

Female Agency and Representation in Punjabi Folklore: Reflections on a Folk song of Rachna Valley

Fayyaz Baqir

University of Gothenburg, Gothenberg, Sweden

This paper is a reflection on a Punjabi love song from Rachna Valley. The theme of the song is true love, which symbolizes the courage to kiss death in the longing to find union with the beloved. This theme invariably depicts love as subversion of patriarchy. It is an act of union with the lover and renunciation of all the barriers of gender, caste and class. The lover in folk tradition—in contrast to the narrative of patriarchy—is invariably female. The story of love plays at various levels; it is negation of vanity, class, and discriminatory norms; and it affirms undying love that transcends all existing bonds. Union with the beloved who is an outcast and belongs to the territory of unknown is only possible by stepping out of the abode of known and living through the pain of separation from the paternal home. The paper provides an in-depth review of how separation from barriers is integrally linked with union with the lover. Love is not only a moment of union but is preceded by moment of separation that completes the dialectical transition from existence to being.

Turn back, turn back, my wandering lover,¹ turn your eyes to me again

Turn back, haven't I asked you to turn your eyes to me?

Turn back (to meet me) in the back lanes of the majesty palaces,

Turn back your eyes to me

A chained tiger is in the lane, turn back (your eyes) to me

A Police Chief has descended (on the lane), turn back (your eyes) to me

He asks for my bracelets; turn back your eyes to me

He asks for my necklace; turn back your eyes to me

With laughter I gave him my bracelets, turn your eyes again to me

With cries I gave him my necklace, turn back (my love) your eyes to me

Turn back to me, my soul is sad, turn back your eyes to me my love

Turn back to me, Turn back to me, my estranged lover.

Turn back to me, I am asking you to return...

—folk song from the Chanab valley of Punjab²

Legends in Punjabi Folklore

In Punjabi folk tradition the five river valleys³ of Punjab are known for five different kinds of legends described in the folk tales originating in these areas. A saying goes, “Ravi Rashkaan, Chenabh Ashqan, Sutlej Salikaan, Sindh Sadiqaan, Jhelum Fasiqan.”⁴ The first four valleys symbolize Agency against the existing patriarchal order in various forms and the last valley symbolizes maintenance of that order with use of power. Together all these valleys constitute a whole which is continuously evolving, going through metamorphoses and representing a perpetual conflict which characterizes the land of five rivers. Land and water also reflect the play between continuity and change. They are integral parts of a whole that is continuously going through the cycle of birth, death and regeneration. This perpetual play is presented through its folk poetry as well.

Ravi is known as the land of people of honor, Chenab as the land of lovers, Sutlej as land of seekers of spiritual enlightenment, Sindh as the land of the true Masters and Jhelum as the land of transgressors (from the path of love)—representing the established order. All the folk tales and songs originating in these areas focus on the relationship between the body and soul; limitations of patriarchy and longing for freedom; and dialectic of conflict between Agency and Representation in human quest for self-fulfillment.

Ravi is called the land of people of honor (known as Rathes). The latest among these Rathes was famous rebel Ahmad Khan Kharal, who killed British Lord Berkeley in a rebellion and was hanged to death by the British (Bhutta, n.d.). Ahmad Khan represented a tradition where honor goes hand in hand with justice, wisdom and moral courage. Ahmad Khan Kharal was Chief of Kharal tribe when Maharaja Ranjit Singh conquered Punjab. Ranjit Singh declared Ahmad Khan as his brother by exchanging turbans with him. Soon afterwards some people of Ahmad Khan’s area were arrested and jailed in Bhera by local administration due to non-payment of taxes. Ahmad Khan considered it an excessive punishment, broke into the jail and got them released. Ranjeet Singh imposed on him a fine of Rs. 4000. Ranjeet Singh’s wise Queen Raj Kaur ended this standoff by sending the money to Ahmad Khan to pay off the fine. In 1849 the British conquered Punjab. They built twenty-five jails in Punjab to establish law and order, collect taxes, and subdue any defiance. At this time the Joya tribe of Lakhuey declined to pay tax. Many Joyas were imprisoned in Gogera Jail. Rai Ahmad Khan spoke to the Deputy Commissioner and the Extra Assistant Commissioner and the prisoners were released. Prisoners brought the news that many innocent children and

women were also serving terms in prison. Ahmad Khan's efforts to get them released resulted in his surveillance and confinement. He was not allowed to leave his area without permission. He once escaped an attempt on his life by Magistrate Berkeley. It did not stop him. He broke Gogera jail to get the prisoners released. He was subsequently killed in a skirmish with the British cavalry led by Captain Black (Bhutta, n.d.; Mirza, 2006). He lived up to the proverb that living a day with honor is worth more than a thousand years with disgrace.

