Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 32

Sufi Mysticism and Poetics IV

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. We are discussing Sufi mysticism and Poetics. So in our last lecture we were talking about shroud, right, and the veil. These have been recurrent symbols found in Sufi mysticism, in Sufi Poetics, Sufi philosophy, right. So we were talking about the concept of Ghunghat, the concept of covering one's face with a veil, right. Now so many of the Sufi lyrics discuss this symbol of the woman's face covered in a veil.

So we were also talking about Abida Parveen, who is a superstar Sufi performer and singer who has made her space within a larger male-centric domain of performance, right. So Abida Parveen sings mystic songs majorly in male style. She has been trained by a number of male artists including her own father and her husband. So Abida Parveen sings this mystic song in Urdu about a female mendicant or Jogania.

We were talking about the mad roving minstrels, roving minstrels who would sing and roam around. This figure is very readily available both in Bhakti tradition and in Sufi cult, right. So the Jogania, the female mendicant who roams around and sings, sings about her lover who is none other than God. So we are reminded of figures like Akka Mahadevi and Mirabai, right. So here we are going to look at one such composition describing a female mendicant or Joganiya.

The original composition was by Hakim Nasser around 18th or 19th century and it is considered as one of Abida Parveen's popular concert compositions. So there are references to the Laila Majnu myth in this discourse, where Majnu has become a complete, you know, mad man. He is roaming around for the love of Laila and people in

the streets ridicule him and throw stones at him. This is how the lyric goes. I am going to read the original first followed by the English translation.

Nadī kināre

Dhua uṭhe

Nadī kināre . . uṭhe

Dhua uṭhe . . .

Mẽ jānu kuch ho..e

Jis karān mẽ jogan banī

Kahĩ vohī nā jaltā ho--e

Nainā tumhī bure ho

A . . tumhī bure ho

Tum sā burā nā ho . .e

Aāp hī prīt kī āg lagāī

Aāp hī beṭha ro..e

Jab se tune mujhe

Divānā banā rakhā hɛ

Sang har sakhs ne

Hathõ mẽ uṭhā rakhā hɛ

, right. When translated to English, "The river's bank arises some smoke, some fire smoulders, river's bank arises, arises smoke. I wonder something happens there. For whom I became a female mendicant, has he ignited himself? O eyes, thou are wicked, thou art wicked. None can be worse than thee.

Thou started this fire of love. Now you sit there weeping. Since thou made me a mad one, a stone every person carries in their hand. So, this is a kind of ranting, a kind of, you

know, soliloquy on the part of Majnu and he is seeing some fire burning, you know, some fire smouldering in the distance and he wonders, he is apprehensive that his beloved Laila has died. She has burned herself.

So, in this song there is a metalanguage of the one in love who is possessed and who has become, you know, mad in love. The mad lover's figure keeps coming back again and again in Bhakti and Sufi tradition because both these traditions primarily look at attaining God through the path of love rather than scriptures. Divana, mastana, these are some of the terms that recurrently come back in Sufi and Bhakti traditions. Additionally, in this song that we read just now, there is also a subtle humour, a sad humour in the verses where the musician is singing of smouldering fire. The speaker who is the female mendicant is fearful that it is perhaps the one she loves who has set himself on fire.

Now here one thing is very important. If we look at the poem once again or the song once again, it is very difficult to understand, you know, who has died and who is singing. Sometimes it feels or the reader wonders that it is Majnu who apprehends that Laila has died, she set herself in fire. Sometimes it is the other way round because the image of people chasing the mad Majnu with a stone is more prevalent. So here when the narrator says, since thou made me a mad one, everyone carries a stone in hand, one wonders that this is Majnu singing the song and Lala has set herself to fire.

And then yet towards the beginning of this verse, this song, we see there are lines such as- "I wonder something happens there for whom I became a female mendicant, has he ignited himself?" So it is clearly Laila speaking. The identities have become very overlapping and almost exchangeable. We do not know at what point, you know, it is Lala's voice and when it switches to Majnu. We will find more lyrics, we will discuss more lyrics as we talk about the Lala Majnu lore and we see that there is something mystic about the fact that their identities are overlapping and interchangeable. There is a point where in fact Laila says that, you know, constantly taking Majnu's name, I have become Majnu.

