

**RESEARCH PAPER****Signs, Structures and Language: A Critical Study of Selected Poems by Bulleh Shah****¹Dr. Khurshid Alam* and ²Munir Ahmed Zia Rao**

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***Corresponding Author** Khurshid.english@pu.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

The Greek tragedy has been endeavoring to explain the quibbles and philosophical niceties existing within the nexus between man and the universe. The study aims to explore Greek tragedy's intricate philosophical underpinnings in connection with the mystic poetry of Bulley Shah, highlighting the ideology associated with divine submission and the role that language plays in comprehending the nuances of human existence. It characterizes subjective mystics experience/desires of communion with the fountainhead, leaving language bagging as differences and binaries start fizzling out. The study employs the Derridean philosophical standpoint as it rejoices in the absence of meaning. This theoretical stain is analyzed at length in his verses portraying binaristic construction of the discourse, foreclosing the possibility of liberation and entailing in oppression. The study reveals a shared human desire for unity with the divine, unravelling the complex relationship between humanity and the cosmos by transcending linguistic boundaries.

Keywords: Binaries, Deconstruction, Derrida, Language, Meanings Differences, Structuralism**Introduction**

The Greek tragedy dramatizes the conflict between man and gods to determine the metaphysical boundaries of human existence. Gods intend to destroy human beings because in them they find a possible threat to their divine order. Hence, man is given a chance to surrender to the will of gods to secure his subservient survival. The choices are clear. Either the human agent can survive by refusing to exercise his free will or suffer eternally. The story of Prometheus deals with this theme. Zeus punishes Prometheus for revealing the secret of making fire to human beings. The punishment is eternal. It can be revoked only if Prometheus recants and surrenders to the divine will of Zeus., but Prometheus refuses to bow down.

This brief introduction to the Greek tragedy gives us the philosophical background of man's relationship with gods or the external universe. The Greeks viewed man as a part of cosmic design. He was free to make choices. But the gods were there to ensure that the choices had consequences. And human action cannot transcend the limits protected and implemented by gods. The chorus on the stage represented an indissoluble link between man and gods.

Neo-classical age or the 18th century stressed more on the material conditions of human existence rather than developing its relationship with gods. The human, whose mind possessed limitless possibilities, was the new god. No metaphysical help was required to deal with human issues. This rational morality foreclosed the possibility of any redemption or salvation in metaphysical terms. Man was all alone in a godless universe. He could only pray to imagined entities, however, there was no possibility of these prayers being granted.

The Greek tragic vision helps us understand the nature of the relationship between man and gods in the Western philosophical tradition. The gods represent the incomprehensibility of this universe in which man finds himself alone and helpless. But the idea of the presence of some transcendental forces saves him from complete despair. It is precisely in this context that we intend to analyze some of the poems by the Sufi poet Bulleh Shah whose quest for God forces him to transcend the boundaries of language and time. Thus, the search itself becomes both a poetic and mystic experience. The poet's ultimate desire is the yearning for unity or a merger with God. But it is a highly subjective and individualized experience which language can neither capture nor describe. It eludes the demands of signification as language works through differences and binaries. Hence, in Bulleh Shah there is a search for a state of existence where the differences and binaries created by language are dissolved and erased. Lover and beloved become one. The subject becomes the object of desire erasing his subjectivity. For a rational mind, this is the moment of birth of paradox, of impossibility describing or representing the experience. Because for the representation it needs to surrender to the binaries created by language. It needs to conform to linguistic oppression. But for Bulleh Shah, as we will explain in the discussion part, sign or language impedes the wholeness of experience. The desired oneness can be achieved by erasing words or sign

Literature Review

The notion of free will and critical thinking forms the framework of Greek tragic vision. In *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus, the protagonist argues that he is punished for his critical thinking. Zeus used this only as a pretext because he intended to erase mankind from the face of the earth. And Prometheus subverted the plan by revealing the secret of making fire to human beings. The birth of conflict has taken place. Zeus represents tyranny and oppression and Prometheus stands for resistance and critical thinking. The conflict is eternal. The Greek audience viewed it as a dialectical struggle between good and evil. The hero suffers from a tragic conflict which paves the way for his downfall. The gods are there to protect the divine order enshrined in the stability of the polis, the city-state.

