

Symbolism of Punjab in Sufi poetry: A Study of the Works of Shāh Hussain

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Abstract

The diction of metaphysics is a deep-rooted notation for poets around the globe. Different poets had used physical and non-physical symbols and metaphors in their poetry and writings. This research article revolves around the objects, which are a part of rich Punjabi culture as a sensation of metaphysical symbols and similes for Punjabi poets that illustrate the philosophy of life. These symbols and similes can easily be conversed in the poetry of the Sufi saint of Punjab *Shāh Hussain* (1539-1599), generally known as *Mādhū Lāl Hussian* or *Shāh Fakīr*. This paper designates the symbolic meaning of spinning and spinning wheel *Charkha*, the material (fibers and yarns) *Sūt*, for spinning and the results of this activity (the thread) *tār*, Warp and weft *tānā bānā* and the process of weaving as a result of qualitative analysis. In this regard, poetry of *Shāh Hussain* reflects the true sense of asceticism with material symbols of Punjab. Concerning the records of beliefs from different sources and treaties in Punjabi culture, this

paper also gives a comparative study with fundamental aspects of human reality, birth, fate and the evolution between the world of the living and that of the dead by fading one's identity.

Keywords: Punjab, symbolism, Sufi poetry, *Shāh Hussain*, *Charkha*, *Sūt*, *tānā bānā*

Introduction

The word Punjab is a blend of two Persian words *Punj* and *ab*, *punj* means five and *ab* patent as *aab* meaning water, so Punjab means five waters. The name denotes the land of five rivers in Indo-Pak subcontinent, now divided in Pakistan and India.¹ Culturally this region is very rich in language, art, craft, social customs, heritage, abilities and legacy, because of so many influences of different religions and invaders. The history of the Punjab during the last four and five centuries has seen many storms and peaceful interludes². These changes are echoed in the literature, social, economic, political, and cultural life of Punjab. This area was the tenant of the Indus valley civilization about 2500 BC. Factually, Punjab province has been the postern to the Indian subcontinent for intruders who invaded from Greece, Central Asia, Iran and Afghanistan. Due to its envisioned location, it has been part of numerous realms and dynasties in past, together with the Indus Valley Civilization, Aryans, Kushans, Guptas, Persians, Arabs, Turks, Ghaznavids, Timurids, Mughals, Sikhs and the British. According to the 2008 Census of India and Pakistan, there are 76,335,300 native Punjabi speakers in which comprised roughly 75% of the Pakistani population. In the Pakistani Punjab region, 97.21% of people are Muslim. The Largest non-Muslim minority is Christians and makeup 2.31% of the population.³

Symbolism has a superfluous element in its system and structure. The important thing is that it can be accomplished in one epoch and discarded in another. In short, symbolism entirely depends on the context of thought. In the given study, then researcher highlighted the metaphors and cultural symbols of rural Punjab related to the process of weaving and materials that are involved in this activity, philosophically and metaphysically conversed in the *kāfis* of the Sufi saint of Punjab, *Mādhū Lāl Hussain* (1539-1599).

Kāfi is a well-known genre of Punjabi poetry, which has been composed by *Shāh Hussain* in ragas whereas *Bhulhe Shāh* and *Ghulām Farīd* carried to sublimity.⁴ Punjabi poetry is alluring in its accent and vocabulary and *kāfi* is an important genre of it, derived from “*Kafi raga*”. Punjabi has been in use as a literary language since the eleventh century.⁵ Its phonological rhymes are more archaic as compare to Hindi or Urdu; its imaginings and metaphors are drawn from country life, simple crafts and daily chores of rural people. One might make a comparison with the Provençal poetry of Southern France. Provençal also is more old-fashioned than French; its poetry belongs to the countryside, to the farm, and tiny market town, and is instinct with a simplicity and sincerity that is rare in the more classical language.⁶

The use of metaphors and symbolism is an old tradition of Punjabi poetry to allude to their sanities and this trend is using since the time of *shāh Hussain* till now. *Shāh Hussain* is the first recognized writer of Kafi. Folksongs are reflected in his melodious Kafis. On the surface, it looks quite commonplace poetry but he has premeditated the philosophy of life in depth. His other great contribution to Punjabi literature is the use of symbols. His symbols grow from Punjabi culture and these are multi-

dimensional in meanings. This is an intellectual and technical innovation that has exerted great influence on classical and modern Punjabi poetry.⁷

Development of Sufism in Punjab and Punjabi Symbolism

It is noted that, Sufism was born soon after the death of the Prophet Muhammad SAW and 'proceeded on orthodox lines'.⁸ In the commencement of Islam in the sub-continent, the Sufis were preachers and missionaries. The cordial Soul, patience and tolerance of Sufis, brought other believers of different religions, inauspiciously ignored by their upper classes, to Islam.

