

A Synopsis

Mystical Symbolism in Poetry: A Study of the Selected Works of Baba Farid, Guru Nanak Dev, Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah

With Special Reference to:

Sri Guru Granth Sahib

Bulleh Shah

Waris Shah's Heer: A Rustic Epic of the Punjab

**A Synopsis Submitted for the Award of the Degree of the
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY in English**

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Worship me in the symbols and images which remind thee of me.

Srimad Bhagavatam, xi.v.

The term ‘mysticism’ has its origin in Neo – Platonism. It was derived from the Greek word *mystikos* which means ‘to initiate’. This meant the initiation towards spiritual truth and experiences. In philosophy as stated by the “Catholic Encyclopaedia”, mysticism refers to the “desire of the human soul towards an intimate union with the Divinity.”¹ Though it may sound ambiguous but mysticism brings a man closer to himself and takes him to those undiscovered realms which lie within himself. William James in his renowned book “The Varieties of Religious Experience” states:

...our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence, but supply the requisite stimulus and at a touch they are there. No account of the universe in its totality, can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded...they open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of accounts with reality.²

Despite different perspectives, all philosophies converge at the idea that mysticism is the technique which links or brings one closer to the Almighty. Robert S. Ellwood has comprehensively defined ‘mysticism’ as:

It may be regarded as the cardinal means towards ultimate transformation; it may be interpreted simply as a contact with the deity or plane that offers it through other means...a mystical experience is a state of consciousness whose dominant symbols and structures of thought, behaviour, and expression relate to ultimate transformation of self and world, and whose same symbols and structures derive

¹ Sauvage, George. "Mysticism." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 10. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911. Web. 24 June 2012.

² James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Forgotten Books, 2008. 270. *Google Book Search*. Web. 24 June 2012.

from or construct a system with theoretical, practical or sociological components also pointing towards ultimate transformation.³

Western mysticism evolved from the ideas of thinkers and philosophers such as Pythagoras, Plato, Plotinus, Aristotle, etc. These became the very basis of the Christian, Jewish and even Islamic beliefs. For Christians, mysticism concerns a spiritual transformation of the human self, the following of a path designed to produce more fully realized persons, "created in the Image and Likeness of God" and as such, living in harmonious communion with God, the Church, the rest of world, and all creation, including oneself. Some of the major Christian mystics include: Francis of Assisi, St. Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart and Teresa of Avila.

For centuries, writers and mystics have experienced sudden insights that seem detached from the flow of everyday perception. In many ways, these are the high points of human experience and the focus of artistic production. They are conveyed through symbols, which gave meaning to the poems of William Blake, William Wordsworth, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, etc. Symbolism thus forms the core of mystical works. It is through symbolism that the poet or the writer conveys his experience of the divine. The word symbol is derived from the Greek verb *symbolleîn*, 'to throw together', and its noun *symbolon*, 'mark' or 'sign'. It is an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or stands for something else. As has been pointed out by Carlyle, "In the Symbol proper, what we call a Symbol, there is ever, more or less distinctly and directly, some embodiment and revelation of the Infinite; the Infinite is made to blend itself with the Finite, to stand visible, and as it were, attainable there."⁴

Charles Chadwick divides the symbols used in literature into two broad categories of Human symbols and Transcendental symbols. Human symbols are confined to the ideas or expressions used by the poet in order to convey the meaning to the readers. Transcendental symbols, on the other hand, are those which "are not from the general human world but from

³ Mysticism Resources Page. *Definition on Mysticism*, by Robert S. Ellwood. *Information on Traditional and Modern Spiritualities*: n. pag. Web. 2009.

⁴ Symons, Arthur. *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1908. 3. Print.

a vast and general ideal world of which the real world is just an imperfect representation.”⁵ The concept of the ideal world was popularized by the eighteenth century philosopher Swedenborg but was originally inspired from the works of Plato.

Islam as a religion began with the teachings of Prophet Muhammad in 622 A.D. Islamic mysticism evolved from the spiritual practices of Muslim saints or *fakirs* and their adherence to the path commanded by God. Muslims consider “The Holy Quran” as the true, unaltered and final revelation of God. The Muslims follow the five pillars of Islam which are, *Shahdah*, *Salah*, *Saium*, *Zakah* and *Hajj* and also a strict code of life. Sufism, an off-shoot of Islam, began as a reaction to the strict religious practices of the Islam practitioners. It helped in the interpretation of Islam in a more liberal sense and was able to reach the masses. Some of the notable Sufi saints in the Indian sub-continent were Sheikh Farid ud-Din “Ganj-I Shakar”, also popularly known as Baba Farid, Muinu’d-Din Ajmeri, Amir Khusru and others.