So the popular imagination and image of Majnu roaming around and people throwing stones at him has now been transcribed onto Laila. The same is happening with Laila. We never know that who is burning and who is witnessing this. It is just like the body and the soul. They are one and the same.

One cannot be imagined outside of or without the other. In the same way Laila and Majnu, in the same way devoted and devotee, God and, you know, devotee, we cannot think them as separate. So here the identities, you know, are very, it is very difficult to separate them. So the formal genres of Punjabi Sufi poetry fall into the same three broad categories as the Bhakti verse and the composition of the Sikh gurus. The main lyrical form is a strophic poem with refrain which is called kāfī.

We have spoken enough about this form in our last lecture. Kāfī is designed for singing in Qawwali and also lends itself to solo singing by amateur artists, amateur devotees and professional performers. Now less frequently attested are various longer strophic poems which may be either lyrical or didactic in nature. And then third, there are some miscellaneous short verses typically used for expressing a single thought. Next we are going to move on to a very prominent Sufi poet who has contributed a lot to the Sufi artistic and cultural repertoire in terms of poems and verses, right.

So Baba Bulleh Shah, whose original name is Abdullah Shah, is counted among the foremost Punjabi Sufi poets along with Varis Shah, Sultan Bahu and Shah Hussain. He was born in Bahawalpur and died in Kasur, now in Pakistan. Bulleh Shah served as a pupil of the Sufi teacher Inayat Shah Qadri and he accumulated the knowledge of Quran, the Arabic and Persian languages as well as the Sufi mystic philosophy from his preceptor Qadri. Bulleh Shah is known primarily for composing kāfīs, which are designed for singing in qawwali, and they can also be sung in solo. We have already stated this.

So the poetic form of the kāfī is similar to other major genres of pre-modern North Indian religious poetry. For example, in medieval India we see the Vaishnava Pada, the Vaishnava Padavali is being written by poets such as Surdas and even the kāfīs are similar with the Shabad written by the different Sikh gurus, right. So once again just hearkening back what I was discussing in my previous lecture, the Sufi tradition in the South Asian context has drawn greatly and is deeply influenced by the local traditions. It does not decouple itself from the pre-existing practices, lores and ballads, right. Composed in simple syllabic meters with evenly distributed stresses, kāfīs consist of varying numbers of strongly rhymed verses.

Those written by Bulleh Shah range from examples that comprise only one or two verses which are possibly incomplete, and they could also be on the other hand much longer poems. So the compositions by Bulleh Shah range from examples comprising only one or two verses which are probably incomplete, to occasionally longer poems that are 20 verses or more which may contain later interpolations. So, this is one of the Bulleh Shah lyrics that has had a number of renditions, one of them being very popular and a recent one sung by Rabbi Shergill, right. So let me read the translation that we have. The original, the initial line of this poem goes like, "Bullah ki jana mai kaun?", "Bulleh, who knows who I am?", right.

So who is this 'I'? There is a problematizing with the first person and the third person, where there is a gaze on one's own identity. One is looking at oneself and asking 'who am I?', right. Bulleh Shah is asking himself, Bullah, do you know who I am? Not a believer in the mosque am I,

Nor a disbeliever with his rites am I.

I am not the pure amongst the impure,

Neither Moses nor Pharaoh am I.

Bulleh, who knows who I am?

Not in the holy books am I,

Nor do I dwell in bhang or wine,

Nor do I live in a drunken haze,

Nor in sleep nor waking known.

Bulleh, who knows who I am?

Not in happiness or in sorrow am I found.

I am neither pure nor mired in filthy ground.

Neither made from earth nor water,

Nor am I in air or fire to be found.

Bulleh, who knows who I am?

Not an Arab nor Lahori,

Not a Hindi or Nagouri,

Nor a Muslim or Peshawari,

Not a Buddhist or a Christian.

Bulleh, who knows who I am?

Secrets of religion have I not unravelled,

Nor have I fathomed Eve and Adam.

Neither still nor moving on,

I have not chosen my own name!

Bulleh, who knows who I am?

From first to last, I searched myself.

None other did I succeed in knowing.

Not some great thinker am I.

