

Tragic Romances as a Manifestation of *Fanaa*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explain how Sufi saints inspired mysticism by allegorizing secular works as spiritual works through the recounting of tales of tragic romance. This paper will be looking into the Sufi influences in the oral and written tradition of the Punjab and the Sindh region which include the tales of *Heer-Ranjha*, *Sassi-Punnu*, *Mirza-Sahibann*, and *Sohni-Mahiwal*. The Sufi concept of *fanaa* will be explored through the tragic romances which were immensely popular at a time that Sufism was making itself known in India. The primary focus of this paper will be on how the lovers depicted in these tragic romances are annihilated in their quest for love, and that is essentially what the notion of *fanaa* is about.

Keywords- *Sufism, Tragic Romances, Fanaa, Sufi Literature, Punjabi Sufi Poetry*

Introduction

Tales of love and romance resonate throughout the world. Almost every region has at least a few, if not many, romantic stories. These stories have been passed down, from generation to generation, and have survived through an array of media – oral retellings, informal and formal written publications, music and cinema. Stories of love tug at the heartstrings. The idea of uniting with a loved one and experiencing affection and passionate emotions for another being is a universal one, with many understanding it on a more spiritual level as a yearning for and uniting with God.

Tragic romances, particularly those dealing with the separation of lovers and ending in their deaths, deviate a bit from the emotions evoked by a happy romantic tale. For some people, it is the melancholy that the tragedy elicits that makes the tale more memorable and relatable. Many take solace in the fact that the lovers were united in death, and that their afterlife will be spent together as opposed to the merely countable years they might have spent together on earth. On looking at this from the spiritual angle, it is possible to say that it is the suffering and the pain that they endured in their mortal lives that enabled them to be united with their beloved. This suffering may also be perceived as the journey a devotee undertakes to relinquish the material world and become one with God.

One can find many such dimensions in a seemingly innocuous story. And what Sufi poets mostly did, and continue to do, is inspire mysticism by allegorizing secular tales. This enabled people to understand profound mystical concepts through these simple tales that they already knew. This was not a particularly innovative strategy, as poets from the Bhakti movement were also doing the same, but it was effective enough as Sufism seeped into the regions where these poets were congregated at.

The Sufi movement in India was a very widespread one. When Sufi ideals first arrived in India from the Arabian region, it melded in quite effortlessly with the prevalent Bhakti ideals (Das 154). The people of India immediately took to it, and there emerged the Indian Sufi literature with many written and oral works in the vernacular languages.

The Sufi movement brought about the genre of Indian Sufi literature by its widespread influence in India. One prolific way that Sufi literature and therefore, Sufism, gained relevance in the country was through Sufi poetry. Sufi poetry took advantage of the rich oral tradition that was present then. While Sufism reaped fruits all over the country, it was particularly noted for its influence in the Punjab and the Sindh region. And that is what has given rise to Punjabi Sufi poetry.

This paper will be looking into the Sufi influences in the Punjab and the Sindh region, particularly that of the Sufi concept of *fanaa* on the tragic romances that were immensely popular at that time. The primary focus of this paper will be on how the lovers depicted in these tragic romances are annihilated in their quest for love, and that is essentially what the notion of *fanaa* is.

This paper will only be dealing with the tragic romances from the Punjab and the Sindh region, which include *Heer-Ranjha*, *Sassi-Punnu*, *Mirza-Sahibann*, and *Sohni-Mahiwal*. One usually categorizes the famous tale of *Laila-Majnun* with the aforementioned ones. However, that tale will not be dealt with as it outside the geographic scope prescribed by this paper.

Sufism

It is a mystical Islamic belief wherein the believers try to seek divine love and knowledge through the direct relationship between the worshipper and God. The word ‘Sufism’ finds its root in the Arabic term for ‘mystic’, *Sufi*. This word, in turn, is derived from the word *suf*, which means ‘wool’; perhaps referring to the early mystics’ clothing made of the coarse material which signified their detachment from worldly wants (Nicholson 1-2).

The question about the origins of Sufism is one with a few different answers, some of those being that it developed after Islam made direct contact with ancient oriental doctrines and Eastern Christianity, or that it came about as a parallel occurrence to the Indian Bhakti movement, another one being that it began as a counter-movement against the increasing materialism and worldliness of the expanding Muslim community. It was a protest against the rulers and the rigid laws (Das 151).

