Bridal Symbolism in the Sufi Poetry of Islamicate South Asia: From the Earliest Times to the Fifteenth Century

Tanvir Anjum*

Abstract

According to the Sufis, the phenomenon of Divine Love, or of love for the Absolute, can only be expressed in metaphorical language. For this reason, Sufis have employed idioms of temporal human love as symbols of the Divine love in their speech and writings. The Sufi poets have often resorted to gendered imagery in their poetry in order to articulate the subtle notion of Divine Love. These Sufi poets present themselves as ardent lovers, portray God as the Beloved, and sometimes evoke a bridal metaphor as well. They employ feminine symbols for the seekers of the Sufi path, whereas God is represented in masculine terms. They identified themselves with a wife or bride, while the husband or groom symbolized the Divine Self. This paper explores the roots of the idea of being 'God's bride', and investigates use of the bridal metaphor in the poetic compositions of Indian Sufis from the time of their arrival in the Subcontinent to the fifteenth century. It also examines the diverse meanings evoked through this metaphor, and how this metaphor was expanded and indigenized in the South Asian cultural context during that period.

---

* Assistant Professor, Department of History, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

Love is a universal emotion, and a phenomenon which denies any overly simplified articulation. Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam, is often called the way of love.[1] Love is a complex and a multi-dimensional concept in the Sufi lexicon. It has been a consistent theme in Sufi writings, particularly in poetical works. The love for the Absolute, or God, or an intimacy with God, often referred to as *maĺabbah* [derived from *Íub*, Arabic: love] or *uns* [Arabic: affection] is one of the core principles of Sufism. Although love may have many other dimensions and manifestations as well, it is the notion of love for God that separates Sufism from mere asceticism. To the Sufis, God is not a transcendental Reality. He is closer than the jugular vein, and so accessible to and friendly with humans. That is why the Sufis emphasize the Divine attribute of 'the Loving One,' or *al-Wudūd*, which is one of the ninety-nine attributive names of the Divinity. Sufis believe in the transformative power of love, which can revolutionize the human self as well as reveal the mysteries of the Absolute. Moreover, according to the Sufis, Divine Love is characterized by reciprocity, which has given birth to the twin notions of *love for* and the *love of* the Absolute.

How love and knowledge are interlinked on the Sufi path is well expressed through an oft-quoted dictum, that is "to know Him is to love Him". In other words, knowing someone or trying to know someone is one of the manifestations of love. It implies the Sufi belief that God is essentially comprehensible, and that His gnosis [Arabic: *ma'arifah*], or knowledge of the spiritual mysteries and truths, is possible and achievable. Furthermore, the Sufi notion of universal or cosmic love embraces the entirety of the universe and creation. In fact, according to the Sufis, this love is the 'first'

1 Describing the dominant doctrinal trends in the mystical systems of various religions, Louis Dupre labels Sufism, as well as the mystical tradition of modern Christianity, as the Mysticism of Love. He refers to Hindu mysticism as the Mysticism of the Self, that of Buddhism as the Mysticism of Emptiness, those of Eastern and early Western Christianity as the Mysticism of the Image, and that of Judaism as Eschatological Mysticism. For a brief discussion see his article "Mysticism", in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 10: 245-61.

cause, the cause behind all other causes. It is this cosmic love which brings all existence out of nothingness. The universe and all of creations have been created by God for the purpose of His Self-manifestation and hence, His Self-disclosure. Therefore, the quest of a Sufi is to unveil the mysteries of the creation and the Creator, and to seek proximity to Him through love.

