

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 35

Gender and Performance in Sufi Movement I

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on performative gender and religions in South Asia. Today we are going to discuss gender and performance in Sufi movement. So, we have to understand the Murid Murshid relationship that is at the heart of the Sufi tradition. So, we see that Murshid being the expert, the preceptor or the teacher and the Murid being the disciple... this teacher-disciple relationship is analogous with or reflects the devotee's love for the god. So, the Murshid Murid, the teacher-student or the preceptor-disciple relationship carries the reflection of the lover-beloved relationship and ultimately the relationship between the devotee and the devoted.

So, the Murid is the person who desires to spiritually advance in Deen, Deen referring to religion and this advancement, this journey happens under the tutelage of an expert who is known as the Murshid. A Murshid on the other hand is a spiritual guide who has achieved a proximity and nearness with Allah or God or divinity through perfectly following his own Murshid's guidance. So, you know.. and so such a wise person you know is applying Shariah outwardly and applying tariqah inwardly, achieving ultimately haqiqah and marifah. So, we have talked about each of these.

Shariah being the codified interpretation of the Quran and tariqah is the inwardly achieving the haqiqah and marifah. So, we have talked about each inward journey. So, we see that there is once again a parallelity between what the Sufi movement you know engenders in terms of the disciple-teacher relationship and the gharanas, the guru-akhras or gharanas that we have in the Indic tradition. So, just like the Murshid is responsible for taking the disciple from darkness to light, the word 'guru' itself means taking the disciple from you know unawareness, from lack of knowledge to enlightenment, towards enlightenment. So, it must be noted that it is not the Murshid or the teacher's duty to perform some kind of karamat or miracles in order to prove his legitimacy or worth.

He is not to be confused with any kind of a showman that is doing some catchy you know clap-trap you know performance in order to draw attention and thereby gain some kind of quick popularity. So, generally we see in all religious or spiritual traditions it is the disciple, it is the onus or the.. it is.. so we see in all the religious traditions that it is the onus on the part of the disciple to journey towards the teacher to you know kind of the quest for knowledge, the thirst for knowledge, the desire, the impetus of learning should be there in the student, in the disciple. The teacher is not going to do anything you know attractive or some quick, you know,...you cannot have karamat or miracles to attract the student. It has to be the student's journey towards the teacher and the patience, the perseverance to learn from the Murshid or the Guru. It is similar in all traditions, right.

So, some attributes of a Murid or the disciple are as follows: So, Taubah or the station of repentance. Repentance is very much central to many of the Abrahamic religions. Even Christianity, you know, places a lot of onus or emphasizes on the act of repentance, penitence as a way of washing off or you know, purging one's past sins. So, the station of repentance or Taubah, then we have Zuhd or renunciation.

So, renunciation of material or worldly pleasures is important in one's journey towards, you know, following, you know, in one's journey towards acquiring what the Murshid has to give. If someone is too, you know, mired in or too much kind of full of worldly desires, then one cannot take what the Murshid has to give. Abandonment of family ties, which is associated with the concept of Zuhd or renunciation, and then we have Taqwa, Taqwa or fear of God so we do not go astray, we do not go in the wrong direction or wrong path. Then the concept of Sabr, Sabr or patience, right, because no good thing, no, you know, good knowledge, no wisdom comes overnight.

In order for us to achieve that, there has to be certain qualities that need to be harnessed, that need to be, that one needs to train with, patience being one of them. And then Jihad al-Nafs, Jihad al-Nafs means struggle against the self. In other words, you know, controlling of yourself. So, all the different instincts, you know, animal instincts that we have; we say the same thing in, you know, Hindu traditions also. What we need to sacrifice is the inward desires or the inward negative pejorative qualities.

It could be anger or lust or jealousy or envy, right, impatience. These are some of the negative human qualities that we need to conquer. That conquest is referred to as Jihad al-Nafs, the readiness to sacrifice and a state of seeking. We constantly need to seek for the God or the divinity in order to discover him or discover divinity within ourselves. So, then another quality required of the Murid is Ikhlas, Ikhlas meaning a sincerity and then Ilm.

