

Who am I?: Plurality of the *Self* in Bulleh Shah

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Abstract

Self is an indefinite and unknown entity that has been reflected upon immensely by philosophers from East and West alike. The Sufi poet Bulleh Shah dealt with this notion through an emphasis on the self's incorporation and transformation of different selves. This paper explores the plurality of the self as a female lover and slave in Shah from the lens of Sufi-Islamic thought, ascertaining how they are constituted in him. It will analyze seven *kafis* of Shah from *Sufi Lyrics: Selections From A World Classic* to probe into its nuances and observe how this plural entity transcends the conventional individuality through an incessant evolution into different selves. This paper also argues that the absence of the beloved engages in a simultaneous act of negotiation with the speaker as a way of defining the self, tracing the trajectory of the "I."

Keywords: Female lover; Self; Slave; Sufi-islamic.

Introduction

Not the least bit of "I" is left in me, since I fell in love with you...
I cannot find my own head and feet; no one else made this "I."
- Bulleh Shah (Shackle 108)

Bulleh Shah (d. 1758) is a widely acclaimed Sufi poet with an immense adulation cross-culturally and cross-communally. Born as Syed Abdullah Shah Qadri in the now present-day Pakistan Panjab, Shah lived during turbulent times with the authority of the Mughal empire declining and the state being fraught with religious tensions. He refused to be shackled by the orthodox leanings, and as Christopher Shackle puts it, Bulleh Shah assimilated diverse elements in his poetry which to this day confer on him a universal acceptance (XXI). He talks about the relationship with God, and there is an introspective awareness of the self in his poetry that

is not a mere given but changes constantly. A transformation of the self takes place, which as the prominent seventeenth century Persian Islamic philosopher Mulla Sadra states, is one in which the self “transmutes into a cosmic consciousness of a sort” (qtd. Faruque, *Sculpting* 245).

The theory of the self has been, and is, discussed in various fields ranging from theology and psychology to even artificial intelligence; consequently, conceptualized within different frameworks, a spate of studies has been undertaken by Western and Eastern philosophers alike. Where some thinkers like William James and Carl Gustav Jung accepted the existence of self, others like Friedrich Nietzsche and David Hume denied it (Faruque, *Sculpting* 1). Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher claims that the self is a modern phenomenon and traces the connection between the idea of goodness and self (Taylor 41). There are major strands of thought in the Eastern philosophy as well, represented majorly by Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Confucianism (Dimkov 200). These are further demarcated into different schools and sub-schools; for instance, the Hindu school in Indian philosophy is further divided chiefly into Samkhya, Nyaya, Vaisesika, Mimamsa, and Vedanta. Although Nyaya, Vaisesika, and Mimamsa school regard the self as a “non-physical entity”, Mimamsa school differs from the other two in the way it “individuates” the selves with a “greater degree of psychological character” (Chakravarthi). Similarly, the Sufi-Islamic thought also contributes to this idea of the self in its own way. Sufism as a mystical movement emerging in the ninth century emphasized on seeking divine love and knowledge through a personal experience with God, and there are various ways in which these adherents of Sufi thought have discussed the self (Faruque, “Charles Taylor” 4). Hence, it is evident that an exhaustive study has been conducted by numerous philosophers and theorists, yet there is no one established definition.

This paper deals with the pluralism of the self in Sufism, with a special reference to seven *kafis* of Bulleh Shah translated by Christopher Shackle in his work *Sufi Lyrics: Selections From A World Classic*. William C. Chittick asserts that when one talks about the self, it should not be to answer the question of what it is, but rather “Who am I?” (54), so this study through the lens of a Sufi-Islamic conception aims to explore the dimensions of the self in Bulleh Shah as a female lover and slave whose reality is not located in the conventional understanding of the individual as supreme. It will also seek to trace how the absence of the beloved plays an active part in shaping the self of the speaker.

