

# Exploring Gendered Spirituality and Representation of Women in Punjabi and Urdu Sufi Poetry: A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA)

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## Abstract

This study explained gendered spirituality representation of women in Punjabi and Urdu Sufi poetry, how Sufi poets Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah for Punjabi and Amir Khusru and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai for Urdu use the feminine tropes and female characters to convey Sufi ideals. The objective of this study was to determine whether the selected poets in their poems portray women as expected by the socio-cultural realities of their respective regions or as non-conformists to the existing patriarchal culture. The study employed qualitative research method. Lazar's (2007) Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) utilized as framework of the study. The sources of data for this study were four poets; Bulleh Shah with two poems- Bullah ki Jana Main Kaun and Tere Ishq Nachaya; Waris Shah with Heer Ranjha; Amir Khusro with Chhap Tilak and Zihal-e-Miskeen; and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai with Sur Marvi and Sur Sassui. This study highlighted, the authors sought to understand how feminine imagery is used to represent the soul's process of portraying its journey towards divinity and how such representations both conform to and subvert patriarchal authority. The findings of the study showed that all four poets employ the trope of the feminine to express spiritual endurance, surrender, and rebellion; however, Punjabi bards Bulleh

Shah and Waris Shah provide a more overt assault on the culture and norms of the period than do the typically more subtle Urdu poets Khusro and Bhattai. The study enriches the existing knowledge on gender and spirituality in Sufi poetry by focusing on the South Asian region, comparing the representations of women under regional contexts, and shedding light on the ways Sufi traditions intersect with patriarchy.

**keywords:** gendered spirituality, sufism, feminine imagery, patriarchy, Bulleh Shah, Waris Shah, Amir Khusro, Shah Abdul Latif Bhattai, Punjabi sufi poetry, Urdu Sufi Poetry, feminist theory, South Asian Mysticism

## **Introduction**

Since Sufism is a mystic form of Islam, it has added much to Punjabi as well as to Urdu literature. In these literatures they also get their place of talking especially in Sufi poetry. Thus, this paper explore gendered spirituality in Punjabi and Urdu Sufi poetry and the roles assigned to/wanted by women in relation to it and how that affects the general understanding of gender in Sufism. As in the case of interpreting Sufi poetry, many of the prior works have been concentrated on the ascension and union of affection between the soul, man or male and the divine or feminine divinity, Spiritual or the kingdom of God. As much as there are appreciations for women roles concerning the development of Sufisms, there is no respect for the physical women in the Sufi work. The goal of this research shall therefore be to fill this gap by examining how women are portrayed as persons, their position within Sufism and how they interact with Sufi holiness. This study will uncover various positive portrayal of women by using texts from famous Sufi poets writing in Punjabi and Urdu languages such as Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah, Amir Khusrau and Shah Abdul Latif Bhattai. They may be the main women saints or the mythological mistresses or simply the women figures who are portrayed as mere objects of domination in society. This means that the sources include the historical and cultural context of the poetry work, the poetic features of the work and the theological antecedents of the images that are depicted. In conclusion, this study intends to contribute towards enhancing the understanding of spirituality with a gender lens that does not reduce Sufism as a male domain of practice. Therefore, the understanding of how the image of a woman is incorporated in the Sufi poetry might be useful for the interpretation of gender, religious and spiritual dimensions in the cultures of South Asia.

Sufism, which is an Islamic mystic, has greatly impacted the cultures of South Asian especially as expressed in Punjabi and Urdu literatures. In these literatures, the issues of the roles women or images of women have been an object of critical analysis by scholars to understand the status and perception of women or the impact and influence of women's role in Sufi thought and practice (e. g., Nasr, 1964; Chittick, 1987; Siddiqa, 2008).

Prior studies on Sufi poetry have paid attention to Sufi metaphors describing union of the masculine soul and the feminine divine or the indeed, the theory of Islamic goddess (Nasr, 1964; Chittick, 1987). However, the focus has been given to study the female icons only in Sufi text whether positive or negative picture but the real women's voices have not been explored enough. Siddiqa (2008) has started with this discourse and explored women's representation as individuals and their parts in the Sufi groups. However, there is still much that can be explored about Punjabi and Urdu Sufi texts and specifically, the representation of 'feminine' and 'masculine' within them. This research will endeavor to augment this existing database by laying out the role of women in such literatures and the consequences of such portrayals when it comes to gender relation within Sufi experience in thought and practice.

### **Scope of the Study**

This study will focus on the representation of women in the poetry of four prominent Sufi poets from Punjabi and Urdu traditions: From the Punjabi poetry, there are Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah and from the Urdu poetry, Amir Khushro and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai. These poets were chosen because of their imprint on the Sufi poetry and the variety of ways, in which they describe women. Bulleh Shah is one of the most famous Punjabi Sufi poets, who has become famous for his rebellious position in relation to religion and social norms. Some of the issues that were evident in his poetry include social norms and expectations particularly those that erupted to the theme of gender. Another Punjabi Sufi poet who went into oblivion for a while is Waris Shah who's most famous work 'Heer' runs a critique of love and the social order. There is a main female character Heer in poem who go against the norms of the society and run behind her beloved Ranjha. In urdu tradition, Amir Khushro is reckoned among the earliest Sufi poets or he lies amongst the first rank of Sufi poets. The architectural designs incorporated elements of Persian and Turkish influences in an indication of the cultural difference in the region. Some of the more recent poets of this tradition are Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai of the Sindhi language who focused on nature and Sufism

with his Urdu poetry. In many of his poems, he puts female characters as representatives of divine affection and magnificence. Thus, through the analysis of the poetry of the four mentioned poets, this work will investigate the various aspects of the image of women in Punjabi and Urdu Sufiisms. Some of the factors to be taken into consideration in the analysis include the social and historical background of the creation of the poetry; the poetic strategies utilized; and the religious/religious overlook of the representations.

