

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 33

Sufi Mysticism and Poetics V

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So, we are discussing Sufi mysticism and Poetics. Today we are going to discuss about two more Sufi mystic poets. So, one of the first mystic poets Rabiya al-Adwaiyyah of Basra ,also known as Rabiya Basri is regarded as a foremost mystic. And most of the poems attributed to her, however, have not been authenticated. She was born into a poor family and she became a follower of the famous Sufi Hassan of Basra, and she was noted for her absolute asceticism, the kind of austere life that she led.

And many legends are told about her life, often citing her devout nature and her absorption in God. In fact, she was the first to understand the idea that God should be loved for his own sake and not out of fear or for getting something back from God, right. So, the idea of a fearful God that Islam, the mainstream Islam actually talks about is not something that Rabiya Basri you know understands as the concept of divine; for her, divinity or divine or God is someone loving and lovable. Her concept of divine love is clearly a departure from the idea of a stern Allah as a judge or a God as a lawmaker, merely a lawmaker.

This is one of Rabiya Basri's poems and it goes like this. The title of the poem is "In My Soul". So, she writes, "In

my soul

there is a temple, a shrine, a mosque, a church

where I kneel.

Prayer should bring us to an altar where no walls or names exist.

Is there not a region of love where the sovereignty is
illuminated nothing,
where ecstasy gets poured into itself
and becomes
lost,"

And then she writes, "where the wing is fully alive but has no mind or body? in my soul there is a temple, a shrine, a mosque, a church that dissolve, that dissolve in God." Next she writes a poem titled "If I Worship You"- O Lord, if I worship you because of fear of hell, then burn me in hell. If I worship you because I desire paradise, then exclude me from paradise. But if I worship you for yourself alone, then deny me not your eternal beauty."

Another poem called "Your Prayers"- Your prayers were Light and your worship peaceful. Your sleep an enemy of prayer. Your life was a test, but you let it go by without a thought.

It is ever passing, slowly vanishes before you know it. So another poem called Your Prayers. Your prayers were light and your worship peaceful. Your sleep an enemy of prayer. Your life was a test.

But you let it go by without a thought. It's ever passing, slowly vanishes before you know it." So next we are going to talk about our second poet, second Sufi mystic poet in lecture today, which is Jalaluddin Rumi. Among the Sufi scholars and poets, Jalaluddin Rumi was a great teacher of love and peace. He was a writer of books and he was a great scholar that has been widely celebrated as a mystic poet in the West.

Rumi was the author of a vast collection of mystic odes and lyrics in Persian language. Now we need to understand the rationale of discussing some of the poets from West Asia or Middle East in our lecture which is mainly about, you know, performative religions in

the South Asian context. So here we have to understand that Sufism has travelled mainly from the Middle East. Its origin was in the Middle East, right, in Iraq, in Iran and so... and also the fact that these heretical offshoots of mainstream institutionalized religions such as Islam or Hinduism do not mind the boundaries of nation-states. Nation state is a very recent, a very modern kind of formation and these movements, these cults are very 'trans' in their nature.

They are transnational, they are transgendered and ultimately they are transgressive in nature. They are transcultural and so they embrace the culture of the place where they travel. This is also true for Bhakti tradition. Just a little, you know, move away from our current topic to understand basically why we are discussing someone like Rumi who wrote in Persian. Rumi has had a great influence on the Sufi mystics who belong to South Asia, who wrote from South Asia.

Rumi's influence in contemporary South Asia cannot be denied, in the art and culture of South Asia cannot be denied. And we see the same for Bhakti also. For a text like Ramayana, it has not remained restricted to the boundaries of what we call as India today. India has travelled to Southeast Asia and even beyond. So there are so many renditions of this epic.

So they have a very transcultural, transnational, 'trans' nature. They are just going beyond and trying to kind of outgrow any kind of limiting borders. They are outflowing, they are flowing out of any kind of restricted compartmentalized border- be it the border of nation, the border of gender identity, the border of culture or language and so forth, right? So, so that is why it is important to read Rumi's philosophy, Rumi's, you know, collection of writings to understand how he influenced the later Sufi poets and how he can be an inspirational figure in contemporary artworks. So Rumi propagated his whole philosophy through poetry.