“The Vedas”, “The Upanishads”, “The Ramayana”, “The Mahabharata”, “The Bhagavad Gita” and other spiritual texts form the backdrop of India’s spiritual and religious life. Due to political and social upheavals between the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries, a loosely associated group of teachers or *sants* initiated the Bhakti Movement. They wrote and preached their mystical experience in “a far simpler, non-intellectual and more colloquial language than is found in the majority of the traditional, sacred books”.⁶ They taught that people could cast aside the heavy burdens of caste and ritual and simply express their overwhelming love for God. Ravidas, Srimanta Sankardeva, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Vallabhacharya, Surdas, Meera Bai, Kabir, Tulsidas, Guru Nanak Dev, Namdev, Dnyaneshwar, Tukaram and other mystics spearheaded the Bhakti movement in the North. Their love for the Almighty can be perceived through the opening lines of the “Japji Sahib” which forms the essence of Guru Nanak Dev Ji’s teachings:

*Ik oa(n)kaar sath naam karathaa purakh nirabho niravair akaal moorath ajoonee
saibha(n) gur prasaadh //*

⁵ Chadwick, Charles. *Symbolism*. London: Meuthen & Co Ltd., 1971. 3. Print.

⁶ Davidson, John. *A Treasury of Mystic Terms: Part I- The Principles of Mysticism*, Volume 1. Radhasoami Satsang, Beas: Science of the Soul Research Centre, 2003. 146. Print.

// Jap //

aadh sach jugaadh sach // hai bhee sach naanak hosee bhee sach //1 //

By the Grace of the One Supreme Being, The Eternal, the All-prevading *Purusha*, the Creator, Without Fear, Without Hate, The Being Beyond time, Not-incarnated, Self-existent, The Enlightner.

Meditations

True in the Beginning, True the Primeval age,

True He is and True He shall be.⁷

With the Arab settlements in the early seventh century, the Islamic influence entered the Indian soil. In the eighth century, the province of Sindh (in present day Pakistan) was conquered by an Arab army led by Muhammad bin Qasim. Sindh became the eastern province of the Umayyad Caliphate. In the first half of the tenth century, Mahmud of Ghazni added the Punjab to the Ghaznavid Empire and conducted several raids deeper into modern day India. A more successful invasion came at the end of the twelfth century by Muhammad of Ghor. This eventually led to the formation of the Delhi Sultanate. Due to the socio-political upheavals, the two major movements of religious awakening- Sufism and Bhakti Movement had a powerful impact on the writings of the Punjab region.

Punjabi Literature which forms an important branch of Indian Literature, emerged with the works of Baba Farid. Punjabi language is said to have evolved from the Vedic language, *Prakrit*. Divided into a number of dialects, Punjabi language depicts an influence of both Persian and Bhakti saints on it.

The written form of Punjabi is the *Gurumukhi* script designed by the Sikh Gurus. With the advent of the Muslim rule in Punjab, along with the *Gurumukhi* script, the Arabic script was also used in the poetical works of Punjab. It was Guru Nanak Dev who first used the thirty-five alphabets of the *Gurumukhi* script in an acrostic called *Patti* or tablet in *Rag*

⁷ Singh, Dr. Gopal. *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*; Vol. 1. New Delhi: Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2005. 1. Print.

Asa. It then became a standard script which was later used by Guru Angad Dev for the writing of “Guru Granth Sahib”.

The first Sufi poet of Punjab, Sheikh Farid Ud-din “Ganj-I Shakar” (1173-1265), also popularly known as Baba Farid, gave inception to Punjabi poetry through his poetic verses. Baba Farid was born in Khotwal village near Multan, in Punjab region which is in Pakistan now. His father Sheikh Jamāl-ud-dīn Suleimān, and mother Kulsum Bibi were God-fearing and inculcated the ideals of daily prayers in him. When Baba Farid grew up, he shifted to Multan for higher studies. It was at Multan that Baba Farid came across his spiritual mentor, Hazrat Qutb-ud-Din Bakhtiar Kaki. He took Baba Farid along with him to Delhi. It is said that Baba Farid underwent severe penance and asceticism under Khwaja Qutb-ud-Din’s stewardship. Baba Farid’s growing popularity in Delhi made it difficult for him to perform his prayers and meditation. He soon left for Hansi in Hissar District. But he finally settled in Ajodhan, where he remained from about 1236 until his death in 1265. Baba Farid was given the title of “Ganj-I Shakar” as it is believed that once when he put in some pebbles in his mouth in extreme hunger they turned into sugar.