Sufism had an irreplaceable role to play in the Turkish, Persian, Urdu, Sindhi, and Punjabi literature. It is through these works of literature that the mystical ideas and concepts of Sufism influenced and spread to a large number of people, giving rise to many other movements with similar ideals.

Fanaa

One such concept with a universal understanding in the Sufi philosophy is that of *fanaa*, an Arabic term which means ‘to pass away’, ‘annihilation of the self’ or ‘to cease to exist’. Annemarie Schimmel’s *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* defines *fanaa* as ‘the total nullification of the ego-consciousness when there remains only the absolute Unity of Reality’ (143). *Fanaa* entails giving up the earthly, mortal existence to live only in God and with God. Attaining the state of *fanaa* is the step preceding a more sublime condition of *baqaa*, translating to ‘subsistence’, wherein one is truly conscious of God and God’s presence.

The concept of *fanaa* can be seen as following a universal train of thought, as there is a similar idea in the Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh and yogic schools of thought called *samaadhi*, which is Sanskrit for ‘total self-collectedness’. *Samaadhi* involves experiencing the highest degree of concentration while still being bound to one’s physical human self. Like in *fanaa*, one needs to let go of all ego-generated emotions to attain the state of *samaadhi* (“Samadhi”, Britannica).

Both the concepts of *samaadhi* and *fanaa* are based on the notion of being spiritually aware, which further entails letting go of ignorance and embracing knowledge.

Tales of romance—a carrier of Fanaa

A. Sufi influences in the Indian subcontinent

Sisir Kumar Das says in his essay, *The Mad Lover*, that when Sufism arrived in India, it was at a time when the Bhakti movement was gaining a stronghold and Indian vernacular literature was in its impressionable stages of growth. Owing to the similar ideas in both Sufism and Bhakti, ‘the Sufi thought permeated naturally into the national Indian psyche’; and it added another dimension to the more widespread Bhakti movement. Sufi ideas resonated throughout the country. Sufi saints called out from different parts of the nation and the movement particularly struck a few chords in Bengal, and the Punjab and the Sindh regions (154).

Sufi poets started contemplating about and reworking existing tales and poetry depicting characters that were in love. This was seen as a reflection of what was going on with the Bhakti movement, with many of the secular love poems allegorized as spiritual works, while still retaining the familiarity of secularism (161).

Romantic folktales in Awadhi, Bengali, Punjabi, Sindhi and Urdu were formally written down as spiritual allegories and preserved as literature through such Sufi poets. These Sufi poets include Malik Muhammad Jaysi, who wrote in Awadhi about the legend of Padmini and named it *Padumavat*, Mulana Daud, who wrote *Chandayan* based on the tale of Lor and Chanda; and Daulat Kazi and Saiyed Alaol who rendered these aforementioned tales in Bengali (165).

B. Tragic romances from Punjab— its significance

The influences of Sufi tradition are quite integral to the history of Punjab, both in its culture and its literature. It is through the combined presence of the Bhakti and the Sufi movements that Sikhism developed (Loehlin 1). Various Sufi poets emerged from all corners of the Punjab and the Sindh region and it brought about a new era in Punjabi literature, particularly through the advent of Punjabi Sufi literature. While quite a few Sufi orders came about in India, says Khushwant Singh in his essay, *Sufis in Punjab*, three of them—*Chishtiya*, *Qalandari*, and *Qadiri* flourished in the region. Many well-known writers who adhered to these orders contributed to Punjabi literature by popularizing certain forms of verse like the *kafi*, *bara-mah*, and the *siharfi*. A major contribution made by these writers was the creation of *Kissa*— epic love poems that were based on legendary romances.

The poets from the Punjab and the Sindh region found their sources in the tragic romances and legends of Heer and Ranjha, Sassi and Punnu, and more (Das 166). Famous Sufi poets such as Jalaluddin Rumi, Bulleh Shah, Waris Shah and more made these love stories from Punjab a part of the Sufi literary tradition by allegorizing the notion of the complete dedication and devotion of the lover to the beloved as the relationship between a devotee and God (167).