He had three main texts written in different forms of poetry. One is the Diwan-i Shams-i-Tabriz (odes) written in the memory of his spiritual master; and then the Masnavi and finally the Rubaiyat or the quatrains. So all these books have some common elements, in that they all suggest the madness of divine experience, the rapture and ecstasy associated with divine experience. The new wave of enthusiasm for Jalaluddin Rumi's poetry in America and Europe has brought Sufism to the attention of many liberal western people,

and Rumi's writing has a universal influence that can bind different ages, different decades and different audiences together. A visionary and mystic poet such as Allama Muhammad Iqbal was deeply influenced and inspired by Rumi's understanding of Quran and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad and Iqbal considered Rumi as his spiritual teacher and called him as a khizar-e-rah or his spiritual guide.

So Rumi says, "What is Love? Perfect thirst. So let me explain the water of Life.!" According to Jalaluddin Rumi, all types of love are ultimately aspects of our love for God and they all lead to God. The constant heat of a love's fire enables the soul to fully ripen and transform into a mature form. It matures an individual when the soul experiences love, the heat of love.

So the power of love enables one to forsake the false ego or nafs of the isolated self for the sake of a deeper vision of reality, which is not self-centered. And Rumi says that- "In the silence of love you will find the spark of life". The highest form of love is a type of gnosis or knowing. In Rumi's words, "If you want to know your self, come out of yourself/ Leave the tributary and flow toward the River." So knowing to lose oneself is the Sufi path for reaching the beloved, right.

That is, as long as we are too concentrated on our self, as long as we are too enmeshed and too mired in material world, we will never be able to come out of our ego, our nafs, and reach the beloved. Sufis believe that love alone enables us to make the types of liberating personal sacrifices, which would otherwise not be possible. So self-negation is very important as far as Sufi teaching goes. Therefore, the spiritual opportunities that are present in love must never be overlooked. Love offers an individual with a lot of spiritual opportunity.

Let us read a couple of poems by Rumi. The first poem is called Desire.

I desire you more than food and drink

My body, my senses, my mind

hunger for your taste

I can sense your presence in my heart

although you belong to all the world

I wait with silent passion for one gesture

one glance from you

This is very sensuous, very sensory. This is such a departure from mainstream Islam. Why we are discussing a poem like desire in this course is to understand how Sufism humanizes God. That is the main thing we need to understand.

The taste of God, the glance or the glance from Him or glance at Him, gazing at Him, so the God that appeals to our five senses, this has not been described and recommended by mainstream Islam at all. So it is a departure. It is feeling the God within one's own body, through one's own senses. It is a very tactile and palpable God. Next looking for your face, once again it is a humanized God, not recommended by mainstream Islam.

It says- "From the beginning of my life

I have been looking for your face

but today I have seen it

Today I have seen

the charm, the beauty,

the unfathomable grace

of the face

that I was looking for"

Today I have found you
and those who laughed
and scorned me yesterday
are sorry that they were not looking
as I did

I am bewildered by the magnificence
of your beauty
and wish to see you
with a hundred eyes

My heart has burned with passion
and has searched forever
for this wondrous beauty
that I now behold

I am ashamed
to call this love human
and afraid of God
to call it divine....

I am skipping a few lines. It is a very long poem. Once again I encourage my students to go back and read the entire poem. One of the paragraphs says,

...your effulgence has lit a fire in my heart and you have made radiant for me the earth and sky.

And then it goes on, right? The title of the poem, once again, it is called Looking for Your Face, Looking for the Face of God. And just harkening back these lines, these particular lines, I am ashamed to call this love as human and afraid to call it divine, right? So it is at the interface of earthly love and spiritual love that one envisions the humanized God, the God that appeals to senses, for whom one can burn with passion. It is unthinkable when we consider God as someone distant who only punishes us, who is a stern figure, who is a lawmaker only. Here it is a personal God, very personal God. God is a lover, right? Wondrous beauty and the desire to want to see this God with a hundred eyes, right? Using the entire body and soul and you know, passion, spending one's entire passion, whatever one has in this lifetime to see this God, this wondrous beautiful face.