The question of fate is of utmost importance in the Greek tragic vision. Usually, it is interpreted as the will of the gods to be imposed on mankind. If one tries to challenge its limits then they are fated to face punishment. Oedipus Rex is the prototype hero who becomes the victim of a ruthless fate ordained by the gods. Before his birth, he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother. The action of the play revolves around the desperate struggle of the hero to avoid his fated downfall. But the tragic irony is that human efforts fail in the face of divine commands. The audience is moved by the sufferings of the hero. The denouement does not give any sense of relief to the spectators sitting in the theatre. Oedipus fails to avoid his fate. What remains valuable in the end is that Oedipus discovers the limits of human action. He learns to be humble which becomes possible only after going through a series of sufferings. Fate derives individuality back within its limits and destroys it if these are crossed.

Gods departed from the earth empowering man to make his own choices. Man suffers but he suffers alone. No *deus ex Machina* will come on the stage to help him. In the opening scene of *the Oresteian Trilogy*, the guard is sick of watching the palace for the last ten years. He prays to the gods to release him of this toil. And the next moment there is a flashlight at the far end of the sky. The prayer has been granted. Troy had fallen at the hands of Agamemnon. And soon the order will be restored in the polis. On the contrary, we have characters suffering from miserable human conditions in modern tragic vision. They pray to the gods. But prayers are never granted. And the human agent finds no escape from this modern fate which at times is more oppressive and ruthless in its operations. Raymond Williams terms it the secularization of tragedy. Any transcendental idea of agency is not available to rescue human beings. He theorizes:

In one sense all drama after the Renaissance is secular, and the only fully religious tragedy we have is the Greek. Yet the decisive factor is probably not this immediate context, in institutions, but the wider context, in beliefs. Elizabethan drama is thoroughly secular in its immediate practice but undoubtedly retains a Christian consciousness. Neo-classicism is then the first stage of substantial secularization (Williams, 1969, p. 52).

Theoretical Paradigm

Ferdinand de Saussure's pioneer work on language paved the way for what we today label as structuralism in social sciences. He defined language as a system of signification that depended on differences. In the *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure proposed the "general science of signs" based on his theory of language. He called it semiology. More important than verbal utterances, language was a system of arrangement of signs in a particular syntagmatic form to generate meanings. The idea of a word is replaced by a sign. A sign consists of two constituent parts i.e., signifier and signified. Signifier is any material thing that signifies. For example, a word on a page, an expression on a face or an image that refers to a certain ideological attachment. Signified is the concept that the signifier refers to. The relationship between a signifier and a signified is arbitrary because it depends on the social structures and agreements that attach certain meanings to a particular sign. Thus, the sign within itself is empty. The social agreement grants it ideological sanctity. People live and die for these signs seldom considering the emptiness that is inherent to these sign systems.

Meanings depend on differential relations among its constituent elements within a system. Structuralism is not interested in meaning per se rather it tends to investigate the conventions and structures that make the process of meaning-making possible. Hence, langue is more important than parole. A sign is infused with meanings in a particular structure. Outside of the structure, meaning ceases to exist.

Jacques Derrida is mainly concerned with the role and function of language in human society, especially in terms of meaning-making. He is known for introducing Deconstruction as a method/lens of reading literary and non-literary text to unveil the conceptual meanings inherent in a text. Derrida argues that Western philosophy is based on dichotomies, where if something is present then the other thing is absent (Zehfuss 2009). His main argument is that Western philosophy from Plato to today has given more importance to speech over written language (Rice & Waugh, 2001). Hence, he terms it to be a metaphysics of presence. Derrida declares that Saussure's signified lies within consciousness and the act of speech realizes that (Lüdemann, 2014). The utterance of a word or logos verifies the presence of a speaker. Derrida questions the possibility of presence and posits that the signifier does not refer to any imagined/conceptual signified. He further argues that every signified has the possibility of acting as a sign referring to an endless chain of signification. The possibility of stable meaning exists if the chain of signification is controlled by a transcendental sign like God or idea. In other words, in a Godless universe (the metaphysics of absence), logos is no more the carrier of stable meaning. Rather, it traps us into a world in which signified or meanings are constantly revised. Thus, Derrida challenges the authority of language, logocentrism, through Deconstruction (Derrida, 2010). Derrida's world celebrates the absence of meanings. This is our main theoretical argument in analyzing Bulleh Shah's selected poems which deal with the themes of signs, structures and language.

Textual Analysis

Bulleh Shahs's life span (1680-1759) is marked by political instability in Punjab. The Mughal Empire was falling apart. And, the Sikh movement in Punjab had become a constant source of threat to the central government in Delhi. Many of the Sikh gurus were executed at the hands of the Mughal empire further fueling rivalry between the two religious communities in India. The persecution of the general population of the Sikh community was heart rendering for Bulleh Shah. There are numerous references in his poetry where he condemns these outrageous acts of violence and witch-hunting. Born into a highly respectable Syed family, Bulleh Shah was against any form of discrimination and injustice especially based on caste or religion. It is interesting to note here that his Murshid (Mentor), Shah Inyat belonged to the Aryan clan; and our poet was heavily criticized for this union between a Syed and an Aryan. Thus, in his personal sphere of life, he had experienced the form of marginalization that happened to plague the political landscape of the entire Punjab. Bulleh Shah's poetry is an aesthetic protest against all forms of oppression. Hence, he tends to destabilize the established hierarchical structures in society which happen to be the main sources of political injustices.