Mirza Kharal, the legendary lover who hails from the river valley between Ravi and Chenab, is remembered as a symbol of love finding eternal life through death (Soofi and Bhutta, 2015). The Punjabi concept of honor includes rebellion against the powerful and respect and honor to the underdog. Men of honor known as Raths symbolize defiance, wisdom and courage. In a Punjabi folk tale documented by Saeed Bhutta,⁵ a Kharal woman of the nineteenth century has also been called a Rath for displaying such gallantry, and many other women have been mentioned for handling disputes and reversing the course of hostility with their courage, wisdom and foresight (Bhutta, 2006; Barkhurdar, 2013). The Ravi is also known for the premium it puts on the value of honor. It also holds dear the concept of valor. It rekindles the memories of the fierce resistance put up by the Ravi tribes against Alexander on his retreat along the river. For an inhabitant of Ravi, whether he is a lover or a fighter, personal valor is highly prized asset.

Chenab is known as the land of lovers. Many legendary love stories of Punjab originate on the banks of river Chenab. The lovers who defy the social norms, barriers, class and gender segregation, kiss death in the act of making the bond of love. They are opposed by clan, clergy and the so-called "custodians of social honor" tooth and nail and are denied social space to cross the boundaries defined by the tradition. They are accused of bringing shame to the family, clan and their near ones, violating religious teachings and polluting the "pristine waters of tradition" (Shah, 1985). However, it is very interesting to note that these lovers are known to be in true love (*Ishq e sadiq*) and are highly respected and revered by the people to this day.

Heer's story of undying love with Ranjha is a household legendary tale in Punjab. This is a tale of sacrificing bodily existence to keep alive the flame of love and finding union in death. The story is sung in Raga Bhairveen across thousands of rural hamlets and symbolizes the conscience of Punjab. All the men and women of God have used the symbol of Heer's love with Ranjha as the symbol of divine love. Ranjha's story begins with living the ecstasy of love and renouncing all the bonds that come in the way of his life of fantasy. He plays flute; refuses to till the

fields or take any woman into marriage; and declines to follow the proper settled way of life of a farmer, like his father Moju Chaudhry, the village chief. His sisters in law are wary of his “indulgent” style of life and to show disapproval of his ways they refuse to cook for him. He takes his flute, abandons his claim on his father’s land and to break connection with his settlement crosses river Chenab. It symbolically means opting out of existing order and deciding to become an outcast.

Throughout Ranjha’s journey his flute—symbol of unconditional love— attracts people of clean heart, mostly women. He, his flute, and his status at the lowest rung of the social ladder are all looked down upon by the custodians of patriarchy. As he crosses the river he has first encounter with Heer, daughter of a wealthy landowner. Heer at first glance snubs him as a high-status woman would treat an outcast. She soon realizes that beneath the veneer of a vagabond is hidden a bright, captivating and loving heart. She gets him hired as a buffalo herder by her father. The buffaloes are captivated by his flute, as are all innocent beings around him. After a few years Heer’s father, upon learning about Ranjha’s secret love with Heer, compels him to leave his estate. This is his second migration. In the first migration, he abandons his status as son of a village chief and in the second one he abandons his status as a buffalo herder. Patriarchy rejects him in both instances. He subsequently goes to the mound of Jogi Balnath to become his disciple and renounce all the worldly attachments to find true love. He is soon granted the status of Jogi, because Balnath becomes aware of his accomplishments along the way. Heer refuses to accept her forced marriage to the wealthy landlord. She is not willing to accept any bond other than of her complete submission to Ranjha. In the act of love, she becomes Ranjha herself.

To lure Heer and Ranjha back to the “sanctity” of Patriarchy, Heer’s parents agree to give her hand to Ranjha. Realizing that they would not be able to bring them back to the fold and live with the shame brought by both of them to Heer’s family, Heer is poisoned on the night of her wedding. This end shows that true lovers who cannot meet under the compulsions of Patriarchy can only find union in death. Because of its message of defiance, unconditional human love and inimitable sacrifice, this legend is alive in the hearts of people to this day.