C. Specific Tragic Romances

The romantic tales were from the Punjab and the Sindh region were centered on women who were madly in love with their lovers but could not be united with them due to certain circumstances. One can say that these women rebelled against the conventional norms which tried to separate them from their beloved significant others; a rebellion with a passion so intense that were willing to risk even their lives to succeed. And this is why most of these tales usually culminated in the death of the characters. These tales which highlight the tragic separation of ardent lovers were often thought to convey spiritual ideas through them, but this notion was never explicitly stated. The mortal, human love which was depicted in these tales was later elevated to divine, spiritual love.

Given below are the some of the popular tragic romances that have been looked at for this paper.

i) **Heer and Ranjha**

This tale is perhaps the most popular of all of the romantic tragedies from Punjab, with numerous renditions and adaptations made by various writers for an array of different media. Out of the several poetic narrations of this story, the most popular one is by the Sufi poet Waris Shah, titled *Heer*, which was written in 1766. This version written by Shah is one of the few instances where the spiritual references are explicitly stated, and the intense love between Heer and Ranjha is said to allegorize the love that ought to exist between man and God, and that it signifies the 'relentless quest of man for God'. The origins of this tale cannot be credited to one definite source, as some claim that this was Shah's original work, while others say that this tale is based on true circumstances.

Ranjha leaves home after quarreling with his brothers and after wandering about from village to village is offered a job by Heer's father to herd his cattle. Heer and Ranjha fall in love and keep meeting secretly over the years. When Heer's family finds out about this, they marry her off to another man. Heartbroken Ranjha leaves Heer's village and becomes a wandering ascetic. He finally finds Heer, and they convince her parents to let them get married to each other. Her parents initially agree, but they later poison her, and Ranjha dies by willingly consuming the same poison.

ii) **Mirza and Sahiban**

Mirza and Sahiban met when Mirza came to stay in Sahiban's town to study. When a marriage is arranged between Sahiban and another man, she elopes with Mirza. While on the run, as they rest for the night, and Sahiban breaks all of Mirza's arrows to prevent him from hurting her brothers when they catch up with the couple. She thought that she could convince her brothers, but all that is for naught when her brothers kill Mirza, and she stabs herself with a sword in despair.

iii) **Sassi and Punnu**

Sassi was the daughter of the King of Bhambour and thought to be a cursed child, she is abandoned. Fostered under the care of a washerman, the news of Sassi's beauty reaches Punnu, the

son of the Khan of Kicham. He finally meets Sassi, they fall in love and Punnu asks for Sassi's hand in marriage from her father. However, Punnu's family does not approve of the match and they abduct Punnu to take him back home. Sassi runs towards Kicham in a mad frenzy. When she is threatened by someone, she prays to God, and she is swallowed up by the mountains. Punnu hears of this and he wishes for the same. Punnu and Sassi are believed to be buried in the same mountain valley. This tale was retold by the Sufi poet Shah Abdul Latif, where he highlights the separation, 'the bewildered wanderings' and her 'tragic death' (Das 167).

iv) Sohni and Mahiwal

Sohni is the daughter of a potter and Mahiwal is a wealthy trader who takes a job as a servant to be near Sohni. When Sohni's family becomes aware of their relationship, they marry her off to another potter. Sohni and Mahiwal keep meeting each other at night, with Sohni swimming across a river with the help of an earthen pot to stay afloat. Her sister-in-law gets to know of their clandestine meetings, and she tampers with the pot. Sohni drowns in the river, and Mahiwal jumps in and drowns with her.

This is another tale that was preserved for posterity by the Sufi poet Shah Abdul Latif. He beautifully 'captures the most dramatic episode', Sohni's last attempt to swim across the river (168).

D. Fanaa in Tragic Romances

'In Punjabi poetry, the Beloved is a man and the Lover who seeks him is a woman. So in the Sufi sense, Heer is the soul that seeks and Ranjha represents the Divine Beloved.' This is what A.C. Woolner says in the foreword to Lajwanti Ramakrishna's book, *Punjabi Sufi Poets*. However, when one takes into account the many tragic romances, including that of *Heer-Ranjha*, from the Punjab and the Sindh region, I find that all the lovers which constitute these famous couples embody both, the 'soul' and the 'Divine Beloved' at the same time. I disagree with the way Woolner assigns these interchangeable roles to people based on their gender. As we can see in the tales of *Sassi-Punnu* and *Heer-Ranjha*, both the male protagonists, Punnu and Ranjha, try to seek out their lovers, thereby reversing the roles that have been designated by Woolner. Also, in the tale of *Sohni-Mahiwal*, it is Mahiwal who seeks to end his life the same way that his beloved died, as the thought of living without her was unfathomable.