### **Problem Statement**

The aim of this research is to fill the existing gaps in the current literature, which fail to provide sufficient focus on the depiction of women in Punjabi and Urdu Sufi poetry. Contrary to former studies, in which mainly the unification of spirit (man) and divinity (woman) or the idea of goddess-worship was explored, the concrete representation of women in Sufi texts has been investigated comparatively seldom. This study seeks to address this gap in scholarship by assessing the role of women in the poetry of famous Sufi poets from the Punjabi and Urdu traditions and the representation of gender within Sufism.

### **Research Questions**

- 1) How do Bulleh Shah, Waris Shah, Amir Khusro, and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai employ feminine imagery and symbolism to convey spiritual concepts in their Sufi poetry?
- 2) In what ways do the representations of women in Punjabi and Urdu Sufi poetry reflect or challenge the patriarchal norms of their respective socio-cultural contexts?
- 3) What are the key differences in the depiction of women between Punjabi and Urdu Sufi poets, and what do these differences reveal about regional variations in gendered spirituality?

### **Literature Review**

Islamic mystic tradition, particularly Sufism, has played an important role in shaping and transforming the socio-cultural aspects of both Punjabi and Urdu literatures. Women have been studied and understood particularly in these literatures, specifically with regards to how Sufi women and women in Sufism are depicted and a role and function of these portrayals in shaping the field's perspective on gender roles and representation in Sufism and Sufi culture as a whole (Nasr, 1964; Chittick, 1987; Siddiqa, 2008; Khan, 201)

## **Theoretical Framework**

The study *Exploring Gendered Spirituality: Representation of Women in Punjabi and Urdu Sufi Poetry* is based on Sufi, feminism, and post-colonialism. With this framework, the analyses of gender, spirituality, and cultural selves as represented by Bulleh Shah, Waris Shah, Amir Khusro, and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai can be conducted.

### **Lazar's Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA)**

Lazar's Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis afford a creative way of analyzing Punjabi and Urdu Sufi poetry in terms of how gender philosophies and power dynamics are co-constructed. Regarding gendered ideas, Sufi poets always describe femininity by dramatizing the roles of women as being symbols of either love or purity. These roles are placed firmly within wider cultural and religious frameworks, in which women's spirituality is positioned as either passive or maternal, which prolongs stereotypical gender roles (Lazar, 2007). Nevertheless, power dynamics are evident in this discourse since womanhood and spiritual experience in Sufi poetry can be silenced, or women's agency subjugated to male comradeship which takes over the spiritual leadership. This prevails as a poetry of Women in religious scriptures by the male dominated societies and norms. However, in some instances, Sufi poetry also provides place for voicing discontent and overthrow of the gender related norms. Some of these poems subvert these expectations by painting a picture of women's spirituality as empowering because female characters overthrow expectations and make decisions backed by their spirituality- thus countering patriarchal ideologies (Lazar, 2007). These examples of transgression indicate that Sufi poetry bears potential for negotiating and reaffirming Patriarchal models of femininity and for giving a layered picture of women's spirituality in Sufism.

Thus, applying the intersections of Lazar's Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), Sufi mysticism, feminism, and post-colonialism theories, the present work will lay down a theoretical framework for the interpretation of women portrayal in the Punjabi and Urdu. It also analyses how these representations operate as emblems of faith and of culture, and reveals and reinforces the gendered spirituality of the South Asian region.

### ***Sufi Mysticism and Gendered Spirituality***

Sufism being part of the Islamic tradition, deals mainly with the spiritual path and seeking of the soul through terms such as love and obedience. In Sufi poetry women are often represented as the souls or the beloved, sexual and purity (Schimmel, 1975). Building on this understanding, this study will use the perspective of Annemarie Schimmel who stressed on the importance of understanding female characters in Sufi literature pertinent to the nature of representing more than beauty and eroticism but representing spiritual experiences (Schimmel, 1975). Women in Sufi poetry are viewed as symbols of spiritual meaning and hence, more than caricatures of their culture.

### ***Feminist Theory and the Critique of Patriarchy***

Gender becomes an important analytical framework drawn from the feminist theory to understand how gender is constructed in Sufi poetry. This conceptualization raises questions about how the representation of women in poetry conforms to or challenges the patriarchal discourse. The principles of Simone de Beauvoir's famous work, "The Second Sex" published in 1949, can also be applied; with the idea of women being the Other and the subordinate part in male-dominated societies; including religious and spiritual ones. Thus, in this investigation of gender representations in Sufi poetry, the researcher intends to utilize the perspectives of the feminist theory in order to determine if the representations of women in Sufi poetry are aimed at empowering the female gender or if their purpose is to perpetuate the power relation between men and women.

### ***Postcolonial Discourse and Cultural Identity***

The framework derived from postcolonial theory of which orientalism by Edward Said (1978) is most relevant to the study of representation of women in Sufi poetry. This tradition continues in the colonial and postcolonial period where Sufi poetry in South Asia has been used to formulate and negotiate cultural and political identity and resistance to colonial powers. This research aims to understand how the selected poets, who wrote in Punjabi and Urdu, employed the image of woman as the signifier of spiritualism but as a way of signifying cultural defiance and creation of a Hyphenated identity in colonial and post-colonial Punjab and Sindh (Said, 1978).