As a central idea in a Sufi's life, love for God requires exertion, discipline and patience. But a Sufi also believes that he or she may be blessed with love that is inspired by God, a love satisfied with nothing less than God, and a love that can only be acquired by the grace of God. The notion of this disinterested or unconditional love for God was exquisitely articulated by an eighth-century Sufi woman, known as Rābiʻah al-ʻAdawiyah of Basrah (d. 801). Her advocacy of a disinterested love of God made her the model of selfless love among the Sufi circles. She urged for the worship of God out of love, instead of out of fear of hell or the desire for paradise. She taught that a Sufi must love God for His own sake alone.[2] Rābiʻah's conception of Divine love radically transformed God's image from that of a Wrathful Master to one of an Affectionate Friend. Her companion Sufi, Maryam of Basrah, delivered lectures on the theme of Divine Love.[3] Another tenth-century Sufi woman named Al-Wāhaţiyya Umm al-Fazl, elaborated on the theme of love for

2 Margaret Smith, *Rābiʻa: The Mystic and Her Fellow-Saints in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984 reprint, first published 1928), 96-110. For a brief note on her views regarding Sufism, see Abū ʻAbd Ar-Rahmān As-Sulamī, *Dhikr an-Niswa al-Mutaʻabbitdāt aş-Şūfiyyāt*, ed. and Eng. trans. Rkia Elaroui Cornell (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2005; first published 1999), 74-81. For a detailed study, see Widad El Sakkakini, Nabil F. Safwat and Doris May Lessing, *First Among Sufis: The Life and Thought of Rabia al-Adawiyya, The Woman Saint of Basra* (London: Octagon Press, 1982). Her poetic utterances are found in *Doorkeeper of the Heart: Versions of Rabia*, Eng. trans. Charles Upton (Putney, VT: Threshold Books, 1988).

3 As-Sulamī says that she used to fall in ecstasy whenever she heard someone speak on Divine Love and that once, while attending a lecture on this theme, her spleen ruptured and she died thereupon. As-Sulamī, *Dhikr an-Niswa al-Mutaʻabbitdāt aş-Şūfiyyāt*, 84-85.

God, and referred to Him as *maĺbūb*, meaning 'the Beloved.'[4]

Divine Love is one of the most consistent themes found in the works of the great Sufi teachers. In the thirteenth-century, the Andalusian (Spanish) Sufi master, Muĺiyy al-Dīn Muhammad b. 'Alī Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240), who popularly was known as Shaykh al-Akbar [Arabic: The Greatest Master), declared: "I practise the religion of Love; in whatsoever directions its caravans advance, the religion of Love shall be my religion and my faith."[5] Similarly, the opening verses in *Mathnavī Ma'anvī* [Persian: Spiritual Couplets] the monumental poetic work on Sufism by one of the most celebrated Sufis, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273), refers to the Sufi philosophy of '*ishq* [Persian: intensified love coupled with passionate longing), which is based on the theory of the separation of the human soul from its Divine Source of origin. Not only in Rūmī, but in many other Sufi writings, '*ishq* is often expressed as the longing of the human lover for the Divine Beloved, with the love of the Absolute Being expressed in human terms. In this narrative of parted lovers, the pain and longing symbolize the urge of the trapped human soul to return to its Source; that is, to God Himself. It is the carnal or bestial self, and its predilection for worldly engagements, that obstruct a union of the two. Those travelling the path of Sufism learn to overcome the hurdles and to tame the bestial self within. They are the ones who achieve the ultimate goal of union as once cleaned, their own self (which later becomes *Self*), achieves harmony with the Divine Self. That is why in common Sufi parlance, the death of the physical body is spoken of as the union of the soul with its Divine Source. The Sufi philosophy of *Waĺdat al-Wujūd* [Persian: the 'Unity of Being,' or Pantheistic

4 She used to say: "The reality of love is that the lover is mute before all but his Beloved and deaf to all but His speech, for the Prophet (PBUH) has said: 'Your love for a thing makes you blind and deaf.' " As-Sulamī, *Dhikr an-Niswa al-Muta'abbitdāt aş-Şūfiyyāt*, 228-29.

5 As cited in Angus Macnab, "Sufism in Muslim Spain", in *Sufism: Love and Wisdom*, eds. Jean-Louis Michon and Roger Gaetani (Bloomington: World Wisdom, Inc., 2006), 127.

Monism] is another extension of the notion of the love for God. According to many Sufis, the highest stage is reached when a Sufi realizes union with God, and the dichotomy between I and Thou, or the Creator and the Creation, ceases to exist. This theme of Sufi love for God has been developed further by many Sufis.

