celebration of the speaker's union with the spiritual mentor or the Murshid. So these are some of the tropes that keep coming back again and again in Sufi songs. Following are the lyrics of the song that we are discussing sung by Shankar Shambhu Qawwal and this composition is called Rang or colour:

When translated to English- "Today is the Rang, O Mother, green is the colour, in my Beloved's abode is the "colour", O Mother, I a beloved mentor, Nizamuddin Aulia have found, many a country and foreign soil have I searched, Thy colour do I fancy, O Nizamuddin Aulia, Such colour have I not seen, O my female friend." So here colour is referring to the soul. So my soul that wishes to be united, that longs to be united with the transcendental soul, the transcendental colour of the mentor or the Murshid, Nizamuddin Aulia. So there are several layers in these poems. First I was discussing that at one level the girl is telling her mother that she wants to be united with her lover.

At another level the feminine poetic persona of Amir Khusrau wishes to be united with his preceptor, his Murshid, Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia. So the underlying play here with emphasis on colour is of celestial nature. It is not merely the colour of holy but also the spiritual colour. When the Murshid bestows his knowledge, his knowledge of God to the Murid, he has coloured the Murid with his own colour. So bestowing of knowledge, giving what one knows is like colouring the disciple with one's own spirit.

This is a celestial or ethereal colour that we are talking about, the divine colour or rang. The colour and celebration has recurrently been used in South Asian Sufi lyrics in order to suggest the Prophet Muhammad's mirāj or ascension to heaven. So Prophet's mirāj or ascension to heaven has also been explained. The Prophet's mirāj or ascension to heaven has also been described through the symbol of colour. Mirāj is a favourite Qawwali theme in which the musicians invoke the bridal imagery.

Amir Khusrau's narrator in the discourse is a daughter. So the daughter talks to her mother, right, about the festivity in her mentor's abode. "Aj rang hai ri rang hari". So the green colour is, you know, being celebrated in my mentor's house. So we see that the invocation of the colour imagery fits in with the native social and devotional contexts.

And when Sufi has arrived in South Asia, it has picked up, it has adapted a lot from the local traditions, local cultures and practices. It has not remained a separate movement. It has been deeply influenced and inspired by the Indic Bhakti movement. And in this particular lyrics we see that the semantics addresses the mother. In fact, we see that in this particular, you know, lyrics in the semantics, the mother becomes a channel for manifesting the speaker's ecstasy and joy for her lover.

The young girl is expressing her love for the lover Mahbub-e Ilahi or God's beloved. Because the lover is not in front of her, she can only express her feelings through the channel of the mother. And who is Mahbub-e Ilahi? None other than Nizamuddin Auliyah. So basically this girl, through this girl, the speaker in this lyric, Amir Khusrau is expressing himself, his own feelings for his Murshid, Nizamuddin Auliyah or Mahbub-e Ilahi. The melody is full of gender markers.

So for example, in "Rang hai ri", "hai" is the verb "to be" and the fact that there is to be a celebration of the Rang festival. So for instance, in "Rang hai ri", he is the verb to be referring to the fact that there is to be a celebration of the Rang festival. And "ri" is a female gender marker, a term of address that establishes intimacy. So "Sakhī-rī", that is a way of referring to a female companion, one's confidante, and it establishes some kind of close relationship, a kind of a female friend to whom you can confide your feelings. So once again 'Dhūṇḍna', 'Dhūṇḍi phīrī', 'Dhūṇḍi phīrī', so 'Dhūṇḍna' means to search or look for and Dhūṇḍi, when we say Dhūṇḍi, it is a suffix that has a female gender marker.

Once again, 'phirna' means to roam around and because 'Dhūṇḍi phīrī', the I suffix is used, 'Dhūṇḍi phīrī', not 'Dhūṇḍi phīra', but 'Dhūṇḍi phīrī', the reference is once again to a female gender marker. And "Sakhī-rī", we are saying here, it is an intimate female friend, the mother being confided to, the mother is being told about the young girl's feelings. She is pouring out her heart to her female companion. So "rī" is a suffix that establishes intimacy. We see that this entire discourse of the lyrics is taking place in a very close feminine, all-female cosmos.

And it has been written by a male poet. This is remarkable. So he considers his poetic persona as a feminized one. All these are distinct syntactic constructions for the female,

the 'Sakhī-rī' and 'Dhūṇḍī phīrī' and "Rang hai ri" and so forth. The marker reestablishes the intimacy of the relationship between the mother and the daughter.

