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Self-Annihilation (Fana) and Divine Union in Punjabi Sufi Poetry: A Case Study of Baba Bulleh Shah's Kafi

Ameer Hamza

Visiting Lecturer, Department of Pakistan Studies, Government College University, Faisalabad

ameerhamza@gcuf.edu.pk

Muhammad Waqas

M.Phil Scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, Government College University, Faisalabad

waqasminhas076@gmail.com

Saima Yasmin (Corresponding Author)

School of History and Culture, Southwest University, China

saimayasmin2023@outlook.com

Abstract

This article examines the doctrines of self-annihilation (fana) and subsistence in the Divine (baqa) as they are articulated in the Punjabi kafis of Baba Bulleh Shah (c. 1680–1757), one of the most celebrated Sufi poets of the eighteenth-century Punjab. Situating Bulleh Shah within the Qadiri silsila transmitted through his murshid, Shah Inayat Qadiri, and within the vernacular kafi tradition inherited from the sixteenth-century poet Shah Hussain, the article argues that Bulleh Shah operationalizes classical Sufi metaphysics the doctrine of wahdat al-wujud (the Oneness of Being) and the fana–baqa continuum through distinctly Punjabi folk idioms, most notably the romance of Heer and Ranjha and the rejection of caste and sectarian labels. Drawing on close reading of kafis available in Christopher Shackle's (2021) and Taufiq Rafat's (2014) English translations, alongside secondary scholarship on Sufi doctrine and Punjabi literary history, the analysis identifies three interlocking dimensions of fana in Bulleh Shah's verse: the dissolution of socially constructed identity, the erotic-mystical identification of lover and Beloved through the Heer-Ranjha motif, and the social leveling implicit in the poet's rejection of religious and caste hierarchy. The article places these findings in the context of William Chittick's discussion on Ibn al-'Arabi's metaphysics, as well as Annemarie Schimmel's writing on fana and baqa, arguing that Bulleh Shah's kafis represent a vernacular theology in which mystical union is made accessible to a wider audience than the Persian literature.

Keywords: Bulleh Shah, kafi, fana, baqa, wahdat al-wujud, Punjabi Sufi poetry, Heer-Ranjha, Sufism.

Introduction

Among the vernacular literary traditions of premodern South Asia, the Punjabi kafi occupies a distinctive place as a short, refrain-based devotional lyric composed for oral and musical performance rather than silent reading. Pioneered in the sixteenth century by Shah Hussain and subsequently reshaped in the

eighteenth century by Baba Bulleh Shah, the kafi became the principal vehicle through which Punjabi Sufi poets articulated the central doctrines of Islamic mysticism above all, the annihilation of the self (fana) and its subsistence in the Divine (baqa) in a language accessible to peasants, artisans, and the rural poor rather than to a Persian-educated courtly elite (Latif & Akhtar, 2024). Bulleh Shah, born Sayyid Abdullah Shah Qadri into a high-status Sayyid family, became the disciple of Shah Inayat Qadiri, a Sufi shaikh of the socially subordinate Arain caste, an act of spiritual submission across caste lines that itself became a central motif of his poetic corpus (Latif & Akhtar, 2024). Composing in a period of severe political upheaval marked by the decline of Mughal authority and repeated invasions of Punjab, Bulleh Shah nonetheless produced a body of kafis considered among the foremost achievements of premodern Punjabi literature (Shackle, 2021).

This article undertakes a focused thematic and textual analysis of the doctrines of fana and baqa as they appear in a representative selection of Bulleh Shah's kafis, examining how these classical Sufi concepts are refracted through distinctly Punjabi folk symbolism, above all the romance of Heer and Ranjha.

Research Questions

This study is guided by three research questions.

1. How is the doctrine of self-annihilation (fana) articulated and enacted within the textual structure of Bulleh Shah's kafis?
2. How does Bulleh Shah employ Punjabi folk symbolism particularly the Heer-Ranjha romance as a vehicle for representing divine union (baqa), and how does this vernacular strategy compare with the more classical Persian ghazal idiom of fana-baqa doctrine?
3. What is the relationship between the mystical doctrine of fana and the social and anti-sectarian dimensions of Bulleh Shah's poetry, including his rejection of caste hierarchy and religious denominational identity?