Moreover, Sufis believe that the higher, subtle and intricate truths of Sufism, often referred to as the "mysteries of Divine Love", as revealed to accomplished Sufi masters are essentially incommunicable. For this reason, some define Sufism itself as being indefinable.[6] However, if an attempt is made to define, articulate and communicate these truths or mysteries, not only do they remain incomprehensible to laypersons, but sometimes they may mislead them as well. Consequently, the Sufi adepts always strongly discourage any publicizing of one's transcendent and subjective spiritual experiences, and particularly before novices. Such subtleties of Sufism are, and in fact, can only be articulated through rich symbols that often employ metaphors, allegories and similes. Their symbolic representation through twined expressions does not make them objectionable in the eyes of the religious establishment, and may not mislead those who do not comprehend them. In particular, many (though not all) Sufis consider that the state of spiritual merging, or the experience of union, is a zenith of one's spiritual quest, and that it cannot be expressed or articulated without recourse to the use of symbols. Highlighting the usefulness of symbols for Sufi poetry, John Baldock notes: "Symbolsare a useful means of understanding how outer and inner realities are fused together, because symbolism starts with the premise that a symbolic object (the outer reality) has an underlying meaning (its inner reality)….The outer form is simply a veil that separates us from the inner reality."[7]

---

6 Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979 reprint, first published 1914), 25.

7 John Baldock, *The Essence of Sufism* (Hertfordshire: Eagle, 2004), 75. Chapter 5: "Sufi Symbolism", 75-85, provides a detailed discussion.

As pointed out earlier, the concept of love for God is the most common theme of Sufi poetry. Yet love for the Absolute is often articulated in human terms by drawing parallels between, and employing expressions borrowed from, the phenomenon of love between a man and a woman. Therefore Sufi theorists and poets often use gendered imagery in their works, presenting themselves as ardent lovers and portraying God as the Divine Beloved. Sometimes, the metaphor of husband and wife also is evoked for God and the human self, respectively. As an extension of this metaphorical expression, God sometimes is depicted as a Bridegroom while the human soul, or the Sufi himself, is represented as a bride. Such a figurative representation of the Divine suggests its personification.

The phenomenon of "bridal mysticism" is not uncommon in the world's other mystical traditions. It can be identified in both the Old and New Testaments.[8] In Catholicism, the human soul is conceived as the bride of God.[9] The renowned German Renaissance philosopher and theologian Nicolaus Cusanus (or Nicholas of Cusa, 1401-64), also portrays God as the Bridegroom of the human soul, which he characterizes as a feminine Bride in his work *On the Vision of God*.[10] Similar symbols can be found in the Jewish mystical literature that refers to the human soul as a bride.[11] The phenomenon of bridal mysticism has been beautifully expressed in the Hindu and Bhakti mystical traditions as well. For instance, in her poetic verses, Mīrābāī' (d. 1547), the renowned sixteenth-century Rajput saint and poetess of

8 Richard D. Patterson, "Metaphors of Marriage as Expressions of Divine-Human Relations", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 51, no. 4, (December 2008): 689-702. For details see Marilynn Hughes, *Bridal Mysticism: An Overview* (n.p.: Create Space, 2012).

9 June McDaniel, "Bliss" in *Encyclopaedia of Love in World Religions*, ed. Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, (Santa Barbara; CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2008), 1: 87.

10 As cited in Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman*, v. 2: *The Early Humanist Reformation, 1250-1500* (Grand Rapids; MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 777.

11 See a brief discussion in Sarah Pessin, "Divine Love in Judaism", in *Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions*, 1: 166-67.

Rajasthan, vividly portrays herself as the bride of Lord Krishna,[12] much to the chagrin of her family and the religious establishment since she was a married woman. Extracts from her *bhajana*s [Hindi: devotional poems and songs in the Hindu tradition in praise of the Lord] are often sung in *qawwālī*s [Urdu: devotional Sufi musical tradition of South Asia].[13] This is because the lyrics of the *qawwālī*s are frequently inter-textual and combine the poetry of more than one poet.

