

## **Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia**

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**Lecture 38**

**Gender and Performance in Sufi Movement IV**

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So, we are discussing gender and performance in the context of the Sufi tradition and the Sufi movement. The issue of gender and women have remained at the heart of all the debates or most of the debates on Islam and Islamic culture in general and the Sufism as a movement in particular. So, at the levels of discourse and engagement with the worldly affairs, Sufism offers a significant space to women and accommodates the gendered beings, which also include the transgendered community besides the male and the female. So, Sufi is conception of Insani Kamil, Insāni Kāmil (Al-Insān al-Kāmil) or perfect human being and also the concept of Waliullah, friends of Allah constitute a diverse spectrum of imaginations and consequently they impact the social world of Sufi activities. So, how a group, a religious group, a spiritual group envisions gender becomes very important and it reflects on their social activities, their social facet and principles. So, here critic Sharify-Funk says that the Sufi conceptualization of complete or perfect human being imply a state in which Jalal or the masculine and Jamal or the feminine qualities become integrated. Therefore, the question of gender remains a highly significant theme and it occupies a central focus within the context of Sufism. So, I remember I was discussing this in our previous lecture, how as the superlative human with the best of the qualities, you know, Prophet Muhammad emerges as you know someone that is beyond this, you know compartmentalization, this bifurcation of male and female, he has the best of the attributes of both the male or masculine and the female or the feminine, right. And that is how with all these superlative qualities of both genders, a person can become an ideal and exemplary leader that you know Prophet Muhammad is believed to be.

Yet, we see that the historical trends show that women within the Sufi thought and activity have been traditionally marginalized, situated at the margins. These trends are shaped based on specific socio-cultural contexts and the popular discourses which testify to the women's position and status in the religious and spiritual domains, and especially

here we are talking about Sufism as a phenomenon in the South Asian region. So, on the other hand, conversely it has been a common tendency for many male Sufis to use the feminine pronouns while explaining their relationship with the divine through poetry, through different art forms. So, we see that the feminized male is a very common existence within the Sufi repertoire, Sufi artistic and literary repertoire and that is very much available at the you know, through art forms such as Qawwali, through songs, through poetry we see the feminized males, the feminized male performer's submission to the divinity or Allah. However, the biological female is excluded from these performances very strategically.

And a lot of critics would agree that more historical evidence is required to disinter, to unearth the South Asian socio-cultural dynamics while considering the gender hierarchies in Sufi thought and activities. Now, we will talk a little about the qawwali tradition. Qawwali music is the mystic worship ritual of the Sufis. The act of listening to qawwali usually at the shrine of a past Sufi master or past Sufi Murshid is an important part; it is considered as a vital part of Sufi spiritual practices. This music is very much a part of the North Indian semi-classical corpus, it runs along a hereditary line.

So, just like you know classical music gharanas, we have hereditary line where qawwali performers you know, have to carry the art as a trade because their forefathers did so. It could be a blood lineage, it could also be understood as a you know, murid-murshid gharana or silsila. So, it runs along a hereditary line and it is taught to male descendants through oral tradition. However, the musicians differ from other Indian classical musicians. So, there are certain overlaps between Hindustani classical music and you know, the qawwali form.

You know, although it is pervasive and popular in the North Indian states, we see that singing mystical verses while observing the rules of the different ragas or melodic structures and also the concept of taal or rhythm, they are additionally fulfilling religious duty. So, just like Hindustani or Karnatic music, there are concepts of taal and lay and raag, there is a certain rag at the heart of each qawwali informing it. However, additionally it has a religious connotation where you know singing a qawwali is not purely and merely for entertainment. Additionally, it is also fulfilling a religious purpose. Having said that, it would be very you know, it would be a little misleading to say that in this sense. qawwali is entirely different from Hindustani classical music.

Why? Because you know, in the Indian context, in the South Asian context at large, it is very difficult to separate performance from religion. It would be wrong or erroneous to say, for example, that Hindustani classical music is not doing or not serving the purpose that qawwali is doing in the Sufi tradition. The ragas and raginis are you know, they have personifications, they are embodied. So, a lot of you know, ustad or masters of classical music in the Indian context have said that these ragas and raginis have their gender, they are embodied; they are gendered, they have their mood, they have their challenge and they have their colors, they have the correct time of performing them. So, there are certain very you know, human-like traits you know, anthropomorphic traits associated with the ragas and the raginis.

