

Portraying the Transformation of Self in Sufi Poetry of Wahab Khar

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Self has always persisted as one of the prominent facets of Sufism and Sufi poetry. The many tenets of Islamic Sufism, such as Wahdatul-Wajood (Unity of Being) and Wahdatul-Shahood (Unity of Witness), wilayat (spiritual authority), and maqams (spiritual positions), are centred around the concept of the self. All of these concepts also symbolise that the self or nafs have the potential to undergo transformation. The indispensable objective of Sufism is to achieve the spiritual self, also called Nafsul Mutmainah. The definition of Sufism also revolves around the self. Sufism can be defined as "a practical and devotional path that leads to the transformation of the self from its lowly instinctual nature to the ultimate state of subsistence in God—a state in which all blame-worthy traits fall away." This study aims to examine the notion and projection of self in the poetics of Wahab Khar, a Kashmiri Sufi poet. In his poetics, the self is constantly seeking for purification and yearning to meet its guide or Pir. Wahab Khar brings into play several ways to attain these two desires. This study aims to emphasise Wahab's attempts to achieve the purification of self.

Keywords: Self, Sufism, Kashmir Saints, Purification, Sufi Poetry.

Introduction

Sufism has been present in Islam right from its inception. Although the Prophet and his companions never gave it a name, it existed in reality without a name. After the era of the Prophet's companions ended, scholars believe the reality part of this spiritual aspect of life extinguished, and the abstract part or the name continued. Martin Lings argues, "It was once a reality without a name." Commenting on this in the following century, Hujwiri adds: 'In the time of the Companions of the Prophet and their immediate successors this name did not exist, but its reality was in everyone. Now the name exists without the reality.' Similarly, but without being so absolute either in praise or in blame, Ibn Khaldun remarks that in the first three generations of Islam mysticism was too general to have a

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special name. But 'when worldliness spread and men tended to become more and more bound up with the ties of this life, those who dedicated themselves to the worship of God were distinguished from the rest by the title of Sufis.'"¹ Self in Sufi poetry has its own dimensions, angles, realms, and shifts, which a reader must be well aware of to understand the deeper philosophies of its portrayal. According to Shulman and Strousma,

“The inherently transformative quality of the self as culturally conceived and understood, in specific cultural and religious systems — its structured tendencies to shift, to split, to unravel, to disappear, to cumulate new levels or parts, to disencumber itself of levels or parts, to refashion, deepen, or diminish its own self-awareness in changing contexts, and so on, all of these processes occurring either voluntarily or not, but very often through heavily determined and ritualized acts.”²

Sufis believe that individuals should always strive to reunite their limited and fractured selves with the divine presence of God. This yearning has its roots in Islam for Sufis, as they allude to the Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) yearning to Mecca at the time of migration. According to Martin Lings, “When the exile (Prophet (SAW)) turns his face in the direction of Mecca, he aspires above all, if he is a Sufi, to the inward return, to the reintegration of the fragmented finite individual self into the Infinitude of the Divine Self.”³ To attain the divine hood of God, saints follow the teachings for a very long period. The self of the person who is going to attain sainthood needs to pass through various stages before obtaining the purification. The “inner change is sought in a continuous, for the most part gradual, discipline of praxis, meditation, and prayer, and the transformation “finally” achieved may be seen as irreversible, as when the poet-devotee fuses into God, or when Enlightenment, which cannot be “reached,” is nonetheless realized.”⁴ Martin Lings also argues that Sufis saints believed that in the transformation to sainthood, the death of something or material self before their actual death happens; he writes, for Sufis, “that something in them had already ebbed before death despite the ‘cage’, something incomparably more important than anything that has to wait for death to set it free.”⁵ Sufis also pursue their masters to attain that desired level of purification, the purification of self or the death of material self, because the “attachment to the spiritual chain gives the initiate (a person who wants to attain sainthood) not only the means of preventing his own ebb back in the direction from which he came, but also the means of advancing along the spiritual path if he is qualified for ‘travel.’”⁶ The concorded model between Master and devotee is cited in

the Qur'an as *"Indeed, Allah was pleased with the believers when they pledged allegiance to you 'O Prophet' under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts, so He sent down serenity upon them and rewarded them with a victory at hand."*⁷