So, we see all these stages. Once a person is, you know, has renounced and the person has repented, not, you know, mired in certain worldly pleasures, patiently seeking the God, ready to sacrifice, struggling against the negative, you know, instincts within oneself and, you know, that is when Ilm or the knowledge of God comes and ultimately there is submission. Submission is nothing other than Islam. Islam itself means to submit, right. So, we see that Sufism is speaking a lot with Islam.

It is an offshoot of Islam and not quite a departure in many ways, just that it could be seen as a less orthodox branch, more liberal and a more syncretic offshoot of Islam. But the basic premises, tenets and philosophy are quite similar. They draw on one another. Ghazali who is a prominent Sufi would say that to journey in the spiritual path is like shooting an arrow without knowing where it will go and what it will hit. So, the path of initiation of the Murid is a path of tests, full of tests.

The test from the initiator, the test from God and then the test, the process of testing one's own self as well as the testing through the worldly affairs, the worldly.. the you know environment or milieu where one has to physically exist. So, to be able to go through and overcome or successfully meet these tests is the sign of real progress for the Mureed. The one who does not observe these tests will be losing his or her own time. So, the Sufi order and the world order imply certain things. So, certain ranks of initiators of the Pir-o-Murshid.

So, according to the Sufi order, the Pir-o-Murshid has already acquired a certain rank, right? The Pir-o-Murshid has a certain rank and qualifies as an initiator. So, owing to his nearness to God, he can initiate a certain another person, a Mureed to undertake the same journey that he himself has taken previously, right? So, such a Pir-o-Murshid, an initiator who acts as a guide, who shows the path must be regarded with respect as someone that has gone ahead in the journey and who is in a position, who is qualified to show the path

to others. This law itself is not very different from the law of nature and from the law of life. So, there are three stages basically for the pupil or the Mureed to tread on the spiritual path. The first stage is that of receptivity, to take all that is given to the person who has given without discrimination when the teacher is teaching.

There is a kind of unquestioning acceptance or imbibing of what the Murshid has to give, right? The stage following that, the next stage after reception or receptivity is assimilation of what has been received. So, once you have received, you know, knowledge or you have received, you have, you have acquired some kind of learning, certain qualities, you have been trained in certain way, now you have to assimilate what you have received. And the third stage is to put the learning in the mind and let the mind see the reason of things. This is more like application. So, learning cannot happen in isolation and learning does not mean anything in isolation until we apply it to the worldly affairs, to the real society where we live.

So, this is more about consideration, right? Once you have assimilated the knowledge received and assimilated it, you consider, you deliberate on it, right? It is processing inside you. And the one who goes consciously and securely through these three stages of receptivity, assimilation and consideration is understood as a successful Murshid in the path. So, we see the figure of Abida Parveen, a noted Sufi singer and Abida Parveen reportedly confesses in one of her interviews with the Guardian that she acquires a state of be-khudī while in the midst of a performance. The concept of being either a man or a woman does not cross my mind is what she has to say. I am neither a man nor a woman on stage.

I am a vehicle on stage for passion. So, the body becomes a carrier or a vehicle or a receptacle for passion to flow, and this passion flows from the singer on to the audience, to the witness of this performance, this rapturous performance. We see, I mean Abida Parveen as a performer is, she emanates, she exudes in a nutshell like many other Sufi performers. What Sufi philosophy precisely is.. she has a very androgynous appearance, she has a very.. her voice is very androgynous, her way of dressing up makes her entire demeanour as so liminal, so beyond absolute definitions; that is basically what Sufi philosophy tries to say. So, she is in a state of be-khudī, she is beyond herself.

So, there is a kind of transcending, an experience of transcending boundaries, transcending the boundaries of religion, transcending the boundaries of gender, any you know boundary that limits one's identity, limits one's self. So, bhekhudi is being something other than or something beyond one's self, the social self that we are. She is regarded as the queen of Sufi music. So, Abida Parveen is a Pakistani singer of Qawwali, Sufiana Kalam, and multiple other forms of devotional music associated with the Sufis of South Asia. She has been regarded as the queen of Sufi music.