Baba Farid’s hymns and *shlokas* had the power to mesmerize even the Sikh Gurus. His hymns were preserved by Sheikh Ibrahim and some of his ancestors who occupied the Farid *gaddi* after Baba Farid’s demise. Some of his verses (about one hundred and thirty-four hymns and *shlokas*) were later included in the “Guru Granth Sahib” by Guru Angad Dev in three different sections. The hymns and *shlokas* of Baba Farid centre round the themes of transience and mortality, sin and suffering, self and pride, illusion and reality, pity and love, longing and nostalgia, alienation and fulfilment.

The works produced in the next two hundred years (roughly thirteenth to fifteenth centuries) in Punjabi Literature do not have the grandeur and the poetic genius as seen in the verses of Baba Farid. It was with the birth of the first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak Dev Ji (1469-1539) that Punjabi poetry re-gained its lost charm. As Professor Darshan Singh Maini points out:

This was one of those unique moments in the history of the Punjabi language when a man of extraordinary genius made it an instrument of the subtlest thought and deepest emotion. For once, the language of the people was lifted to such felicity and sovereignty that the humble and home-spun vernacular proved more

than a match for the classical and scholarly Sanskrit.... Guru Nanak's Poetry at once comprehended the classical poetic tradition and the current folk metres, folk rhymes and folklore.⁸

Guru Nanak Dev Ji was born on April 15, 1469, in a small village called Talwandi (now Nankana Sahib) near Lahore in the present day Pakistan. His father Kalyan Das Mehta (Mehta Kalu) and his mother Mata Tripta ji were Hindus belonging to the Vedic Kshatri (Khatri) caste. Guru Nanak had an elder sister named Nanki, who was the first to recognise Nanak as an enlightened soul.

When he was twenty-eight, it was said that one morning Guru Nanak went into deep meditation for three days. When he reappeared, filled with the spirit of God, he said nothing; he left his job and distributed to the poor all that he had. Accompanied by his childhood friend, Mardana, he left his town. It was then that Guru Nanak began his missionary work and travels.

As Navtej Sarna points out: "His purpose was to liberate the human spirit from the clutches of the priestly classes and the various monastic orders whose vested interest lay in making religion abstruse.... His message, however, was aimed at the common masses, both Hindu as well the Muslim populace."⁹ Nine hundred and seventy-four hymns or *shabads* of Guru Nanak Dev Ji have been included in the "Guru Granth Sahib" in nineteen different *ragas*.

The Sikh Scripture, "Guru Granth Sahib" is a masterpiece in itself. Having been divided according to musical measures or *ragas*, "Guru Granth Sahib" has a melody which can be felt throughout the text. The images and symbols that have been prominently used are those which are taken from our daily life and which can be easily understood. A number of renowned scholars have tried to translate the Holy Scripture in English Language. But it was Dr. Gopal Singh to whom goes the credit for completing the first complete translation of "Sri Guru Granth Sahib" into English in 1960. As the first English translation, it was welcomed by non-Punjabi readers and was also accepted by the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabhandak Committee. Mrs. Pearl S. Buck, Nobel Laureate, also states:

⁸ Miani, Darshan Singh. *Studies in Punjabi Poetry*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1979. 3. Print.

⁹ Saran, Navtej. *The Book of Nanak*. India: Penguin Books, 2003. 127. Print.

I have studied the scriptures of the great religions, but I do not find elsewhere the same power of appeal to the heart and mind as I find here in these volumes. They are compact in spite of their length and are a revelation of the concept of God to the recognition and indeed the insistence upon the practical needs of the human body.¹⁰

With the immense contribution of the Sikh Gurus to the Punjabi poetry, the Sufi poets of Punjab also added significantly to it. Some of the prominent Sufi poets writing in Punjab were Shah Hussain, Bulleh Shah, Sultan Bahu, Shah Sharaf and Ali Haider. Bulleh Shah (1680-1758) has been considered one of the greatest Sufi poets of the Punjab. His poems are not only read by the Arabic and Punjabi reading students but they have also been put into musical compositions and are widely popular even today. Bulleh Shah was born in 1680 in the village of Uch Gilaniyan in Bahawalpur State (Pakistan). Later, his family moved to the village of Pandoke. He received his early education from his father. Bulleh Shah was an eminent scholar of Arabic and Persian Literatures. In his compositions one can find a number of references to Islamic thought and mystical expressions. As has been pointed out by J. R. Puri and T. R. Shangari, “When he attained mystic realization, his erudition and learning acquired a new significance. But Bulleh Shah had to go through a hard struggle before he attained this inner knowledge.”¹¹ Bulleh Shah came to Lahore in search of a spiritual teacher. He heard of Shah Inayat’s greatness and asked him to be his *murshid* or master.

