

“Bullah Ki Jana Mai Kon”: The Question of Self and Spiritual Transcendence in Bulleh Shah’s Poetry

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Abstract

This research paper seeks to gain insight into the poetry of the 17th century Sufi mystic, Baba Bulleh Shah and its lasting relevance. Known for his profound sense of divinity, Bulleh Shah’s verses may reflect the philosophy of self-negation and possess a transcendental quality. Focusing on his seminal work “Bullah Ki Jana Mai Kon”, this study delves into the intersection of Sufi philosophy and existentialism. Drawing on theories of semiotics and Derridean deconstruction the paper elucidates how Bulleh Shah dismantles the conventional notions of self and human identity based on societal constructs. By employing the perspectives of Sufi philosophy, existentialism, and poststructuralist theory, the paper examines how Bulleh Shah deconstructs the system of signs and binaries based on race, class, and gender that are inscribed on the human body. Jacques Derrida’s concept of deconstruction is deployed to understand how the poet undermines these identity categories in order to attain a spiritual union with the divine. Bulleh Shah’s poetry may be seen as a radical negation of corporeal identity markers in pursuit of a transcendent existential truth. Furthermore, the paper highlights the enduring relevance of Bulleh Shah’s poetry. His timeless, mystic verses are being continuously revived through the contemporary musical renditions by artists like Rabbi Shergill and incorporated into popular culture, including Bollywood music. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to illuminate the significance and universal appeal of Bulleh Shah’s poetic oeuvre.

Keywords: *Bulleh Shah, sufi philosophy, existentialism, self-negation, spiritual transcendence.*

Introduction to Sufism

In the 11th century, Sufism gained momentum in Punjab. The term “Sufi” originates from the Arabic word “suf,” referring to coarse woollen garments worn by early practitioners, symbolizing their voluntary poverty and detachment from worldly pleasures (Singh 3-5). Alternate theories believe that it is derived from the Greek word “Sophos,” meaning wisdom, which becomes philosophy or falsafa, the love for wisdom.



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In Punjabi, the term “Sofi” also denotes a sober individual, one who is not intoxicated or drunken, but rather embodies sobriety and clarity of mind. Interestingly, Sufis can be likened to “Sofi” in the sense that they exhibit sobriety in worldly pursuits, refraining from materialistic desires while becoming intoxicated with divine love and spiritual ecstasy. Sufism represents the mystical dimension of Islam, delving into its inner, esoteric aspects. Burckhardt, “Sufism is an expression of the inward or internal (batin) an esoteric aspect of Islam, as distinguished from its outward or external (zahir) and exoteric aspect. It designates the whole of the contemplative ways founded on the sacred forms of Islam” (Burckhardt qtd. in Singh 5). Sufis, through their poetry, delved into existential questions, seeking meaning and the divine. Further, they incorporated singing, known as “Sama,” to praise God, while distancing themselves from worldly affairs to explore spirituality beyond conventional boundaries.

Bulleh Shah

Bulleh Shah (1680 – 1757), born Abdullah Shah in Uch, Bahawalpur (modern-day Pakistan), was a prominent Sufi poet (Sattar 4; Puri 127). He challenged societal norms, criticizing discrimination based on caste, colour, religion, etc. Bulleh Shah continued the Punjabi Sufi poetic tradition established by earlier poets like Shah Hussain and Sultan Bahu, while living alongside contemporaries such as Mir Taqi Mir and Waris Shah (“Bulleh Shah”). Bulleh Shah’s preferred verse form was the Kafi (Refrain), a traditional Punjabi poetic style which was also followed by his contemporary Shah Hussain (Puri 133-34). Unlike many of his peers who used Persian or Urdu, Bulleh Shah and other Sufi poets wrote in vernacular languages like Punjabi, Saraiki, and Sindhi, connecting with the common people (“Bulleh Shah”).