In Kashmir, "Sufism has emerged as a significant force, playing a vital role in nurturing a sense of unity and coexistence among the various communities that inhabit the region."⁸ They allude to different personalities and mythologies that belong to other religions in Kashmir other than Islam. This mystical way aims to uncover the enigmas of the self, as it is founded on pure connections. Sufi poetry is seen as a means of bridging the gap between the human self and the heavenly presence. "A Sufi poet, who makes one, not only feel but touch Allah (God) indispensably in his verses."⁹ Kashmir's Sufi saints and poets have always worked for harmony and cultural betterment. "Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam, has played a significant role in fostering cultural harmony in Kashmir."¹⁰ They have worked beyond religious boundaries for the promotion of peace, unity, and spiritual enlightenment. Wali has pointed out, "Kashmir has been a cradle of Sufism since centuries, representing a unique blend of various faiths and ideologies."¹¹ This phenomenon has been studied under the scholarship of vernacular cosmopolitanism, where the cosmopolitan thought is vernacularised, and the vernacular is cosmopolised.

In Sufism, the understanding of Islamic spirituality has been understood through local understandings of the spirituality. Clinton Bennett argues, "Sufis, traditionally, are open and tolerant toward diversity, respecting other faiths and even emphasise commonalities. Some accept non-Muslim initiates."¹² We often see references to local religions in the poetics of Kashmiri Sufi poets. In the vernacularisation of Islam, "message and teachings of Islam adjusted and adapted in local regional environments outside Arabia. The universal principles of Islam were vernacularized in specific time and space, and contextualized or localized forms and expressions of Muslim piety emerged in these regions."¹³

Wahab Khar, a Kashmiri poet, is highly acclaimed for his significant contributions to Sufi literature. In his poetics, he effectively depicts the central teachings of Sufism and their profound impact on the amicable blend of cultures in Kashmir. He used colloquial poetry to spread Sufi ideas among the local masses. He employed local and universal symbols in his poetry to convey his message. He often draws images, similes,

metaphors, and other symbols that create an immense effect on the reader. He creates his own realm in the poetry and takes a reader into that realm and makes him feel the realm. Meanwhile, the use of symbolism has been one of the main aspects used by Sufi saints and poets for understanding and comprehending the Islamic message. Sufi poetry is known for its frequent use of metaphors to enhance the depth of its meaning and transcending of the self. Wahab Khar uses images, metaphors, and stories and other concepts from Islam and other religions, and also juxtaposes local or global personalities and mythologies. Commenting on the verses of his poem, "*Mas deutham baal i yaaro / Kas wane soander soander* which means, "*You fed me liquor, O dear beloved, / To whom should I 'lovely lass' say?*" Farooq cites that in these lines, the poet uses liquor to express his state of ecstasy. A state of transcendence, where the poet's self leaves its bodily form and reunites with the divine. He writes "the poet says that his beloved has fed him liquor and now unmindful of the world around, he feels restless as to whom would he convey his ordeal. Here 'liquor' is used for 'love's nectar.' By using 'liquor,' as a metaphor, the poet expresses his ecstatic state."¹⁴

In his other poems, Wahab Khar has used the metaphor of a woodcutter. The metaphor signifies someone who trembled the poet's self towards divinity, who took him out from infancy or ignorance towards a life of self-annihilation and transformation. In the poem *path wan raeyil oosus naaz/ kya kari pare pare, cham ne aawaaz / bae tchatith trowus tabardaaran/ yaaro wan, bala yaaro wan* (*In past, with grandeur I was a Deodar of dense forest/ What would I do being speechless? / I have been reduced to pieces by woodcutter /Tell me, my love, tell me* (trans. Moti Lal Saqi)¹⁵, in another poem he says *bai-aar tabardaaro/ laeytham tabar tabar/ Tabar e korum paar e paaro/ Kas waene soander soander* (*O unkind woodcutter/ You axed me again and again/ This axe tore me down into pieces/ To whom should I 'lovely lass' say?* (trans. Shad Ramzan)¹⁶). In these poems, the poet consistently portrays the woodcutter as a repeating theme, symbolising the power and control to which the poet willingly surrenders. His perpetual awe at the insignificance of the individual self in the presence of the divine is also apparent in this context. Philosophy that has pertained to the religious domain has been predominantly emphasised along the lines of the essentiality of love for people as a prerequisite for love towards God. This is where we observe a profound affection for the divine conveyed via a highly secular language. Moreover, Self-annihilation has been given importance in Sufism. As Sarwar Alam points out, "It is sometimes described as a journey toward the "Ultimate Reality,"

a journey of realizing nothingness and annihilation of the self before God. The change is vital for being close to God; the more a Sufi understands his God, the more annihilation occurs in his self.”¹⁷ While Khar’s work on divine yearning and self-sacrifice might be too lofty for us lesser mortals, luckily, wisdom can be found in his more worldly and accessible verse.¹⁸