Who is standing in my shoes, alone?

Bulleh, who knows who I am?

This is how the song goes. So one could also see the, you know, in a way the neti neti tradition we were talking about in the context of Guru Nanak's compositions.

So I am neither this nor that, this is the style that we also find in Bulleh Shah's writing. So through a kind of negation of possible, you know, meanings of self, Bulleh Shah is trying to deduce, he is coming, he is trying to come to the significance of his own existence, the question of who he is, he is trying to answer that. If he is neither this nor that, who exactly is Bulleh Shah? Is Bulleh Shah even I? So who Bulleh Shah calls as 'I' may not exactly be Bulleh Shah. So for Bulleh Shah, as for so many other Sufis, the primary reason for creation was God's desire to be loved. The primal compact between the divine and the ephemeral or God and man meant both man's recognition of God as the object and the Lord of his devotion, as well as the special presence of the divine within man as the noblest of God's creatures.

His poetry also bears out the gist of the most popular tale of Bulleh Shah regarding how he once fell out of favor with his own mentor. And this is owing to the fact that he was too outspoken in his criticisms for formal Islam and he was too radical in his way of thinking and so his preceptor, his Murshid dismissed him from his company. He was dismissed by his Murshid from his company. Since Bulleh Shah knew of Shah Inayat's fondness for music and dancing, so Shah Inayat was his mentor right? And Bulleh Shah very well knew that his guru, his preceptor is fond of performance of music and dancing; he had gone away and then taken lessons of you know dancing with a dancing girl and he reappeared in Lahore himself dressed as a dancing girl in order to win his Murshid's favor, his Murshid's heart basically because he had been dismissed by his guru, he wanted to win back his heart and he went to the extent of becoming a transvestite. Some of the myths would even go to the extent of saying that he had become an intersex in order to win his Murshid's favor.

After coming back to Lahore dressed as a dancing girl, Bulleh Shah danced and sang in front of Shah Inayat, his Murshid and he was won over, he was very easily won over by Bulleh Shah's performance and so Bulleh Shah was readmitted to his favor. So this is a Kāfī written to commemorate that moment:

Come to my assistance, doctor, I have lost my senses.

Your love has set me dancing in rhythm.

Bulleh, let us go and sit at the gate of Shah Inayat, who made me dress

in green and red.

When I started dancing, I found my way to him.

So this is actually commemorating a real event that happened in Bulleh Shah's life. But symbolically once again Shah Inayat stands for none other than God. Dancing, singing through rapturous and you know, excessive performance, the performance that shows bodily excess, one is able to reach God. It is not through restraint, it is not through some kind of gnosis or knowledge, bookish knowledge, but as the Sufis say that through dancing and singing one can attain the divine.

So through.. when I started dancing, so when I started dancing I found my way to him. The long story of the eternal power of love is brought home through Bulleh Shah's frequent references to the local legends already available, pre-existing in the Indus Valley. The standard convention of Indian lyric poetry where the poet takes on the persona of a female lover is also present in Bulleh Shah, where he assumes the role of one of the local romantic heroines. In some poems for example, he is assuming the persona of Sassi who is waking to find herself abandoned by her beloved Punnun or in other poems he is assuming the character of Sohni who prepares to cross the river Chenab in order to meet her lover Mahinval. So all these love lores, local love lores are being exploited and celebrated in Bulleh Shah's poems.

The greatest of all these local legends is the story of Hir and Ranjha of course, and it is set in the world of the Jat pastoral tribes of western Punjab. So Hir Ranjha belonged to the Jat tribe from the western part of Punjab. The romance of Hir Ranjha is best known for its famous narrative treatment by Bulleh Shah's younger contemporary Varis Shah, which tells the whole story of how Ranjha leaves his family home in search for Hir who is the daughter of a Sial Chieftain Chuchak. So Hir's father is persuaded to hire Ranjha as a herdsman, which allows him to meet Hir again and again you know on the pretext of grazing the cattle beside the Chenab river. There, you know, their love story goes on till it is discovered by the elders and then after discovering their love, Hir's parents forcefully marry her off to a man from the Khera tribe.