The Self as Female Lover

Love is often a predominant concern in the Sufi texts with it operating on either a figurative or literal level (Mannani 162). Bulleh Shah adopted a path of love marked with a sense of transcendental unity traversing beyond the constructed artifices. According to Ahmed and et al., in the spiritual and Sufi literature the poets often use an ambivalent self to delineate the relationship between lover and beloved (108), and in Bulleh Shah one can discern the different selves, with one of them being the female lover who further takes on different personas. Lines such as "Calling myself a yogini, I wore my hair long. . .", "If I sleep in my Lord's embrace, then I will be called a wife.", "I destroyed my blouse and scarf in my hut. . ." (Shackle 8, 11, 92) are indicative of the presence of the self as a female lover. The self is not a constant state and as repeated by scholars consistently, in Sufism it is an on-going process which is indeterminate and unknown (Faruque, "Charles Taylor" 8; Chittick 54; Shaikh 35). Bulleh Shah reveals through the following *kafi* the shaping of the self as a dynamic process with the absence of the beloved playing a part in its transformation.

Now who can recognize me? Now I have become something else
The guide taught me this lesson. There is no coming or going of the other
there. The absolute being displays his beauty. Divine unity has created
confusion. Infinite at first, the beloved appears as manifest and hidden.
I have no name or mark anymore; all dispute and confusion are ended.
When the beloved displays his beauty...Now that I have observed the
graceful movement of the wild geese, Bullha, I have forgotten the motion
of the crows. (Kafi 44)

The aforementioned verse is not merely a reflection of the transformed self, but reveals how this knowledge of it as a female lover is brought about by a "reflexive" stance that makes the speaker look inward and understand her reality, because as Mulla Sadra stated, "When I attend to my self (*dhati*), I only perceive the being which perceives itself in a particular way. . ." (qtd. in Faruque, "Charles Taylor" 10). Since the "wild geese" are a symbolic reference to being spiritually aware (Shackle 143) the "motion of the crows" might be a symbolic reference to her previous self; as a result, the self only knows herself through a knowledge of the Divine whilst letting go of the one that defined her formerly.

Embracing plurality in self also implies that it is not be established as a given and is to be captured through various dimensions. Azra Waqar in

her article "The 'Lover' Archetype in Punjabi Classical Poetry" claims that the lover is someone who is under a constant state of rediscovering the authentic self (145). However, there can be no "one" authentic self, because it is understood in terms of different aspects, wherein even though the process is continuous, the self is not always the same; for instance, in Bulleh Shah the self as a female lover is continuously transforming into different versions of herself. At times she refers to herself as a yogini or gopi, at times a conventional devotee aspiring for her beloved, and at other times as Hir.

The bridegroom's procession of the Kheras has come. I, Poor Hir, am finished now.

I am the beloved's, the beloved is mine. . . (*Kafi* 122 Come, Sir Ranjha, grant me a sight of you. Forgive my faults.

Ranjha went from Takht Hazara, the master of poor Hir. (*Kafi* 142

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. . . Whoever dwells within us determines who we are. I have become just like the one I love. (*Kafi* 145)

The self here gradually progresses to a state where it dissolves, leading toward a unity between the lover and beloved; however, there is not a complete loss of individuality. Hir here has become one with her beloved, but the self still exists, because now instead of being located in the traditional conception of "I" she experiences it in the transformed state of the "non-I" which in this case is Ranjha (Faruque, *Sculpting* 257).

The self is both continual and evolving, and Chittick reiterates, it is not possible to know the self in its entirety because of its constant unfolding into something new, an "I of the moment" which is a distinctive and renewed entity (55). Comparably, in Bulleh Shah too, there is located a self that encounters different versions and dimensions of itself, and as mentioned previously, the self as a female lover experiences a distinct phenomenon every time. In *kafi* 91 the lover seems to be in a stage where she has removed the veil obscuring her heart, paving way for the self to emerge as an "I" aware of its current truth and the Lord's omnipresence.

I am utterly lost, girls. I have removed the veil from my face and danced.

In whichever direction I look, he alone is there. By him
I swear that there is no one else.

.....

I have no name or mark, girls. Keep silent when I speak.

Make sure you do not tell this to anyone. Bullha has
a firm sense of the truth.