In Sufism, there were twelve orders or Silsila, and Bulleh Shah belonged to the Qadiri Silsila. While seeking spiritual guidance, he found his spiritual master, murshid or pir, in Shah Inayat Qadri (Puri 128). He found him, in a humble setting, amidst a kitchen garden, Bulleh Shah, belonging to the upper caste of Syed, knelt before Shah Inayat Qadri, who hailed from the lowly Arian caste of vegetable sellers (Puri 128). This act of seeking spiritual guidance from a guru of a lower caste challenged societal hierarchies. “As Bulla knelt before him in an ecstasy of recognition, Inayat Qadiri spoke as he worked: “*Bulleya, Rab da kee paana? Idhron putna te odhar laana*” ‘Bulleya, do you seek God? Put your soul from here (below) to there (on high)’”

(Narayanan), that is to elevate the soul beyond the confines of the worldly realm, into the realm of the spiritual. Bulleh Shah's Sufism is woven in the metaphorical relationship between the lover and the beloved, metaphor of seeing the beloved in the divine. Moreover, Bulleh Shah's love for his murshid or spiritual guide, mirrors this profound connection, as he expresses his reverence and adoration for his mentor in a similar manner, portraying him as the embodiment of divine love and wisdom. "It is linked with Krishna-bhakti, where the love of Radha for Krishna was a high allegory for the human's longing for God, and with Advaita philosophy, the longing of the *jivatma* or individual soul to merge in the *Paramatma*, the Supersoul" (Narayanan).

Bulleh Shah employed the kaafi style of Punjabi poetry, which is characterized by refrains that are repeated throughout the poem, often sung by qawwals to create a specific mood or atmosphere (Sattar 21-23; Puri 133). The Kaafi style, rooted in Sufi devotional singing, became a medium for Bulleh Shah to express his spiritual insights and devotion. In Hindustani classical music, a raag with a similar name is also known as raag kaafi.

Bulleh Shah's poetry illuminates his mystical journey through the four stages of Sufism: Shariat, Tariqat, Haqiqat, and Marfat (Motwani). Shariat is the foundational stage where the novice Sufi adheres to ethical principles outlined in scripture. Tariqat, or Observance, signifies the transformative process guided by a Master, or Murshid, along a path filled with spiritual challenges. Here, the virtue of both thought and action is given importance, preparing for union with the Divine by discarding external rituals and focusing on internal transformation. Haqiqat, or Truth, marks the stage of realization where the seeker perceives the Divine in all things, transcending distinctions between religions and recognizing the universal essence underlying all existence. Marfat represents the ultimate merging into the Divine reality, often experienced as a trance or altered state of consciousness known as Fana (Motwani). In this stage, the disciple perceives the entire world as a reflection of the Divine. Bulleh Shah is believed to have attained this final stage of union with the Divine, as evidenced by his spiritually profound poetry (Motwani).

Bulleh Shah dismisses all societal boundaries, binaries, and hierarchies to merge with the ultimate totality, God. This final stage transcends the limitations of language because the inherent structure of language, with its reliance on binary oppositions and hierarchical constructs,

imposes limitations on the representation of such transcendent experiences, as Alam and Rao put it:

Lover and beloved become one. The subject becomes the object of desire erasing his subjectivity. For a rational mind, this is the moment of birth of paradox, of impossibility describing or representing the experience. Because for the representation it needs to surrender to the binaries created by language. It needs to conform to linguistic oppression (14).

The paper elaborates on this notion by analysing his particular kaafi, *Bullah Ki Jana Mai Kon*, its English translation can vary in interpretation, such as "Bullah who knows who I am," "Bullah how do I know who he is," or "Bullah how do I know the whoness?" as Syed contemplates on the poet's blend of mature wisdom and childlike inquisitiveness reflected in his question (Syed 85-86). Bulleh Shah engages in self-introspection, where one aspect of the self is defined by external labels, categorizations imposed by the society, serving predetermined definitions and signs, while the other aspect makes him transcend and negate these societal constructs in pursuit of an authentic self, analogous to shedding layers like clothes, skin or bones—religious affiliations, regional identities, and other superficial categorizations. Each layer peeled away brings him closer to the core of his being, where he confronts the fundamental question: "Who knows, Bullah, who am I?" In this process, the initial inquisitive question transforms into a rhetorical one, suggesting that the true answer may be unknowable and that forms the essence of this kaafi.

