

**Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia**

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**Lecture 34**

**Sufi Mysticism and Poetics VI**

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So, this is our last lecture from the module on Sufi Mysticism and Poetics. We are going to continue our discussion on Jalaluddin Rumi before moving on to some further discussions and finally, you know, concluding this module with today's lecture. So, it is important to note that Rumi was highly dedicated to his spiritual master, his Murshid Shamsi Tabrizi. And Tabrizi helped Rumi to break away from the confinements of Islamic jurisprudence. Actually, Tabrizi initiated Rumi to the Sufi path and Rumi himself states in one of his ghazals, it goes as follows:

"My hand always used to hold a Koran, but now it holds Love's flagon.

My mouth was filled with glorification, but now it recites only poetry and songs".

It is from the Divan-i Shamsi Tabriz. And so, Rumi was a well-respected clergyman who earlier used to take his profession very seriously before he encountered with Shams. And according to William Chittick, Shams had "transformed him from a sober jurisprudent to an intoxicated celebrant of the mysteries of Divine Love poetry".

So, from the path of Shariah, he had chosen the path of Tariqah, the Sufi path, the path of knowing God through love, ecstasy and performance. So, Rumi's love of Shams manifests itself in and through their constant companionship, the Murshid-Mureed relationship that they share. In Rumi's almost fanatical attachment to his Murshid, this love is available, it is expressed also in his deep sorrow following Shams's mysterious disappearance. One sees this deep bond that they share. So, once Shams disappears from Qoniyeh, we see Rumi adopting the Murshid's name both as his pen-name and as the title

of his collection of sonnets called *Divan-i Shamsi Tabriz*. So, his famous work, his eponymous work is actually named after his own preceptor, his own Murshid.

He also chooses that name as his pen-name following his Murshid's disappearance. So, this relationship is probably one of the strangest in the history of Persian literature and something that has been a subject of much analysis, anticipation and interpretation. It was a unique preceptor-disciple relationship, Murshid-Murid relationship that Rumi shared with Shams. So, Rumi is also responsible for inventing the whirling dance called Sama, which accounts for the poet's unorthodox lifestyle. So, the poet along with other Sufi followers viewed this whirling dance as instrumental in helping the Sufi practitioner distance and detach themselves from the material surroundings.

So, there is a rhythmic yet controlled and highly symbolic movement of different body parts involved in the whirling dance invented by Rumi. The whirling motion itself is indicative of the first of the five tenets of Islam, which is monotheism or Tawhid, which implies that whichever direction we face, we only see God, God is everywhere. So, Rumi's poetry shows all the characteristics of typical Sufi poetry, typical Sufi metaphysics. In his exploration of the theme of love through poetry, Rumi is the founder and proponent of love mysticism, also called *Tasavvuf-i ashiqânah*, which is principally opposed to pious mysticism, also called *Tasabufi Zaidana*. So, rather than *Tasabufi Zaidana* or attaining God through piety, a lover saint like Rumi would like to attain God, discover God through *Tasavvuf-i zâhidânah*, the language of love, the language of madness.

So, whereas basically Islamic clerics had been wary of God's omnipotence and had been in awe of Allah's power, Rumi would only like to see the smiling face of God. So, we see that someone like Abdul-Karim Soroush compares the situation of an individual in search of truth and God with that of a deer that finds itself in front of a frightening lion. So, the basically Soroush compares the God of righteousness as a frightening or an awe-inspiring lion. Rumi does not subscribe to this kind of an imagination. Rumi sees himself immersed in the ocean of God's love and bounty.

So, the Sufi's God is a personal God, a humanized God, a God of love, a merciful God. He is surrounded by the love of God and he cannot see anything but such a God's graciousness. When compared to logic, reason, the question of justice, jurisprudence,

righteousness, for Rumi, love is everything. It shapes everything, it is the giver of everything as well as the annihilator. So, it is also important to note that Rumi's poetry bears a kind of universal message that appeals to the audience across time and space.

This is something we have been discussing in our previous lecture too. The message that Rumi's poetry gives resonates with everyone and speaks to all kinds of audience, all the core values that mankind cherishes, and there is at the heart of his poetry an aspiration for a peaceful and a fulfilling existence. So, it is understood by everyone because it is not directed at any individual religion; it transcends religious boundaries, cultural boundaries as well as boundaries of nations. Rumi himself has explicitly said in one of his poems that he does not see himself as belonging to any specific religion or race. This is how the poem goes.

This is how the poem goes:

What is to be done, O Moslems? for I do not recognize myself.

I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Gabr, nor Moslem.

I am not of the East, nor of the West, nor of the land, nor of the sea;

I am not of Nature's mint, nor of the circling heavens.