### ***Representations of Women in Sufi Poetry***

Studying Sufi poetry, prior scholars defined it based on sensual components concerning the union of male soul (the seeker) and the female divine or the concept of femininity divine (e. g. , Nasr, 1964; Chittick, 1987). Though, there is an apparent focus on the role and place of women in Sufi texts, more attention is paid to the idealized images of women. To fill this gap, Siddiqa (2008), Khan (2015), and Hussain (2020) have started writing on how women are represented as persons and their parts in Sufi populations.

### ***Saintly Women***

Among these representations, the most protruding one is the representation of women in Sufi poetry as the saintly woman which is equal to the divine wisdom. They are portrayed as submissive women who are religious and loyal wives and mothers, thus being good examples for both sexes. For instance, in Bulleh Shah-Kalyan poetry, the lady saint offers direction to the spiritual seeker to attain the truth (Khan, 2015).

### ***Mystical Lovers***

Here are some other frequent topics in Sufi poetry in another piece of poetry, there is a motif of anthropomorphic attraction between the soul man and The Divine woman. The most common image of the woman in Sufi literature is that of being a divine beloved, the aim of the Sufi's search. According to Waris Shah's Heer Ranjha, Heer is a passionate lover – an embodiment of desire – seeking her beloved which is similar with the soul seeking the divine (Siddiqa, 2008).

### ***Marginalized Figures***

Besides these pure images Sufi poetry too portrays the hemmed-in woman – the prostitute, the widow and the low caste women. These figures are shown as the sufferers of social subjugation and discrimination, but they may also be depicted as the targets of pity and divinization. For example, metaphors of liberation in the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai have depicted the secluded women as the embodiments of blessing and mercy (Hussain, 2020).

### ***Gender Dynamics in Sufi Thought and Practice***

It is critically important to examine the place of women in Sufi poetry as it relates to the conditions of gender relations in Sufism as a whole. Sufi authorities encouraged the equality of men and women in the spiritual realm that is divine, Sufi communities themselves have not always been egalitarian. Mr Zain remarks that a number of scholars have suggested that Sufi mysticism

can best be understood as a mode of resistance of women to patriarchal values and gendered roles and responsibilities. However, it should be noted that stressing the non-differentiation of men and women spiritually may subvert traditional gender roles and power relations. However, others argue that Sufi practices may also be oppressive to women as they perpetuate gendered division of labor and make women subservient to men.

It is essential to note that the place of women in Punjabi and Urdu Sufi poetry is a topic that cannot be discussed in its entirety and simplicity. Although there can be various representations of women as pure and spiritual beings or as romantic souls, women can also be presented as being isolated and suffering. This exploration can offer a glimpse of the gender relations as entwined in Sufi idea processes and practices, as well as into cultural and historical contexts of Sufi poetry creation.

### **Methodology**

This research uses a qualitative approach based on the interpretivist paradigm to analyze women portrayal in Punjabi and Urdu Sufi poetry. This research approach is ideal for this study as the interpretivist approach leans heavily on how individuals and cultures find meaning in and construct their realities through expressions such as language and literature (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This research aims at demystifying the relationship between gender and spirituality as embodied by poetry of Bulleh Shah, Waris Shah, Amir Khusro, and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai.

### **Data Collection**

The method of data collection for this study is based on purposive sampled consisting of the poems written by the four selected Sufi poets. In terms of the selection of participants, the sampling technique used is purposive since the type of poems under analysis is predetermined in this study to suit the outlined study's theme of gendered spirituality. The selected poems are those which are either on the surface deal with femininity, spiritual love, and the position of women in the mystical path, or when read between the lines, convey similar messages.

### **Data Analysis Technique**

The data analysis will be conducted using the thematic analysis approach which is popular with qualitative data with an aim of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It should also be noted that the method of thematic analysis suits the



research of the topic of representations of women in poetry well as poetry is rich in the various shades of depiction that can be difficult to reveal without proper adjustment of the research approach.

### **Data Analysis**

This section engages with a set of poems from four classic Sufi poets, Bulleh Shah, Waris Shah (Punjabi), Amir Khusro, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (Urdu) to investigate how the themes of gendered spirituality and women are depicted in the text. Analyzing the poems like Bulleh Ki Jana Main Kaun, Heer Ranjha, Chhap Tilak and Sur Marvi, the critical analysis traces the overuse of female characters and tropes to convey metaphysical intentions. Understanding how the representations of women by the respective poets fit into the cultural and religious context of the poets, this analysis seeks to answer to what extent Sufi poetry deviates from or reinforces patriarchal gender roles, thus providing a rich perspective on gender and mysticism in the South Asian poetic tradition.

By looking through the lens of Lazar's FCDA, able to see in Punjabi and Urdu Sufi poetry how gender ideologies are constructed, how power is employed and how resistance can be achieved. Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah, two more Punjabi Sufi poets, can be seen as much more provocative about the structure of patriarchal construction wherein the female imagery is deployed as the sign and the symbol of revolt and spirituality as well. So why can't we regard Urdu poets like Amir Khusro as radical when like many other poets of medieval times, they openly celebrate lower half but are in fact criticizing the system subtly They redefine the feminine subjugation by sticking to the mere Patriarchal subjugation, hence it might be implied that they were subtly rebellious against the social structure? In extending and subverting such a thematic, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai portrays women as being in a pursuit of an elusive truth, and therefore shuns the subalternist discourse of docility and authority. Therefore, FCDA makes it possible to reveal on how Sufi poetry depicts the consideration and construction of the feminine, as well as the subversion of the gender roles that are dominant in the culture at large, but within the desired spiritual frames of FCDA. This approach helps not only to explain how gendered spirituality is constructed in Sufi poetry but also to map out ideological controversies between conformity and rebelliousness in the representation of women in poetry.