In fact, it is easier for women mystics, who naturally possess the attributes of femininity, than for their male counterparts, to evoke the bridal symbol in their writings. Interestingly, however, the male Bhakti poets composed poems from a feminine perspective and identified themselves with the *gopī*s, the young herdswomen who had fallen in love with Krishna.[14] Furthermore, in Vaishnavite cults in Hinduism the goal of one's spiritual quest is to submit before Lord Krishna, which is expressed through the metaphor of submission of a woman or wife before her Husband-Lord.[15] One might note as well that some scholars and historians mistakenly assume that the bridal metaphor was an invention of the Indian Sufi poets, who had borrowed it from the Hindu mystical tradition.[16] Yet evidence suggests that the same metaphor can be found in the poetic writings of some of the very early Sufis, as will be discussed below.

---

12 See the translators' notes on Mirabai and her teachings in *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*, Eng. trans. Robert Bly and Jane Hirshfield (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 1-6.

13 For a detailed study, see Mussarrat Youssuf, "*Prem Diwani*: Meera Bai's Love Lyrics' Proliferation into *Qawwali*s" (Unpublished Paper, nd).

14 John Hawley, "Images of Gender in the Poetry of Krishna", in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, eds. Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell and Paula Richman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 231-56.

15 Hawley, "Images of Gender in the Poetry of Krishna", 236.

16 See, for instance, Ayesha Jalal and Sugata Bose, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 1998), 31-32.

Indeed in the Muslim mystical or Sufi tradition, the concept of betrothal to God has been a common theme,[17] which metaphorically suggests the notion of spiritual marriage. It is found in many diverse forms and meanings depending on the social and cultural contexts in which the metaphor is used in prose or poetry. Some of the early Sufis employed the metaphor of God's bride or bridal symbolism in their writings, though it is mistakenly assumed that this metaphor was not prevalent in the Sufi literature in Islamicate South Asia.[18] For instance, the ninth-century Persian Sufi, Bāyazīd of Bistam (d. 874), who is known for his ecstatic intoxication (in contrast to sobriety), referred to Sufis as the brides of God.[19] Bridal symbolism is also discernible in Rūmī, who evokes the bride-groom and wedding metaphors in his *Mathnavī-i' Ma'anvī* to depict the spiritual union of the soul-bride with the 'Primordial Beloved'.[20] Such allegorical expressions are characterized by gender reversal, since the male Sufi poets identify themselves with the feminine. The thirteenth-century Sufi theorist and poet Ibn al-'Arabī employed gendered imagery in his writings. He used the normative gender symbols but transformed their meaning so that the masculine is not necessarily active and the feminine is not essentially receptive. Rather, both can simultaneously be active and receptive. He argues that in relation to God, all human beings, irrespective of gender, are essentially and invariably

17 Lloyd V. J. Ridgeon, *Sufism: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 73.

18 Though Jamal Elias acknowledges that the idea of bridal mysticism is also found in Christian mystical poetry of the Medieval period, and that there existed cultural contacts between Christians and Muslims in the Mediterranean world and Middle East, he mistakenly assumes that since "this metaphor is not prevalent in the Islamic literature of that area, it is unlikely that the mystic as a bride of God was taken by Indian Sufis from Christianity." See his 'Introduction' in Sultān Bāhū, *Death Before Dying: The Sufi Poems of Sultan Bahu*, English trans. and introduction by Jamal J. Elias (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 16, n. 11.

19 Carl W Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1997), 60.

20 Annemarie Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam* (New York and London: Continuum, 2003), 110.

receptive.[21] It is important to note that the Sufi worldview not only challenges such birth-ascribed and blood-based discriminations as race, ethnicity and caste, but it also rejects the gender prejudices.

Sometimes Sufi poetry suggests a slight semblance of eroticization of Divine Love in its bridal symbolism. As a matter of fact, it was squarely in line with the medieval literary conventions of the Mediterranean world, and particularly with the Persian poetical tradition. Persian Sufi literature is especially known for its erotic and sensual quality. The great Sufi masters like Rūmī have also employed sexual imagery in their works in order to convey the subtle concepts of Sufism.[22] In addition, some of the poetic compositions of Fakhr al-Dīn 'Irāqī (d. 1289), ×āfiz of Shiraz (d. 1390), and Nūr al-Dīn 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī (d. 1492) are also considered sensual, erotic and bacchanalian.[23] Even so, such expressions have symbolic values of their own and need to be understood as such.