Theoretical Framework

This analysis draws on two interlocking bodies of theory. The first is the classical Sufi metaphysical doctrine of wahdat al-wujud, the Oneness of Being, most fully systematized by the Andalusian mystic Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240) and explicated in Chittick's (1989) authoritative study of Ibn al-'Arabi's metaphysics of imagination. Within this framework, fana denotes the annihilation of the seeker's phenomenal ego-consciousness, understood not as literal non-existence but as the collapse of the illusory boundary the self perceives between itself and the Divine Reality (al-Haqq); baqa denotes the subsistent life that follows, in which the traveler perceives all things, including the self, as manifestations of a single underlying Being (Schimmel, 1975; Chittick, 1989). Schimmel's (1975) classic account further distinguishes stages of fana annihilation of attributes, of acts, and finally of essence a graduated schema against which Bulleh Shah's kafis can be read as dramatizing successive stages of self-dissolution. Khan's (2017) study of fana and baqa in Rumi's Mathnawi provides a comparative touchstone, demonstrating how a major Persian Sufi poet structures an entire epic around the same doctrinal progression that Bulleh Shah compresses into short vernacular lyrics.

The second body of theory concerns the specifically Punjabi literary strategy of vernacularization, whereby cosmopolitan Persianate Sufi doctrine is rendered through indigenous folk narrative and idiom. Following Latif and Akhtar (2024) and Matringe (1992), one can understand how the poetry of Bulleh Shah uses both the mystic language (such as concepts of Persian and Arabic cultures: hale, the state of intoxication, masti and others) and signs of the local culture (the flute, the yogi, and the folk romance about Heer and Ranjha). These elements allow regarding the kafis as both orthodox mystic poems and popular cultural-historical phenomena connected with the particular understanding of wahdat al-wujud. Such a perception will be the basis of the following discussion.

A third idea related to *wahdat al-wujud* is connected to the concept of *al-insan al-kamil*, that is, the perfect man or the *tajridi* which is the complete manifestation of the Divine Names and Qualities. According to this belief, when the seeker attains the *fana* that leads to the state of *baqa*, they become one with the perfect man, meaning that from now on, they experience the unity and equality of everything created by God (Chittick, 1989). From this idea, it could be inferred that the most radical interpretations of Bulleh Shah's poetry claiming that the poet has become equal to God are incorrect since *al-insan al-kamil* only represents the ideal that can be achieved in the spiritual journey. Thus, any traveler who has followed the right path under the guidance of an experienced *murshid* can attain the same level of understanding and perfection in their spiritual development.

This egalitarian message of spiritual potential inherent in the very nature of the doctrine had ramifications for both sides of any encounters, and was, in part, responsible for power dynamics in the relationships between South Asian Sufis and the social orders from which they were born, as detailed in Anjum's (2011) study of Chishti Sufis of the Delhi Sultanate and later demonstrated, if on a smaller and more personal scale, by Bulleh Shah's attachment to the far lower-class *murshid*. In turn, Mir's (2006) reading of genres and devotion in Punjabi popular epics serves as a reminder that folk religious literature, at least in Punjabi, often resists attempts at strict taxonomization by straddling the categories of different faiths, as will be demonstrated by Bulleh Shah's hesitations regarding labels for his own religion in the following verses.

Methodology

This study focuses on close reading (qualitative) of the selected *kafis* by Bulleh Shah that were considered most popular and frequently anthologized in the academic course readings. The *kafis* analyzed are Bulleya Ki Jaana Main Kaun ("Bulleh, What Do I Know of Who I Am"), the *Ranjha*-identification *kafi* beginning with *Ranjha Ranjha Kardi*, and *Hindu Na Nahin Musalman* ("I Am Neither Hindu nor Muslim"). Textual analysis relies on Christopher Shackle's (2021) scholarly translation, *Sufi Lyrics*, published in the Murty Classical Library of India, and Taufiq Rafat's (2014) literary translation, cross-referenced against secondary scholarly discussion of the same poems (Latif & Akhtar, 2024; Matringe, 1992). Given the strict limits on reproducing copyrighted translated text, direct quotation is minimized throughout and confined to brief, clearly attributed phrases; the analysis instead relies on paraphrase and thematic description of textual content and structure. This approach necessarily privileges the interpretive lens of English-language translation over the original Punjabi, a limitation discussed further below.