These legendary love stories have been written in poetic form by very respectable Sufis, and the names of characters in these stories are used by Sufi poets to express mystic love for the creator (Shan, 2000; Shah, 1985; Shah, 1992; Shakarganj, 2007; Bahu, 1966; Farid, 1994; Hussain, 2014). This poetry is still widely sung in Punjabi villages and heard by the people with extreme reverence

and devotion. Contrary to the established norms, lovers in these stories are women and beloved is a man. In Sufi poetry, this relationship symbolizes the relation between a human being and the Lord. Ranjha, one of the legendary men in these folk stories, has been mentioned as a symbol of true and pure love by Sufis like Shah Hussain (fifteenth century), Bulleh Shah (seventeenth to eighteenth century), Sachal Sarmast (eighteenth century) and Khwaja Ghulam Farid (twentieth century).

Sutlej is known as the land of seekers of the mystic path and some of the great Sufi Masters of the South Asian sub-continent are buried here. Great twelfth-century Sufi Baba Farid Shakar Ganj is buried at Pak Pattan (“Pure River Bank”) and is known for compassion, generosity and wisdom. Baba Farid was a great poet and his Sufi poetry is popular among the people to this day. Farid is also known for his apostate belief that basic pillars of Islamic faith are not five—belief in One God, performance of regular prayer, fasting during the month of Ramadan, paying *Zakat*⁶ and performing pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*)—but six. The sixth one is provision of bread to the common people (*roti*). According to Farid, if food security is not provided to the people, they can easily deviate from their faith. This is in line with the Islamic teaching that secular cannot be separated from the spiritual in a truly Muslim society (Khan, 2008). Sutlej is also the home of the founder of the Chishti Sufi order in Punjab, Hadrat Khwaja Noor Mohammad Kharal Maharwi.

It is narrated that Shaikh Farid lived a very simple and ascetic life and taught his disciples to do the same. He refrained from even the smallest indulgences in life. He used to fast daily and broke his fast with the tasteless wild fruit *golar*. He had four very close disciples living with him in the *khanqah* (monastery). Before sunset (time of breaking fast known as *Iftar*) one of his disciples would collect wood, the other would collect *golar* and the third one would fetch water. The fourth of his disciples would make fire and boil tasteless *golar* to prepare the meal. Shaikh Fareed would always take a very small helping. He would receive the most delicious food, fruits, sweets, gold coins and precious stones as tribute every day and would distribute all these gifts among the needy. He would never partake of single morsel of this food or keep a single coin in his custody. One day one of his disciples thought, “Our Shaikh eats tasteless *golar* day after day; why not add a little taste to the meal for his pleasure?” There was no salt left in the *khanqah*’s *langar* (kitchen for preparing free meals), so he borrowed a few pinches of salt from the local *bania* (village shopkeeper). At *Iftar* the sheikh took his first bite and stopped eating. He said, “The bite is heavy today. Did anyone mix

anything forbidden in the meal?" Everybody was surprised. Nobody could recall any component obtained through unfair means. Suddenly the Shaikh asked, "Where did the salt come from?" "I borrowed it from the local *bania*," the cook replied. The Shaikh responded, "It is not proper for a *salik* (the seeker of path) to taste borrowed salt for personal pleasure. Taming the self by denying even the most basic pleasure in midst of plenty is the path of reunion with the Lord. Seekers keep the world from disintegrating like the Salt of the Earth by denying even a pinch of salt to themselves."

Sindh is known as the valley of the pure or truthful. The riverbank of Sindh was inhabited by great Sufi masters, some of whom laid their lives in fighting against unjust rulers, from the Mughal dynasty to the British Raj. Sufi Shah Inayat led a peasant rebellion during the Mughal Rule and successfully overpowered the local allies of Mughals, but was trapped through a conspiracy and killed (Somroo, 2014). Shah Inayat was a seventeenth-century saint who made a *khanqah* in the Jhok area of Sindh and distributed his land to farmworkers. Subsequently he raised a local army of tenants to demand "land to the tiller" from the feudal lords under the patronage of Mughal Emperor Farrukh Siyar. He was despised by orthodox *mullahs* and local landlords. As they were unable to quell his rebellion, they approached the King, who ordered the ruler of Northern Sindh, Yar Muhammad Kalhoro, to send an army to crush the rebels. A prolonged siege of Jhok did not produce any results. Finally Kalhoro Chief sent an emissary and offered to settle the dispute through negotiations. Shah Inayat's followers smelled a conspiracy in this meeting and persuaded him not to enter the dialogue unguarded, but the Shah had given his word and could not turn back. That is what being truthful (*sadiq*) meant to him. He was killed by his hosts. His last words to his executioner were, "You have released me from the chains of existence. May Allah bless you now and in the hereafter." He lost his head but saved his soul by upholding truth in the face of fear. That is why Kalhoro rulers have been forgotten, but the Shah lives in the heart of every Sindhi.