The concept of human lover and the Divine Beloved is a consistent theme in Indo-Persian, Urdu and South Asian vernacular Sufi poetry. The bridal symbolism is also a well-attested tradition in South Asian Sufi literature. The term '*urs* (derived from an Arabic word meaning wedding) traditionally refers to the death anniversary of eminent Sufi Shaykhs, celebrated by the disciples, devotees and the common people alike. These death anniversaries are not merely observed, they are celebrated, and the occasion is considered one of festivity and rejoicing. In symbolic sense,

---

21 Sa'diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabī, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill; NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 130-31. See also William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 272.

22 For a discussion on Rūmī's use of sexual imagery in his *Mathnavī*, and the relationship of esotericism and eroticism in the framework of postmodern theories; see Mahdi Tourage, *Rūmī and the Hermeneutics of Eroticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

23 Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2003 reprint first pub. 1975), 287-89.

it denotes the idea of spiritual wedding or union of the soul of the deceased or departed Sufi with God—the Primordial Beloved. The Sufi is considered the bride of God, who has left for his eternal abode; that is, the house of her Divine Groom or Husband. Traditionally speaking, in the South Asian cultural context, the relationship of a woman to society, and more particularly of a wife to a husband, is analogous to the relationship of a Sufi to God, which is characterized by extreme submission and intense devotion.[24]

In the South Asian Sufi poetic tradition, bridal symbolism is a consistent theme which also has found manifestation in Punjabi Sufi poetry. One of the earliest exponents of the "bride of God" idea was Shaykh Farīd al-Dīn Mas'ūd alias Bābā Farīd (d. 1265), the renowned thirteenth-century Chishtī Sufi of Pakpattan, who also is believed to be the first poet of Punjabi language. His poetic utterances are said to be incorporated in *Guru Granth*. In a generic sense, he employs the bridal metaphor for the human soul and God in his poetry.[25] But in addition to the above-mentioned connotation, the same metaphor is used with an altogether different meaning: the opening *shalok* [Hindi: couplet] of Bābā Farīd in the sacred scripture of the Sikhs, *Guru Granth* vividly portrays death (or the angel of death) as the bridegroom, which takes away the soul-bride. The moment of death is the moment of wedding or marriage, the merger of the soul in the Godhead. The angel of death is glorified as he takes the soul-bride to the Divine-husband even against her will. Bābā Farīd reminds that one needs to be mindful of

24 In the words of Barbara Metcalf: "This element of a feminine ideal is explicit in what one could call an extreme or intense expression of cultural values"; Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 190.

25 Muhammad Āsif Khān, *Ākhiyā Bābā Farīd nē* [Punjabi: Baba Farid Says], (Lahore: Pakistan Punjābī Adabī Board, 1978), 156, 174 and 263. For a brief discussion, see also Brij Mohan Sagar, *Hymns of Sheikh Farid* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1999), 118-19, and Baghwant Singh Dalawari, "Divine Songs of Sheikh Baba Farid"*, Sikh Review,* 47, no. 3 (March 1999): 8-11.

the fact that one day we all have to renounce this fleshly and mortal existence, and only our good deeds will guarantee salvation. This *shabd* [Hindi: a hymn or a section of a hymn] of *Guru Granth* composed by Bābā Farīd reads as follows:

> The day of the bride's wedding is pre-ordained.
> On that day, the Messenger of Death, of whom she had only heard, comes and shows its face.
> It breaks the bones of the body and pulls the helpless soul out.
> That pre-ordained time of marriage cannot be avoided. Explain this to your soul.
> The soul is the bride, and death is the groom. He will marry her and take her away.
> After the body sends her away with its own hands, whose neck will it embrace?
> The bridge to hell is narrower than a hair; haven't you heard of it with your ears?
> Fareed, the call has come; be careful now—don't let you be robbed. [26]