Theoretical Framework

For the theoretical framework, I draw upon the theories of structuralism proposed by Saussure and deconstruction articulated by Derrida. Saussure's structuralism posits that language functions as a system of signs, comprising signifiers and signified in an arbitrary relationship shaped by societal structures and agreements (Gordon 18-34). Meanings are derived from the differential relations among these elements within the system. Structuralism focuses on investigating the conventions and structures that facilitate the process of meaning-making, prioritizing langue over parole. In this framework, a sign gains significance within a particular structure, with meaning ceasing to exist outside of this framework.

Derrida articulated the concept of deconstruction, arguing that Western philosophy is based on binaries and hierarchical structures. According to Derrida, the presence of something is defined by its corresponding absence or negations, which leads to a perpetual deferral of

meaning (Abrams 430). This process results in an endless chain of signification, where each sign is defined by another, ultimately leading to a chaotic accumulation, an empty verbatim of signs constantly deferring each other as M.H. Abrams described (431). The possibility of stable meaning arises and the chain of signification ends when there is a transcendental sign to which all signs refer to, the ultimate totality, such as God or an abstract idea which contain within itself the entirety. In a universe devoid of such transcendental signs (referred to as the metaphysics of absence), language loses its authority as a carrier of stable meaning and instead traps us in a world where meanings are in constant flux and revision. Derrida's theory of deconstruction challenges the notion of logocentrism and celebrates the absence of fixed meanings in the world.

Analysis and Discussion

In his kaafi, *Bullah Ki Jana Mai Kon*, Bulleh Shah poses fundamental questions about existence. He raises the ontological and teleological question, the very questions from which philosophy, or falsafa, begins: the question of being, who am I, what does it mean to be?

Bulleh Shah rejects the signs which are inscribed on the human body for the creation of meaning, to create its identity in relation to social structures. He explores the notion of binaries seeking his presence within these signs, only to discover that his presence lies in absence, and absence in presence. Society assigns identity based on these signs, yet Bulleh Shah rejects such categorizations. For, he declares, “*Na main moosa na pharaun/Na main Arabi na Lahori/Na Hindu na Turk Peshawri*, I am neither Moosa nor Pharaoh, neither Muslim nor Arab, nor Turk” defying categorisations based on religion. He further explores existential realms, stating, “*Na main baithan na vich bhaun/Na main jagan na vich saun/Na mai pakan vich paleeti/ Na mai shaadi na ghamnaaki*, I am neither still nor in motion, neither awake nor asleep, neither virtuous nor evil, neither joyful nor sorrowful.” He transcends elemental distinctions, proclaiming, “*Na main aatish na main paun/Na mai aabi na mai khaaki*, I am neither fire nor wind, neither earth nor water.” Bulleh Shah even challenges the notion of naming, indicating his absence where social structures put a person's presence—in his name (“*Na koi apna naam dharaya*, nor did I name myself”). Through these assertions, he rejects the signs of binary divisions transcending categorizations based on religion, ethnicity, and elemental existence. Bulleh Shah embodies the fluidity and deferral of meaning. Alam and Rao offer an insightful analysis of Bulleh Shah's approach to identity and meaning-making:

Bulleh Shah refuses to attach himself to any discourse of identity or meaning-making. He does not know who he is, because knowing means creating a centre both for meanings and existence, and then celebrating that imagined superiority over others who refuse to conform to grand narratives. Bulleh Shah wants to free himself of language. There is a desire for a decentered centre, a rhizomatic subjectivity which remains in search of a non-lingual attachment to this world. Representation connotes clarity. And the more one contemplates existence, the vaguer it turns out to be... Bulleh Shah prefers vagueness over clarity and questions over answers (18).