There is a long list of such illustrious Sufi martyrs who aligned with the cause of justice and sacrificed their lives. Latest in this list of great masters was Pir Sibghat Ullah Pagaro, who founded the *Hur* (free from slavery) spiritual community in Sindh (Soomro, 2004). He was hanged by the British in 1943 for inciting a militant rebellion against the government (Lambrick, 1972).⁷ Pir Pagaro was so popular in Sindh that he was buried at an unknown place to prevent his grave from becoming a shrine for the rebels. His place of burial is unknown to his family and followers to this day.

Jhelum is known as the land of Transgressors. This is the only valley associated with the symbol of maintaining the existing system of power through use of instruments of power. It represents the form while other valleys symbolize the spirit of rising above the form, norms, power and patriarchy. Form and the spirit constitute the whole. The supporters of the status quo are portrayed uncharitably because they pose a hurdle in the self-realization of soul. The reason behind this negative portrayal might be the fact that any invaders crossing Khyber Pass and moving to Delhi succeeded in marching forward only if people of this valley cooperated with them. The river separating Jhelum valley from Khyber valley is known as Attock. In local language it means the barrier. Any invader who crossed this barrier would cross all the subsequent barriers on the way. The legend has it that the warriors of this valley were so proud and courageous that they would not surrender even in the event of defeat. When Alexander the Great entered Jhelum valley, also known as Gandhara, he defeated the local king Porus.

Alexander the Great had invaded India against the advice of Persians. His first battle was against Porus, the king of Taxila. Alexander bribed Porus' rival King Ambhi to join his armies and promised to reward him with Porus' kingdom after the victory. A ferocious battle ensued between Alexander's and Porus' armies, ending in Alexander's conquest. Porus was brought to Alexander's court so that his fate could be decided. Alexander asked him how he wanted to be treated. Alexander might have expected submission or a request for mercy by Porus, which would have led to his public humiliation and established psychological superiority of the Greeks in the hearts of indigenous inhabitants for generations. Porus, a proud king, a brilliant warrior and a man of honor, was not cut out to make such a deal. He did not want to bring shame and humiliation to his people to save his own head. It was a small price for him to pay. To the utter surprise of Alexander, Porus said, "As one king treats another king." This could mean: either death, or respect and honor. Alexander got the message. He was overawed. He returned to Porus his own kingdom and that of Ambhi. Those who defy death continue to live and those who live under the shadows of fear turn into living dead.

This folk song can be well interpreted keeping in view this context. Love, spirituality, courage, wisdom and order cannot be separated but constitute a whole. Various forms of expression symbolized through these river valleys of Punjab describe the unity and conflict of form and spirit constituting the existential reality of Punjab (Syed, 2007a and 2007b). The structure of this song lays bare various threads defining this tradition and its various components.

However, this reality is in flux; it is continuously annihilating and recreating itself. The form is therefore deceptive and it symbolizes Representation; the spirit is in quest of realizing its potential, it is invisible but real and represents Agency in the act of metamorphosis. This view has been further developed with reference to the folk song in the ensuing commentary.

Structure of the folk song

The folk song narrated above provides unique insights in exploring the relationship between the male and female archetype, female agency and representation, body and soul, social boundaries and freedom, social reality and consciousness and temporal and spiritual. The person expressing the longing to unite with the beloved is a female. The female as lover is at this point confined to the four walls of her house and boundaries of her hamlet. She is restricted by the boundaries but is not willing to accept the lines drawn around her. The word used for her love is *Pardesi*—a person who has departed on a long journey, and may or may not return. The loved one in a way belongs to the domain of the unknown; ideal, spiritual, unreal; someone who represents the possibility of transcending the existing social reality in the act of reunion (Syed, 2007a).

The present state of the lover is the state of separation. She is constricted by the tradition, by the boundaries drawn around her separating her from her lover. She is prisoner of her Representation anchored in the social reality. She wants to transcend this reality not by crossing the boundaries but calling back her lover to reunite with her. That is why the expression "*Mur kay la*" ("turn back to me" or "turn your eyes to me my love") is used. She is aware of the pain of separation; she wants to end this separation by trying to bring back her love to conform to the social realities, wanting her love to reinhabit the prison built around her, to share her suffering, and return to the land he has abandoned to realize his possibilities. These metaphors, which seem to be describing the mundane and material reality, have at least three layers. At one level it is a call for ending the separation between the lover and the loved one; at another level it is a longing to establish unity between the ideal and the real; and at a third level it depicts an internal conflict between the longings of the body and the soul. The central conflict in this desire to "reunite with the lost love" is between conformity and rebellion: a choice between following the Representation defined by existing social norms or Agency which yearns to transcend these norms. The choice is between death and life (Syed, 2003). Putting it differently, it can be seen as a choice between the death of the

body and eternal life of the soul, or survival of the body, its pleasures and security at the cost of the death of the soul, and the yearning for freedom, the act of Agency.⁸

