

Reimagining Female Role in Divine/Sufi Writings

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Abstract

The present paper aims to explore whether the spiritual poets use a female character to represent their stereotypical behaviour or they are using their symbol as a role model for society to induce their quality as real representative of dominance. For this purpose, a comparative study of two poets namely John Donne and Bulleh Shah has been carried out. The study covers a detailed debate on previous researches related to gender issue and the fundamental nature of woman to sacrifice as claimed by gender theory. The analysis shows that Bulleh Shah has used the symbol of woman and man to show an extreme regard to beloved and humbleness of a lover. He has presented God as a beloved with masculine powers and strength while human soul as beloved who struggles for a union with her Lover. Similarly, Donne has also showed his love for God in a symbolic way by using the same symbols of man and woman but with ambiguity. He never makes it clear to his reader the gendered identity of the lover and the beloved. Both the poets use the experiences of women love in the form of symbols and metaphors, and utilize their experiences for conveying the thought of soul relationship to God through social segments of civilization and culture so that the reader can easily comprehend the poet's message .

Keywords: Divine poets, Sufism, gendered identity, feminism, masculine power

Introduction:

Sharma and Katherine asserted, "Power might have no gender but gender has power"¹. When we talk about gender and power, the role of religion and its attitude towards gender is highly influential as it theorizes a woman's place and identity with reference to its particular belief system. The feminist critique usually studies women's role in general, or with a specific theoretical agenda. Feminism aims to study the phenomenon of identity of a woman's particular cultural position and her status in relation to men.

Originally coined by Alexander Dumas², the term 'Feminism' discusses the vital issues related to women's rights for equality between sexes, their fixed gendered role in a society and religion, liturgically and theoretically. Women have multiple understanding and multi-vocal descriptions in religion and literature according to their gendered demand, as our emphasis here is on their role when we discuss human relation to God in literary piece of writings. The aim of the study is to explore the impact of feminism with reference to religious traditions of a particular area in Sufi literary writings.

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Ranft³ discusses in detail a woman's place in religion and spiritual practice in Christianity. She asserts that in Christianity there is a firm demarcation between male and female identity if we discuss the question of equality among them. Ranft states that female presence in spiritual tasks is as important as they are used as agency by their male partners in all aspects of life. As a historian, she sees a rich Christian tradition of women and a few men in pre-Enlightenment world to follow equality and justice in all social and spiritual worlds. But, she further points out that in later period, with the effect of secular scientific knowledge women's inferior presence became stronger and the spirit of equality was lost.

The modern reader is familiar with the concept of gender, feminism, identity and different discourses related to these terms and schools. A reader ambivalently understands the important connection between political and social relations and advancements that the writers use in their piece of art to make the reader aware of these diverse constructions and dimensions at the social and individual level. But, still there is room to accommodate a discourse on the use of language particularly when a writer is writing about his/her love for God. The language of love is as influential as the language of politics. But, the language of love is not for socio-economic power relation or for any certain ambition; rather it is the real subject of a piece of writing that act not as a metaphor used for serving an opinionated purpose of any kind rather it has its own supporting nature. Oakley⁴ declares gender as more a social construction than a biological condition. It is a socially unequal division between masculinity and femininity; the proponents of feminism assume that women are with less power than men that is unequal, so, the main concern is about power relationship and the understanding of inequality between the two sexes. It is not only literature but also other pieces of writing which reflect female presence while showing their relationship with God. They always show God with a masculine power and human beings possessing feminine characteristics in them.

Rationale of Research:

It is often observed that writers and poets, while creating their work of art, use female essence necessarily to serve the purpose of their texts. The purpose behind can be varied according to writer's requirement to present a female as a role model for a specific concern or social or religious construction through their literary work. Here, the researchers are trying to explore whether the spiritual/Sufi poets use a female character to represent their stereotypical behaviour or they are using their symbol as a role model for society to induce their quality as real representative of dominance. For this purpose, the research work is limited to comparative study of two poets namely John Donne and Bulleh Shah. The research covers a detailed debate on previous investigation by thinkers and scholars on gender issue and the fundamental nature of woman to sacrifice as claimed by gender theory, how feminism look at the issue and how do the poets make a harmony or cooperation between male and female relationship.