Self has been interpreted in Sufism as “Nafs”, “soul”, and “spirit” or “Heart”. The “nafs became, primarily, the designator of a negative, earth-bound fiery entity that needs to be constantly condemned and watched over.”¹⁹ Sviri further states that nafs for Sufis have always been a mediocre facet of the human psycho-physiological structure. Sufism considered the nafs as inferior to the soul, which is a different perception from the philosophical notion. Soul for them is divine and nafs has a worldly entity. They take this notion from a hadith of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH): *"Your worst enemy is the nafs that lies between your sides"*. “Adverse as the nafs may be, it is seen by Sufi authors as a component of human nature that can be transformed.”²⁰ Wahab Khar’s in his two poems *“Qadam faqirs qad bala, haa dumb-ba-dumb par hu-Allah”* and *“shaam sonderaa bar kernes te lolo, Kaam Devas lug parmast te lolo”*, That is, *“the rank of the faqir is grand, O’self repeatedly say Hu-Allah,”* and *“the evening beauty is caught in spell completely, Kamadev also has fully intoxicated”*, exhibit a persistent quest for redemption on the part of the poet. In order to achieve it, he diligently accompanies his Pir-o-Murshid (spiritual master) to various locations. The poems do not depict the protagonist’s encounter with his Pir; nonetheless, both poems conclude with a very positive tone.

In the opening of the first poem, the protagonist asserts the role of his Master in the spiritual domain; his mentor has achieved a highly esteemed status. Accordingly, the self must submit to the teachings of his Murshid in order to achieve its intended destination. The pir or spiritual leader will provide guidance and ideas, which are essential for reaching the sacred realm. He asserts that self-annihilation for the sake of Allah is the one path that has endured and will continue to endure for me. In Islam and Sufi mysticism, the notion that the self must be entirely prostrated before Allah is of paramount importance. It facilitates an individual in achieving the spiritual dimension of their religious beliefs. The Quran repeatedly emphasises the need for nafs to be controlled as a means to achieve bliss. As al-Quran states, *“O soul at peace return to your Lord, well pleased and pleasing [to Him].”*²¹ The poet possesses a complete understanding of the challenges that the nafs, in addition to other obstacles, create for an

individual's pursuit of the holy journey. Even in Islam, the nafs have been called the enemy of a person between him and God. Sufis and classical authors with an ascetic or moralistic inclination both have an inherent unfavourable perspective on nafs. A commonly cited Prophetic saying (Hadith Nabawi) in literature simply reflects this perspective: "The most powerful adversary you face is the nafs, which is within you"²². The fact that nafs is seen as a hostile entity, it is necessary to formally declare war on it. However, the nafs, within the context of this metaphorical depiction of conflict and hostility, is not isolated. The extent of pietistic fighting expands when additional "adversaries" join the conflict area. Traditionally, Satan is commonly referred to as the Adversary and represents the base propensity, as shown in Hellenistic and Christian scriptures. In response to this combination of three elements, the deeply religious Muslim, whether they are a Sufi or not, is encouraged to engage in the 'larger holy war'. Wahab Khar has highlighted this notion in the fourth couplet of the poem by saying that to be in the realm of Kalima (phrase) is very hard and difficult to follow; the only solution is to follow your guide; his teachings are way out that will help to deal with this difficulty. He writes *Kalimeh chui lalo truthui/ Piri gandai daras hutui/ su goo quadrat aalaa/ haa dumb-ba-dumb par hu-Allah*", it can be translated as *Kalimah is, dear, toilsome/ endure it through sage's counselling/ He, the Divine, is great/ O'self repeatedly say Hu-Allah*. He used the word "Truthui", which means it is very difficult or tough and challenging. It signifies You will face consistent struggles in the ways to conquer the realm perfectly. This transformation of the nafs or self has to go from *Nasoot* to *Jabroot* state of existence. The existence in *Jabroot* is where the nafs is pure from all the evils. A self that is free of earthly attachments, worries, and hopes, and finds fulfillment in its eternal connection to God. The nafs has to cross three stages to reach purification. As Sara Sviri points out:

"The idea of the transformation of the self has been understood to rest upon three Qur'anic verses which address nafs explicitly. The first verse addresses the nafs as "that which incites to evil" (al-nafs al-ammara bil-su; 12:53); in the second, it is designated "the nafs that blames" (al-nafs al-lawwama; 75:2); and in the third, it is described as "the serene self" (al-nafs al-mutma'inna; 89:27). These three designations, culled from disjoint locations, were seen, when juxtaposed in the foregoing order, as a paradigm for the progressive transformation of the lower self through effort, discipline, introspection, and, ultimately, divine grace, into the desired state of fulfilment."²³

This transformation should be held voluntarily. At the end of the poem, Wahab Khar writes, “*Nasootie TAchtoh ander/ Malkow neerith chui guzar/ Lahoot Jabroot chui aalmah/ haa dumb-ba-dumb par hu-Allah*” that is, “*at Nasoot submit yourself/ transcending angels is your quest/ lahoot jabroot are further cosmoses, O’self repeatedly say Hu-Allah*”. We see that the poet wants to attain the highest spiritual levels. He wants to attain the level of “Jabroot”, a spiritual position of self where oneness with God is attained. Where you and Allah have no filters in-between. This level of spirituality can be referred towards the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and his meeting with Allah on the journey of Miraj. He met with Allah, and it is supposed in Sufi Islam that he saw Allah at that moment. “The yearning for God and passing through various stages of soul’s purification can turn one into a Sufi who can visualize God through his inward eye.”²⁴ To attain the level of Jabroot, one has to go through various other levels- Nasoot, Malakoot, and Laahoot- which are very difficult to attain. Nasoot is the level of our physical world, full of worldly charms and things that lure a person to crave them, consequently a very difficult one to leave for spirituality. The transformation should be achieved voluntarily. While citing Shafiq Al-Balkhi's notions of transformation through “acts of worship” Sviri writes that these “supererogatory acts that “the people of sincerity” (ahl al-sidiq), those who seek to transform the darkness (zulma) of their nature into light (nur), take upon themselves voluntarily. Evidently, not all believers are thus inclined.”²⁵ For Wahab Khar, the transformation is a must irrespective of gender or sex, irrespective of the profession a person holds. Because it’s the transformation of self or nafs that will help a person to save himself or herself from hellfire. In the poem he writes, “*gaahay nar yah maadeh Tchi/ gaahay guzarwan zade chi/ tass nish arshan mong panah/ haa dumb-ba-dumb par hu-Allah*” which means, *whether male or female/ whether is he octroi post holder/ from (His) wrath, holy throne prayed for refuge/ O’self repeatedly say Hu-Allah*. The transformation that Wahab insists needs a guide, he refers to his spiritual guide, Ahmed Sahab Machaam, in the last couplet and writes *maula Ahamd Rahnuma (dear Ahmad is the guide)*. “Wahab approached Ahmed Sahab Machaam, a great Sufi saint and guru of his times. Remaining attached to him and his spiritual teachings, Wahab understood the niceties of Sufism and became capable of documenting and recording his spiritual experiences in words, thereby bringing to the fore a Sufi poet of high pedigree.”²⁶ The spiritual guide may be his teacher Ahmed Sahab Machaam, or Piri-Kamil [Hazrat Muhammad (SAW)], a person whose guidance Machaam followed to perfect his own sainthood, as the name of Khar’s Pir is the namesake of the Prophet (PBUH). The importance of the

guide in the transformation and purification of nafs is also highlighted in the second and third couplets of the poem. Wahab writes, *Piri baawi akh mukaam/ hasil Tche supdi tii anjaam/ fanaa-fillaahii aam baqa/ haa dumb-ba-dumb par hu-Allah*, which translates as *Pir will disclose you a position/ you will attain the culmination/ annihilation to Allah secures subsistence/ O'self repeatedly say Hu-Allah*. In these lines, Wahab explicitly asserts the importance of the Pir-o-Murshid in reaching the highest mystical stages of the self of Islam designated according to Sufism as Fana and Baqaa, annihilation and subsistence. Siviri cites “When he (a person) experiences the numinosity of these states, or stages, the transformation of his self becomes complete. The self and its allies, it seems, are incapable of subsisting in such experiential altitudes. In the preceding citation, the verbs baqiya — “he remains without inclination” — and faniya — “he is lost” allude to the complementary states of fana and baqa’, annihilation and subsistence, which are, according to most authors, among the highest mystical states to be attained or recorded.”²⁷

