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Religious Universalism in Bulleh Shah's Selected Poetry

Abstract *The Indian subcontinent had been ruled by the Mughal Empire for almost three hundred years. The regime was marked for its ethnic, cultural, and religious multiplicity. The Mughals utilized the narratives of belonging as a part of their state-building objectives for which diverse cultural, social, and to a great level, religious identities merged. This article concentrates on the significance of poetry in history as a social and political instrument via the selected poems of Bulleh Shah, a poet of the Punjabi language (1680-1757). It aims to exhibit the linkage between the religious, political, and cultural aspects of the Mughal Regime in the sub-continent to pinpoint a liaison between the political and social dynamics of power while establishing statehood. In this regard, the poetic heirloom of Bulleh Shah is persistent in understanding not only the cultural prominence of the Mughal Regime but also the cultural bridge between the religious and political hierarchy of the region.*

Key Words: Bulleh Shah, Culture, Mughal Regime, Punjabi, Sub-continent

Introduction

In the earliest modern epoch, the Islamic world was known by the three influential authoritative empires of the Central part of Asia – the Mughal Empire, Safavid Dynasty and Ottoman Empire. All these three had a mutual heritage. The Indian sub-continent had been reigned by the Mughal Empire (1526- 1857) for almost three hundred years. During this time, the empire was supposed to be the richest state of all its times. Archeological study shows that the rule by Muslims in the Indian subcontinent has mainly been an outcome of invasions and conquests. The Arabs ruled in the Middle East and the Turkic warriors in Central Asia. Similarly, the Umayyad dynasty was set up in Sindh in the 8th century (Fisher, 2016). Up to the thirteenth century, the Muslims remained rulers of the western areas of the Thar Desert. Under the Sultanate of Delhi, it expanded its boundaries into the central part of Hindustan and then moved forward to the Southern regions. In the sixteenth century, India was split into provincial ruling authorities and remained deprived of centralized administration. In 1526, Zahir ud-Din Babur arrived and ensured victories of North Indian territories (now most of the Afghan region). It led to the development and establishment of the Mughal Empire which was both ethnically and religiously supposed to be a minority in that part of the world because of an expatriate dynasty.

The Mughals utilized the narratives of belonging as well as identity as a part of their state-building scheme hence merging themselves into the social values of the region. However, despite this endeavor to construct an all-inclusive identity, the Mughals had distinctive diversity existing in the region. During the 18th century in the sub-continent, Muslims gained an identity after the Mughal struggle to legitimize their powerful existence in the region. From Babur to Aurangzeb's empire, this trajectory of Mughal rule exemplifies the impact of cultural dynamics in which identity narratives progressed in their quotient of 'difference' and 'sameness'. Although it was an Imperial state yet, the innate Islamic nature played an inexorable and vital role in shaping a Muslim identity. As the Muslims were a religious minority, they needed to form a distinct identity that might have differentiated them from the local people and aboriginal rulers.

Bulleh Shah, a Punjabi poet, was picked as the poet for study because of his widespread reputation in Indo-Pakistani literature. Among the other renowned and influential poets of the Indian subcontinent who made their mark on history, Bulleh Shah was selected as the case subject for this study because his poetry not only has a rich legacy but it also offers insight into the cultural and

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religiopolitical climate of Punjab during the Mughal empire in the 18th century (Fisher, 2016). His poetry is written in Punjabi, a language that rises above the geographical and political boundaries of the Punjab province, which was divided as an outcome of the 1947 partition. Even though he was a Muslim, his poetical work is replete with allusions and he took cultural imagery from various traditions in religion that coexisted at his times and developed a common ground of understanding among distinct religious groupings. Bulleh Shah's poetry that he wrote during the political collapse of Punjab illustrates the religious tensions that existed at the time and portrayed the despair and bitterness felt by the local folk. Being a Muslim poet in the Punjabi language, Shah was ultimately a byproduct that gave an identity to the Mughals Empire. His poems can be considered the epitome of the Muslim identity of the 18th century that existed in Punjab, despite his lack of direct and formal relations to the imperial power. As a direct consequence of its historical significance, Bulleh Shah's legacy has had a tremendous impact on the formation of cultural national narratives in the Indian subcontinent, notably in Punjab. While a group of people tries to portray Shah as a member of single folklore, the other sees him as a global character who serves as a cultural bridge in religious strife (Rinehart, 1999).