It could also be two women from same age group. And this is also observable in Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's Punjabi qawwālīs, where the "rī" is only replaced by “nī”. So instead of "rī", Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan in his Punjabi qawwālīs uses “nī”. And there also the speakers are all females. Amir Khusrau created many of his compositions using the bol or verses that are related to the seasonal festivals and wedding rituals that are also used as Sufī songs in accordance with the context.

So Khusrau has named a number of ragas or melodic musical scales after different seasons or different festivals and celebrations. For example, there are compositions called “Rāg Bahar” commemorating or celebrating the spring season. “Rāg Bahar” is spring melody. Then “Rāg Holi Khamāch” which celebrates the Holi melody. “Rāg Basant” which is once again spring melody.

“Rāg Sarang” which is the music melody and then "Rang" or the color melody. So all these different ragas or melodic musical scales have been composed by Amir Khusrau. The qaul and the tarānā are said to be the induction of the Perso-Arabic elements into South Asian music, which lead to the form of qawwālī. Tarānā is especially a contribution in South Asian music by the Perso-Arabic composers. Tarānā is an element that is induced in South Asian music by the Perso-Arabic composers.

So another important and very common trope that keeps coming back in Sufī verses is called "bābul", the concept of bābul and "bābul ka ghar". And here we take a thumri in our discussion as an example where the theme of babul is prominent. So this lyric and melody that we are going to discuss are both associated with Amir Khusrau and this video was produced during the 100 year celebrations, the centennial celebrations of the poet in Pakistan. Bābul is a wedding tune that the bride's friends sing at the time of her departure from her father's home. The bride's lament is originally inspired by some of the rural songs that are sung during the Awadhi weddings and there is a strong pathos at the heart of the bābul songs.

The lyrics you know composed under this trope of bābul. So there is a strong pathos informing the lyrics composed for this theme of bābul. So the melody of bābul is quite similar to the hir, the theme of “Hir” that is sung in the Punjabi traditions which also is supposed to bring the listeners to tears, the listeners tear up while they listen to “Hir”, while they participate in the “Hir” melodies. There are esoteric meanings embedded in these compositions. So it is not only the departure of the bride from her bābul or her father's home but at a transcendental level, at a symbolic level it is considered as a departure from an earthly transitory life to a transcendental home which is equated with the home of the in-laws.

So there is an esoteric meaning embedded in this composition as the bride's departure from her bābul or father's home at the surface level also has a transcendental meaning. It is considered as a departure of the ephemeral being from an earthly transitory life and entry into a transcendental home, and this afterlife is equated with the home of the in-laws, right. So the ritualistic sending away of the bride in the traditional contexts in the South Asian part of the world is similar to the funeral in a way. So when a bride goes away, there is a kind of the ritual of all the female companions and female kith and kin crying, which is almost similar to the death in a family.. to the funeral. So in both these occasions the kith and kin cry.

However, the occasion of the bride going away is celebrated as an auspicious event. So the ritualistic sending away of the bride in a traditional context in the Indian subcontinent in the South Asian context is very much similar to the funeral. In both events the kith and kin cry. In the case of the bride's departure, especially the female companions and the female relatives cry. However, the bride's departure from babul's home is considered and celebrated as an auspicious event, unlike the funeral.

Let us take a look at the lyrics. First the original one and then the translated version. So the original one goes as follows. When translated to English it goes as follows. Why hast thou married me in a foreign soil? Listen, O my father, To my brothers thou gave [several] palaces,

To me thou gave the foreign soil. Listen, O my father, I am, O father, like the little birds in thy courtyard, When night falls, they fly away. Listen, O my father, I am, O father, like the little buds of jasmine, Every home seeks them. Listen, O my father, Why

hast thou married me in a foreign soil, listen, O my father? A mantle full of dolls that I left, Left all my female friends.

Listen, O my father. Lifted I the cover from my palanquin, To see, The arrival in another's foreign soil. Listen, O my father, Having seen this Khusrau says, "May thou always be blessed in matrimony." Listen, O my father.... So it is a child bride being married away to a foreign land, to a stranger and it is a lamentation, it is almost a rueful, a lamenting tone that informs the entire lyrics, right.

She still plays with dolls, she is leaving her childhood friends behind and she keeps you know repeating this refrain, "Re sun bābul mere." There is a kind of pleading in this repetition, why do you even send me to the foreign land? The other way round can also be explained where the ephemeral life is the life at the home of the in-laws, the unknown home where one is separated from the Babul or the God, right. So a reunion, an urgent reunion with the God is something that the young bride, the devotee craves for, to go back from where she has come. So Babul can also be seen as the God, right, from whose home everyone has come to live a temporary life on earth as an ephemeral being.