### **Table 1**

*Title: A Comparative Analysis by Urdu and Punjabi poets on representation of women in their poetry*

Poet	Poem	Themes of Gendered Spirituality	Representation of Women	Cultural Context and Interpretation
Bulleh Shah	Bulleh Ki Jana Main Kaun (I Know Not Who I Am)	Identity beyond social roles, transcending gender. The spiritual quest is depicted as a process of shedding worldly labels, including those of gender.	In the quest for spiritual awakening, gender identity is blurred or irrelevant. The soul is depicted in a universal manner, questioning rigid social roles and hierarchical distinctions, including those imposed on women.	Reflects Bulleh Shah's rebellion against rigid societal norms in Punjab. The spiritual transcendence challenges not only class and caste boundaries but also gendered expectations.
Bulleh Shah	Tere Ishq Nachaya (Your Love Made Me Dance)	Spiritual surrender symbolized through the feminine act of dance. The imagery of a woman dancing expresses a deep emotional connection to divine love and surrender of the self.	The female dancer represents the soul caught in ecstatic love. The dance is not seen as passive but as an active, joyous participation in the divine, challenging patriarchal notions of female passivity.	The dance motif resonates with Punjabi culture, where ecstatic expression of love is celebrated. It challenges traditional gender roles by attributing spiritual agency to women.
Waris Shah	Heer Ranjha (Epic Poem)	Love as a metaphor for divine union. Heer's determination and defiance serve as spiritual metaphors for resilience in the	Heer is depicted as a strong-willed woman, who defies societal norms and patriarchal constraints in pursuit of true	Set in the cultural context of rural Punjab, where love legends reflect the tension between societal norms and

		soul's pursuit of divine love.	love. Her steadfastness reflects the soul's resilience in seeking divine union, symbolizing the breaking of societal and gendered boundaries.	individual freedom. Waris Shah uses Heer as an embodiment of the struggle for spiritual and personal agency.
Amir Khusro	Zihal-e-Miskeen (The Plight of the Poor)	Themes of spiritual poverty and longing, expressed through a female voice. The soul's vulnerability in seeking divine grace is depicted in terms of emotional longing and deprivation.	The female voice in the poem reflects vulnerability and longing for union with the Divine. The depiction of poverty and love is feminized, showing women's emotional resilience and suffering as a spiritual path.	- Reflects the courtly and mystical traditions of Delhi. The feminized voice of longing in the poem symbolizes the spiritual seeker's vulnerability, aligning with Persian Sufi traditions Khusro adopted in his work.
Amir Khusro	Chhap Tilak (You've Taken Away My Beauty)	The bride as a metaphor for the soul in union with the Divine. Spiritual transformation through divine love, expressed through feminine imagery of adornment and loss of self.	The bride represents the soul, losing its individual identity in the overwhelming presence of the Divine. The act of losing beauty and worldly identity reflects the Sufi concept of annihilation ( <i>fana</i> ) of the self, where the woman's experience symbolizes	Part of the Indo-Persian Sufi tradition, where the metaphor of the bride represents the dissolution of the ego. The bride's role is both traditional and elevated, representing deeper mystical surrender rather than merely reinforcing gender roles.

			complete surrender.	
Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai	Sur Marvi (Chapter of Marvi)	<p>Marvi embodies loyalty and steadfastness, representing the soul's struggle to remain true to its spiritual path. The soul's resistance to temptation is symbolized by Marvi's defiance.</p>	<p>Marvi, a simple village girl, resists the temptations of wealth and power. She is portrayed as a symbol of spiritual purity and steadfastness. Her resistance to worldly allurements reflects the soul's dedication to remaining pure on the spiritual journey.</p>	<p>In Sindhi culture, Marvi represents the ideal of loyalty to one's roots and values. Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai elevates her to a spiritual archetype, showing that women's spiritual strength lies in their steadfastness and purity.</p>
Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai	Sur Sassui (Chapter of Sassui)	<p>Sassui's journey represents the soul's quest for union with the Divine. Her perseverance through trials reflects the inner struggles of the spiritual path,</p>	<p>Sassui's character embodies patience, endurance, and unwavering devotion. Her journey, fraught with difficulties, symbolizes the spiritual seeker's trials. The feminized perseverance challenges the gendered assumption of passivity, showing women as active agents in spiritual quests.</p>	<p>In Sindhi folklore, Sassui represents the ideal of devotion. Bhittai uses her character to reflect the Sufi path of spiritual endurance, where women's roles are not just supportive but central to spiritual narratives.</p>

The theoretical framework draws from the area of feminist literary theory and Sufi spirituality to scrutinize how ideas of the spiritual realm in Sufi poetry are related to the portrayal of female characters. Feminist theory enables the exercise of a gender analysis of the role of female characters and feminine symbols within the patriarchal and mystical discourse in South Asian culture. Through this lens, it is possible to determine whether Sufi poetry encourages or subverts the existing gender roles framework, and Sufi mysticism is the approach used to assess women's spirituality.

In *Bulleh Ki Jana Main Kaun* (I Know Not Who I Am) the master Bulleh Shah disturbs conventional Sufi morality along with male and female roles, by asserting that souls belong to the otherworld. Thus, for the sake of negation of the ego, Bulleh Shah liberates the soul from the cast, religion, and sex, expressing his protest of prejudice. It implies that on the journey to achieve the divine union of course this gender of the speaker is indeterminable, whether a man or woman.