I am not of earth, nor of water, nor of air, nor of fire;

I am not of the empyrean, nor of the dust, nor of existence, nor of entity.

I am not of India, nor of China, nor of Bulgaria, nor of Saqsin;

I am not of the kingdom of Iraqain, nor of the country of Khorasan.

I am not of this world, nor of the next, nor of paradise, nor of Hell;

I am not of Adam, nor of Eve, nor of Eden and Rizwan.

My place is the placeless, my trace is the Traceless;

'Tis neither body nor soul, for I belong to the soul of the Beloved.

This is from Diván-i Shamsi Tabriz 125. This reminds us of Bulleh Shah's poem, "Bulla Ki Jana Mein kaun?"

Does Bullah himself know who he is? And the Neti Neti style that informs the writings by Guru Nanak. So, I am neither this nor that. Through negation, the search of identity, search of self continues and then this self is best discovered within the self of the beloved. So, only when we transcend this self, the ego or the nafs associated with this self, can we find our self better through the image of the beloved soul. My soul as its reflection can be understood in the soul of the beloved.

That is the only identity that I recognize. This is what Rumi says. So, in the words of Leonard Lewisohn, Rumi believes in the unity and universality of all religions. Rumi as a poet transcends individual religion and quite often one reads in Rumi how futile it is to look for God only in shrines, in mosques. So, based on Rumi's worldview, God can be seen anywhere and everywhere.

God is as much present in shrines as in taverns. So, the reference to alcohol, reference to saqi and the chalice, you know, are very often in Rumi's poetry. Rumi's universal message bears the promise of a world in which there is, you know, a desire to understand, appreciate and accommodate all kinds of worldviews. So, Rumi is content for appearance or form, the outward appearance of form also called Zahir and his insistence in trying hard to reach the core meaning or batin in one's dealings with the world comprises one of his primary Sufi teachings to ignore the surface meaning and reach the core meaning. So, Rumi constantly reminds his readers of the peril in reading the world, in understanding the world and its phenomena through surface level, thereby ignoring the deeper meaning.

One has to reach the deeper meaning and avoid the superficiality. So, the pairings of foam and ocean, picture and painter and dust and wind are some of the metaphors that keep coming back in Rumi's poetry, in order to delineate the contrast between secondary causes and the cause of all causes - that God is. So, according to Rumi, once one is able to discriminate between the real and the sham, the appearance and the core, one should be able to see the pulling force as a common one. So, behind all phenomena there is one unified cause that is God. So, in that sense, one could say that Rumi has an aversion for multiplicity in spiritual terms.

Multiplicity can only be acceptable to Rumi as long as it leads the spiritual traveller to witness unity. So, this contrast between multiplicity and unity is one of the key concepts in understanding Rumi's poetry. Having said that, this reminds us once again of the Dvaitabad and Advaitabad in bhakti philosophy, the saguna and the nirguna, two opposing forces, two opposing tendencies, both of which are accommodated by the bhakti philosophy. While it is very important to realize the Brahman that precedes gender, that precedes any features, any characteristics, it is also important to know dualism because without dualism there is no gun, there is no you know, there is no sensory behaviour or character and such a God cannot be loved. So, so much as Rumi is talking about the unified one God, he himself subscribes to the idea of a loving God and love is a gun.

He is striving, he is longing to see the God, to feel the God with all his five senses that would not be possible with the idea of an abstract God. So, his poetry itself you know, subscribes to the idea of a humanized God, not the God as knowledge that is always-already there, a God that needs to be discovered, that entails some kind of discourse with the devotee. That is very much available in Rumi's poetry. So, it would also be a partial understanding of Rumi if we say that he only believes in a unified singular understanding or meaning of God, a God that has no anthropomorphic qualities. That is not exactly Rumi's God.

That could be the metalanguage that any institutionalized religion is using, where defining God in human terms is not a possibility. But Rumi basically does that. He wants a God that can be tasted, that can be seen, that can be heard, a God that is so close to him, his own personal God. That is very, very similar, very close to the Sagun school.

It is not a God to be known. It is a God to be loved. So, it has to have certain qualities. Otherwise, without that, the play, the amorous play that Bhakti calls as Leela would not be possible. The play between God and devotee would not be possible if the God is sans any gun, if the God is like Brahman. So, we see both these aspects in Rumi.