Literature Review:

In the context of Pakistani literature, Shameem Abbas⁵ is of the view that *Sufiana Kalam* is replete with women input. The Sufi poetry which is widely studied and appreciated is essentially a male genre, but in this devotional context, feminism is with its central participation and position. Women's presence, directly or indirectly, plays a vital role to enhance the effect of *Sufi kalaam*. There is a complete classification of masculine and feminine folklore that gives rise to a scholarly creation. Abbas believes that female participation in Sufi writings employs the *sufiana kalaam* to express the religious ideals and myths. She further categorizes the Pakistani Muslim women state by describing that women are the symbol of respect and dignity for men. They are not allowed to be visible in public especially as a singer (whether singing *sufiana* song or otherwise); but the linguistic wealth of Sufi music and poetry, the semantic and syntax mode of speech in poetic work, is all decorated in female tune. The Sufi poets express their difficulties of their union to God, finding love of God, through symbolic description of household things which are used by women on an everyday basis. In this way, they communicate their effort and struggle through a feminine voice and by using different kinds of elements related to feminine world to express their difficulty in struggling for union with God. Though feminism is a modern term and explicitly a social term that shows gender issues like racism and patriarchy, yet its usage to show spiritual dislocation and subjugation before God is central to all social and spiritual perspectives as human beings on earth are as subordinate to God as women are in a patriarchal society.

The proponents of feminist and gender studies argue that men always have a stereotypical gendered role as compared to women. They look at them as a different race which is bound to perform a specific gendered role under the influence of men. They create and maintain an attitude towards women which exhibits the supremacy of man and enforce submissive acceptance of that supremacy by women. Even the women, in their upbringing, are trained to perform that gender-based specific role. The supporters of feminist critique take such behaviour and gendered role as self-determined and accountable while the men take it as their identity with success, ambition and power. The feminist critique argues a low status of woman in her gendered role, but the situation became worse when we see the acceptance of female gendered role in history. We are surprised to see that in ancient times, in different nations, there are leading goddesses (a typical female) with her influence on man. She is shown, with her acceptance and submissive attitude towards man, as a dominant female. In Greek, Hindu, Buddhist, and Roman mythologies along with Punjabi folklores, we find women are used as an agency with dominance and power but with obedience and respect for men. In Hindu religion, writes Sharada Sugirtharajah⁶, we see that the feminist term is not acceptable by the women themselves as they call it a western term and they are not desirous to gain the same rights as the feminist movement is trying for the women in West; rather, they take it in their religious and cultural context. Hedman⁷ quotes that Hellman discusses Hindu goddess as a reflection of women of Indian society. Though Hindu religion gives a

significant place to their goddesses, yet, they are identified with a control of masculine power. Equality is a complicated term for them. For example, they worship the goddess Kali, but, their manner of worship is different among men and women. Hellman notes that the goddesses possess two qualities: protective and creative, the qualities of being protective and creative are not individual; rather, they are controlled and governed by male gods. Hellman⁸ gives example of goddesses Lakshmi, Pavrati as showing respect to their husbands and Kali and Shitala are considered as dangerous and uncontrolled by male gods but the stories about Kali expresses that though Kali had a furious mood yet she was controlled by Shiva (her husband) and obeyed him. In this way, the Hindu religion views the two qualities of their goddess as a possession of women. When goddesses can protect and maintain her cosmic order, similarly, a woman can protect and maintain her social order. They take Seeta, Savitri as their role model and give a selfless sacrifice for their husbands. The remarkable fact is that in Hindu society and in Hindu religion, there is no goddess who is shown powerful, independent and creative simultaneously. In a nutshell, men and women are shown with a patriarchal order which shows the woman as subordinate to man.