They are like the demi-gods and goddesses, right. They are like you know, they are similar to the figure of the muse, right, in the Greco-Roman tradition; not quite the same, but similar. So, ragas and raginis and the class Indian you know, Hindustani classical music being entirely dissociated from spirituality would be a wrong thing to say. It is not very different from what qawwali is trying to do. Maybe qawwali is you know, directly situated within the shrine, the Hindustani classical music may not have to be sung always within the sanctum sanctorum, but the purposes are quite you know, overlapping/converging.

So, qawwali not only utilizes, you know, the Indian ragas, but also has contributed some of its own you know traits to the mainstream tradition. For example, the concept of Tarana, the musical genre known as Tarana, which is now also part of Hindustani classical music, engendered from qawwali. So, Tarana refers to rhythmic pieces consisting entirely of syllables that are drawn from Persian and Arabic phonemes accompanied by percussive sounds, sounds of percussion such as tabla or pakhwaj. So, the word 'qawwali' comes from the Arabic word 'qaul'. So, 'qaul' is the etymological root of 'qawwali', which literally means utterance of the name of god and it refers to the genre and its performance.

So, basically it has a quality of dhikr. We were talking about dhikr and sama; they are all inbuilt.. these qualities and the intentions of dhikr and sama are inbuilt in qawwali. So, performers are known as qawwals, singers and musicians who usually operate in groups and these groups can consist of any number of people. However, they commonly include a lead singer, one of the two secondary singers who provide melodic counterpoints and also play the harmonium, and then at least one percussionist. Now, we were talking about the larger context of gender and performance vis-a-vis the Sufi movement.

Women's position in Sufism and more specifically within the qawwali performances has been discussed while talking about Islamic femininity, and we see that there are gendered hierarchies and women's existence or women's presence itself is quite complex. Women's agency, the idea of women's agency in a dargah is quite layered and complex. Sufi principles allow agency to women in order to function according to the spiritual motivations within the traditional sites of ritualized performance. The agency, however, comes into a dialectical tension as women, on the other hand, are represented as pious.

Okay. So, we see that on principle Sufis allow agency to women in order to function according to their spiritual motivations within the traditional sites of ritualized performance. However, this purported agency that has been you know granted to the woman comes into a dialectical tension. This is because women, on the one hand, are represented as pious and in position of spiritual authority and yet on the other hand, they are sidelined from having agency within the qawwali performance. So, the Chishti Orders, also known as Chishtiyya, right, they are examined as a traditional site of musical performance. Their Kanqah or community center, primarily existing in the northern parts of India, were instrumental in the spreading of Islam through charity, through charity work.

It was at the Dargah of Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti, one of the noted preceptor from the Chishti Order or Chishti Gharana and his successors that the devotional music of Sufi became popular. So, Muinuddin Chishti's Silsila or lineage made the devotional music of Sufis very very popular. Sufi music has been successful in transmitting Sufi ideals to the mainstream audiences in a seamless fashion. They transcend, we have talked about the 'trans' quality of the Sufi movement of the Sufi tradition itself, where it is transcending gender boundaries, national boundaries, religious, ideological boundaries. It is constantly trying to become something more than the fixed ritualistic or codified space.

So, Amir Khusrau is another very big, very important name vis-a-vis the Sufi movement. He is from the Chishti Order and has been one of the biggest contributors to Sufi music. Amir Khusrau was credited for creating, for example, a bricolage, a bricolage or a mishmash, a very interesting experimentation with Indian, Turkish, Arabian and Persian musical traditions. So, you know, music existing at the crossroads of so many different, you know, cultures, Indian, Turkish, Arabian and Persian, we can imagine how beautiful

the hybrid forms might be. And you know, the resultant what we get, what emerges or churns out of this mishmash is what we today refer to as Qawwali.

So, this art form can be found in Pakistan and Bangladesh besides India. The songs are usually sung in Urdu and in Punjabi. These are the languages that resonate with all the three countries, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, especially, you know, in Pakistan and India. Urdu is.. in northern part of India, Urdu is a prevalent language. So, Pakistan also had notable Chishti sheikhs, such as Tajuddin Chishti, Noor Muhammad Maharvi, Muhammad Suleman Taunsvi, Khwaja Ghulam Farid, among others. Their shrines, the shrines of these Sufi saints, especially in the Punjab and Sindh regions of Pakistan are rich with the presence of the Humnawas, Humnawas referring to the Qawwali musicians.