Literature Review

Colonial literature dominated early Mughal scholarship, which strove to comprehend and display this land as a colonial polity. In the 930s, when the nationalistic sentiments aroused, intellectuals and chroniclers from throughout the subcontinent became interested in the prehistoric period (Rodriguez, 2015). As a result, basic falsifying of historical facts – for example, valuing particular sources and paying attention to specific events, themes and rulers – are vulnerable in portraying the Mughal Empire in the history of the region. With British India's partition into two sovereign states in 1947, regional research has continued to expand. While there was an increasing attentiveness to Mughal state creation, influenced by a Marxist ideological theoretical framework, a more dominating trend of patriotic narratives emerged (Babur, 2002; Mubarak, 2014; Khan, 1947). Because of the geopolitical circumstances, academic studies grew more patriotic and strove to establish a nationalistic identity, which resulted in historical misstatements (Khan, 1947). Even so, a conscious attempt has been made to filter via such emotive scholarship while utilizing secondary literature in this study. While the majority of the secondary literature used dates from the late twentieth century (i.e. the 1990s) to present publications, previous publications are, however, cited since they present constructive theories and narratives to the critical eye.

The earliest texts of Shah's writings date to 150 years after the deceased. His work is primarily oral; the majority of these documents are present in the shape of musical scripts. However, even these scripts are a problematical historical source; for example, the difference in dialects draws results in deviations from the same work of poetry. Moreover, because these manuscripts were composed as performance pieces to be performed by indigenous *qawwali* singers, the performers may probably have inserted their own words and verses without distinguishing between the genuine work and the additions made by them to it (Shah, trans. by Taufiq Rafat, 2015). It must be observed that poetry used in my research work is one kind of the several variations that exist, as it would be impossible to use the 'original' piece (as exists no more). So, as a result, the first issue that arises while interacting with the basic materials is the unavoidable question – of which poetical work should be credited to Shah to form a definite corpus. In choosing the poem, three compilations will be viewed to write this article, *Bulleh Shah: A Selection* (Shah, trans. by Taufiq Rafat, 2015), *Sufi Lyrics* (Shackle, 2015) and *Bulleh Shah: The Love-Intoxicated Iconoclast*, (Puri & Shangari, 1986) and all of these comprise translations of the poetry of Bulleh Shah. The first two books offer translations as well as their genuine verses to the reader, respectively, in the scripts of Gurmukhi and Shahmukhi. The former comprises the translation of the poem as well as a comprehensive commentary on the individual poem. It helps the readers to understand it in a better way by offering a contextual background and deciphering the metaphorical language. Whereas the books which are mentioned above give a rational choice of poems, translation available online in forums and blogs would also be helpful. With the purpose of certifying the attribution's reliability, the chosen anthologies would be cross-corresponded with poetry taken from sources that are available online.

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Research Methodology

Bulleh Shah's historical personality will be evaluated via the lens of historical anthropology. By having its origins in the Annales school, historical anthropology tries to employ socio-cultural anthropological ideas from history by putting the particular personality within the setting of its history. This approach of involving different approaches to let the new centers of thinking in developing by putting the abstract periphery into a centralized place. It goes beyond simply elucidating the cultural and social phenomena of history – relatively. It tries to explicate the production of time, space and people (Axel, 2003). In historical studies, such a framework is extremely effective in relating to societies or people as it aids in linking the past politics with the present. Richard Bulliet, one of the historians of Islamic History, for example, has used this method to explore the evolution and influence of Islam in marginalized civilizations in the Islamic world. Bulliet in his book, *Islam: The View from the Edge*, attempts to elucidate how Islam turned out to be a deeply built-in society and cultures that were removed from the epicenter of politics till now (Bulliet, 1994). Bulliet uses local biographical details in order to accentuate the local scholars and their role in setting up Islam in, primarily, a converted society. Bulliet's objectives and method provide this study with very valuable instruction in analyzing and investigating Bulleh Shah as well as his writings. Furthermore, the poet's religion (Muslim), culture (Punjabi) and his social belongings (as he belongs to a family of Syeds) milieu will be examined along with his political works. Many researchers debate against labeling his philosophical and religious orientation and worldview as a sole tradition. Shah's poetry is not free from the impact of Islam (Rinehart, 1999). Such a viewpoint would doubtfully lead to a narrow and limited study. It does not endorse Bulleh Shah's inspiration taken from local indigenous ideologies and religious structures. Relatively, it exhibits the region's dynamics and the complex web of relationships between the numerous social, religious and cultural worlds as evident by borrowing and fusing the thoughts of cultural and religious expressions.