Similarly in *Tere Ishq Nachaya* (Your Love Made Me Dance), there is a representation of feminine gesture where the Bulleh Shah is trying to convey that the soul dances only when it surrenders to the divine love. The women dancer is commonly depicted and the act of dancing can be seen as a metaphor of the spiritual pursuit of the lover. In this way, with the help of the Bulleh's freedom of spirits, the poet indirectly pays attention to gender issues in the patriarchal society of Punjabi women as a dancer. I have interpreted the dance as the act of religious surrender through which the soul gives itself and at the same time is strong. Even at this erotic level, feminist theory is useful for decoding the language of metaphor through which feminine incarnation signifies rapture, the utopic space of love as an sexual encounter in which gender difference is transcended by the God of the burning bush.

There is no question of the male-female dichotomy in Bulleh Shah's poetry as the poetry of Sufis is beyond the prescribed gender roles of a society. Feminist theory reveals how under its disguise Bulleh Shah uses feminine iconography as something more than just a silence and submission to the male authority.

In *Heer Ranjha* Waris Shah successfully constructs a story in which Heer, the female hero, represents spiritual love and rebellion. Heer's love for Ranjha is more than the pure love of this world; it is the soul's love for the Divine. Her rebellion against norms and patriarchy corresponds to Sufi rejection of the material world and societal limitations. Precisely, Heer's strength in

rejecting societal norms and choosing love and loyalty paints women not as submissive but powerful women involved in a spiritual journey. Heer's character represents the struggle of soul against the rigid norms of society, traditions such as forced marriages, and gender roles. Overall, the methodology of the feminist approach helps to focus on how Waris Shah places a woman at the core of the narrative of the spiritual revolt since the very motives of Heer, who is described as a rebel against the patriarchal system, may be viewed metaphorically as the Sufi self-rising against the chains of matter.

Readers find new appreciation through this creation by Waris Shah of named figure Heer in which she is depicted and defied stereotype image of woman as object of male delight. Instead, she is able to take control of her spiritual experiences and turn the film into a thought provoking work of feminism.

In Chhap Tilak (You've Taken Away My Beauty), brave Amir Khusro uses the metaphor of the soul being a bride and so she had no personal identify or self since she is with the Divine. Many motifs of Sufi poetry are quite similar to the literary representations of the feminine in world literature, such as an image of the bride is considered to symbolize the purified soul and surrender. The poem shows the element of annihilation of the self and follows the major Sufi principle where the soul of the woman gets complete in her submission. Thus the imagery of bride which Khusro uses corresponds with the patriarchal ideas of women's beauty, submissiveness, marriage but transforms them into symbols of spiritual change.

Obviously, Khusro does the same in Zihal-e-Miskeen (The Plight of the Poor) when he portrays spiritual destitution and desire through a female persona. It is explicitly stated from a female voice of the soul's lack and the positions of weakness are not flawed but are only a step towards the Divine. Applying the method of the feminist analysis, it becomes possible to look at how, although these metaphors were drawn from the cultural context of the poet, Khusro supplanted them with the imagery of spirituality.

While Amir Khusro refers to the female gender role in a traditional way, setting the soul as a bride and the world as the groom within the spiritual understanding of Sufism, he makes both of them paths to spiritual enlightenment. These latter aspects are what enable Feminist theory to simultaneously denounce the glorification of femininity while acknowledging the positive change-making potential, as identified by Khusro that relates to these qualities in the religious setting.

In both, Sur Marvi and Sur Sassui, the poet socializes two women personalities of Marvi and Sassui as spiritual strength and defiance. Marvi also refuses the riches and all the comforts provided to her, she prefers staying sincere and simple, as she is born, it fulfills the Sufi idea of shunning the wealth, sensual pleasure in search of spiritual enlightenment. Her submission does represent the soul that remains loyal to its Creator even in the face of sinfulness of the outward temptation.

In the same way, Sassui's never ceasing in the journey despite the fact that she is on search for her beloved symbolizes the soul's constant striving for union with the divine. Here Sassui stays loyal despite over and over attempts and she is therefore the icon of the spiritual fight. Thus, through these characters, Bhittai raises women's roles from mere being eroticized and objectified to players active in spiritual history where suffering and people's resistance are honored as victories over death.

Marvi and Sassui, the major creations of Bhittai, are a defiance to the stereotyped gender roles. Looks like the women take up the spiritual journey here. If one examines these characters using feminism, they will see how the above characters resist patriarchy, resilience and loyalty representing the soul's journey to divine love.

The Sufi ethical-mystical tradition stresses selflessness, and the soul's passion for the presence of God. The place of women and the significance of the feminine metaphors within this setting is another question entirely. Women are portrayed as searching for spiritual truths or as the embodiment of divine love as opposed to suffering or being subservient. Criticizing these representations, feminist theory questions whether the women presented in Sufi poetry are in any way more than symbols. In this case, the study shows that the selected poets do not just conform to the stereotypical representation of women as portrayed by masculine vigor, but they build on it to give women a symbolic victory of spirituality. These portrayals are also influenced by the cultural and spiritual background of each poet, providing a discussion into the manner in which gendered spirituality is conveyed in Punjabi and Urdu Sufi poetry.

This presentation shows that major Sufi poets use 'feminine' metaphors and figures to present 'masculine' mystical motifs in the poems that have been analyzed as examples of this trend. The combination of the two protests shows how women's role in Sufi mysticism involves not only the submission to divine will but also the urge to actively search for the spiritual world,

which provides women with a very active role rather than being just symbols behind which lie the wisdom of men.