In line with the Sufi and Bhakti literary traditions, Guru Nanak (1469-1539) also uses the bridal metaphor. According to a *shabd* of the *Guru Granth*, Nanak classifies human beings or souls in two categories: *duhāngan* and *suhāgan*. *Duhāngan* refers to those unlucky women whose love remained unfulfilled, who failed to achieve their love, or are deserted by their Husband (God), whereas *suhāgan* refers to those lucky women who enjoy union with their Husband, achieve their love and thus reap the fruit of their past actions.[27] In the opening *shalok* of *Guru Granth*, Nanak evokes the symbol of the veil of a bride for the illusion which hinders the vision of reality.[28]

---

26 *Siri Guru Granth Sahib*, vol. 1, Eng. trans. Singh Sahib Sant Singh Khalsa, 3rd ed. (Tucson, AZ: Hand Made Books, n.d.), 1377.

27 As cited in Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 79. See also Ishar Singh, *Nanakism: A New World Order, Temporal and Spiritual* (New Delhi: Ranjit Publishing House, 1976), 166.

28 *Siri Guru Granth Sahib*, vol. 1: 2.

The fourteenth-century Chishti Sufi poet and musician, Abu'l ×asan Yamīn al-Dīn Khusrau, popularly known as Amir Khusrau (d. 1325), evoked the bride-groom metaphor in his Persian and especially in his Hindavi (Urdu and Hindi languages), poetic compositions. According to hagiographical works, it was at the behest of his preceptor, Shaykh Nizām al-Dīn Awliyā of Delhi (d. 1325), that Amir Khusrau's poetic expression underwent a shift at a particular moment in his poetic career. He then started employing the idiom of mundane human love in representing the mysteries and intricacies of Divine Love. According to *Siyar al-Awliyā*', the Shaykh asked Khusrau to follow the poetic tradition of Safahan [modern Isfahan in Persia], which employed allegorical expressions for the articulation of Divine Love.[29] However, Khusrau's use of the metaphor was not one-dimensional as he employed it in at least two ways.

Firstly, as a disciple and devotee, he expressed his spiritual relationship and emotional bonding with his *murshid* [Arabic: spiritual mentor, guide, or preceptor] through the bridal metaphor. In classical Sufi texts, the relationship of a disciple with his mentor is often described in gendered conceptualization.[30] As is the norm in the disciple-master relationship in Sufism, Khusrau was devoted to his mentor, Shaykh Nizām al-Dīn Awliyā, and most of his poetic love lyrics, therefore, are addressed to and revolve around his beloved mentor. In one of his poems, entitled "Nizam, I am ready to die for you", Khusrau celebrates the fact that Shaykh Quţb al-Dīn Bakhtiyār Kākī and Shaykh Farīd al-Dīn Mas'ūd (alias Bābā Farīd) had come to attend the wedding party, wherein Khusrau himself was the bride and the groom his mentor, Shaykh Nizām al-Dīn. It reads:

---

29 Amir Khurd (Saiyyid Muhammad ibn Mubārak 'Alawī Kirmānī), *Siyar al-Awliyā*' (comp. in 1351-82 A.D.), ed. Chiranji Lal (Delhi: Muhibb-i Hind Press, 1302 A.H./1885 A.D.), 301.

30 For a detailed discussion, see Margaret Malamud, "Gender and Spiritual Self-Fashioning: The Master-Disciple Relationship in Classical Sufism", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* 64, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 89-117.

Nizām, I am ready to die for you.
Ready to die, Nizām —let me be sacrificed.
Among all the women,
my veil is besmirched,
everyone sneers.
This spring, dye my veil.
My honour is in your hands.

Nizām, I am ready to die for you.
Others fight with their in-laws,
but I have you—this everyone knows.
My honour is in your hands.