In the same way, according to Encyclopaedia Britannica⁹, goddess Juno is shown in subordination to god Jupiter. She is the counterpart and an equal to Jupiter, a representative of all aspects of a woman's life especially a married woman's life and a representative of sacrifice, loyalty and selfishness in service to society and home. In Buddhism¹⁰, Tara is a female Buddha who is the representative of achievement and success in work. The same Tara has widely known forms among different Buddhist communities, for example, she is known as Tara Bosatsu in Japanese Buddhism, and Duōluó Púsà in Chinese Buddhism. This goddess is considered as a role model for women as she is the embodiment of sensitivity to suffering, like a mother, sympathetic, and skilful. She is a helper and a preacher of goodness for them. But, it is interesting to note that, in present age where women are still suffering from internalised oppression, and feel derisory and unworthy, Tara is role model for them to use their skill and wisdom to dominate others. Apparently, the Buddhist religion preaches equality and goodness. They are without any kind of discrimination, but the Buddhist social life is opposite to it. Another remarkable thing is that their female goddesses are independent and not under the rule of any male god like Hindu goddesses. For them, feminism is Buddhism.

In spiritual/Sufi literature, the poets use an ambivalent self/other relationship while describing a connection between a lover and his beloved. The audience perceives inevitable relationships of autonomy and intimacy, desire and distance, pleasure and love and risk of consumption in these love poems. There are hardships and struggles for finding true love of beloved and a fear of lack of faithfulness from lover's side is always obvious and comprehensible. Literary writers, while writing such masterpieces, have used their 'linguistic skill'; they showed the 'masculine pervasive force' of the beloved and a genuine expression of devotion of the lover in a feminine portfolio. In this way, we see a poet's linguistic skill is not easy to understand where he/she is struggling with fixed identities of men

and women. The basic requirements of these identities are that a man should be shown as safeguard to his male identity and a woman with her specific restricted gendered role. In English literature as well as Pakistani regional literature, there are many spiritual/religious/or Sufi poets who blur the typical male/female boundary and re-centre a gender role of compromised harmony. They use this binary relationship as a strategy to assert the very idea of male dominance and female acceptance of that supremacy willingly.

Similar case is reviewed by Sharon Doerre¹¹ in her article on the subject of spiritualism and its practice in Islam. She, in her review on female voice in Sufi rituals, favors the same aspect of using female voice while discussing a union with God. Doerre says that “a feminine influence is a significant element in defining the supplicant believer...the lover, and the belief...the Divine Beloved¹²”.

Asani¹³ theorizes that Sufi poets, while composing their verses, give a beautiful description of relating their link with God. They use metaphors and different kinds of parallels for showing a soul engaged in the remembrance of God. Asani remarks that all poets use women and their attributes as transmitters of their ideas. Women are the literary conventions due to their loving and longing nature. The poets employ the metaphor of a woman sometimes as a young bride-to-be waiting for her Husband (God), or a peasant woman when she restlessly waits for her husband to return from the fields. Thus, in Sufi poetry, the poets use women-soul as a symbol for mystical interpretations and experiences in which the poet always identifies himself to a woman who expresses the core of a Sufi contemplation or the human soul for the Almighty. In local romances, we see an allegory of painful purification of soul of Sohni, Heer and Sassi who are in search of their lost beloved. Hence, the poets use the experiences of women love in the form of symbols and metaphors, and utilizes their experiences for conveying the thought of soul relationship to God through social segments of civilization and culture so that the reader can easily comprehend the message that a poet wants to transmit.

In Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, E.b.Havell¹⁴ writes that the religious people have used the word *urna* for spiritual people and the same image is used by Buddhist as an image of Divine Eye. Literally, this word gives the meaning of ‘wool’, and this explanation also leads us to understand the Arabic word ‘Sufi’ which is a symbol for Muslim devout people meaning ‘Wool.’