Sufis in the Punjab region, composed poetry for a long time in the Persian dialect. They replicate the expression, metaphors, similes, in-fact, the entire system of Persian pattern and rhythm of Persian poetry and rhymes, later on; they started writing in other regional languages. It might have been just in the centre of the fifteenth century that Sufi poetry began to compose in the dialect of the local people, i.e., Panjabi, which might have been adopted by the Chishtī order of the Sufis.

The concept of spirituality is more dominant in Sufism on avidity in Panjabi Sufi poet's natures, their expression is sumptuous, and the writing style was very simple, the major effort of Sufis was to manifest their virtues briefly. They mostly relate this continuous practice with the symbol of *charkha* as constant activity.

The language, symbols, metaphors and technical terms were confined to their regional trades, and the predominant mystical ideas. Similes were taken from daily Chores, were used skilfully and preceded in order.

Life history of Shāh Hussain

Shāh Hussain was a Sufi poet of Punjab born in 1539 CE near Taxali gate at Lahore. He was called Hussain and his grandfather Kahlasray

embraced Islam from Hinduism in the time of Feroz Shah Tughluq.⁹ His father Sheikh Usmān was a weaver but Hussain never learned this art. Shāh Hussain was a disciple of Shāh Bahlol Daryāi.¹⁰ Krishna noted in her document that Husain was put under the charge of Abu Bakr at a very tender age and became a hafiz when he was ten years old.

Then Shaikh Bahlol of Chiniot who learnt the doctrine of mortality *fanā* from a Sufi of Koh-Panj-Shir, came to Lahore and made Husain his own disciple.¹¹

It is said that after some time Shaikh Bahlol went back from Lahore and left Husain to endure his studies at the shrine of Dātā Ganj Bakhsh in Lahore. He served his *pīr*, spiritual guide for twelve years and followed the Qur'ānic teachings firmly. He is said to have spent many a night in a standing posture in the river Ravi, repeating the *Quran*. At twenty-six he left that *pir* and became a student of Sa'dullah, with whom he read many a book on Sufism.¹² Husain wore a red dress and came to be known as Lāl Husain or Husain the Red.¹³

As Shah Hussain grows into a Sufi, he instigated preaching in society. A Brahman boy of a small village of Shahdara near Lahore, across the river Ravi, regularly visited these religious sessions and showed profound attention in his teachings. This attracted the attention of the saint, who soon became attached to Mādhū. This attachment developed so much that his name came to be preceded to that of the saint, who to this day is known as Mādhū Lāl Hussain. Madhū Lāl Hussain freely mixed with the company of dancers and musicians as he was very fond of singing and dancing and his nature empathies on his poetry as Hanif quotes, "He developed the plant of Sufism which was sown by Sheikh Farīd. He sang

the songs of love, dejection, devotion and separation. Shāh Hussain transformed the entire spirit of Sufi poetry in the Punjabi literature.”¹⁴

Husain was fortunate to have been born, to live, and to die during the reign of Emperor Akbar whose fondness for religious men and especially the Sufi was proverbial. It appears from the writings of Dārā Shikoh, who knew Husain. Prince Dārā writes, ‘Prince Salim and the ladies of Emperor Akbar’s harem believed in his supernatural powers and entertained respect for him. He died in an early age of 53.

Sufi poetry of Shah Hussain

Prince (later Emperor) Salim was greatly attached to the saint and appointed Bahar Khan, an officer, to record his daily doings. These records, which were regularly submitted for the perusal of the Prince, were later on compiled together with the sayings of the saint and were named Baharia. The Bahariais said to be replete with incidents relating to the supernatural power of the saint. Ahmad Salim notes that:

What might be called the Golden Age of the Indus valley Sufi poetry spans some three hundred years beginning with the verse of Mādhū Lāl Hussain or Shāh Hussain who lived during the time of Mughal Emperor Akbar. From here on a succession of renowned Sufis composed poetry of rare beauty in the native language of the valley, Sindhi, Sirāikī, Balochī and Punjab to spread their message of love and tolerance.¹⁵

Symbolism in Sufi Poetry of Shāh Hussain

During the middle ages of Islam many contemplating and religious-minded persons were attracted to the towns and cities of the Indus valley for their reputation, peaceful life and respect for the learned, thus setting

the stage for the emergence of a rich tradition of Sufi poetry that has served to unify and synthesise the diverse cultural heritage of the people and their folk wisdom (Salim,14). It is stated before that Sufis of Punjab adopted Persian and Arabic style and expression in their poetry but they were inspired by their surroundings so they employed the local terms adopted from social and cultural backgrounds, concerning *taṣawwuf* (the mysticism).