Nizām, I am ready to die for you.
Qutb and Farīd come in the wedding party
and Khusrau is the bride.
Nizām, I am ready to die for you. [31]

In his poetic utterances, Khusrau often addressed his mentor as *Pī* or *Pīyā*, which literally means beloved in Hindavi. In relation to his preceptor, with whom he enjoyed an intense spiritual bond, Khusrau conceived of himself as a *suhāgan*, or a happily married lady, who has achieved the love of her beloved husband, and he also refers to the concept of *suhāg*, or a state of marital bliss. So great was Khusrau's devotion to his preceptor that on one occasion, when Shaykh Nizām al-Dīn was in a gloomy mood after his nephew's death, Khusrau dressed up like the Hindu women whom he had seen celebrating the *basant* festival, singing and taking mustard flowers as an offering to the deity.[32]

In Sufism, the centrality of a Sufi Shaykh to one who traverses the path of Sufism cannot be overstated. For spiritual development, it is considered necessary to have complete faith in, and devotion and obedience to, one's guide. Here one may recall

31 See the English translation of a poem by Amir Khusrau in Saleem Kidwai and Ruth Vanita, *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 129-30. See also poem no. 66 in Amir Khusraw Dihlavi, *In the Bazaar of Love: The Selected Poetry of Amir Khusrau*, English trans. Paul E Losensky and Sunil Sharma (New Delhi and New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 106.

32 Sunil Sharma, *Amir Khusraw: The Poet of Sultans and Sufis* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 77-78.

a statement of Bābā Farīd (the mentor of Shaykh Nizām al-Dīn) in *Fawā'id al-Fuād* [Persian: Morals for the Heart], wherein he likens a Sufi Shaykh or a master to a *mashshāṭa*,[33] the hairdresser of brides, who adorns and prepares them before their final meeting with the bridegroom. To Bābā Farīd, it is the Sufi master who cleanses, embellishes and beautifies the human soul, and so prepares it for its possible union with the Divine.

Secondly, Amir Khusrau drew on the rich social landscape and cultural topography of North India, and borrowed imagery from it. Though his father was a Turk, he always took pride in his Indian blood from the maternal side. The bridal metaphor is still more evident in Khusrau's Hindavi poetry, which is replete with conceptual borrowings from Indian social and cultural milieus. Though the bride-groom metaphor occurs both in Persian and Indic literary traditions, it is important to note that the Persian language is gender-neutral, whereas many vernacular languages of South Asia — such as Hindavi, Urdu, Punjabi and Saraiki — have grammatical gender.[34] In the opinion of one critic: "In all the Hindavi poetic forms, gender plays an important role because it allows the poet to adopt a different persona and express his feelings through a female voice. In contrast, this remains a moot point in his [Khusrau's] Persian poems where there is no grammatical gender and the beauty of the work, to some extent, relies on sexual ambiguity."[35]

The Indo-Persian, Hindavi, and Urdu poets of premodern South Asia focus on themes of love. They employ Persian (and sometimes Arabic) terminology for it such as '*ishq* or intensified love coupled with *firāq* or *Íijr* [Persian: separation], *waṣl* [intimate and ultimate union or communion], *dīdār* [sight or vision of the beloved], *ma'shūq* and *maÍbūb* [the beloved], and '*āshiq* [the lover]. In a similar manner, a good deal of Persian terminology has found way in vernacular languages, especially Punjabi, for the articulation of the emotion of love in both human and Divine contexts. The Sufi poets in particular purported to represent the

33 Amir Hasan Ala Sijzi of Delhi, *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād*: *Malfūzat of Shaykh Nizam al-Din Awliya*, ed. Khwajah Hasan Thani Nizami Dehlavi (Delhi: Urdu Academy, 1992 reprint, first pub. 1990), 44.

34 Pushto and Baluchi languages are gender-neutral, but in everyday spoken Sindhi, there exist gendered terminology for inanimate objects or nouns, but these can be referred to as both masculine and feminine.

35 Sharma, *Amir Khusrau*, 77.

haqīqī or allegorical interpretation of love through the language and terminology of *majāzī* or temporal and human love. That is why two or more readings of Sufi texts, particularly poetic, are possible.

According to South Asian cultural traditions and norms, a husband is supposed to be kind and considerate to his wife, whereas the characteristics expected from a wife are loyalty, faithfulness and willingness to serve her husband with complete devotion. So in the South Asian social and cultural context, a good wife is the one who is loyal and faithful to husband, who believes in total submission to him, who possesses the utmost of devotion and love, and who is ready to sacrifice herself for his sake. So the South Asian Sufi poets identify themselves with the feminine, and portray the human soul as a woman or wife, while God is presented in a masculine form. This switching of masculine and feminine positions, or gender reversal, is a common characteristic of Indic poetry.