So earth as a sasural or the in-law's home from where one will once again go back to the original home of the God. So we find the aesthetic construction and the sociolinguistic context of this melody as extremely moving, full of pathos, especially when it is understood that a young female narrator, a child bride is narrating this entire poem. The song where the child bride calls herself as the bird in her father's courtyard or the bud in his jasmine recurs often in other poet's writings as well. In several vernacular languages we see this concept of Babul using these metaphors, where the child being sent away is compared with the birds in the father's courtyard or the flowers blooming in his garden, right. These are some of the familiar metaphors for the audience.

The mantle full of dolls that the child bride is leaving behind or when she lifts the cover of her palanquin, she finds herself in an unknown land, in the unknown home of her in-laws. These form some very powerful and familiar social symbols. And regardless of, you know, region or religion, in the South Asian context this trope, this theme and melody of Babul has been extensively used, it has been extensively used. These themes can be called as cultural nodes.

In the words of T.S. Eliot, these themes, these pan-South Asian themes can be called as cultural nodes. These are the contexts that the poets such as Amir Khusrau, Mirabai and even Guru Nanak, they are all coming from different traditions, from different schools, celebrating, you know, gods of different communities, but using these common metaphors. So we see that a number of poets coming from different backgrounds, different schools, celebrating gods of different communities use these metaphors, the metaphor of Babul for instance, the metaphor of Rang for instance, right? A number of poets belonging to the Bhakti and Sufi traditions addressed through female metaphors and female poetic conventions their desire, their longing for uniting with the god. So a number of poets from the Bhakti and Sufi traditions addressed their desire, their longing to unite with the god using female metaphors and female poetic conventions. In the modern times, we see Pandit Ravi Shankar and Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan have created something quite similar which can be compared with the impact of Amir Khusrow's poems or Mirabai's poems or Guru Nanak's poems, where they are mixing their own native linguistic and musical resources with the world music.

There is a pan-global musical and cultural exchange. There is a wonderful and very interesting, remarkable phenomenon happening as a result of such exchanges, such pan-global exchanges, right? As a vocalist, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan generated one of the largest qawwālī repertoires in the Pakistani languages, especially in Punjabi and he has used the female voice as the dominant one. In most of his qawwālīs, the female voice is dominant. Sakhi is a favorite word in Khusrau's as well as many other Sufi poet's mystical poetry and it is also, you know, commonly available in qawwālīs. So women use it in an intimate context to address to each other, especially in Geet in Qawwali forms.

Another theme that is very common in Sufi expression, in Sufi lyrics is Piya. Piya or the beloved is a theme that recurrently appears in Hindi love poetry and it is almost a staple expression in Sufi lyrics. So the speaker in the lyric of the Piya theme is a female and this female is supplicating, she is beseeching to Hazrat Muinuddin Chishti of Ajmer. However, the songs are very interestingly sung by the female, by the male musicians and vocalists, right? The persona of the narrator is a feminized one, it is a female speaker within the frame of the lyrics.

The songs are sung by male vocalists and musicians. When Sufi lyrics are performed in the diaspora before a multicultural audience, the language also gets mixed in order to attract a larger crowd. We see that the linguistic chords are Khari Boli or Hindi mixed

with some bit of Punjabi. So this is how a lyric goes, a poem goes based on the theme of Piya: Māngat māngat same guzrīo, Pehanke gale kafan, Mē dar pe jāgī Khwājā kī joganīā, Mē ban jā gī, Sakhī more Khwājā se kahī: “Dekhā do jo kuch uṭhā ke ghūnghaṭīā.” When translated to English it goes like this- "A lifetime have I begged, wearing a shroud around my neck, I shall go to thy doorstep.

Khwaja's jogan or female disciple I shall become. O female friend, tell my khwaja ji, show whatever, lift thy veil." So once again the symbol of veil comes, the veil on the self-knowledge, the preceptor, the murshid is responsible for removing this earthly veil, this veil of distraction and show us or manifest the true knowledge in front of us, the disciple. That's what this feminized persona, this jogania is begging; and this friend becomes a channel, the female friend listens to her, her fervid desire to meet the khwaja ji, right? So the lyric would have been sung in the same gender, applying the same linguistic codes and style in Amir Khusrau's time around 13th and 14th centuries. One understands that the musical instruments would perhaps have been somewhat different. This is because the modern day qawwāl parties are also using a lot of electronic devices in addition to the traditional instruments, right? We will harp more on this topic in our next class. Thank you. Thank you.