Historical and Biographical Context

Bulleh Shah was born around 1680, most likely in the town of Uch in the Multan Subah of the Mughal Empire, into a Sayyid family; his father, Shah Muhammad Darwaish, was a prayer-leader and teacher, and the family later settled near Kasur (Latif & Akhtar, 2024). Bulleh Shah's formative spiritual relationship was with Shah Inayat Qadiri (c. 1643–1728), a Sufi shaykh of Lahore belonging to the Qadiri-Shattari lineage and to the Arain caste, traditionally associated with farming and considered socially subordinate to the Sayyid lineage into which Bulleh Shah was born. Bulleh Shah's acceptance of Shah Inayat as *murshid*, despite and in explicit defiance of this caste disparity, became both a biographical turning point and a recurring thematic reference point within his *kafis*, several of which allude to a period of estrangement from his teacher and to the anguish of separation that preceded eventual reconciliation (Latif & Akhtar, 2024).

Bulleh Shah's lifetime coincided with one of the most turbulent periods in Punjab's history, marked by the terminal decline of Mughal imperial authority, recurring invasions by Ahmad Shah Abdali, and the early stirrings of Sikh political assertion. Paradoxically, this period of political fragmentation also produced some of the most enduring literature in Punjabi, Sindhi, and Urdu, with Bulleh Shah's contemporaries including Waris Shah, author of the canonical Punjabi rendition of the *Heer-Ranjha* romance, and the Sindhi Sufi poet Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (Latif & Akhtar, 2024). Upon his death in 1757, Bulleh Shah's

unorthodox teachings particularly his claimed union with the Divine expressed through the figure of Ranjha provoked such controversy among orthodox clerics that his burial in a Muslim cemetery was initially contested, though his funeral prayer was ultimately led by a respected local religious authority.

Popular biographical accounts also preserve an episode in which Bulleh Shah, having been estranged from Shah Inayat following his family's objections to the caste disparity between them, is said to have disguised himself as a dancer and performed at a celebration attended by his murshid in order to seek reconciliation, an act of self-abasement that biographers and devotees have long read as itself an enactment of fana: the willingness to relinquish the social status and dignity attached to his Sayyid lineage in favor of proximity to the spiritual guide (Puri & Shangari, 1986). Whatever its actual historical basis, the episode figured so prominently in the oral lore about him that it serves as one more confirmation of just how deeply the idea of self-renunciation had been ingrafted into the hagiographic tradition surrounding Bulleh Shah, so that his very biography became a form of self-abnegation.

The Kafi as a Literary and Devotional Form

A kafi is a lyric poem, usually consisting of a refrain and a number of couplets or stanzas, traditionally associated with a particular raga in which the poem was meant to be performed, and thus more closely related to music than to literary expression (Latif & Akhtar, 2024). It was initially pioneered by the sixteenth-century poet Shah Hussain, who wrote in Punjabi, as opposed to the more “elevated” languages of Persian and Sanskrit used in the Mughal court. By the time of Bulleh Shah, kafi had been firmly established as a popular lyrical genre (Latif & Akhtar, 2024; Asani, 1988; Eaton, 1974). However, while Bulleh Shah remained faithful to the rustic Punjabi flavor of his predecessor, he expanded the range of mystical topics and poetic devices associated with kafi, using both Perso-Arabic and Indian sources. He introduced vocabulary associated with Islamic mysticism into the poem, as well as the Hindu motifs of the flute, the yogi, and the yogini (Matringe, 1992). It is perhaps this combination of Indian and Islamic mysticism that gives kafi its unique flavor and allows it to be performed both as a qawwalis and as a popular song.