## **Discussion**

The poets like Bulleh Shah, Waris Shah, Amir Khusro, and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai employing feminine metaphor is quite distinctive in context of Sufi message and likewise encompasses the traditional gender bias as well. Bulleh Shah uses feminine imagery dominantly to signify a journey of the essence beyond the earthly boundaries of male and female. As mentioned in perusing through *Tere Ishq Nachaya*, dancing, which is often associated with the female gender or domain, is used symbolically to depict the soul's rapture in surrender to divine love. While the aforementioned elements involve aspiration of feminine traits, these images further the inquiry beyond dualisms of gender, proposing that only through erasure of such earthly containers as gender can one find genuine communion with their God. Waris Shah's *Heer Ranjha* portrays the female figure of Heer as a figure of spirituality and rebellion. Heer's rebellious nature is illustrated by her unconventional attitude to the norms and values of Pakistani society, which is also characteristic of Sufi teachings. Thus, the presence of Heer's character reveals an assertive and independent woman who is in love with Ranjha that indicates the soul and its inner desire for the embrace of the divine. Its heroine's defiance of societal roles is painted in the moralistic light of the spiritual imperative, antitype casting women to passive roles.

Amir Khusro has twice opted for the figure of bride to describe the soul's yearning for the Beloved. In *Chhap Tilak* the bride is said to symbolize the soul which feels beautiful and has identity to give herself out for the Divine. This symbolism of femininity has the same essence to the surrender of the mystic to his or her God, making the role of the submissive and the beautiful woman in a raised level of spirituality. Here the bride acts as a mediator who channels the recipients' spiritual change.

The poet Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai makes Marvi and Sassui his female heroes in the poetry *Sur Marvi* and *Sur Sassui*. The male characters; Marvi transmits spiritual agility and resistance, Sassui resists trials for the purpose of divine love. Moreover, Bhittai's female characters are much more than metaphors and are rather Subjects on the love interest and having agency in spiritual pursuits, having qualities such as tenacity and fidelity.



In all four poets, female imagery is employed with regards to matters of the soul with respect to the divine focusing on ideas such as submission, adoration and endurance. In this way, these poets transform traditional roles of women by imbuing them with spiritual essence even though the forms of such transformation also depend on the poets' cultural backgrounds.

Being spiritual in nature, the treatment of women that the authors of the Punjabi and Urdu Sufi poetry offer is somewhat rebellious of the patriarchal ideologies at work albeit not explicitly so since the essence of the Sufism is masked in allegories and the philosophy of spirituality.

Feminine imagery in Bulleh Shah's Punjabi poetry, particularly his poetry from *Tere Ishq Nachaya* is an excellent example of how the saint defies the hegemonic masculinity by equating spiritual freedom to femininity, to dance and to surrender. Indeed, the traditional gender notion which saw women as passive beings is turned on its head here; 'feminine' gestures are, in fact, signs of freedom and power. Nevertheless, the challenge is a bit concealed since Bulleh Shah emphasizes the given society's complete disregard for such divisions as sexual one.

Waris Shah in *Heer Ranjha* is much more didactically prescriptive of patrifocal structures and locates the female protagonist, Heer, at the core of spiritual rebellion. Heer boldly defying the norms of marriage and motherhood and choosing love above conformity presents a rebellion against the regulate patriarchy of the traditional Punjabi society over women. Contemplating further about it I endeavored that her love for Ranjha metaphorically denotes her spiritual rebellion and resistance against the materialist and patriarchal culture consequently, making her inspiring symbol of resistance. However, although Heer's spiritual agency is represented and glorified, her fate at the end of the film demonstrates that the struggle and the question of crossing the line is a lose-lose game within the existing framework of the power relations.

In general the poems written in Urdu by Amir Khusro are seen as having the overtone of patriarchy even as these assumptions are then rhetorically recoded in a spiritually symbolic register. *Chhap Tilak* represents virtues of the culture where the beauty of the bride and the level of her submission is set by the patriarchy. But in the religious sense, these features are reattributed as the virtues of soul's surrender to the divine affection. Thus, although Khusro does not directly subvert patriarchal conventions with regard to women in the poem, by bestowing those roles with divine significance he seems to suggest that a woman's subservience in the path to salvation.

Of all the poets, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai seems to be the most rebellious while depicting women in his poetry. Marvi and Sassui are both strong symbols of women resistance against male domination refusing materialism in order to suffer for spirituality. In Sur Marvi, Marvi turned down kingship and luxury in favor of devotion to her country and divinity eradicating the hegemonic control on women self-determination. In the same way, Sassui's journey in Sur Sassui symbolizes spiritual perseverance with a female character of the woman as a seeker and not of the divine love. Bhittai's poetry portrays women in spiritual entity having ability to challenge the societal norms and customs.

Thus, from the representation of women in Punjabi Sufi poetry by Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah, one can determine the overtones of spiritual rebellion and women's fight for themselves, while in the case of Urdu Sufi poetry by Amir Khusro and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai may include stereotypically feministic elements, but with the mission of spiritual transformation, they open up hidden tendencies subverting patriarchal paradigm.

Comparing the representation of the women character in Punjabi and Urdu Sufi poetry a difference in the level of spiritual authority conferred to women can be discerned based on cultural nuances and Sufi philosophy.