However, there are also you know men and women from within the Sufi orders, who would give an impression that Abida Parveen is not really a Sufi, but only a singer of Sufi music. So, we see, we have already talked about how all movements, be it the.. you know the Vaishnavite tradition, the Sufis, they have many ramifications, many branches, some of which are more orthodox than the other. So, it is difficult for the more orthodox branches to accommodate the liberal tendencies, right. And they sometimes disown these tendencies and say that they are not Sufi enough, right, or they are not Vaishnav enough, right. So, these kinds of differences in nomenclature where internationally Abida Parveen would be called as the queen of Sufi music, whereas you know, some of the Sufi orders do not even claim her or kind of disown her Sufiness.

Will I question regarding who a Sufi is, who is the veritable Sufi, who is the authentic Sufi, do we have a definition? It hints at the intricate web of significance that is attached to the idioms of Sufism. So, in Sufism gender is both material and immaterial, a shaper of identity, an obstacle on the path to purifying the soul and bringing it in proximity to the ultimate divine. And finally, gender is also a marker of the wider or outsider's status within ritual spaces. So, gender has certain social meanings as well as certain, you know, metaphysical or spiritual meanings. The classical Sufi tradition configures gender as a correlative of spiritual journey.

So, in other words, masculine and feminine rather than the outward biological traits refer more or connect more with the concept of qualities of one's soul. And we see the Sufi tradition saying that both male and female in varying proportions is present in all humans. So, both male and female qualities are possessed in varying proportions by each human being with respect to the state of his or her soul, on its ascent towards the divine reality or conversely descent away from the divine. Now, once again, this reminds me what you know another version of mystics [other than] the Sufi have to say. Especially this is very much a part of one of the oldest Bengali literature called Charyapada. Charyapada is noted as the first you know written/scripted Bengali literature and it

describes human body and human tendencies, you know, in a strikingly similar way; the Sufi order and the Charyapada have a lot of overlaps.

So, Charyapada is talking about, you know, the body or human bodies regardless of you know.. regardless of the outward gender that we possess; having a bama or the bama referring to the body or the female, the feminine aspects; the purush or the male aspects, masculine aspects; and finally, also a neutral aspect which is known as the avadhuti, right. And it would go on to say that when a person has become.. has attained that realization of oneness with god, the person is neither a bama nor a purush, the person has you know discovered the avadhuti, the neuter that is you know flowing in the body. It is very beautifully described in Charyapada in very esoteric language. So, coming back to you know Sufi tradition, I am trying to see these overlaps, these simultaneity of you know different mystic traditions which enable us to understand the continuities that flow in the pan-Southeast Asian culture, the culture of performance, religious cultures that are very... the religious traditions that are very performative in nature. So, we are trying to understand the pan-Southeast Asian religions or spiritual traditions that are very performative in nature. Now, we see Sachiko Murata's seminal study on gender titled the *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* explaining the qualities, the gender qualities as being reflections of the inward dimension of the human being, particularly from the perspective of those who understand the human being to correspond to the microcosm, in which all aspects of the macrocosm are reflected.

So, put simply, the human is a microcosm onto which all the qualities of macrocosm are available, are visible, right. So, this is something once again, that we find in Vaishnav tradition, also the Vaishnav mystics would say.. the sahaja occult, right..they say that what is not there in the body is not there in the universe. So, these qualities of male and female are available, are present in varying proportions in different individuals. So, Murata's book says the following for most authors of the intellectual tradition. The various names applied to the inward dimension of the human being do not refer to distinct and autonomous entities, but to different qualities or degrees of a single reality, right. So, they are not really distinct from one another. There is a continuity among the different individuals, the different creatures.. different earthly creatures in that each material body, each matter is composed of the same ingredients, but in varying proportions.