While he is talking about one being, he is also talking about a very humanized, very personal God, a God that is immediately identifiable, that someone can identify with, not a distant, stern God. The path projected by Rumi through his poetry, through his philosophy is not the one that is easy to travel. Apart from the pain of separation from the

beloved, there is the physical hardship and the denial of material comfort that a Sufi has to endure through his journey. To Rumi, the human ego or nafs, also called the self, is a source of metaphysical doubts and one cannot grasp the truth about one's existence and approach God unless one has transcended, you know, this self. So, one has to have a transparent soul and having a transparent soul is possible only when one can battle the difficult demands of one's ego.

So, being selfless means putting one's needs on hold, transcending the limitations and bounds of oneself and thereby tuning in and responding to the calls of the beloved. Only when one has a transparent within can one resonate with the calls of the beloved. So, interestingly, the first poem in Masnavi talks about the songs of reed in which a reed moans because it is separated from its reed bed. This is how the poem goes:

The music of the reed-pipe is fire, not wind

Everyone should be as passionate

It is love that is in charge in the empty reed

It is passion that is bubbling in the glass of wine (Masnavi 1: 9-10)

It is from Masnavi. So, just as the reed pipe has to be clear and clean within in order to produce the melodious sound, in order to resonate the melodious sound, so must the lover be transparent within if he wants to be heard by their beloved, if he wants to resonate with the call of the beloved. So, the tenets of this universal message are diverse and interconnected.

And this is what is symptomatic of Rumi's broad mystical worldview, something that one can relate with across, you know, time and space. So, Rumi's mystical doctrines are communicated delicately and with much poetic taste through allegorical narratives in the six volumes of the poet's spiritual epic called Masnavi Ma'navi. In her book titled *The Sacred and Erotic Poetry of Jalaluddin Rumi and John Donne: A Comparison*, Maniji Mannani says the following: She says that the wide range of the subjects covered in the Masnavi, the collection's consistent tone and the stable point of view from which the poems are told have resulted in the classification of Rumi's work as the highest in the canon of Islamic mystical poetry to the extent that some have stated that the Masnavi is the Quran for the Persian language. Rumi's profound understanding of the universe, his

views on human's place, human's existence in the large universe and the question of man's happiness are among the many, you know, grave topics that he has touched in his lyrical work, in his sonnets in Divan-i Shamsi Tabriz.

So, this is a piece from Divan-i Shamsi Tabriz called "If You Seek Love":

If you seek Love

And are a lover of Love,

Take a sharp knife in your hand

And slit the throat of self-restraint.

Nothing is a hindrance more

Than fear of losing your good name;

It's a saying made without gain;

Accept it with a mind that's pure.

Why did that madness seize Majnun...

In many forms?

Why did beauty choose so many Wives?

He rent his robe, he climbed mountains;

He sipped poison, he tasted death.

The spider caught a prey so large;

"How much larger will the Lord's snare be!

Since Leila's face had value such,

How much more the worth of the nocturnal journey!

Have you not heard of Waisa and Ramin

Have you not heard of Wamiq and Azra?

You gather your garment away from water;

But if need be you must dive in the river!  
The way of Love is drunkenness and being low  
The torrent runs not upward but from high to low.  
You will be the jewel in the ring of lovers  
If you are in the circle of the jewel master,  
As the sky is enthralled by earth,  
As the body is enthralled by the soul.  
Beat not your drum that none can hear;  
Plant bravely your banner in the desert's heart!  
Listen to the voices with the ear of your soul,  
The many voices rising up under the green dome.  
When your garment is removed by Love,  
The firmament will stare aghast.  
The universe is in turmoil because of Love;  
It purifies all above and below.  
When the Sun rose, the night vanished;  
When bounty came, affliction was banished.  
I am silent.  
Speak, O soul of soul of soul,  
Each atom speaks  
Desiring your face.

Right? The poem is called "If You Seek Love". So, the seeker of love has to do the following. Cut the throat of self-restraint.



Cut the throat of ego or nafs. Be prepared to dive in the river. Be prepared to shed the cloth of, you know, the outward appearance of honor, of prestige. This is something that the Bhakti tradition, the Bhakti Vaishnavite tradition celebrates - the idea of Avisarini Radha, who embraces the kalank associated with her, the kind of sacrilegious act, the kind of amoral act she is involved in when she meets Krishna. So, that kind of, you know, parallelity we can draw with this poem and the concept of Avisar in Vaishnav tradition, where she is meeting a paramour, not her husband, in the dead of the night, right? She is an Avisarini. And so, what is the fear of water? What is the fear of the bad name? If you are afraid of water, better dive in the river.

You shed your cloth. So, all pretentiousness, all kinds of limitations associated with ego or self need to be shed if you want to listen to the call of the beloved. So, he is mentioning so many lovers that died while treading the difficult path of love, the travails, the trials and tribulations they have undergone, right? This is compared with the Sufi path of hardship that an ascetic has to undergo while reuniting with God. So, this entire life as a longing for reuniting with God. And finally, what is desired is not the knowledge of God. The last line we see that- each atom speaks desiring your face.