Poetry is the site of political resistance in Bulleh Shah. He does so by decentering the sign systems that work through language and ideology to enslave the masses and the have-nots. We tend to examine some of his kafis (poems) especially those which deal with the theme of language through the templates of Structuralism and Deconstruction.

The first poem in Taufiq Raffat's selection is titled *Alif Allah dil ratta mera (A for Allah)*. The entire poem in the translation reads as:

A for Allah who has my heart
 I have no knowledge of B
 nor do I know what it means
 while A savours sweet to me
 I can't tell between O and Q
 it makes me dither and delve;
 Bulleh look after the first
 the rest will take care of itself.

As native speakers of the Punjabi language, we posit that translation has not done justice to the source text. Suffice it to say here that translation has always its limitations. No language can transfer the cultural consciousness of the source language to the target language. And the Punjabi language is no exception to this. The Punjabi word *alif* has been translated as A and *bey* as B. The poet argues that the first letter of the alphabet is enough for me. He doesn't want to read or understand B. The refusal to read B has political as well as philosophical connotations. The first alphabet alone is not enough to express thoughts, concepts and desires. Since the alphabets in themselves do not create either a system of signification or have any inherent meanings. Hence, they need to pair with others to create the possibility of production of meaning and knowledge. These are the morphological and phonetic differences, which through various infinite combinations tend to create concepts and ideas. And in the next stanza, the poet says that he does not understand the meaning of B. The alphabets per se do not contain any meanings whatsoever.

From Ferdinand de Saussure's perspective (2008), language is a system of signification that works through differential relations. Alphabets through various combinations create signs that refer to things or concepts in society. But their relationship with the objects that they refer to remains arbitrary. Hence, the word stone does not contain anything stony within itself. But a social agreement makes the world intelligible for us through syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. Bulleh Shah does not want to move from the alphabet A to B because this movement will create binaries through which language works. The binaristic construction of discourse forecloses the possibility of liberation. It tends to be inherently oppressive. Therefore, there is a conscious choice and desire to reject B as it would create the possibility of not operating within linguistic signs. Rather, it would create a non-lingual subjectivity that transcends all man-made oppressive hierarchical structures. The poem celebrates the birth of the poetic desire to imagine a self which does not negotiate with language. Hence, in the next verse, he says that he loses all understanding of things when he becomes conscious of the existence of the next alphabet viz. B. For him, staying at the point of A is a moment of rupture, ecstasy and celebration. It frees him of everything that language creates. Though the poem uses language to voice this theme, it also explores the possibility of transcending language through language.

Bulleh Shah is faced with a paradox here. In Bulleh Shah's view, the alphabet A stands for Allah or God. Hence, there is no need to move forward towards the next alphabet. Because the concept of God transcends all human understanding that is essentially based on language.

In the next verse, he narrates that he cannot understand the difference between *ain* (translated as (O)) and *ghain* (translated as Q). Here, we are faced with issues which are related to translation. In morphological terms, *ain* and *ghain* have the same form on the page except for the difference that *ghain* is written with a dot on its top as the word *i* has a dot. In another poem titled "The Difference, Bulleh Shah sings that both *ain* (O) and *ghain* (Q) are similar with a difference of dot. And this difference has "made the whole world wriggle" (Rafat, 2015, p. 42). But it is interesting to note here that *ain* also serves as a complete sign which signifies oneness, completeness and purity. Thus, the alphabet *alif* makes him understand that he need not move beyond *ain* because it does not need any other combination to form a concept. The duality is created through the binaristic structure of language and he got this understanding by deciding not to move beyond A. The movement towards B, in theoretical terms, means creating social structures and ideologies. One dot on *ain* would create duality and binaries, shattering the oneness of an idealized non-lingual subjectivity. One dot can pave the way for subjugation.

In another poem "One is Enough", "*Ak nuqte wich gul mukde aye*", the poet reinforces the theme of rejecting the production of such knowledge which terrifies human beings through such concepts as hell, sufferings in the grave, and the Day of judgement. Raffat has translated the title as One is Enough. In our view, it should be translated as One point (dot) is Enough. The point/dot is the smallest expression in written language. In morphological terms, it is the building block which creates various forms of alphabets on the paper and these alphabets, in turn, form signs. These signs through differential relations make us internalize oppressive discourses.