Bulleh Shah’s poetry has been divided into a number of *Kafis*, *Barah Maha*, *Atthvara*, *Gandhan*, *Dohre* and *Siharfi*. His poems have been translated in English by J. R. Puri and T. R. Shangari of the Radhasoami Satsang, Beas. Love and longing for the Divine are the recurring themes of Bulleh Shah’s poetry as can be seen in the following lines of one of his popular *Kafis*:

Bulle Shah piyare bajhon
Rahe uraar na paar
Rabba hun ki kariye

Uth gaye gawandon yaar

¹⁰ Singh, Dr. Gopal. *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, Vol. 1. New Delhi: Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2005. xiv. Print.

¹¹ Puri, J. R. & T. R. Shangari. *Bulleh Shah*. Beas: Radha Soami Satsang, 2010. 5. Print.

Rabba hun ki kariye

O Bullah, away from the dear Master,

I am neither on this shore nor across.

O Lord, what shall I do?

The Beloved is about to leave my neighbourhood.

O Lord, what shall I do?¹²

The eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries saw the growth of Qissa poetry in Punjabi poetry. The Qissas have been a popular entity of Punjabi poetry for they combine the message of divine love with the physical love portrayed in the love legends of Punjab. The Qissa poetry evolved with Damodar Gulati's "Heer Ranjha", which became a model for later Qissa poems like "Sassi Puhnu", "Sohni Mahiwal" and "Mirza Sahiban". But it was through Waris Shah's "Heer", that Qissa poetry gained an epic stature.

Waris Shah (1735-1784) was born in Jandiala Sher Khan, now in Pakistan, in a Sayyed family. Waris Shah's parents are said to have died when he was young. He acknowledged himself as a disciple of Pir Makhdum of Kasur and received his education at the shrine of his preceptor. After completing his education in Kasur, he moved to Malka Hans.

Waris Shah's "Heer" is much praised for its blend of both the sensuous and the philosophical aspects. Some critics say that through this story of romantic love, Waris Shah tried to portray the love of man for God (the quintessential subject of Sufi literature). Waris Shah's "Heer", has been popular the world over for its beauty and descriptions. The epic was first translated into English in prose by Charles Frederick Usborne. Later, it was translated into verse by S. N. Dar and was published posthumously.

The mystical experiences of these spiritualists gave them access to those undiscovered realms which are beyond our mundane human understanding. Baba Farid, Guru Nanak Dev, Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah, are four pillars of Punjabi poetry each adding his own beauty to the genre.

¹² Puri, J. R. & T. R. Shangari. *Bulleh Shah*. Beas: Radha Soami Satsang, 2010 . 165. Print.

Though some critical studies on these distinguished poets have been made, but the extant criticism deals with an analysis of one or two poets at most. A comprehensive study of “mystical symbolism” in the works of these four great poets will, therefore, yield significant results and open new avenues of research in the field of mysticism and Punjabi poetry.

The aims and objectives of the study are:

- a. To study mystical symbolism as depicted in classical Punjabi poetry.
- b. To analyse the nature of traditional symbols and the influence of Sufism and Bhakti on the poems of Baba Farid and Guru Nanak Dev.
- c. To probe the relationship between human love and divine love, the use of the leitmotif of union and separation in the poems of Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah.
- d. To explore the elements of music, features of style and use of symbols in the poetic depiction of mystical experience.
- e. To compare the wealth of common elements and shared experiences of these great mystics and explore some differences in the traditions they represent.

Tentative Chapter Division:

Chapter I: Mystical Symbolism and Love in Poetry: A Historical Survey

Chapter II: The Poets in the Making: Formative Years and Influences

Chapter III: The Poetry of Baba Farid and Guru Nanak Dev: A Study of Spiritual Consciousness

Chapter IV: Colours of Love: The Fusion of the Shades of Union, Longing and Pain in the Poetry of Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah

Chapter V: The Convergence of Textual Elements, Music and Poetry: A Stylistic Study

Chapter VI: Conclusion

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