Sufism, in Pakistan, and specifically Punjabi Sufism is the branch of Sufi movement originated in Arabia in second century. Sufism followed the principles of Islam to its true nature and soon their asectism converted into mysticism and the followers of this kind of life and attitude were called Sufi, who practiced their religion and made it an endemic of their life. In Christianity, it took its origin from Greek philosophy of Ashrakian and Dionysus. They followed the Greek and neo-platonic philosophical tendencies and searched for truth and knowledge and were greatly influenced from Persian, Buddhist and Hindu thoughts. Zuhuruddin Ahmed¹⁵ classifies Sufism into orthodox school, time philosophic school, and the popular school. The first school belief is tolerance of different religions and conversion from

one religion to the other religion, the second one deals with pantheistic view of religion and the third one is based on beliefs and superstitions of different creeds. The Punjabi Sufi poets like Bulleh Shah belonged to the second school of thought as claimed by the researcher in his paper. He, through his debates, tries to prove clearly that Sufism is a way to give submission to God and for proving his point of view he gives, time and again, the references from the Holy Quran. Further, he argues that in Sufi talks, a reader will always see a struggle to find God in all His Creations and to have a union with God whether by living or after death. The Sufi poets call God as their Beloved with a masculine attitude and the Sufi is like a woman who weeps and wails for her union with the beloved. Krishna, in his work on Punjabi Sufi poets, writes that the Sufi poets always take God as a beloved with masculine powers and strength while human soul as beloved who struggles for a union with her Lover. Heer by Waris Shah, Sassi Punnu, and in Sohni Mahiwal, we see the tales of pure love with a deep feeling of sorrow and thirst for their beloved. A close examination will make it evident for the reader that everywhere we see a woman (Sassi, Sohni, Heer) facing different threats from the world and she gets a union with her beloved (always a male) after her death which proves a kind of soul meeting with the other soul. The women are used, in these poetic pieces, symbolically as human beings and the men are used as symbols for god, and their union has always resulted in ultimate peace and bliss.

An example of Punjabi Sufi poet is Sultan Bahu, who is famous for writing simple and humble verses without any pretence. His verses are famous for the use of the word *Hu* meaning He (God). Sultan Bahu always acts as if the speaker is a woman who is the seeker of the love of her beloved who He (The Ultimate) is.

Jim jinha shau alif thi paya, oh fer kur'an na parh de hu
oh maran dam muhabbat vala, dur hoyo ne parde hu
Dozakh bihisht Gulam tinhade, ca kitto ne barde hu
Mai kurban tinha to bahu, jehre vahdat de vice varde hu.¹⁶

Translation:

Those who have found the Ultimate (alif), they however do not read the
Holy Quran , O He;

They breathe love and their veils have gone far away due to that love, O He;

Hell and heaven their slaves become, their faults they have forsaken, O He;

I am a sacrifice for those, Bahu, who in the unity enter, O He.

Bahu, while philosophising his theory of love, argues that for a beloved a fair face is not necessary rather acceptance and purity of love towards him/her is the real condition. Therefore, the beloved (God: masculine) is impressed by pure heart and not by fair face of the lover (the human: feminine). The same perspective we see in Bahu's Poetry when he says

Dal dil kale kolo muh kala canga je koi us nu jane hu
muh kala dil accha hove ta dil yar pachane hu
eh dil yar de picche hove, mata yar vi kade sanjhane hu
Bahu sai alam chor masita natthe, jab lage ne dil taikane hu.¹⁷

Translation:

A black face is good enough than a black heart, and each person is aware of
this fact, O He;

If a face is black with a white heart, the Beloved can recognise it, O He;

Such Heart must always follow the beloved and He recognizes O He;

Bahu many scholars have left their mosques when they recognised the fact, O He.

A Brief Study of Bulleh Shah's Poetry

Bulleh Shah, the great Sufi poet of Punjabi poetry in Pakistan, is renowned for his emotional and passionate writings for God. He is a great mystic poet who enjoyed the title of being mystic more than any other Punjabi poet. According to C.F. Usborne¹⁸, he was born in a village of Kasur in Lahore district in 1680 A.D and died in 1785 A. D. After finishing his education, he came to Lahore and got spiritual education from Shah Inayat and made him his murshid (spiritual Leader) and he was called the Rumi of Punjab. He is an advocate of immanence of God in everything. His poetry is abound in searching soul within and outside in every object of nature. He feels God in all His creations. Nothing is good or bad for him; rather a phase that manifests the presence and influence of god in those things, and, this made him desirous to search for God as He was his beloved and the only cure for his sorrows and he wrote poetry to highlight this attribute (God). Bulleh Shah's poetry seems as erotic by general minds, but it is fundamentally symbolic. Like all other Sufi poets, he too writes for his Divine Beloved. The tradition of writing God as beloved is inherited through Persian where beloved can either be a man or a woman. In Indian spiritual writings, it is the man who is the seeker of the love of his beloved, a woman. But Bulleh Shah is free from such influences which are borrowed from different traditions. Rather, he is genuine in conveying his message of love. He adopts a guise of a woman lover seeking love of his beloved who is with masculine attributes (God). So, in this way, we see beloved as a universal soul, immaterial and eternal who is highly spiritual and pure, while the poet also behaves as a true seeker. For him, the worldly love is unnecessary and he was directly in love with great Lord