Comparing Punjabi Sufi poems by Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah this is true for women with sign of strength and rebellion. Regarding the gender normalization of the anti-hero in Heer Ranjha, Waris Shah turns Heer into a spiritual insurgent woman whom decides on love and freedom instead of patriarchy. In the same way, the heterosexual slant as manifested by the incorporation of femininity by the Bulleh Shah in Tere Ishq Nachaya is liberation and not restraint. This can be viewed as a manifestation of Sufism which is present in Punjab as an antiestablishment one, which concentration is on the ability to overcome or simply deny social norms and standards, including the gender divide. While the women portrayed in the poetry works are mostly spiritual rebels who rebel against the attempts of subjugation by the patriarchal society, and the worldly norms and traditions in Punjabi Sufi poetry are far more explicit.

Other Urdu Sufi poets like Amir Khusro and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai paint slightly different picture of how women were pinned down politically and socially in terms of gender roles and spiritual power. Amir Khusro's selection of bride as an object of the poem conveys stereotype cultural norms of women as beauty and obedience while changing the meaning of the roles to

portray the soul seeking God's passion. Whereas Khusro's sexuality aims at subverting the existing structures and turning them into metaphors of the spiritual world, at the same time the overall movement can be described as less radical in comparison with the Hindu tradition and operates within the frames of a more conservative attitude.

Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, however, present a bridge between the two traditions in the form different from both the traditions. His female protagonists are Marvi and Sassui who aptly are depicted as spiritual struggle and resistance something more allied to Punjabi spirit of spiritual rebellion. Marvi says no to wealth and Sassui endures; it therefore promotes agency which counters the feminine patriarchy but Bhittai situates this in the traditional/religious norms of Sindh where patience and loyalty are virtues.

Ideas of regionalism in general are manifested in Pakistani Punjabi and Urdu Sufi poetry and are also concerned with gendered spirituality. While Punjabi poetry can be read as warning the patriarchal norms and propounding a revolutionary assertion of an individual's spiritual and sexual freedom, thus offering a more militant form of gendered liberation, Khusro's Urdu poetry holds up a mirror to a conservative culture that wants to transform the existing gender roles in to a spiritual metaphor and thus accommodating them better.

### **Findings of the Study**

Thus, this study proves that Bulleh Shah, Waris Shah, Amir Khusro, and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai draw upon the female tropes and heroines to dignify the Sufi passion, power, surrender, and captive. Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah pacifist messages of emancipatory and freedom based of women as meter of rebellion against social and prejudicial norms. Shah's Heer, especially, represents this rebellion by opting for love as against the norms of the community, and is much more subversive than one might think. The critique of Patriarchal norms however is less blatant in Amir Khusro's representation of women especially as the bride. His poetry retains a patriarchal vision of the role of man and woman, but raises submission and beauty to the status of universal value, as spiritual aspiration in the context of the union of the man and woman. Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai like other writers referring to similar cultural precepts describes his women characters in search of spiritual truth while refusing them passive roles typical for women in his context. Hence, when comparing the regional differences between Punjabi and Urdu Sufi poems one finds that Punjabi poets are more erotic about the spirit while the Urdu poets are little more sophisticated

and subtlety in their poems are very much symbolical and spiritual. These results indicate that both the traditions revolt against patriarchy in Punjabi Sufi Poetry in more direct and outspoken manner, whereas Urdu Sufi Poetry's scope of resistance is much more nuanced but subtle.

Thus, the results of the present study support and expand the earlier literature and the conceptual model of the feminist Sufism and gendered spirituality. Prior research works on the topic of women portrayal within Sufi poetry has found out that Sufi poets often equate women with the soul and as a result portray women as chaste, obedient and patient (Ahmed, 2013). This study supports such observations but goes further by analyzing key features of these metaphors with reference to the workings of patriarchy.

Thus, the research is consistent with Gross's (1996) postmodern approach to spirituality to identify that although Sufi poetry in Punjabi and Urdu cultures employs familiar disciplines of womanliness (obeisance, allure, loyalty), it engages the sexes in an unconventional approach that puts spiritual powers in women's hands. For example, Bulleh Shah's *Tere Ishq Nachaya* can be explained as the breaking gender stereotype, where feminine dance is depicted as the way to freedom according to Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridization where the culture can be subversive and resists the power of the dominating culture.

The same is the case with the feminist lens used for the interpretation of Waris Shah's *Heer Ranjha*; in which the role of Heer has been portrayed as a symbol of rebellion against her family as well as against the patriarchal society, which is also evident from the earlier researches done by Shahzad in which Heer has been described as a symbol of autonomy and spiritual rebellion. This can be co-related to Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, in which Heer's action challenges the expected feminine gender role and thus subordinating them to the spiritual level of men.

Contrary to this, in *Chhap Tilak* Amir Khusro has used the bride metaphor which is consistent with other research studies done on the Urdu Sufi poetry where the poets do not question seclusion of women but turn it into a metaphor for spiritual enlightenment (Khan, 2009). This is quite in line with the gendered spiriting theory postulated by Irigaray (1985) who posits that females' subordination ought to be seen as strength in spirituality. Despite the fact that Khusro does not put the bride in the position that can be seen as challenging the patriarchal norms in any direct way, the metaphor is definitely rich in spiritual meaning concerning gender and power relations.

Such characters as Marvi and Sassui are depicted in the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, portrait women who are spiritually strong women who may be socially domesticated but are definitely independent while seeking the deity. This conforms to analysis that has indicated that beyond mere symbolism, Bhittai uses women both as a foil to society, as well as instruments of critique through their spiritual invincibility (Memon, 2011). These findings are in line with Foucault's (1980) conception of power and ways in which the women characters seek and attain spiritual power in relation to and against the backdrop of their contexts.