So, some has the you know greater masculine qualities, whereas others have more prominent feminine qualities and so forth. Later Murata also says, (I quote): "...the

human being is compounded of a large number of qualities, and the nature of these qualities can be understood by finding in the macrocosm the realities that make them manifest.." All these ingredients are also available in the macrocosm; the human is not outside of that.. the human is not decoupled from the macrocosm, the universe, and thereby the god. They are continuities of one another, right. These qualities display the three 'directions' of existence by and large, three large classifications of existence would be ascending towards god, which you know endows one with the quality of being angelic; then descending away from god, which endows one with the quality of demonic and finally, dispersive referring to the quality of animal. So, in Islamic metaphysical spiritual traditions, gender as a mutable quality of the soul or nafs is a means for human beings to achieve spiritual perfection and ultimately union with the divine, right.

From the general point of view of the Shariah, god's qualities are masculine in relation to his creation which is feminine. So, we see that there is a continuation and yet a dissociation from you know Shariah interpretation of Islam. Sufism is more pliable, more flexible where almost both genders are in tandem; both genders are simultaneous, exchangeable, they have exchangeable platforms, there is no hierarchy. So, there are greater possibilities in the Sufi tradition as the limitations are less. Shariah is more definitive and codified, it is telling you know very... absolutely that god is more masculine, whereas the creation is feminine. So, it is creating, you know, it is understanding divinity in terms of hierarchy. This hierarchy is very gendered in nature; it is thereby saying that feminine is lower than masculine, by saying that god is masculine and you know the created, the humans or the creatures are feminine.

So, with respect to the general point of view of Islamic spirituality, which include but are not limited to Sufism, the stress is on god's feminine aspects which exists within a greater masculinity conceived as all-encompassing cosmos. So, Sufism focuses more on the feminine you know qualities in the god. We see this tendency as Shariah understands god more as you know, god as a lawmaker, a law giver of justice and that is the imagination of a very stern Allah right, a very strict divine imagination.. imagination of the divine. On the other hand, Sufism celebrates the idea of a kind and a very personal god that can be loved, right, that can be treated as one's lover, right. So, from the perspective of god's control over and identification with his creation, the creator is revealed by the mystic tradition, such as a Sufi as both feminine and masculine simultaneously; that is where Sufi order is coming from, right. There is no special onus or emphasis on god's masculinity, right.

So, neither perception nor the qualities inherent in creator or creation are static or fixed, right. So, there is a kind of flow, there is a kind of you know flux. All these qualities are in a state of flux, they fluctuate in response to the relationship between the creator and the creation. So, we have you know a number of Sufi people who are in the state of flux in response to the relationship between the creator and the creation. So, we have you know a number of Sufi poems, where both the imageries and imaginations are available; the devotee being a feminized self, you know, and a bride seeking union with Allah, the masculine groom, right. Conversely, the god in many of Rumi's poems, the god is the veiled bride and the veil refers to the earthly distractions that keeps us away from union with the god.

So, the god is the veiled one the feminine being or existence, whereas the devotee is yearning to unveil and acquire knowledge of that divinity. So, we see this kind of reversal.. gender reversal, where there is no staticity, there is no fixedness and proportion to the stage of ascent or descent of an individual as he or she is progressing towards cultivating a conscious state of being, consciousness of god, of absolute reality.. these you know understanding. So, these presences of maleness and femaleness fluctuate, they change, right. So, The material plane, 'ālam-i nāsūt', ... So, 'ālam-i nāsūt' refers to the material plane or the outer manifestations of existence, which reflects the tendency of human beings to place themselves at the center of divinity or divine reality as different from other creatures, right.

So, here we see Islamic masculinity and femininity are predominantly conceived in static and homogenous terms. So, and this would be a more orthodox interpretation of you know Islam or Quran, where the man is fixed... has a very fixed and static social position as the breadwinner and the supreme authority you know figuring in the household, whereas the woman or the wife is primarily you know running the household chores, devoted to the husband, home and children. So, it is very stratified, hierarchical way of laying out a social pattern, right, social mores and conventions where the man is above the woman and it cannot be the other way round in any way. That is where you know the more orthodox reading of religion comes from, and even human being above all other creatures..a very anthropocentric point of view which generally informs all the Abrahamic religions - Judaism, Christianity and finally, Islam; all of them see humans and more strictly speaking man at the center of creation, right. It is very.. it is very not only homocentric, but androcentric in nature.