So Rumi, like many of his contemporaries and his predecessors was a Sufi and so he believed or he followed the mystical approach to Islam. Sufis believed in the Quran and in the teachings of Prophet Muhammad but for them the way to salvation could not be dictated by a strict clergyman or a maulavi whose teachings could be inefficiently summarized in religious jurisprudence. So Sufis do not entirely rely on the maulavi's interpretation or the maulavi's teachings. Sufis are of the opinion that the Islamic law or Sharia has to be largely complemented by Islamic way of living or tariqa to help the seeker or Sa'k in search for truth or Haqiq'a, right? In William Chittick's words, "...Sufis understand 'Law' or Shari'ah in its widest sense, as embracing 'knowledge and all the theoretical teachings of Islam.' So the way or tariqa is something that Sufis emphasize.

Tariqa is the method of putting this law into practice. So it is not only the theoretical law per se and the reality of Haqiq'a is the inward states and stages or stations that are attained by the traveler or the seeker, the Sa'k in his journey towards God. Sufis renunciation of religious formality is deeply rooted in his mistrust of knowledge, any kind of formalized knowledge, bookish knowledge or even logic, dogma and reason being the only tools for gaining proximity or closeness to God. And so he is defining man-god relationship alternatively. All Sufis are of the opinion that an individual on a spiritual quest should first annihilate the nafs or ego and become selfless.

It is only after he has divorced himself from the material needs and the worries that the seeker can approach the divine. The love of divine will substitute all the needs that the Sufi had once experienced in material terms and so surrender will come, a wholehearted surrender to God will automatically come. In Sufi literature, sublime love almost always manifests itself in the form of an amorous relationship between two earthly lovers who have to overcome some kind of obstacles in order to unite, and this metaphorically means a union between the divine and the devotee. So the irresistible attraction of the sublime for the seeker is symbolically conveyed through lines depicting the physical beauty of an earthly beloved. So the last poem that we just now read by Rumi describes the beauty, the wondrous beauty of God, the ecstasy that one feels, the ecstasy that one feels within after witnessing such a beauty.

And there is also this pang of separation from the divine through images which project a yearning or longing lover whose entire existence has become meaningless in separation from the beloved, right. So due to the nature of this relationship of earthly lovers, there are a lot of profane and mundane images and motifs that are used, that accompany the detailed description of physical beauty of the beloved. But in the end what all these artworks, these poems strive for is establishing the love between the devotee and the God. On a spiritual plane, on a transcendental plane, this is one of such poems, it goes as follows, Reach for the cup and make us all drunk, for

No one has become happy unless hidden from himself.

When you have concealed from yourself.

Quickly flee the world! Do not turn your face back toward

Yourself _ beware! Beware!

This is taken from Divan-i Shamsi Tabriz (1176-1182). And these accounts and intricate symbolic references to wine, to the cup of wine, the cup bearer or Saqi, the tavern and the drinking companions of the lover are abundant in Rumi's poetry. They create a lively and multicolored world where leaders of different cultures and beliefs can take refuge in and they can find their spiritual satisfaction through reading these poems. So, Leonard Lewisohn in his interview with Shysha Guppy says that Rumi uses many immoral stories, so-called immoral stories, profane stories in his poems in order to make spiritual points. These stories and humorous lyrical narratives have the same spiritual function as the profane, non-sacred images and by nature they serve to defamiliarize blind acceptance of ethical points and religious obligations.

All of these characteristics make Rumi's poetry less rigid and dry and they become more accessible and lively despite their philosophical content, their philosophical profundity. The entertaining stories and subtle ideas are narrated in a language that speaks to the poet's powerful imagination. So Rumi's creative views of metaphors and other figures of speech, his serene tone, his refined diction and at the same time an unpretentious language, an unpretentious language that he uses and the lively rhythm, all of these factors, all of these aspects complement the captivating content of his spiritual work. So he does not take what the religious texts say for granted, he does not take them on face value, he tests them through his, you know, Sufi ways through his tariqa, right? They can sometimes be profane, they can sometimes sound like blasphemy, a threat to certain sacred topics. But in the end what he is trying to achieve is the spiritual aim of his poetry.

Through mirth, through light-heartedness, through a reference to Saqi and Jaam, he is trying to achieve something more profound, something that is philosophically grave in nature, right? Several scholars would agree that no other poet in the canon of Persian poetry has been able to introduce as many varied rhythms as Rumi has. So Rumi's poetry in that sense comes across as not only educational, therapeutic and sincere, but also as artworks that entertain the audience or the reader with a magical effect. So I would like to stop my lecture here today. With this, we come to the end of this module and let us discuss a new module in our forthcoming lectures. Thank you. Thank you.