Punjab was an agricultural land and cotton was cultivated since from the time of Indus valley civilization, the people themselves shaped all of the certainties of life in those times. The most imperative trade of the Punjab, which flourished more or less in every village and city, was the cotton industry and become a cultural symbol. Hussain's father, himself was a weaver but he never learned this art of weaving rather he used to observe his father when he was weaving cloth on *Khaddi*, so the related terms are flashed in his poetry from carding to twirling thread on spinning wheel to weaving cloth on *Khādi* or loom. As noted in Natural History and Commercial History of Cotton¹⁶ "In the old world, cotton appears to be an original native of the countries, east of the Indus" This process comprised three practises:

1. Cleaning and carding of cotton and making small rolls ready for spinning.
2. Spinning, turning cotton into yarn or thread
3. Weaving

Selected *Kāfis* (Poems) of Shah Hussain for Punjabi symbols

Shah Hussain used the terms Julāhā, Charkha, Wadh, Sui da nakka, Tar, Tānā bānā, as metaphor and symbols in his poetry in a very simple manner which are described here with reference of his poetry. As he says:

انی حسینو جلاہا، ناں اس مول نوں لاہا
 نہ اوہ منگیا نہ اوہ پر نایا
 نہ اوس گنڈھ، نہ ساہا
 نہ گھر باری، نہ مسافر
 نہ اوہ مومن، نہ اوہ کافر
 جو آہا سو آہا!

In this *kāfi* shāh Hussain claims that he is a weaver means “a lay-man or a worker” in a simpler meaning, and he asked to call him a weaver. Here he uses the word *Julāhā* (weaver) as a symbol. He knows that this world is mortal and man has to pass time in this mortal world by obeying and carrying out the orders of his Lord (*Allah*) as a worker and one day he will have to go back to him after completing his task. He will have to meet him again. He said that he is innocent and pure in nature. He has faith in the concept of mortality *fanā* but he doesn't acknowledge the dogma of *anā al-Haqq* without which mortality will be not intelligible.

عاشق ہوویں تاں عشق کماویں
 راہ عشق داسوئی دا نکا
 دھاگا ہوویں نال جاویں
 باہر پاک، اندر آلودہ، کیا توں شیخ کہاویں
 کہے حسین جے فارغ تھیویں تاں خاص مرا تہہ پاویں

In this *kāfi* shāh Hussain says that the path of love *Ishq* is not so easy. He depicts the eye of a needle as a symbol of hardness and toughness. He says the path of love is live going through the eye of a needle. He follows the imagery of a needle and thread. He says that all the associations and relations of life of a human being are guided through what appears to be a hump in a relationship. A thread that has found union with a needle becomes a productive tool. The image of a needle and thread has two

elements in the background that they are part of a weaver's daily experience. Shah Hussain also conversed that we become the thread from un-spun cotton, we have twisted through the spinning wheel and now we can go through the eye of the needle. He tries to make us understand that we can recognize the whole process of reforming or refabricating the authentic self is similar to those starts with pummeling of raw cotton to whirling and whirling to yarn and then meticulous processing. All this doesn't happen on its own or through contemplation but through actions. In the next stanza of given kafi:

چرخہ میرا رنگ لال
 ہے اوڈ چرخہ، تے وڈ منے
 ہن کہہ گیا باراں اپنے
 سائیں کارن، لون رنے
 روئے ونجایا حال

My spinning wheel is red, it is charming red. The charkha is used as a symbol of rural self-sufficient society as well as in the urban manufacturing area and, hence, it is more universal. Shāh Hussain says that as bigger is the *charkha* a spinning wheel "a symbol of the world and its worldly desires" bigger will be the experiences, miseries and sufferings of it and the worldly desires will make you tired so limit yourself and your desires. Shāh Hussain placed life in mortal, non-living things and have transformed them into immortality so that even today we can hear and feel the wailing and crying of *Charkha* alive as we read the poetry of shah Hussain. We can see Shāh Hussain as much impressed by the cracking, shrieking and squeezing of *Charkha*. Shah Hussain has dissected every part of the *Charkha* and felt its inner deep message and explored it to

the entire world. Furthermore, in another poem Shāh Hussain use warp and weft as metaphors of life as give below:

رہا میرے حال دا محرم توں!
 اندر توں ہیں، باہر توں ہیں، روم روم وچ توں
 توں ہیں تانا، توں ہیں بانا، سبھ کچھ میرا توں
 کہے حسین فقیر نمایاں 'میں ناہیں' سب توں