Ranjha ranjha kardi ni mai ape ranjha hoi
saddo ni mainu dhido ranjha, heer na akko koi
ranjha mai vicc mai ranjhe vicc hor khial na koi
mai nahi uh ape hai, appni ap kare dil joi
ranjha ranjha kardi ni mai ape ranjha hoi
saddo ni mainu dhido ranjha hir na akho koi
hatth khundi mere agge mangu, modhe bhura loi
Bullha hir saleti dekho, kitthe ja khaloi
Ranjha ranjha kardi ni mai ape ranjha hoi
Saddo ni mainu dhido ranjha, hir na akho koi.¹⁹

Translation:

By repeating Ranjha Ranjha , i myself have become Ranjha

Call me now Ranjha, and none should call me as Heer.

My Ranjha is in me and myself is in Ranjha and there is no other thought,
or I do not exist.

He himself exist

By repeating Ranjha Ranjha , i myself have become Ranjha

Call me now Ranjha, and none should call me as Heer.
In my hand is a staff, before me is the wealth and there is a coarse blanket
around my shoulder;
Bullah, observe Hir of Sial and where she is standing.
By repeating Ranjha Ranjha , i myself have become Ranjha
Call me now Ranjha, and none should call me as Heer.

The above described lines are clearly indicating the element of male-female relationship in a mystic way. The poet has used the word Ranjha symbolically and declared that in pursuing her love Heer, the lover, has found that she should ignore her presence and accept the hue of Almighty and should dominate His presence over her. So, instead of keeping her own identity as a woman, she adopted the divine identity and declared that if the Beloved colour is not obvious from his lover acts, then the lover does not exist, rather, he is just alive.

Bulleh Shah has composed his blessed verses in a language that is directed by a deeper thought. His poetry is abstract but not incomprehensible. He has used philosophy but his philosophy is not obscure and tinged with conceits.

Téré darsan ki boon main sain mati
mujhe la do piya chhati sun chhati
Pyare hath dhar sanhhalo munj kun
Kih til til duti tuj mati darati²⁰

Translation:

Beloved I am sad for your sight.
Beloved, come and lays your heart on mine
Beloved take my hand in your protection
And may it, at every moment strike fear in those others mad for you

He is a poet of love who preaches love, humanity and unity to people of all religions and sects.

A Brief Study of John Donne's Poetry: Stereotypical Boundaries and Men and Women Blur in John Donne.

John Donne is regarded as a male prerogative by his critics like Janel Mueller²¹ (1998). Being a 17th century poet, Donne has earned much fame in metaphysical writings which is defined as a work of art with ingenious use of conceits by speculation and use of wit. His poetry was basically about religion and love. He was essentially a meditative poet, claims Mary Cole Sloane²² in her article on John Donne's imagery, who uses metaphors and images to express his idea of Self and God. There is a politics of Love apparent in his love and divine poems which is with an encoded language and many critics call it a language of real love. The social and political thinkers give Donne a different colour by calling his poetry a socio-economical representation of the society that he represents through a relationship between man and woman. But, a minute study makes it clear that the love relationship is dominant and central throughout his poetry. He is there with two vital components in his poetry; the one is a man and the other is a woman, with their mutual relationships, hardships and power transaction. The central focus here is

Donne's treatment of female characters and how he has used the very character of female to serve the purpose of his poetic art.