This study shows that by applying the feminist and Sufi views Punjabi Sufi poets comment on the patriarchal nature of society by their spiritual rebelliousness while offering broader references to feminine and subversive imagery more subtly, Urdu Sufi poets use the feminine symbols to address, undermine, or perpetuate the customary roles. Therefore, this research can be seen as a valuable contribution to the scholarship on gendered spirituality in Sufi poetry where it is argued that women's representation in the text presents a comment on while not rejecting patriarchal culture altogether engaging with it.

The outcome of this study complements Lazar's Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) since it supplies means with which gendered portrayals within Sufi poetry may be explained. Some of the poets such as Bulleh Shah, Waris Shah, Amir Khusro, and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai have used female tropes to give elevation to Sufi ideas of love, power, submission, and capture, all of which accord with the gender paradigm of patriarchy that Lazar's FCDA endorses. For instance, Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah embraced women as a metaphor for the escalating opposition against conventional and discriminate society and traditions, particularly the characterization of Heer by Shah. Love as rebellion that breaks the norms of the Heer is an exceptional sign of the female defiance within the Sufi discourse. This can be compared to Lazar who is concerned with how gender ideologies work and are battled out in poetic discourses (Lazar, 2007).

On the other hand, Amir Khusro's portrayal of women as while subordinate brides indicates the given gender roles submissive women who are dominated and dominated men who dominate within patriarchal paradigms as being ideal spiritual examples. Essentially, Khusro 'includes' patriarchal visions of the world within his work in exactly the same sense as Lazar's (2007) framework elucidates that women's contributions and religious perceptions are silenced by

male movers-shakers. But at the same time, using beauty and submission as a universal values, Khusro still shows how spiritual positions can be replica of gender subordination.

Some of the Hir and Kahlma female characters depicted by Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai as spiritual souls in search of divine reality and refusing to be passive examples of feminine tradition are also good examples of women's resistance and rebellion against the patriarchal practices. The characters' vigorous search for spiritual experience emphasizes how some Sufi poets employ women's spiritual searches as a way to subvert the Western's sex-related stereotypes. This complements FCDA's interest in how poetic language can be used to construct and challenge masculinities and femininities, as well as generate discursive potentialities for women.

Last of all, the regional difference between Punjabi and Urdu Sufi poetry show contrasting with the male domination. Urdu poets are symbolic to extend of rebellion but Punjabi poets are blunter like Bulleh Shah. This variation of the strategies of resistance has supported FCDA's idea of discourses of gender and power being contextual and having complexities that entail both explicit and implicit subordination. Therefore, results support the manner in which Sufi poetry engages or resists gender logistics regarding ideologies in conformation to Lazar's FCDA model.

## **Conclusion**

This paper aimed at dissecting the image of women and the use of feminine and female characters in Sufi poetry including Bulleh Shah, Waris Shah, Amir Khusro, and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai to express spiritual concepts. In this research, the representations of gender and femininity in Punjabi and Urdu Sufi poetry were analyzed with the help of the theoretical frameworks of feminist Sufism and gendered spirituality to identify whether they confirm to the patriarchal patterns of their societies or not. The results showed that all the poets, despite the stylistics and particular symbols they relied on, chose the feminized imagery as the means to express faith, endurance, and devotion. Whereas Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah, two Punjabi poets, broke the gender stereotype more consciously. From this perspective, Bulleh Shah's work embodies the rejection of categorization into categories such as man/woman or good/bad which is evident in Tere Ishq Nachaya where feminine performance is a form of escape. Waris Shah's famous traditional 'Heer Ranjha' portrays Heer as a rebellious woman who goes against all social norms

and conventions set by society and subjugation by men, instead choosing to love spiritually rather than conform to expectations. While Meer Taqi Meer and Wali Mohammed Wali, both Urdu poets, were less blunt in their exploration of gendered spirituality. Unlike the conventional patriarchal portrayal of women, beautiful and docile wives as depicted by the so called emotive bride symbol in Chhap Tilak, Amir Khusro portrays a dominating feminine deity indicating a somewhat conservative but holier pitch for daughters-in-law. Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, in Sur Marvi and Sur Sassui, employed female figures as symbols of spiritual journey, though he paints women as eager beings in the search of divine love yet bound with the social roles. It is within these narratives that the portrayals provide the reader with the ability to subvert traditional gender roles and provide the women in each story with a measure of spiritual power.

It was also established from the study that there were distinctive differences between Punjabi and Urdu Sufi poetry with regard to regions. The Punjabi poets such as Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah offered a more revolutionary stance against patriarchy as they incorporate gendered metaphysics to challenge the social order. Urdu poets, on the other hand, used feminine symbols to mediate spirituality in calculated social settings; the result was a more conservative but nuanced response to gender roles. These differences overlay the manner in which culture and language affect the portrayal of women in Sufi poetry. This study also provided a useful discussion of the research and potential areas for future studies investigating gender and Sufism, so aligning the results with Butler's (1990), Lazar's Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) and Irigaray's (1985) theories, as well as with existing scholarly literature (Ahmed, 2013; Khan, 2009), helped to expand the knowledge of how gender is constructed in the context of Sufi poetry. The breakdown provided further evidence of how these virtues are maintained but reimaged in a spiritual realm, subverting the traditional patriarchal understanding in both surface and philosophical levels. The present study offers a hermeneutical analysis of the use of the feminine figure to depict various mystical themes by Sufi poets irrespective of their language and culture. Thus, it contributes to the development of the concept of gendered spirituality in South Asian Sufism and reveals directions for further research on how these narratives can inform modern spiritual and cultural practices in Pakistan. In conclusion, it sees the interest with Sufi poetry sustaining its resonance in terms of activating and reconfiguring the discourse on gender in the light of the spiritual realm.

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