It is this notion, of the lovers attempting to unite with each other, which prompted me to look at these tragic tales through the Sufi perspective. This is, by no means, a novel concept. In fact, as mentioned before, this is exactly what led to the inception of Punjabi Sufi Poetry.

The immense yearning the lovers have for each other can be seen on a more spiritual plane, as being equivalent to the yearning of man for God. This fervent yearning is so zealous, that they are willing to destroy themselves in their attempt to be united. And this is what makes me think that these

tragic romances are a manifestation of the aforementioned Sufi concept of *fanaa*, a sentiment which is the echo of many Punjabi Sufi poets.

There are many who say that the tale of *Heer-Ranjha* was one that ended happily, with the lovers united and living in Mecca. It is believed that Waris Shah gave his popular version the tragic ending so that the story could serve as a carrier of Sufi ideas, wherein the lovers are annihilated in their quest to be united and thus attain *fanaa*. They can be thought of to be united in death, and through their union with each other, they are united with God.

The willingness to be destroyed does not limit itself to the physical world. These lovers impassioned by their all-consuming love were even inclined to let go of their individual identities and their notions of the self to be wholly one with their lovers. Like Bulhe Shah's Heer declares through these lines:

*Ranjha Ranjha Kardi ni mai ape Ranjha hoi
Sadho ni mainu Dhido Ranjha Hir na akho koi.*

Translation:

Repeating 'Ranjha, Ranjha,' myself, I have become Ranjha.
Call me Dhido Ranjha, none should call me Hir anymore.

A Reflection in Europe

The tragic love story of Tristan and Ysolt, or Isolde as she was called in Richard Wagner's opera, is one such tale that derives mainly from Celtic sources. Although, it can be observed that the story incorporates the motifs of the tragic romances from the East. These tales might have been transmitted from India through Arabic Spain. The first recorded instance of the mention of this tale is in the works of an author monogamously known as Thomas. His version of this tale is what has served as the inspiration for various adaptations and reenactments of the same (David and Simpson 136).

Conclusion

"The ideal of the Punjabi mystic poet was to find God in all His creation and thus attain union with Him (14)", says Lajwanti Rama Krishna in her book, *Punjabi Sufi Poets*. I find that this statement reflects the Sufi notion of *fanaa*. It is in the same way as Bulhe Shah's Heer becomes Ranjha that man becomes one with God on attaining *fanaa*. Once he has become entirely one with God, he ceases to be just himself. He sees God in himself and the external world, and through this realization, he *becomes* God.

Notes

1. Most of the general information presented here about Sufism is from the Encyclopedia Britannica (online edition) unless mentioned otherwise.
2. Most of the general information presented here about Fanaa is from the Encyclopedia Britannica (online edition) unless mentioned otherwise.
3. This epic poem is a fictionalized version of the historic siege of Chittor by Alauddin Khilji in 1303 AD, who attacks Chittor after hearing of the beauty of Queen Padmini, the wife of King Rawal Ratan Singh.
4. The story revolves around the romance of a married Rajput princess Chanda with Lor, an Ahir tribesman, with whom she elopes to escape the censure of her parents and the public.
5. It is also spelt as *Qissa* or *Qissah*.
6. Also, it is to be noted that these tales were made known and spread across the region by means of oral traditions and hence, there are different versions available of all these tales. As I wanted to collect these tales from a common source, most of the information on these tales has been taken from Wikipedia, which I have deemed credible enough for the purpose of this paper, and it will be these versions that I will be referring to for the entirety of this paper.
7. The transliteration and the translation have been taken from Sisir Kumar Das's essay *The Mad Lover* (171). He stated its source as Lajwanti Rama Krishna's book *Punjabi Sufi Poets* (80). Das's transliteration has been used here as it is better understood today.

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