Ismaili Sufi literature in South Asia, and especially that produced by the Khoja branch of Ismailis, also contains bridal symbols. Scholars have studied the Ismaili Sufi literature with a particular focus on *gināns*. The *ginān* is a distinct literary genre found in many Indic vernacular languages such as Sindhi, Multani, Hindi, Marathi and Gujarati. According to Lokhandwalla, these poetic compositions exist in forty-two languages, and are characterized by the use of Indian meters, while another scholar claims that thirty-six meters of Indian prosody have been used in them.[36] They are hymn-like poems dedicated to the Shi'ī Imams, the first and the foremost of whom is Imam Ali (d. 661).

Asani, who has highlighted the use of bride-groom symbols in Ismaili Sufi literature, specifically points to the *ginān* compositions of the fourteenth-century Sufi, Saiyyid Pīr Øadr al-Dīn ×usaynī (d. 1380). He employs the metaphor of Husband and wife for God and human soul respectively, while the fifteenth-century Sufi, Pīr ×asan Kabīr al-Dīn (d. 1470) the son of Pīr Øadr al-Dīn, evokes the symbol of soul-bride awaiting the Divine-groom.[37] In the same

36 S. T. Lokhandwalla, "Indian Islam, Composite Culture and Integration", in *Composite Culture of India and National Integration*, ed. Rasheeduddin Khan (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1987), 110.

37 Ali S. Asani, *Ecstasy and Enlightenment: The Ismaili Devotional Literature of South Asia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 57-58; for details, see Chapter 3: "Bridal Symbolism in the *Ginān*s", 54-70.

century, a Sufi-poet of the Rifa'ī *Silsilah*, Shāh 'Alī MuÍammad Jiv Gāmdhānī (d. 1565) of Gujarat, uses the metaphor of a longing bride to symbolize the longing soul in his poetic collection *Jawāhir-i Asrār-i Allah* [Urdu: Gems of the Divine Secrets], written in Urdu language.[38] Through the use of the symbol of a bride-groom in his poetic compositions, he tries to explain the mysteries and intricacies of *WaÍdat al-Wujūd*,[39] the Sufi philosophy characterized by the notion of the Unity of Being, which is considered an extension of the notion of love for God. In the opinion of Bhatnagar, he was the first poet to expound the spiritual philosophy of *WaÍdat al-Wujūd* in Urdu poetry.[40]

Conclusion

Like their counterparts elsewhere in the Islamicate world, the Sufi poets of South Asia during the period under study i.e. from the earliest times to the fifteenth century, resorted to the use of rich symbols in their poetic compositions. Many used gendered imagery, identified themselves with women, and thus wrote from a feminine perspective. While evoking the notion of God's bride, they employed the bride and groom metaphors for the seekers of the Sufi path and the Divine Self, respectively. In order to express the higher truths of Sufism, and particularly for articulating the subtleties of Divine Love and union, they frequently used the bridal symbols. This symbolism was borrowed from the Islamicate Sufi-literary traditions, as much as from other mystical traditions, but it was indigenized as well as expanded in conceptual terms by the Sufi poets of Islamicate South Asia. The Sufi poetry composed in vernacular languages, well-embedded in the local cultural ethos and literary conventions, effectively appropriated local concepts like *suhāg* and *suhāgan* indigenizing and expanding the bridal metaphor.

38 Gamdhani is considered one of the earliest Urdu poets of South Asia. See Muhammad Sohail, "Origin and Development of Urdu Language in the Sub-Continent: Contribution of Early Sufia and Mushaikh", *South Asian Studies,* 27, no. 1 (January-June 2012): 141-69.

39 Vijay Mishra, *Devotional Poetics and Indian Sublime* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 156.

40 Rajendra Sarup Bhatnagar, *Mysticism in Urdu Poetry* (New Delhi: Department of Islamic Studies, Jamia Hamdard, 1995), 19.