In the line, “*Avval Akhir aap nu jaana*” meaning that he is the beginning and end, he is the be all and end all of creation, it may be linked to an anecdote from his childhood at the Madrasa, where he is learning the alphabet and “he remains lost in contemplation of Alif, the first letter, in which he beheld the creator and all of its creation” (Narayanan). It also “links culturally with the teaching in Indian classical music that all music is contained within the first note, Sa” (Narayanan). This emphasis on the ‘alif’ is not mere childlike wonder but connects with Sufi metaphysical thought. The renowned Sufi mystic Ibn al-’Arabi discusses about symbolism of ‘alif’ in “The Meccan Openings”: “The alif (the letter a) is isolated in writing. This means that it cannot be written connected to the letter following it. The alif thus symbolizes the transcendent. The downward stroke of the alif symbolizes universal manifestation from the highest state of Being to the lowest one” (“The Sufi Interpretation”) that universe is manifested in all the forms be it highest or lowest. ‘Alif’ represents the number one, belonging to the element of fire, and its shape resembles the numeral 1 – symbolic of the unity and singularity of God. Thinkers like Rajab Borsi viewed the ‘alif’ as the symbol of the Intellect, the First Created from which all degrees of the universe proceed (“The Sufi Interpretation”).

Haydar Amuli, in the 14th century, depicted Sufi metaphysics as likening the world to ink on a page. Within this metaphor, we discern letters (essences/substances) in the ink, distinguishing various substances/essences/categories. Yet, everything is composed of the same uniform ink, it is the human tendency to discriminate which creates the illusion of separateness, yet reality remains an interconnected whole, beyond our limited perceptions. This is the Sufi philosophy of Wahadat Al wajood, the unity of existence, “the unity or oneness of existence” (Coates 3) which Bulleh Shah aligned himself to. It is the belief in Hamah-ast (*Sab kuch khuda hai*) or in Hindi, ‘*Har me Hari*’ (Singh qtd. in Kaur 32). This is one of the central logics of Sufi philosophy, second being Wahadat al Shuhud, the unity of being, Nakshbandi silsila aligned themselves to this school (Kaur 32). Although there were not many differences between these

schools of thought, later differences arose due to the rigid orthodoxy of its preachers. One belief was that the world is a reflection of God, not part of it, in contrast to Wahadat al Wujud (33).

Connection of Sufi philosophy to existentialist thought

Sufi philosophy shares a deep resonance with existentialist thought in its emphasis on subjective experience, authenticity, and the quest of an individual for meaning amidst the apparent absurdity of existence. The existentialist grappling with the seemingly meaninglessness of existence finds parallels in Sufi teachings on the impermanence of the material world and the goal of achieving a profound, non-dual understanding of reality. Existentialists like Sartre, Nietzsche, Camus rejected the idea of God, because it would limit the individual. Sartre remarks in *Being and Nothingness*, “existence precedes essence” (Sartre qtd. in Palmer 21) that individuals are not defined by any inherent or predetermined essence. Bulleh Shah may be said to shed the essentialism of ethnicity placed on a human identity, like bearing the characteristic traits of being an Arabi, Lahori, or Turk Peshawari, or essentialism of belonging to particular religious sect, Hindu or Muslim, he transcends from these essences to oneness, being the beginning and end, to the unity of existence, the Wahadat Al Wujud, that is “existence is prior to thought and not its product... . For Ibn ‘Arabi, as an objective for the accurate understanding of one’s existence, our path is not to seek God but to seek God’s vision of Himself as us” (Coates 69-72), as is evident from Bulleh Shah’s kaafi, *Rabb da Banda*, where he writes, “*Pehla apne aap nu padh, fer mandir masjid vadh*”/ Learn about yourself first, then return to temples or mosques or in “*Bulleh Shah asmaani fadna hai, ghar baithe nu fadaya hi nhi*”/ Bulleh Shah you long for the divine above, yet you have not discovered the inherent power within yourself, quietly residing within the sanctuary of your own being, emphasizing the necessity of self-discovery before delving into spiritual practices. However, Bulleh Shah realized that the true understanding eluded him, in searching for his essence in the societal constructs that defined people, he found his own absence, as reflected in the kaafi, *Bullah Ki Jana Mai Kon*. This existential question serves as a poignant reminder that the more we learn, the more we realize we don’t know anything, as Alam and Rao apprehend it while contemplating over Bulleh Shah’s philosophy: “Representation connotes clarity. And the more one contemplates existence, the vaguer it turns out to be” (18).