Shah Hussain made a generous use of the terms of this industry and took them as metaphors and symbols that excels interest and expression of thoughts for the followers, devotees and readers. Here he says that you are the only one who understands my feelings. No one understands my pain and grief, I am suffering from. You are inside and outside of me and knows everything. True Sufi intellect refracted here. Sufism is not a religion or philosophy in itself; it is a narration of one's mind in which a person forgets one's self in search of divine love and Sufis are the truth seekers who devoted their lives in search of veracity. The ideal of almost all the mystics was to find God in all His creation and thus attain union with Him. Hussain negates his personality and entity. He depicts the world Tānā bānā beautifully to symbolizes the life doings and activities, relations and associations and saying that every bit of this universe is made by Allah and he is everywhere ales even you are every bit of me (sabh kujh mera toon). In the end, Hussain explains the truth of life and says that I am innocent, weak, abandoned, and helpless and only can say that all this energy in this universe is yours. In another kafi:

ہن تن دیاں تیرا تانا، میٹھی چندڑیئے نی
 صاحبزادڑیئے نی، سر پر جینیئے نی، گھم نہ آوینیئے نی
 تن دیاں تیرا تانا
 کتدیاں کتدیاں عمر وہائی نکلیا سوت پرانا

کھڑی دے وچ جلائی پھاتی، نلیاں دارو گھت وبانا
 تانے پیئے اکو سوتر، دوتیاں بھاؤ نہ جانا
 پینی جھڈ کراہی ہنر اریں رچھ پچھانا
 تانا آند، بانا آند، آند اچر نہ پرانا
 آکھن دی حاجت ناہیں، جو جائیں سو جاناں
 دھرن آکاش وچ وتھ پچے دی، تہاں شہاں دا ٹھانا
 سبھ ویسے شیشے دامن در وچ حسین نمانا

Hussain used the word *Tānā* as a symbol of life. He says that life is short and it must end at once. Oh, my life now I will take control of you. For him, the world was a spinning-wheel and his own self or soul as a child who was supposed to be spanned and now, he will manage himself according to the short span of life of this mortal world. When he says *Kattday Kattdayan kattdayan umar wahai nikla soot purana* means that he ruined his time in worldly things and desires. He came to know the reality of immortal life very late. He believed in the postulation of *Karma*. His good actions were like spinning and the yarn thus spun was his dowry that he would take to the *Rab* (God). Therefore, God loves the Sufi who died with a good account (karma or actions) and possessed qualities that would befit a soul striving for good, so I will manage my life and spend it according to His will and will do good deeds. It determined that course and humans can only enjoy authentic living by realizing or utilizing the fact of the limited time, they have. As he said weaver entangled in the loom and spindle ended, here he means that life remained busy in its affairs in this mortal world and the death arrived. In short life is so small to spend and for good deeds. Hussain says that all warps and wefts are known to me as well as the spinning wheel is known to me, here he means

that he has all the knowledge that Hussain is nothing but a valueless, unimportant a small human being.

The upper given Kāfi of Shāh Hussain describes the whole theory and hypothesis of his preaching and portrays symbols of life factually in relation to Punjabi culture and as a folk lore. Weaving is the most sophisticated skill in contrast to cultivation, etc. and by using this as a poetic symbol Shah Husain raised up Punjabi poetry to other higher level. This is an intellectual and technical innovation which has exerted great influence on the classical and modern Punjabi poetry.¹⁷ He used very rich imagery, drawn not only from common objects but also with acts of daily chor from his surroundings, for the expression of simple ideas urging for the abandonment of the worldly life and for the practise of love for God.

Conclusion

Shāh Hussain's poetry can be appreciated in the connection of the chronicled and socio-economical concept that truly depicts the symbols of true Punjabi culture. This paper is basically about the symbolic meanings of the Spinning (Charkha *kattna*) and thread are therefore related to notions about birth, the creation of a body and the fate of a new-born child who according to traditional folk beliefs, is spun from un-spun wool, which symbolizes a child's prior existence in the other world, in a wool basket, or womb. He has studied the philosophy of life in depth. His other great contribution to Punjabi literature is the use of mystical imagery to allude to his thoughts. His symbols grow from Punjabi culture and these are multidimensional in meanings. As such, spinning a thread or child's body from un-spun wool means creating a link that stems from the otherworld (un-spun wool) into this world (spun thread). The spinning continues while a man is still alive. When the spinning stops, a man dies,

the length of the thread which is to be spun being, as we have seen in numerous beliefs around the globe, past and present, determined by spinning fates at birth. The individuality of Shāh Hussain is resonated through his poetry. The centerpiece of the Sufi belief in wahdat-ul-wajud, the oneness of all beings. The poet's message of universal fraternity, love and respect for all creation is firmly rooted in this pivotal concept.

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