Religious Universalism in Bulleh Shah's Poetry

Despite the fame of the poet, there has not been much academic research on Bulleh Shah. Due to the limited availability of historical material, this is unsurprising as much of the biographical data on the poet is obtained from his writings (Rinehart, 1999). Bulleh Shah's biography is packed with colorful anecdotes about his mystical skills, and much of what has been published about him presents him as a quintessential Sufi saint. Not only do Islam and Hinduism claim the ownership of Bulleh Shah, but to some extent, Sikhism also claims him to be its staunch representative (Chandra, 1986). As one might expect, this has resulted in particular readings of the poetry of Bulleh Shah, where the plethora of explanations has simply turned out to be a validation exercise. Yet these kinds of readings and interpretations are important because they demonstrate the sublimity of the poetry of Bulleh Shah that appeals to all the religions of the subcontinent.

The cultural values of the sub-continent, especially of Punjab, are rich in their poetic expression with special reference to folkloric poetry. Folk songs manifest, clearly, the local cultural values, social structures, general beliefs of the masses and a strong response to the changes occurring historically in society (Singh & Gill, 2004). Not only on celebratory occasions but also on the daily routine of life, we relish the taste of the rich cultural heritage of Punjab as well as the true depiction of the rustic life of the masses. In this regard, the poetry of Bulleh Shah is of greater value as it conveys the true beliefs of the Shah to the general public by following the rich historical tradition. Having a performative nature, Shah's poetry is not seen in the form of a definitive corpus. The performers prefer to sing his poetry as a *qawwali* as they can blend their own made compositions and mix different poems together (Rinehart, 1999). These modifications have not only helped in preserving Shah's poetry but also have added a lot to the poetic corpus because of their dialectical differences. Though it has been difficult to differentiate between the actual verses of Shah and the modifications made by the *qawwali* performers yet the scholars did so by identifying the unique poetic style of Bulleh Shah. As Kafi poetic composition is very much popular among the Sufi poets of Punjab and Sindh, Bulleh Shah adopted this popular poetic style to convey his message to the masses which really has helped the scholars to compile his works. Bulleh Shah is not the first Punjabi poet to use *Kafi* as his poetic expression. Rather Baba Guru Nanak and Baba Farid have already written in this poetic form to make it a standard model

in didactic poetry. As the idiomatic expression of the locales is used in writing *Kafi,* Shah writes *Kafi* to reflect the minds of the ordinary population (Langah, 2014) whereas cultural symbols and metaphors are used in structuring the philosophical framework. Furthermore, his lyrical style in performative mode becomes an undeniable part of the musical culture of the sub-continent.

The Mughal State, having diverse socio-religious, racial and ethnic groups, gave way to such dialogues as were based on inter-religious themes and inter-cultural traditions. Their common features led to establishing a common culture (Hanlon & Washbrook, 2011). Despite the religious differences, strong communal bonds were fostered by the religious communities of the sub-continent due to the common traditions of their respective cultures. Punjabi language as well as the traditional values of Punjab formed strong and intrinsic relationships among the communities living in different parts of Punjab. Both Sikhism and Punjabi Sufi culture led to the development of the Punjabi language in this region as the religious representatives of the two separate but intertwined traditions used Gurmukhi and Punjabi in promoting their religious values among the general public, especially the rustics.

If the Sikhs were seeking to form a distinguished identity by writing in Gurmukhi, the Muslims also focused on forming an Islamised identity by adopting Arabic and Persian vocabulary and writing in Shahmukhi script (Shackle, 1970). In this regard, Bulleh Shah was not exceptional as he also used this script and utilized many words from Arabic and Persian languages to exhibit his religious interests. There may be a question that why did Bulleh Shah use Punjabi language for his poetry when Persian in the Mughal State was the official language. Shah might have reached the hearts of the nobility and the educated community through the use of the Persian language. The answer may be that Punjabi was the language of the folks who were larger in number and the use of Punjabi against Persian was a sort of political reaction shown by the masses against the Mughal State that was almost at the edge of its decline and the state was unable to control the rigid religious divisions in society. The use of the language of the masses kept Shah away from the centralized orthodox views initiated by Aurangzeb and helped him in proving the universality of the spiritual and mystic experiences which are beyond religious traditions. So, the expression of abstract ideas through the medium of Punjabi verses eclipsed the religious divisions and formed a strong relationship among people despite the difference in religious beliefs.