Though the Sufi philosophy of Wahadat Al Wujud is closer to the existentialism of thinkers like Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Bultmann and Tillich than Sartre. Karl Jaspers, though not religious in the conventional sense, had a philosophical faith. He focused on the transcendent quality of religion, going beyond and shedding dogmas, exploring religious faith from the standpoint of a secular existentialist. Bultmann emphasized the need for an existential interpretation of religious scriptures and narratives rather than a surface one, treating God not as an external object, a detached entity but as a quality of personal experience. Jasper and Tillich are in favour of an existentialism which looks out for, ‘symbols of transcendence’, “Religion is unbelievable unless it sheds its dogmatism and sees its task as exploring the symbols of transcendence”, which is akin to Bulleh Shah discovering the symbol of Alif as the transcendent symbol (Rodgers and Thompson 134-48). Mystics have often sustained that “God is not external to us but that we are at one with him. God certainly does not exist- because an existing thing (in the sense of something within the world that might be detectable by science) is certainly not what ‘God’ is about. God makes sense only within a self-world framework of meaning; a God who exists cannot be God” (144), as is also affirmed by Bulleh Shah in the couplet “*Masjid dha de, Mandir dha de, dha de jo kuch dhenda, par kise da dil na dhanvi, rabb dilan vich rehnda*” break temples, break mosques, break whatever can be broken, but don’t break people’s hearts for God resides in there, his philosophy moves towards existential humanism.

Bulleh Shah’s universal appeal stems from his ability to address life’s complexities with simplicity. His kafis have been embraced by a diverse range of artists, from street-singers to renowned Sufi performers like the Waddali Brothers and Abida Parveen, Sufi rock band Junoon, and many Punjabi singers like Rabbi Shergill and Ahen (Sattar 24-29). It has also been adapted into Bollywood songs like “*Chhayya Chhayya*” inspired from “*Tera Ishq Nachaya Kar Thayya Thayya*” in the movie Dil Se, sung by Sukhwinder Singh and composed by AR Rahman (“Sukhwinder Singh” 1:13-1:30). Thayya Thayya comes from tatkaar in kathak, the dance syllables that are produced from footwork are called Tatkaar. In Kathak dance the main syllables of Tatkaar are: *Ta Thei Thei Tat, Aa Thei Thei Tat*. Bulleh Shah, as the anecdote goes in order to reconcile with his pir, Shah Inayat Qadri, he learned dance from the kanjar community and performed kathak, emulating the role of a kanjari, ‘*mai kanjari ban ke yaar nu manawa*’ as Shah Inayat Qadri loved dance and music (Kapuria 219-220).

Conclusion:

Bulleh Shah's poetic oeuvre transcends conventional boundaries of identity, religion, and existence. His poetry echoes the Sufi philosophy of Wahdat al-Wujud, the unity of existence, where all distinctions dissolve into the singularity of the divine reality. Bulleh Shah's universal appeal lies in his ability to convey complex existential and spiritual truths through simple, yet profoundly resonant verses. His verses serve as a poignant reminder that true understanding often lies beyond the limitations of language and societal conventions. His work continues to inspire contemporary artists, solidifying his legacy as a timeless mystic poet.

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