Bulleh Shah advises the reader to "forget hell's terror and its flames/purify your dreams and desires/ beliefs and unbelief are just names (Rafat, 2015, p. 62). By labelling ideological constructions as just names, he desires liberation from fear and tyranny. As argued earlier, the names are created as empty signs through the various combinations of other signs. Hence, the poet desires a regression from the sign to its basic constituent i.e. dot, the smallest indivisible unit of language. In metaphorical terms, the dot refers to the emptiness of language and sign systems that any human society celebrates in the name of ideology.

In the next stanza, the poet critiques the inherent emptiness of various religious rituals because they cause pain and suffering to those who do not follow them. He questions, "In prayer why abrade your forehead/ Away with it, tear down the façade/ Of morality. Causing people pain/is the only sin you should dread" (Rafat, 2015, p. 62). Bulleh Shah wants a world free of human suffering and tyranny. And those who define themselves through these sign-centred religious rituals imagine themselves to be morally and spiritually superior to "others". Thus, an oppressive morality is born followed by violence against the "irreligious other". Bulleh Shah longs for the possibility of liberation. And it can be realized if he dismantles the linguistic structures formed by combinations of various signs.

The last poem for analysis is titled "Does Anyone Know"? It is considered one of the most famous poems sung by the people of the Punjab. The poem deals with the existential question, "Who am I"? It is an ontological question. In our view, it happens to be amongst the most difficult of all the questions ever asked or raised by the human intellect. It relates to the relationship between human existence and the rest of the universe. The Greek tragedians were also grappling with this question by dramatizing conflicts between human subjects and gods. As discussed in the opening paragraphs of this essay, the Greek tragedy dealt with the metaphysical boundaries of human existence. It raised questions of ontological and teleological nature. Bulleh Shah also raises the same questions by placing him at the centre stage as someone who feels baffled by the complexity of the questions. The poem begins, "Who am I? / Does anyone know?". Amid the storm, King Lear also expresses the same desire to know who he is. But the question remains unanswered both for Bulleh Shah and King Lear.

The poem begins with the ontological quest for stability of meanings. And in the next line, Bulleh Shah rejects all those signs and discourses which divide humanity through binaries. The world that we experience is defined by the binaristic division between good/bad, pure/impure, Muslim/non-Muslim/, Moses/ Pharaoh etc. Bulleh Shah disassociates himself from all such differences. As argued earlier, these differences are needed for language to shape the world around us and create the possibility of the creation of meanings. But the binaries are not apolitical. In any such division, one term always becomes superior to the other. And this superiority paves the way for political oppression and marginalization. In other words, constructing subjectivity through signs would lead to division and segregation. Hence, Bulleh Shah's refuses to attach himself to any discourse of identity or meaning-making. He does not know who he is. Because knowing means creating a centre both for meanings and existence and then celebrating that imagined superiority over others who refuse to conform to grand narratives. Bulleh Shah wants to free himself of language. There is a desire for a decentered centre, a rhizomatic subjectivity which remains in search of a non-lingual attachment to this world. Representation connotes clarity. And the more one contemplates existence, the vaguer it turns out to be. It is like a riddle which either had many answers or no single answer. Bulleh Shah prefers vagueness over clarity and questions over answers. Najam Hussein Syed in *The Recurrent Patterns in Punjabi Poetry* remarks that for an ultimate fulfilment man took up the search for identity and affiliation. Each level of experience deceived him with an answer which took the shape of a dogma, an institution, a belief, a value, an attitude or a relationship (Syed, 2006, p. 86). Every answer is a form of dogmatic fascism. And Bulleh Shah celebrates vagueness, emptiness and a centreless centrality. This is a world of questions and not answers. And the best expression can be found in the form of dancing, the rhythmic movements of a dervish celebrating the union with oneness which evades all forms of lingual representation.

Conclusion

Our research has led us to conclude that Bulleh Shah rejects the system of significations through which language works. Language creates discourses of identity and affiliations. And those who remain committed to these discourses develop a myopic vision

towards humanity. Redemption is not possible unless humanity can transcend these boundaries created through language. In this way, Bulleh Shah questions its validity and desires for sublimation. He does not attach himself to any side of any binaristic division. The non-commitment to any form of ideology is a dream, a desire that can be fulfilled when we refuse to be entrapped within the world created through the signs/words. A non-lingual existence is the answer to the ontological question, "Who am I?".

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