Thematic Analysis: Self-Annihilation (Fana)

The Dissolution of Constructed Identity

Perhaps, the most recognized presentation of fana in the work of Bulleh Shah is the kafi generally known as Bulleya Ki Jaana Main Kaun, where the lyrical character denies all the signs of identity and social categories such as religion and sect, class, or even the concepts of belief and unbelief, and ultimately reaches a state of ignorance about their true identity (Rafat, 2014; Khan, as cited in Latif & Akhtar, 2024). Notably, the kafi illustrates the process of fana rather than simply describing it since all of the lines that deny the identities lead to this blankness and ignorance, which is characteristic of the complete annihilation of the ego described by Schimmel (1975). The process of fana is not completed in this kafi since the character is left ignorant about his or her true identity; however, instead of a single identity, the person now denies every aspect of it, which is also considered the beginning of fana according to Schimmel (1975).

Anti-Sectarianism as an Expression of Fana

Bulleh Shah's rejection of religious labels finds its most direct expression in the kafi broadly known as Hindu Na Nahin Musalman (“I Am Neither Hindu nor Muslim”), in which the poet insists on his belonging to none of the officially recognized religious categories. However, when interpreted through the prism of wahdat al-wujud, this statement takes on a distinctly doctrinal sound, suggesting that the entire multiplicity of religious categories is a fabrication of the ego that ought to be transcended in the quest for fana (Chittick, 1989). Latif and Akhtar (2024) highlight the iconoclastic nature of this particular statement

as part of a larger theme of Bulleh Shah's "writings on the ulema and qazi as well as the feudal lords and the privileged classes," which are thematically linked to the poet's opposition to caste hierarchy (p. 7). Indeed, as Anjum (2011) points out, Muslim society in premodern South Asia was hierarchically stratified on a caste basis, with the most powerful and prosperous groups being the ashraf ("superior") and the Sayyids, while the ajlaf ("inferior") occupied the lower tiers – a hierarchy that was consistently challenged by Sufis and is implicitly critiqued in the poetry of Bulleh Shah.

Thematic Analysis: Divine Union and the Heer-Ranjha Motif

Ranjha as the Divine Beloved

Bulleh Shah's most distinctive contribution to the poetic representation of *baqa* lies in his adaptation of the Punjabi folk romance of Heer and Ranjha as an allegory of the soul's union with God. In a celebrated *kafi*, the poetic voice, speaking in the persona of Heer, declares that through ceaseless repetition of the beloved's name, "Ranjha," she has herself become Ranjha a declaration that provoked accusations of blasphemy from contemporary clerics, who mistook the claim of mystical union for a literal claim to divinity (a genre of professor commentary; Latif & Akhtar, 2024). However, within the framework of *wahdat al-wujud*, this fusion of the lover and the Beloved is the very paradigm of *baqa*: having overcome the illusion of separation, the subject who has achieved *fana* no longer perceives any objective difference between itself and the object of its devotion. The emphasis on Ranjha, a humble cowherd, over more exalted human or even supernatural figures, is therefore consistent with the theoretical context. By anchoring an essentially metaphysical teaching in the narrative tradition of the Punjabi countryside, Ranjha's creators demonstrate a theoretical awareness akin to that of Latif and Akhtar (2024), who recognize the same cosmopolitan thematics in the Sufi mysticism of Pakistan's popular piety.

Bridal Mysticism and the Feminine Voice

Bulleh Shah's choice of a female poetic character for his *kafis* fits into the tradition of bridal mysticism developed by Shah Hussain. In this regard, Petievich (2007) notes that the love of God is compared to the love of a woman in the verses of many Sufi poets. Anjum's (2013) article sheds light on the symbolic meanings of the bride in the Sufi poetry of South Asia, which was developed in the earliest period of Islam's spread in the region. In other words, Bulleh Shah did not invent anything new when he started writing love poems to a woman named Heer. Rumi's *Masnavi* contains numerous motifs of bridal mysticism. According to Khan (2017), the Sufi poet wrote about the same experiences of separation and union with God as Bulleh Shah. However, while Rumi wrote in Persian, a language associated with the court, Bulleh Shah used Punjabi and depicted the life of ordinary people (Latif & Akhtar, 2024; Malhotra, 2017).