This is how the story goes; and after Hir is married off, Ranjha becomes a yogi. He is initiated.. he goes to yogi Gorakhnath for initiation. He becomes an ascetic mendicant and this radical transformation in appearance from a herdsman into a yogi is depicted in so many of these poems where Ranjha is you know yearning for Hir, he wants her to come back, he wants to win her back from her husband's home even. So as a yogi he goes to Hir's husband's home and he is looking to win her back from her husband.

This is how a poem goes:

I will go with the yogi, having put a mark on my forehead.

I will go, I will not be stopped from leaving. Who is going to turn me back as I go? It has become impossible for me to turn back, now that I have experienced reproaches for being in love.

He is not a yogi, but my heart's beloved. I have forgotten why I fell in love. I lost all control, once I gained a sight of him.

What did this yogi do to me? He put his hooks in my heart. He cast the net of love when he uttered his sweet talk.

So naturally we see that Hir is the narrator in this, in these verses.

Although the legend of Hir Ranjha makes some appearances in early Sufi poetry by Shah Hussain, it is Bulleh Shah primarily who exploits the rich potential for the mystical allegory that is inherent in the Hir Ranjha myth. At one level this relationship is taken to symbolize the earthly love relationship between the man and the woman, and then at another level it is the love between the human and the divine. And then at the third level obviously the spiritual plane also goes on to reflect the relationship that is lived out between Bulleh Shah, the poet, and his Murshid and Lord Shah Inayat. So three levels at least we can see, one is the human couple, the other is the Murshid-Murid which directly you know points to the devotee-devoted relationship, the spiritual plane. So although Ranjha who is a chieftain's son from Takht-Hazara assumes different appearances as an ascetic or a yogi and a flute playing herdsman, the true mystery lies in his being fundamentally identical with Hir.

I was talking about this, there is something mystic about the fact that Hir and Ranja are interchangeable. They are almost exchangeable identities, they are one and the same. There is a point where one does not understand how the narrator's voice started with you know Hir's persona and it went on to become Ranjha in the due course of the poem. And we are definitely.. as the flute playing lover, when we look at Ranjha we are reminded of the figure of Krishna, the most popular icon of lover in the South Asian context. So many of Bulleh Shah's memorable lyrics express this kind of sweet and mysterious contradiction where the reader is confused whether it is he speaking or Ranjha.

So look at the following lyrics: "Through repeating "Ranjha, Ranjha," I have myself now become Ranjha. Call me Dhido Ranjha, let no one call me Hir.

Ranjha is in me and I am in Ranjha, this is my only thought. There is no me, there is only him, and he is the one who shows tender care for himself.

Whoever dwells within us determines who we are. I have become just like the one I love.

With a staff in my hand I drive the buffaloes before me, wearing a rough blanket around my shoulders. Take me to Takht Hazara, Bullah,

I can find no refuge with the Sials."

So she does not want to stay at her parents' home anymore.

So Takht Hazara is where Ranjha belongs and she is impersonating him. She is you know behaving like Ranjha, playing the herdsman with a stick in his hand, grazing the cattle. With short and apparently simple Sufi lyrics such as this, Bulleh Shah shows the overlapping identity of the lover and the beloved beyond apparent variety. So apparently they are different but within they are one and the same.

They are united. Appealing simultaneously to so many different human aspirations and to universal meanings of human existence in a divine world, Bulleh Shah's assimilation of diverse elements into his poetic expression emphasizes the philosophy of unity of existence, right. So this is very similar to what we were dealing with or what we were discussing in our Bhakti module- underlying all kinds of dualisms, all kinds of Dvaitavaad, right, there is the concept of Advaita, right. So Advaita and Dvaita are a continuation of one another.

They are not really in contradistinction. So this philosophy of unity that informs Bulleh Shah's poems makes him an outstanding interpreter of the transcendental relationship or the concept of transcendental itself beyond the readership of Punjab. There is a universal appeal in his poems. In fact, in the poems of all Sufi mystics.. we will also discuss Rumi and we will find that the kind of love they are talking about, the human emotions they are talking about appeal to, appeal to populace across time and space.

They have a timeless appeal. So look at this short poem. You have learnt so much

And read a thousand books.

Have you ever read your Self?

You have gone to mosque and temple.