“There are as many paths to God as there are people,” is a well-known Sufi saying. The second poem, although it begins with an allusion to romantic love, transcends into the realm of spirituality. Here, the self of the poet is in a consistent quest for his spiritual sage. He is very eager to meet him at any time or any place. He seeks for him throughout the places of Kashmir that belong to Sufi mystics and Pirs of the valley. He calls himself an ignorant who does not know where his spiritual guide is or is unable to find the salvation or purification of nafs. He writes “*Wuth gaafilo eas gacho khanyar/ arzaa kero dastegeras lolo*” (*O ignorant pilgrim to Khanyar/ plead to Dastgir*). Khanyar is supposed to be the ziarat or pilgrimage shrine of Sufi of Sufis or what we call him in Kashmir “Pir-i-Piran” Hazrat Shaikh Abdul Qadir Jelani(ra), also known as Dastgir Shab. He then craves to visit the shrine of Sultanul Arfeen Hazrat Shaikh Hamza Makhdoom (ra), and says *jayi khalwat shubaaan haz Sultana/ jayi retnem path thazras te lolo* (*Hazrat sultan love solitude/ he resides on the high zenith*). He again tries to find him in the natural beauty like Dal Lake and in the flower garden. He writes, *poshimut moin feraan chu poshibagan/ posh lagas bu asteh asteh lolo/ mah bozum draamut su chu Dalgate/ Tchui feraan Dal selas te lolo*, can be translated as *my flower is wondering in flower garden/ I will leisurely shower him petals/ I heard he went to Dalgate/ he is relishing the drive in Dal*. The imagery the poet has used again alludes to the Sufi culture. He refers to flower and flower gardens, and he also calls his beloved flower lover. Then he tries to find him on Dal's lake. Where one of Kashmir's holiest shrines is located

known as Hazratbal shrine. It contains the moi-e-muqqadas of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). The water is also mentioned in the couplets that have a symbolic value in Sufism, as re-counted to Sufi Hazrat Khizir (AS). At last, the poet seeks to verve to Charar, where Kashmir's greatest saint, Hazrat Shaikh Noor-ud-Din Wali, known as Alamdar-i-Kashmir, is supposed to be buried. He writes, *neb bozum ase ma gomut charar/ Almdars halam daras te lolo (I traced him at Charar/ I will lay my bosom before Alamdar)*. Here, he wants to plead at last so that he can attain his purification of self. The salvation for the poet is impossible without the proper guidance of the master or the Pir. He consistently searches for it at different places, and through this search, he highlights its importance. This poem discusses the poet's quest to find his Pir around the mystical valley. The free nature of the murshid has also been highlighted in the couplets, which, according to Martin Lingis, is crucial for a Sufi saint. Although a saint finds this world a cage, he can pursue it everywhere. Martin argues that a "full-grown Sufi is thus conscious of being, like other men, a prisoner in the world of forms, but unlike them, he is also conscious of being free, with a freedom which incomparably outweighs his imprisonment."²⁸

The other important notion in the poem is giving the narrator a female portrayal. The female voice is significant in Sufi poetry because "the woman is taken as a symbol of the human soul."²⁹ The technique of giving the narrator a female voice is called *Virahini*. It is a poetic trope or literary motif that signifies a woman, separated from her beloved, who yearns to meet or to see him. This yearning is symbolically essential as it embodies the soul's craving to meet God. Although this technique has been used in Hindi-Sanskrit literature, Sufis borrowed it to emphasise the quest. This local technique has been used in Sufi poetry across the globe, notably in the Indian subcontinent. This craving and quest for the sake of love is highlighted in the poem. The erotic reference in the opening and the romantic reference in the middle of the poem is pedagogical. Pnina Werbner argues that "Ghazali and Rumi regarded worldly love as a pedagogical experience, a sentimental education in how to love God."³⁰ The poem juxtaposes between platonic and courtly love. It highlights the vernacular and Islamic references. The motif of *Virahini* that runs deep in the poem emblems the importance of worldly and vernacular forms of love to reach out to the divine. "Both aesthetic appreciation of beauty, often manifested in the face of an Earthly beloved, and ethical conduct, the Sufi path of voluntary self-denial or asceticism, are entangled in ideas of Sufi

love... It is an unfulfilled yearning for intimacy and closeness, which may also be equated with a higher “stage” on the Sufi path.”³¹

In conclusion, we see that Wahab Khar has demonstrated the role of self in Sufism and the importance of attaining purification. He emphasises the transformation of self as essential for being close to God. His apprehension of the nature of self is discernible in his poetry. His poetry shows that the pursuit of God and the purification of the soul through various passages can lead to the Sufi vision, allowing one to see God through one's inner eye.

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