So, this is very different from the Shariah, the institutionalized mainstream Islam, which can never humanize God, right? Here it is talking about the desire to see the face of the God. It is a very radical thing to see, but it is the lover's face that the beloved desires/seeks to see.

Next, we talk about Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti. So, Hazrat Sheikh Khwaja Sayyid Moinuddin Hasan Chishti, in short we call him Moinuddin Chishti, also known as Gharib Nawaz or a benefactor of the poor. He was one of the most renowned saints of the Indian subcontinent.

And indeed, he was an international spiritual inspiration who lived during the 6th century. Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, after receiving the robe of Caliphate from his spiritual guide and teacher, had left on tours and travels. He first reached Osh and then he went to Isfahan, where he met Sheikh Mahmud of Isfahan and he gave his clothes that he was wearing to Khwaja Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki. And giving his clothes to Kaki implied that he had espoused him as his spiritual disciple. After giving his clothes, Kaki became a disciple, a murid of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti.

So, Moinuddin Chishti said that mysticism is a name and not a custom. By merely being knowledgeable of and conversant with mysticism, one does not become a Sufi. It is the inner life, the life of practicing these principles through which one can emerge as a mystic. So, once again the path of Tariqah through which Haqiqah is discovered. So, mystic must have an exact understanding of divine knowledge.

He should surrender his will to the will of God. He should be kind, hospitable and courteous, devoid of haughtiness or arrogance or any kind of superiority. He should be compassionate, content and gentle, reposing his utmost trust onto God. So, the ambitions to win disciples and to win some kind of outward glory and fame according to Moinuddin Chishti are foolish and vain. Rather, the essential ambition should be to be nearer to the friend.

Here friend refers to the God, friend or beloved refers to God. And the success of a Sufi's journey lies in ultimately being accepted by this friend. So, the Indian Sufi Sheikh Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki was a disciple of Moinuddin Chishti and he was a master to Baba Farid or Fariduddin Ganjshakar. Kaki is said to have heard the following verses during a Qawwali performance. So, myth goes that when he was listening to Qawwali performance, he heard the following verses- For the victims of the dagger of surrender, there is new life at every moment from the unseen.

And after listening to these verses, he fell into a trance and he never came out of that trance, he passed away after three days. He became known as the martyr of love. So, the verses that celebrate love over dagger, these verses that celebrate love over any kind of institutionalized knowledge hearing which, listening to which he dies, right, and later goes on to become the martyr of love. Later on, you know, because he died after listening to these verses, these verses have been considered as taboo in the Qawwali performances, they are not performed. And before he died, Sheikh Kaki wrote some beautiful poetry of his own that is still performed by the Qawwals till date.

So, one of his verses goes like this. This is a poetry by Sheikh Kaki. So, this is how the poem goes:

Dil pareeshan deeda hairan kardah ee . . . Jan-e mun too kardah ee haan kardah ee, [you took away the peace of my heart and dazzle my eyes, oh my life, you have done that, you have done that]

Deedah giryaan, seena biryab kardah ee . . . [you make my eyes shed tears and my heart to burn]

Shokhee o baibaki o naaz o adaa . . . Behr-e yak-dil een cheh samaan kardah ee

[your playfulness, openness, vanity and captivating demeanor, all this to enchant the one poor heart of mine]

Az kuja me aai aitu faani hosn, al mera kana viran kardai, [your beauty is like a tsunami from where has it come to crash and bear the entire world]

Jaanam shukrana aste dar de ishk, murdane dushwar aas an kardai, [my life is a humble offering at the order of my painful love for you, you have made my dying harder from easier].

Murgi sera dar kafas af gandai, be gunai ra bazindan kardai, [meaning in English you have captured and put in the cage the free bird of the wild, my carefree heart, oh you have imprisoned an innocent one].

Mun she kwayam hus tu kwaja mooin ab de kud ra kut be doran kardai, [oh khwaja moin mine are only the vain words, but you embody the reality as you have elevated your slave to the axial saint qutub of this age.]

So, it is, the poem has two layers, rather three layers, it is talking about the lover and the beloved, but then Sheikh Kaki is also referring to.. he is referring to Moinuddin Chishti, in the end we see he is talking about khwaja Moin and finally, it is the call of the devotee to the divine.

So, with this we come to the end of this lecture and this module, where we have basically discussed Sufi metaphysics and Sufi philosophy through reading the poems by some prominent Sufi, and after this we will meet in our following lectures with a fresh module and some new discussions. Thank you. Thank you.