Have you ever visited your soul?

You are busy fighting Satan.

Have you ever fought your

Ill intentions?

You have reached into the skies,

But you have failed to reach

What's in your heart!

right.

That is the central idea of both Bhakti and Sufi philosophies. So the extraordinary richness of the dynamic love is conveyed by Bulleh Shah's remarkable range of poetic references, and it extends beyond the Islamic tradition to include occasional references to figures from Hindu cultural repertoire. The Islamic past is mainly conceived through stories of a number of martyrs who were variously and differently tested by gods, martyrs such as Ibrahim, Suleiman, Ayub and Zakaria. So among the famous pairs of lovers in Islamic legend whose stories inspire, you know, Sufi poetry, we have mention of the Persian romance of Yusuf who was loved by Zuleika in Egypt and then Laila who was madly adored by Majnu in Arabia. Their legends greatly inspire the Sufi cultural and poetic repertoire. Then there are the great Sufi saints who were ostracized for saying radical things, you know, for proclaiming radical statements such as Sufi Mansoor Al-Hallaj, who is known for his famous saying, anā'l-haq, "I am He."

Look at this poem- "They put Yusuf in the well, then sold him in the bazaar. He was paid for in full with a hank of yarn. You will be priced at a cowrie.

Zulaikha fell in love and bought him. Lovers are writhing in agony over there. Majnun says, "Ah, ah, ah!" What will you bring back from over there?

Over there some have their skins flayed, some are cut up with saws, others are seized and put on the gallows. You too will get your head cut off over there."

This is a direct confrontation and conflict between institutionalized religion, the Sharia law and the path of love that the Sufis follow, the path of Tariqa. So the proper religion or

the mainstream religion that is like.. that defines law and order, jurisprudence, and that is imagining God as a stern figure; versus the Sufi order that sees God as a lover.

There is fundamentally a difference between these two orders. So all these lovers, Yusuf and Majnu, they will all perhaps be punished. They have to undergo some kind of persecution, some kind of punishment for doing what they have done, for doing radical things. So we in the last paragraph.. we are talking about the different forms of punishment being meted out and these are fearless lovers. Maybe they also have to undergo some such punishment for daring to love. So similar reflection of heresy is available in the following lyrics of a ghazal that is composed by Urdu poet Akbar Allahabadi and it has been famously sung by Ghulam Ali.

I will read the original and then the translation to English. So the original goes as follows.. “Hungāmā hai kyon barpā? Thodi si jo pee lee hai, Dākā to nhi dālā, Chori to nhi ki hai”.. And then I am skipping some of the lyrics. “Na tajraba-kāri se, vāiz ki yeh baatein hai, iss rang ko kya jāney,- poochon toh kabhi pee hain...Sooraj mein lage dhabbā, fitrat ke karishme hai, Butt hamko kahe qāfir, Allah ke marzi hai...Har zarrā chamaktā hai, Anwar-e-Ilahi se, Har sans ye kehti hai, Hum hai to khuda bhi hai.” The ones that are interested are highly encouraged to go back and read the entire song. It is so readable and so wonderfully written.

So the last paragraph says, This is very similar to Annalhaq. "I am he." And it is a very radical thing. It is a very heretical thing to say. So when translated to English, the song would be: “Why is there such a noise, hue and cry? I have only had some alcohol.” This reminds us that Islam prohibits drinking alcohol, right? And “no one has been robbed, nor have I committed any theft.”

“Out of inexperience the preacher's words are spoken. How will he know the effects of it, someone who has never tasted wine?” So this is against the priestly or the maulavi tradition. Someone who is only reading scripture but who has never drunk the wine of love, never knows the path. “Even the sun is eclipsed, sometimes it is the wonder of nature.

The stone idol of God is calling me an infidel. It is God's will. Every little particle shines with the radiance of God. Every breath is an affirmation that if I exist, God does too." So it is through my existence and my own agency that I can discover God. I can realize God through my body, through my, you know, experience of love, through my journey of love, through the tariqa and haqiqa I will find self-knowledge and thereby, I will discover God.

It is talking about human agency, not a small thing to say. With this, I am going to stop our lecture here today, and let us discuss more in our ensuing lectures.