The relation of a man to woman is considered as the basis of a society. Donne repeatedly uses this concept of love relationship by showing the distribution of power, conflicts, and anxieties around the boundary of power. In Donne's *Elegies*, a reader observes his focus on human body and especially on female body, which has functioned as a natural symbol of society expressing the standards, powers, perils and order of that society. *The Good-Morrow* is also there with its celebration of mutual love with a special importance to the beloved. But here one thing is noticeable that Donne has re-centered the gendered boundary and wittingly hidden the role of man and woman. He usually uses the word *we* to show the mutual relationship between men and women. He, sometimes, becomes a woman who is trying to convince her beloved and many time he guises as a man who shares his love experience with a woman. In this way, though, he is a religious poet but he uses his love art with an intellect and indefinite wit. His ambiguous and confusing celebration of gender role in his poetry makes him different and dominant among his contemporaries. There is an overlapping dominion of male and female, self and other throughout his poems and the reader notices an exchange of the gender role in accordance with the demand of the subject. For example, in *The Relique*, a reader can observe a blended sex identity:

First, we lov'd well and faithfully,
Yet knew not what wee lov'd, nor why,
Difference of sex no more wee knew,
Then our Guardian Angells doe;²³

In *The Damp*, Donne is with all female qualities. He is ready to sacrifice; he seems compromising; he is shown accepting the dominance of the beloved (God). In all these ways, the reader sees him as a lover who is wholly and solely with a feminine role, ready to sacrifice and accept for his gendered dominant.

Kill me as woman, let me die
As a mere man; do you but try
Your passive valour and you shall find then,
Naked you have odds enough of any man.²⁴

Donne preserves a sense in relation to his beloved. Sometimes, it seems as a woman and sometimes a man, but the lover is there with all its forms, manifestations and expressions. In *The Sunne Rising*, there are metaphors of sovereignty of the beloved and the submission of the lover as a mistress to the sovereign.

Princes doe but play us; compar'd to this,
All honor's mimique; All wealth alchimie.
Thou sunne art halfe as happy'as wee,
In that the world's contracted thus;²⁵)

What Donne has portrayed, through his poetry, is a consolidate gender identity. We can call it a kind of writing much influenced by the 17th century's masculine identity, in which the poets make it their business to give a marvellous identity to man than woman. It can be concluded that perhaps Donne, with his

blended gender identity, aims to please the 17th century critics and his inner self at the same time.

Conclusion:

It is the right and choice of a poet to use a language which can create an aesthetic piece of art and can bear a hallmark for the poet. Donne and Bulleh Shah have given a splendid condensation of meaning that proved them as true poets. A close reading of both the poets make it clear that they are singing in praise of one Beloved with a little difference in style and that Beloved is no one other than God, the Almighty. Both are acting as lovers in pursuit of their beloved, and again, the lover is a symbol of Human Soul. Bulleh Shah is a pure love poet who is in Divine love; he has skilfully used the symbol of woman and man to show an extreme regard to beloved and humbleness of a lover. In the same way, we see Donne who has also used his skills for showing his love for God in a symbolic way by using the same symbols of man and woman but with ambiguity. He never makes it clear to his reader the gendered identity of the lover and the beloved. But, he has blended their identity deliberately which gives his poems a variation from Bulleh Shah's poems. But directly and indirectly, both are serving the same gendered purpose, that is, the dominance of male over female. Everywhere we see that if the lover is female she is described with feminine aspects of her life. She is there with a submissive attitude, with her respect and meek attitude towards her lover. She is ready to sacrifice in all conditions of life and even ready to die for her love. We see the power of gender and accept it anyways; we see the gendered role as a basic requirement for seeking love. The outcome of this tradition of binary thinking (the man-woman affiliation) is dignified elevation of spiritual devotion that gives a deep significance to poetic art. The poets have used the stereotypical behaviour of society towards male and female, but it is not proved by any of the poems as stressed and tormenting, rather, it is with a relief. In simple words, we see a strong gendered force in witty intellectualization of Donne and in lucid philosophy of Bulleh Shah. We cannot confine the two poets in a unified style, but they are obviously with an understanding of primacy, dominance and supremacy of masculine identity. Though they are using this masculine power as an instrument for defining God, yet in social terminology, they are advocating this superiority equally.

Notes

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