The Murshid as Intermediary

Across Bulleh Shah's corpus, the *murshid*, embodied biographically by Shah Inayat Qadiri, functions as the indispensable intermediary through whom *fana* and *baqa* become accessible to the seeker. Several *kafis* make it clear that the poet has had a love-hate relationship with his master. This serves to illustrate one of the doctrinal ideas in the poem: that no one can achieve annihilation by oneself, but only under the guidance of a teacher who has reached the power of his own spiritual guide (Schimmel, 1975). The very fact that he became a disciple of an Arain while belonging to the higher caste of Sayyid reflects the theme of caste barriers being irrelevant in his religion as taught in the poem.

The Symbolic Vocabulary of Ecstatic Union

Beyond the Heer-Ranjha allegory, Bulleh Shah's *kafis* draw on a recurring vocabulary of ecstatic intoxication borrowed from the Persian Sufi tradition, including the terms *mast* (intoxicated) and *hal*

(ecstatic spiritual state), used to describe the condition of the seeker who has passed beyond ordinary rational self-possession (Latif & Akhtar, 2024). This vocabulary of intoxication functions as a further textual enactment of fana: the intoxicated seeker, like the lover merged with Ranjha, has lost the ordinary faculties of discrimination and self-reference that sustains the illusion of a separate ego. Alongside these Persian-derived terms, Bulleh Shah incorporates symbols from local Krishnaite devotional culture, most notably the flute and the figure of the yogi, which Matringe (1992) traces to the influence of Punjab's Nath-yogi and Vaishnava devotional milieux. The flute, associated in Krishnaite tradition with divine call and irresistible longing, functions in Bulleh Shah's kafis as a further sensory figure for the seeker's being drawn out of self-possession toward the Beloved. Bulleh Shah's use of the humble textile imagery of everyday Punjabi life cotton, thread, and the various kinds of cloth carded from a single yarn serves a related doctrinal function, figuring the apparent multiplicity of created beings as manifestations of a single underlying substance, a homely restatement of *wahdat al-wujud* accessible to an audience of weavers and spinners rather than philosophers (Latif & Akhtar, 2024).

Comparative Perspective: Bulleh Shah, Shah Hussain, and the Persian Tradition

Placing the given poem by Bulleh Shah within the context of the Sufi poetic tradition can help understand how fana and baqa are interpreted in this work. Firstly, it is important to note that Bulleh Shah was significantly influenced by Shah Hussain, the pioneer of sixteenth-century kafi poetry who also used to use a female identity as a poetic device. Similar to Shah Hussain, Bulleh Shah addresses themes of spinning-wheel and weaving throughout his poems, while also personifying the beloved as Heer (Latif & Akhtar, 2024). However, while the earlier poet managed to express his meaning using exclusively Punjabi vocabulary, Bulleh Shah's kafis contain elements of mysticism and Krishnaite symbolism, which indicates both the diversity of the audience addressed and the multiplicity of cultural traditions living in the eighteenth century Punjab alongside each other (Latif & Akhtar, 2024). It is possible to argue that compared to Rumi, whose *Mathnawi* represents the peak of Persian poetry and was intended as a comprehensive theological discourse on fana and baqa (Khan, 2017), the kafis of Bulleh Shah are much more condensed and contain a specific layer of mysticism understandable only to an unlettered peasant. Thus, while in Rumi's work, the concepts of annihilation and survival are presented in a continuous narrative designed to guide the reader toward Quranic wisdom and Islamic mysticism (Khan, 2017), in the poetry of Bulleh Shah, the same ideas are presented in a highly compressed form, which presupposes a different level of engagement and understanding.