The music of the Humnawas can also be heard in India and by extension in other countries too, due to the prolific use of the internet and improvements of, improvements in technical apparatus. So, at traditional sites of Sufi music, one can observe how technology provides amplification for the Qawwali performances. Thanks to technology, you know, these art forms, these musical traditions have now transcended their places of origin. They have now become global, they have a wider audience and they are followed by people from, you know, you know, coming from different cultures and different backgrounds. Now, we have to understand the Islamic practice of Sama or listening to sacred words in accompaniment with music is one of the salient references and at the heart of Qawwali performances in different shrines.

So, I was talking about Sama and Dhikr being integral to and an intrinsic part of the Qawwali performances. Qawwali is therefore the devotional music of the Chishtiyya Sufi order in South Asia. So, we see that scholar Regula Burckhardt Qureshi describes the Qawwal as someone whose profession it is to perform Qawwali as a devotion, as an expression of love, and it is a guide towards a knowledge of love through self-realization. It is a manifestation of love through art and aesthetics. So, Sufi music's live experience such as Dhikr, chanting the Divine Name of Allah and Sama, which is the audition in a traditional special model, seeks to guide its audience to fanah.

So, even the audience that is participating in this process through passively participating, albeit just listening to the music, is also going to be guided to the process of or through

the process of fanah, you know absorption into the spiritual realm and finally, self-annihilation, annihilation of any ego. So, it would not be wrong to say that the performer and the audience, the artist and the audience are unified through the art form, they become together, they become one through the art form and the art form actually is translated or the art form becomes after point none other than God, which you know makes everyone come together. So, the feeling of the experience of the audience is also elevated to a state of fanah, it is also a spiritual journey on the part of the audience. So, the role of the audience is no less than that of the artist. The audience actually fulfills, completes the circle, the journey, what the artist has to give and the audience you know takes, it is a complementary position or relation.

There is a devotional form of etiquette or adab that follows the qawwali performances at the dargah, which is enforced by a class of hereditary performing groups. For instance, hand clapping is discouraged from the audience, the general sitting position is observed behind the qawwali group so that both the audience and the qawwals are facing the shrine. So, the entire experience between the audience and the performer is dedicated to or directed towards the shrine, implying the dead Sufi master whose shrine it is. These hereditary groups dominate the chants and the spiritual functions in the groups that perform the qawwali and not all groups can perform in all the shrines. So, they have their lineage and their you know, rights to perform in certain places.

This is I mean something that we see in across so many different Hindu and Muslim traditions all over South Asia where certain gharanas, certain lineages are associated with certain shrines and temples. Regula Burkhardt Qureshi has been at the forefront of studying the Muslim musical culture in India and Pakistan. Her works amongst the hereditary performers emphasize primarily the mystical poetry, the musical expression and their function in supporting the spiritual needs of the audience, how the music serves and tends, take cares of the spiritual needs of the audience. So, Qureshi's research into the recorded aspects of qawwali reveals the prominence of hereditary performance groups and their claims to guard the spiritual culture of a given shrine in terms of or as sanctioned by the patrons and spiritual experts. So, apparently certain lineages can guard certain shrines according to the rules laid out or you know, according to the spiritual culture laid out by the patrons and the experts.

So, Qureshi portrays the division of the shire and the qawwali performances along gender lines. The live performances belong to the male domain and she portrays women's participation solely in the realm of listening. So, all the visibility that women can have in

this entire you know practice and tradition of qawwali is in the position... or they can play the role of the audience. They have only the position as the listeners in the realm of listening. Qureshi would argue that even though women are generally you know historically sidelined in these performances, the recorded aspects of qawwali music provide increasing amounts of agency to women as listeners.

So, as listeners, women do not have a passive position, rather they are active more due to the fact that women exercise agency at home more than men and therefore, their decisions become dominant in the choice of which qawwali music should be played. So, they can exert their choice within the realm of domesticity although in the shrines, social bondings... So, although in the shrines the homosocial bondings are more prevalent where women are categorically invisibilized. So, Annemarie Schimmel and Carl Ernst argue along similar lines in their delineation of women's agency as listeners. Women are said to have access to Sufi preachers and historically, it is believed that they have also been allowed to attend meetings in the 9th and 10th centuries.

So, Qureshi's work as well as Schimmel and Ernst's research do not engage with the accommodation of women's voices in the religious qawwali performances. Although there are suggestions that women have been performing in public meetings in the past, you know their contemporary role remains kind of silent or it is not mentioned too much. It is worth noting that this sidelining of women's participation in qawwali occurs all across India. The Sharia law that helps to frame Islamic traditions and practices, you know social practices has played a seminal role and you know, it is very significant vis-a-vis this attitude, this attitude of marginalizing the women. The Islamic patriarchy is at the roots of deciding that women should stay behind the pardah.