In this model, the man is routinely depicted as a spiritual warrior. So, celebration of his hyper-masculinity basically, whereas the woman is understood as deficient both in intellect and spiritual capacity, despite the presence of some of these great female adepts who defied such stereotypes. There were many female Sufi saints who you know revisited this kinds of stereotypes. They took Sufi order or Sufi cult and tradition on to a different level all together. So, this kind of a codified and definitive interpretation or vision is predicated on an ideal of sex segregation, male dominance and clearly delineates gender roles and relationships, right.

Most certainly there are many male you know such counterparts in all religions, for that matter in Hinduism we have Manusmriti that is doing something very similar to Shariah. It is very codified, very definitive, putting man at the center of and you know, the core generator of and enjoyer of this entire knowledge system. He is at the heart of the Vedic knowledge system. Women have been depicted in very narrow terms where a woman can either be a varvaneeta or a prostitute or she can be the household woman who is giving birth to children, and her roles are very distinct and defined in that sense.

She cannot be anything beyond that. So, we could say that Shariah is very similar to Manusmriti in that way and even the caste divisions are very clearly.. very clear terms defined in Manusmriti, right. So, Sufi literature and poetry is rife with examples of, you know, ignorant women. Even Sufi.. some of the orthodox Sufi branches are talking about you know.. they reinforce the stereotype of ignorant women who manifest the characteristics of blameworthy souls that lead to evil. The biological emotional conditions of the female gender have been understood by many male and female Sufis as an impediment on the path to perfection of the soul and union with the divine. And this, I mean, pertains to all the religions and very prominently present in Hinduism.

In Christianity, obviously, the story of Adam and Eve where Eve is the cause of the fall from paradise, right. So, yet having said that, Sufis have also been known to challenge such received knowledge about you know normative models of gender. Several studies have exposed the ways in which the materiality of gender is challenged by the Sufi adept, in the process of communicating spiritual lessons about the importance of community, the perfection of faith and ultimately the purification of the seeker's soul. So, Deepak Mehta's study of a community of Ansari weavers in the Barabanki district of UP in India talks about the relationship between Sufi baba who is a local mystic and his fellow Ansaris. It illustrates how gender reversals that shape social relationships also blur the

lines.. blur the lines not only between masculine and feminine, but between spiritual and material exchanges in everyday interactions and in ritual context.

So, you know Deepak Mehta's study of this community of Ansari weavers in the Barabanki district present in UP India is looking at the relationship between the Sufi baba and his disciples, the fellow Ansaris. It illustrates.. it illustrates how gender reversals that are responsible for shaping social relationships also blur the lines.. lines between the masculine and the feminine as well as the spiritual and the material exchanges in everyday interactions and in ritual contexts. So, Sufi baba describes himself both as a male and a female, and is seen by others as embodying both the genders within his one body; that is very interesting. He enacts and reifies this gender ambiguity constantly through an affective relationship with his audience that encompasses his multiple roles in the community. Such a baba is a spiritual performer and also has some very interesting you know social interventions, right, the multiple roles in which... multiple roles through which he intervenes the society. So, he can you know have multiple functions in a community- healer of women in his everyday medical practice, liaison or go-between for the prostitutes and their customers, and a cross-dressing clown during the annual Chelam festival.

So, we see that it is very motleyed, a very layered identity that this person has, which is very much a departure from the seriousness that any religion entails and this kind of a figure such as the Sufi baba among the Ansaris is thriving in a you know, at the margins, with very marginal subjects; as his you know.. as a part of his cosmos he is dealing with the women who are marginalized gender-wise and then with the prostitutes who exist at the peripheries of any given society and then dressing up as a clown. So, religion not only for edification, but also for entertainment. It is a very multifarious and a very interesting position that a figure like the Sufi baba wears[poses], right. A very interesting layered identity that he wears and he is.. he claims himself neither as a male nor as a female. We will talk more about this phenomenon and you know, this practice among the Ansari viewers in our next lecture. Thank you. Thank you very much.