In Punjabi literature, much more room is given to poetry than prose and certain common metaphors and symbols have been adopted in Punjabi from different cultural and social elements that are beyond religious boundaries. In this regard, the most common metaphor is Spinning Wheel which is associated with the human body. It symbolizes the journey of the soul towards its Creator and Bulleh Shah has used this very symbol in many of his poems to stamp on his mystic bent of mind. In his poem, *Katt Kure Na Vatt Kure* ("Spin, Oh Girl, Do Not Roam"), Shah lays stress on the value and impact of meditation on the human body. To Shah, the wedding night of a young unmarried girl is not simply the union of two bodies. Rather it is the arrival of death, a way to unite with the Divine Creator. He urges the young unmarried girl to get prepared for the big day (Gamard, 2018). Man is like a young unmarried girl who has an intense urge to meet her mate. Leaving the house of his parents is just like Man's leaving this temporary world where he can never come back. His stay in the world is transitory and ultimately, the wheel of life would be spun to the eternal life hereafter.

Do your spinning, Oh Girl, roam not aimlessly. Take off the hand of yarn, put it in the basket. Your parents have fixed your wedding day, And you are still unmindful of it. The days are few, you waste your time.

You will not come again to your parents' homes. Do your spinning, Oh girl, roam not aimlessly . (Puri & Shangari, 1986)

The repetition of "*Do your spinning*" symbolically shows the struggle of human beings to attain the Divine favour in order to reach ultimate union. In another poem, *Dhilak Gayi Charkhe Di Hathhi* ("My Spinning Wheel is Broken"), Shah points out the importance of Murshid as a spiritual guide whose leadership leads man towards the journey of purifying his heart and soul. Shah shows his helplessness in repairing his soul alone. He feels that his spinning wheel has broken which indicates that the harsh and bitter realities of life and the obstacles in his journey to the divine path have maligned his way. It is only the ironsmith in the form of a Divine hand that can repair his soul (Rumi, 2004).

The spinning wheel is broken, I cannot spin. Call the smith, for the axle wobbles on its pin.

The spinning wheel is broken, I cannot spin. (Puri & Shangari, 1986)

As we have already mentioned that Shah uses a common symbol of the Spinning Wheel which clearly demonstrates that different religious traditions have certain common symbols of universal relevance. These may remove the cultural and religious boundaries and bring people together to make inter-faith conversations and form a harmonious identity. Shah, through his poetry, challenges the popular doctrine that religious identity is limited to certain boundaries. He believes that the common spiritual metaphors are much more helpful in creating socio-cultural harmony.

It is the quality of the sub-continent that the religious identity of its people is not bound to a particular religion rather, the mystic element of religion brings different people together on a single point. That is why the Sufis in the sub-continent are valued by all the folks not because of their religious identity but rather by their distinguished social identity that weighs people not based on religion but on humanity (Green, 2004). The 'Pir' and 'Baba' among the Muslims have almost the same meaning as 'Jogi' in Hindus as all these words stand for a mystic figure. 'Baba' in Baba Bulleh Shah directly indicates his social identity of him as a mystic figure. Indeed, Green asserts that the term '*Musalmani*' (i.e. Muslim) had less of an ideological inference but, rather, implied a clan-like identity of a community (Green, 2004). Waris Shah's folk tale "*Heer Ranjha*" is another great example of spiritual harmony and the universal appeal of mysticism as "*Heer Ranjha*" is not bound to one religious culture or a particular society rather, the Punjabi folks from different religious backgrounds relish the mystic taste of the said folk tale (Shah, 1978).

Apparently, it is the tale of romance but the deep meaning of "Heer Ranjha" clearly manifests the spiritual devotion as are common among the folks of the region from different religions (Sheeraz, 2013). The story of Heer and Ranjha is not the story of the struggle of two common lovers struggling for their union rather. It is a spiritual journey of two souls whose unification would complete the mystic pleasure. The strength of *Heer Ranjha* is demonstrated by its usability by different religious traditions in highlighting the message of spiritual devotion and a mystical religious experience (Ahmed, 1998). In Punjabi poetic tradition, the poet presents himself as a female to show the intensity of his feelings for her lover. The acute desire for union with her love symbolizes man's intense desire to gain the love of his Creator.