So, the Sharia law and its depiction of women as being you know lesser than men, traditionally speaking, that is how it has been and also women being depicted as source of pollution has led to women's invisibility with regard to performances of qawwali. According to interpretations of Sharia law, women are traditionally prohibited from singing in the presence of men. This rule for women not to sing in the dargah or any public place is connected to the larger concern of adultery associated with the Sharia law. The presence of women in dargah is supposed to cause for men to slip from their you know, their modest path, their faith, their iman; the larger concern, therefore lies in the inherent guilt that is attached or associated to the male desire and to the female sexuality. So, the male desire is you know, frequently associated to the so-called you know, female

titillation or women's presence causing some kind of erotic arousal and the supposed inability on the part of the woman to control her own sexuality.

This is a kind of guilt or a kind of precautionary measure that Sharia suggests and that is why women's presence in the public is prohibited. This need to lay blame basically worsens the sense of guilt and it is thereby also internalized by the women. They also feel that they are the source of pollution and source of you know problems associated with.. related with adultery. So, it is a kind of ideology, it is a kind of ideological explanation used to ensure regulation of female sexuality and to control the entry of women within the male-dominated public spheres. This plays into the exclusion of women's bodies in Islamic rituals.

So, this justifies women's exclusion. The patriarchal structure of most traditional performances is evidently visible at Nizamuddin Aulia's Dargah. It bears a very glaring sign right in the front, which states that no women are allowed in the shrine. So, looking at such a sign in one of the most prominent Dargahs resonates with or it harkens back what Pierre Bourdieu has to say. So, Bourdieu and Michel Foucault talk about the body as a practical direct locus of social control.. social control, state's control. The female body becomes a medium through which the rules of cultural life are indoctrinated as a habit.

So, after a point exclusion of the female becomes kind of a regular thing, it becomes normalized with repetition; any practice becomes kind of natural and normal, people stop questioning it. Such habits become a hereditary conditioning tool for other women to follow unquestioningly, thus using the female body as a vehicle for creating a culture of adherence to patriarchal control. According to Qureshi, women have no part in the Qawwali performance at any stage. This statement is, however, contested by other scholars, such as Shemeem Burney Abbas. So, Abbas argues against the patriarchal study of women's role within and with Sufi music.

And Abbas claims that women play a significant role in the Dargah community and researchers have not been able to study that so much or look for their contributions in the shrine mainly because they are blinded by the Pardah. So, they usually exist behind a veil or segregated section. Abbas' work gives agency to women in the larger encompassing function of the shrine, but she does not foreground however the absence of women's



voices within the musical context of Qawwali. So, women's roles within the Qawwali are marginalized. It would not be wrong to conclude that women are not so much visible.

Although sometimes there are special arrangements made to accommodate women, these prohibitions against women are justified via Sharia law, like I have already explained, and this has worked towards keeping the female gender or the female population away from the performance aspects of the shrine and thus made Qawwali as a homosocial discourse. You know, Qawwali has emerged in terms of androcentric domination. I would like to conclude our lecture here today and we will talk in our ensuing lectures about more other types of performances coming from different communities. But one thing that remains common is the absence of the female, the biological female, right? The man has to enact and dress up and assume the feminine role and this absence after a point becomes glaring and conspicuous. One understands that singing and dancing and you know community-gathering and entertainment have historically been understood as a homosocial discourse, entertainment being purely a domain of the males.

Males need that kind of entertainment, so it is for, of and by the males. Women have participated albeit from behind the pardas or some separated segregated space. They have been passive audience and so the economy around the female body, the fixation around the female body which defines the community's honor and prestige has been something very prevalent in across all traditions and cultures in the South Asian context. Women, you know, dancing and performing and singing is generally not seen as something modest by especially in terms of the upper caste, you know, ideologies or values. So, we will see similar absence of females from other dance-drama traditions.

It is not only pertaining to the Sufi tradition, a module which comes to an end with this lecture today and we are going to talk about other dance forms in our other modules. In our following modules, we see there how it is not only an Islamic cosmos that prevents or prohibits women from a public appearance or public performance. It has been present across the grids of, you know, communities. It has been a common trend across communities, castes and, you know, different ethnicities.

With this, I am going to stop my lecture here today. Thank you.