Discussion

These insights suggest that in Bulleh Shah's kafis, the ideas of fana and baqa are enacted through an accessible textual medium that localizes Sufi teaching. If the fana-baqa binary is played out in Persian Sufi poetry, particularly in the *Mathnawi* of Rumi, as an extended allegory worked out in a didactic narrative addressed to a literate audience (Khan, 2017), in Bulleh Shah's kafis, it is compressed into a pithy lyrical genre utilizing colloquial speech. This genre is performed by minstrels for an audience of illiterate peasants and artisans (Latif & Akhtar, 2024). Another distinction is that while Rumi's didactic verses are directed outward, towards God, the fana-baqa motif in Bulleh Shah's kafis is turned inwards, towards the self and society. The same metaphor of annihilation and return, when transposed into the love allegory of Heer and Ranjha, undercuts the very foundations of caste and community superiority in eighteenth-century Punjab (Asani, 1988). So, do Bulleh Shah's kafis serve as a medium for transmitting Sufi ideas to a popular audience while also mocking upper-caste and religious prejudices? By making the mystic love of God comparable to the love of Ranjha, the Sufi teachings of fana and baqa are deinstitutionalized and rendered accessible to the masses. Thus, it is the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud* which informs the kafi's double role as both an elitist mystical treatise and a vehicle for popular social critique (Latif & Akhtar, 2024).

The reading also sheds light on why Bulleh Shah's assertions of union provoked such intense unease in his time. A mysticism confined to the private, inner world of a Persian-speaking elite would have scarcely touched the social order. But an openly expressed mysticism, sung in the language of the marketplace and the village, by a ploughman's daughter and addressed to an amorphous audience of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, inherently challenged the social order. It implied that, just as the veil between the self and the divine was illusion, so too were the veils of caste, creed, and color. Thus, in Bulleh Shah's kafis, the themes of fana do not form a binary discourse but amount to a single idea, developed from different angles; the annihilation of the ego before God is inextricably linked to the annihilation of the social hierarchy that the ego upholds, and the two dissolve together in his poetry.

Reception and Legacy

Although Bulleh Shah's kafis have survived in performance rather than in the written form, his verses have been frequently performed by singers and adopted into the qawwali, folk, and pop music traditions of Pakistan and India. They have been covered by popular singers such as Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Abida Parveen, and others and found their way into contemporary film and pop music (Latif and Akhtar, 2024). This popularity in musical performance is crucial to considering the legacy of the Sufi mystic in modern Pakistani culture. Since the kafis were never intended to be read but instead represented a form of spiritual invocation, their continuous performance up to the modern day has in a way preserved the original ritual of fana that was performed by Shah himself. Furthermore, the fact that the verses have been adopted and performed by singers of various religions is yet another confirmation of the universal spiritual message that lies within them, which is the basis for the discussion presented in this paper. The ability of Bulleh Shah's poetry to transcend religious boundaries and be accepted, if not embraced, by members of different faiths as an expression of their own spirituality illustrates the fundamentally non-sectarian nature of his thought.

It is not completely accurate to attribute Bulleh Shah's ideas of fana and baqa to any specific religious tradition. While the Sufi mystic was a Muslim himself, the themes of his kafis were performed and understood by Hindus and Sikhs in much the same way as by Muslims. In fact, it could be said that the border between different religions in the Indian subcontinent has been, until the arrival of the British, more fluid and less defined than often portrayed in modern historical studies. Oberoi (1994) notes that in premodern India, the boundaries between Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism were blurred, and people of different religions often practiced elements of each one on a daily basis. This could be the primary reason why Bulleh Shah's poetry, which combines elements of Muslim Sufism with the folk traditions of the Punjab region, was so widely welcomed across different communities. Its ability to invoke a universal spiritual feeling, rather than being tied to a particular religious practice, was the main reason behind its survival and enduring popularity.

Conclusion

Baba Bulleh Shah's kafis are one of the most essential vernacular adaptations of the classical mystical philosophy of Ibn al 'Arabi in premodern Punjabi literature. By way of the systematic depreciation of created identities, the erotic mysticism of self-identification with Ranjha, and the outright dismissal of caste and sect, his verses give a new popular form to an ancient Sufi teaching about fana and baqa without undermining its metaphysical rigour. These poems are simultaneously part of the larger Islamic mystic tradition that saw its peak in Mawlawi's Rumi, with whom Baba Bulleh Shah's work shares certain fundamental conceptual and narrative similarities. At the same time, the kafis break away from the Persian cultural hegemony by using an inimitable Punjabi poetic language rooted in popular tradition to convey the same metaphysical ideas. As such, Baba Bulleh Shah's kafis are an indispensable phenomenon for the further study and comprehension of India's Islamic mysticism.

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