Indeed, Bulleh Shah's corpus is peppered with poems that feature Ranjha. The poem, *Ranjha Ranjha Kardi* ("Ranjha Ranjha, I repeat"), is actually the mystic influence of "Heer Ranjha" on Bulleh Shah when he puts himself at the place of Heer, who is calling Ranjha for unification and ultimately (s) he renounces (his) her identity and finds Ranjha within (him)herself. This self-renouncing and giving of one's reigns into the hands of one's lovers is the true spirit of mysticism as may be found in the Sufis, who possess a universal appeal to attract the people from all religions towards them. That's why Shah claims: *Repeating the name of Ranjha, I have become Ranjha myself; Let no one call me 'Heer'; Call ye me Dhidho Ranjha* (Puri & Shangari, 1986). The allusion towards the quintessential Sufi garb stems from the etymological derivation of the word 'Sufi' wherein the Arabic word, *suf* (wool), was used to identify ascetics (Renard, 2015). In the same way, the following lines show the word *fakir* that is used by the South Asian folks for such a person who renounces his identity and, in order to gain spirituality, wears the robe of materialist poverty.

Take off your white sheet, my lass;

And put on the fakir's coarse blanket.

The white sheet will catch stains, the blanket will get none. (Puri & Shangari, 1986)

Now the contrast between the blanket and white sheet is important in the sense that the white sheet shows the stains whereas the blanket absorbs the stains. Shah promotes the spiritual idea that wearing a white sheet would not let man reach the Divine pleasure as the dogmatic beliefs would be reflected through his personality. On the other hand, the function of a blanket is different. Man must avoid staining his robe with egoistic desires, rigidity and self-centered ideas rather, he must be broader enough to absorb the sufferings of others in himself and payback with universal sympathy,

love and care. The path leading to Divine pleasure goes only through the love of humanity, not the individuals.

Another important aspect of the Punjabi language is that it has a very powerful tradition. As many of the folks are illiterate and do not know how to read, the songs, folk tales etc. are sung and told orally. Whether it is the religious gatherings or the social ones, the people love to relate tales to each other. So we can say that in the sub-continent, these oral traditions are much more influential not only in preserving history but also in bringing people closer to each other despite their religious differences. Bulleh Shah's poetry, in the same way, reflects the oral traditions as the performers sing the songs and act accordingly. As Green contends, these spiritual allusions serve as allegories of authority between the temporal and the manifest sacred (Green, 2004).

People from different religious and social backgrounds enjoy the performance of the actors and the singers depart with a feeling of spiritual pleasure that connects different religious traditions and fosters a unique communal identity. Shah's poetry allows the audience from different socio-religious backgrounds to interpret it within its own framework by keeping its individual identity.

Conclusion

The history of the sub-continent reveals the fact that two big religious communities along with minorities had always lived in the region with religious, political and regional harmony though there had been off and on conflicts leading to a big conflict that resulted in the 1947 partition. One thing may not be denied that this big conflict between the Muslims and Hindus was turned and fuelled into intense nationalism by colonial rule. Otherwise, under the Mughal Empire, there had been no such religious disharmony between the two nations under the reign of Akbar; some conflicts arose, yet they were within the limits of tolerance and peace. The present research proves that the linking force between the two diverse religious beliefs had been the mystic folk poetry that was always welcomed warmly by the masses due to its common features, themes and especially the language. In addition to that, the focus on localized experience instead of the central imperialist and royal narratives helped in digging out the social and cultural response to pluralism. The poetry of Bulleh Shah contributed a lot to bringing the people together under the flag of mysticism. Though the focus of Shah was on divine pleasure instead of promoting state affairs under the Mughal regime yet, it helped a lot to the royal state to strengthen its hold onto the masses whose cultural, social and religious gaps had been bridged by Shah's folk poetry studded with Divine mystic pleasure. Both Sufism and the promotion of Islam under the Mughal Empire removed the social and cultural gaps and formed a religiopolitical characterization of the polity.

It is the Sufism of Bulleh Shah and the mystic influence of his poetry that changed the philosophy of the locality in the sub-continent and inspired them to remove their individual cultural and regional identity and gather under the umbrella of mystic plurality. He bridged the gap between the Sikhs and the Muslims not only through his poetry but also through his mesmerizing mystic presence as the people from all communities valued and respected him collectively. He did not believe in violence for violence rather. He favored love against violence and dwelling with religio-cultural harmony. His poetry clearly demonstrates this very doctrine of Islam and proves him to be a cultural icon in the sub-continent. Bulleh Shah is not the poet of a particular region or time. The universal appeal of his poetry immortalizes him and makes him the poet of all ages and all regions. The very message of his poetry promotes the idea of fighting against one's self to gain a spiritual purgation instead of raging war against each other. As he is the poet of humanity rather than the poet of the Muslims, his teachings through his poetry may today be applied in bridging the gap among the people from different religious and social backgrounds having political and religious intolerance.

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