To understand the transformation of the self in its plural forms a sense of self-cultivation has to be understood alongside self-awareness. In the beginning of *kafi* 114 the self is enmeshed in an existing “I” which is conscious of its present state of existence, similar to *kafi* 91; however, the self here is in a process of transition that she can only achieve once she cultivates her ‘self’, which as Faruque explicates is a “transformed way of seeing the world” (*Sculpting* 198). The former part of the *kafi* deals with the speaker accepting that there is no turning back for her after falling in love with the Lord and mentioning that a game of “love and law” has begun (Shackle 91). There is a passing reference to her previous self, wherein she claims to be a “silly girl”, but then that is merged with her present reality in which she has won the game by ignoring the derisive remarks passed at her and uniting with the beloved. Nevertheless, this is one aspect of the self in which the speaker merely refers to her own awareness, but it is in the latter part of the *kafi* that the process of self-cultivation is brought in. She says:

I destroyed my blouse and scarf and my hut, after burning duality on the fire. I
have sacrificed great unbelief from my heart, with my head placed on my palm.
How lucky I am to have killed my master, handling it poison to drink.
I will be together with my beloved, abandoning all shame and reserve.

.....
We are united as one, now that Bullha has found the Lord. (*Kafi* 114)

There is an implicit repudiation of the lower self which plays a part in the transformation through self-cultivation. The consistent absence of the beloved plays a pertinent part in making the self aware of its condition and practices spiritual exercises to subjugate the ego in order to reach the beloved. Hence, it can be gleaned from the analyses that the self as a female lover is in itself a plural entity transforming into different versions of herself as she moves forward.

The self as Slave

In Sufism the negation of the self and submission to God have always been “actively sought” and the goal has been to refine the self for an “experiential” communion with God (Malamud 101; Shaikh 35). Hence, the individual often refers to the beloved or God as master and to the own self as a slave who has to submit to the authority of the Lord to achieve transcendental unity, but it does not imply that the self is being coerced and relegated to a mere static and dependent entity. Similarly, in Bulleh Shah the self is not furnished as a singular and fixed entity limited to its socio-cultural environment; rather, it oscillates between different forms with each ultimately striving for a union with the Lord.

Faruque explains that regardless of humans’ uncertainty about the “nature of the self or self-God relationship”, the introspective awareness present in the works of the Sufis should not be ignored, because this is one way of understanding the inner experiences of their self (“Charles Taylor” 11). Bulleh Shah often employs love as the source of unification and in the following *kafi* the self is a slave overwhelmed in its search for the beloved.

Do not hide behind a veil, my lovely. I desire a vision of you. Without my beloved I have become mad, and people all taunt me. If the beloved is solicitous, then I will call to him as a suppliant.

I am your slave girl who is being sold for nothing. Come to me, beloved, my life is going for nothing. I am not suffering some sudden separation. I am a nightingale of this garden. (*Kafi* 68)

Even though the self here is a lover desirous for a union with the beloved, it is also a slave who in separation is being ‘sold.’ The reference to the first person “I” as a slave is evident of the self’s awareness of its current reality, but this consciousness of being dependent on the beloved for a union is also reflective of how the self has not yet completely shed off its individuality. The absence of the beloved once again plays a vital role in shaping the self, as a deference from the union is exhausting, and the self is calling upon the beloved to end the misery of being separated.

Self-transcendence is a sustained process that must begin with a critique of one’s ordinary conventional self. A. Reza Arasteh maintains that the self in Sufism is given an “infinite and unlimited potential,” and that the conventional self contains various other selves that have to be overcome

(1, 9). Since this is an arduous process, the self must gradually progress toward achieving a unification. As opposed to *kafi* 68, the self as a slave in *kafi* 126 is not only self-aware of its condition but is also attempting to cultivate itself to enter into a state of “one-ness.”

I keep waiting, do come and visit me some time.

.....

I have spread out my eyes as a bed for you, I have made my heart your lodging.

.....

“What fault is there in me? I am your slave. Who do I have besides you? Do not destroy my heart.

.....

I have gone down the first stair and am stationed on the Sirat bridge. Hajjis go to Mecca, but I gaze on your face.

.....

I have heard the call of the Apostle, and I blossom like a flower. I am in permanent attendance upon you, and I am present before you. My permanent attendance upon you is my humble act of prostration.

In this *kafi*, the self is not merely making entreaties to the beloved, but is also indulging in the process of self-cultivation. Sirat bridge is a bridge that one must cross over to reach paradise whilst simultaneously avoiding falling into hell, and the reference to Hajjis and Mecca is to show the contrast between the orthodox pilgrimage taken by people and the unconventional pilgrimage taken by the speaker (Shackle 160, 141). Hence, the self as a slave is in a stage of transformation wherein it is prostrating before the Lord and participating in its personal comprehension of spirituality to transcend that “I-ness.” Once again, it is the absence of the beloved that leads the self to engage in its cultivation and move ahead to achieve a communion with the Lord.

The self has to pass through these states before reaching the state of “Universal self”; as a result, it transcends the “limited socio-intellectual consciousness” (Ahmadi and Ahmadi 82). The conventional self has to be negated and overcome for a complete affirmation and identification with

the Divine, which is reached through 'sculpting the self' by practicing self-cultivation (Faruque, *Sculpting* 255). While in the previous *kafi* the self as a slave was performing spiritual exercises to achieve one-ness, in the following *kafi* it seems to have reached the stage where the sense of 'I-ness' has been dealt with.

What has happened to me? The "I" in me is lost and gone. What has happened to me? Why do they call me crazy? When I look into myself, there is no "I." Only you can be seen in me. From head to foot, there is only you. You are inside and outside. I am free from the far bank and the near bank. There is no boat, there is no river. Dear Mansur said *I am God*. But who was the one who made him say it? Bullhe, the lord is the lover of those who have destroyed their selves. (*Kafi* 140)

There is a higher level of awareness in this *kafi* as the "I" of the self has transformed, but the self-abnegation does not lead to a complete loss of individuality as the self is now located in the "non-I", which is "everything other than the individual self" (Faruque, *Sculpting* 257). "I-ness" has transcended into "one-ness" (Lewin 140) and there is no sense of distinction between the self as a slave and the Divine being. The Sufi martyr Mansur was executed for proclaiming to be God, but it was the lord himself who made him say it; as a result, the self must destroy itself if it wishes to transcend its conventional existence. Therefore, the self as a servant too is a plural entity that transforms and ultimately transcends above its conventional selves to unite with the Divine.

Conclusion

Bulleh Shah is an acknowledged and revered Sufi figure who wrote about transcendental unity, and keen on introspective awareness, his poetry also deals with the transformation of the self. This paper aimed to deal with the plurality of self in Shah by focusing on the Sufi-Islamic thought wherein his seven *kafis* were selected and it was also traced how the absence of the beloved plays a pertinent part in defining it. The self as a female lover and servant are explored as dynamic entities that continuously change and evolve. In Sufism there is no definitive answer for what a self is and the conventional self of an individual has to be negated to achieve transcendental unity; as a result, it becomes a phenomenon in which the nuances must be explored to avoid the pitfalls of a limited understanding.

The self as a female lover is in itself a plural entity because of the dif-

ferent versions it constitutes within. The reflexive stance brings about an initial awareness of the self, further leading to a transformation that does not lead to a complete loss of individuality by constituting the 'I' in the 'non-I'. The self eventually reaches a state where self-awareness is enjoined with self-cultivation, and the female lover is able to abandon all reserve and become one with the Absolute. Similarly, the self as a servant holds various selves within it too, wherein initially it is in separation from the lord and unable to shed its individuality entirely. Since self-transcendence is a sustained process, the self begins to perform activities to cultivate itself; consequently, leading the way to the stage where the "I" merges into the one it has been seeking.

Hence, this paper offers a novel understanding of the self in Bulleh Shah by emphasizing its plurality, whilst also paving way for potential future researchers to interrogate it through other multi-dimensional frameworks.

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