The lover is torn between conformity and rebellion. Her yearning for reunion possesses her body. At this point however, she is longing reunion not by stepping out of her boundaries but passionately calling her love to return, to be together again. But there is a realization at the same time that return is not possible. The ecstasy, the consuming passion that possesses the lover is connected with the charm of reuniting with the one who has already crossed the boundaries; who is familiar but a stranger, one who is so close but so far away; who belongs and at the same time does not belong to the world of lover. If this dichotomy, this tension, this agony to be and not be ends it will be the death of the longing for reunion. The lover is not willing to step out of her boundaries but at the same time wants her lover to know that she does not belong to these boundaries. She likes him as an outsider and an outcast; she sees herself in him and him in her. At this point a third metaphor is introduced in the song. In the third and fourth line, she asks her lover to reunite with her in the back lanes of the majestic palaces (Mehlan de Pichvarey). She also describes her limitations and uncontrollable passion as a chained tiger. It is pertinent to look at the class angle expressed in this image. Imagery in the song points to the class status of the lover who happens in this case to be a woman. Her class origin is associated with the image of tiger and chain with the restrictions imposed by patriarchy. In the act of love she has to cross all boundaries: gender, class and locale.

The interplay between the call to reunite in the back lanes of the palaces and the chained tiger is very significant. The lover is bound by the restrictions of norms imposed by power, wealth and traditional values but sees no possibility of reunion under these boundaries. She sees the possibility of reunion outside the tradition and asks her love to come back and meet her outside the palace, in the back lane. She also depicts the authenticity of her desire by saying that she is a chained tiger; that she wants to break the chains. To this point the lover defies the norms, boundaries and restrictions imposed by the tradition by living within the realm of tradition and not taking the step of stepping out of the given. She sees her freedom contingent upon the return of her lover. She has taken the first step for reunion by imagining herself united with someone who belongs to her but is not there. Her whole endeavor is to reunite by stepping back into the tradition, by calling back her love to embrace the tradition. She wants to transcend but not transgress the tradition. She wants to save what needs to be destroyed. She sees

the barriers outside her but not the barriers within her. Without crossing the barrier inside her, without overcoming her hesitation and ambivalence reunion is not possible (Syed, 2003; Syed, 2007a).

The next section of the song describes the steps she is taking to cross her internal barrier, her journey from finding strength in the act of Agency rather than Representation. Taking responsibility for her act of defiance rather than asking her love to do it for her. While the act of asking the lover to return seems to be an act of defiance, in fact it is an act of compliance with the norm. On the surface it seems that the lover is reaffirming her natural interdependence by asking him to return. In reality it is reestablishing the interdependence characterized by patriarchal norms. While it seems that her love is “abandoning” her by moving out of the known to the realm of uncertain, undefined and the unknown, this separation is about breaking the existing interdependence and reproducing it at a higher level by embracing the unknown.

The act of defiance is accompanied by many perils, agonies, risks and gradual death and destruction of what is. The whole dynamic of committing this act revolves around transcending the dichotomy between appearance and reality, between body and the soul, between the form and the spirit, between the temporal and the eternal and between death and life. What appears to be death of the body, social reality, traditional bonds and highly valued norms is intrinsically linked with the birth of the new, regeneration of the soul and reunion with the Eternal. The act of freedom is the act of realizing the limitations, deceptive appearance and finiteness of the form and discovering the authenticity of what appears to be ideal, spiritual and unreal (Jung, 2006). It consists in discovering unreal in the real, infinite through the fleeting glance of finite and soul through the guise of death bound body. In folk and Sufi tradition it has been likened to the merger of a drop of water in the ocean. When a drop of water falls in an ocean, it appears to be an act of death and annihilation of that drop of water but it is simultaneously an act of becoming part of the universal and eternal; an act of transcending the finite and becoming part of the infinite. The act of Agency is realization of the reality that is and is not at the same time and it unfolds itself by realizing the possibility offered by is not. This entails undoing what is. This act of undoing is not compatible with the return. Desiring for return is tantamount to complying with the limitations of form. Agency on the other hand is the act of demolishing the form, which sets the conditions for true union with the other (Syed, 2003; Syed, 2007a, 2007b).

In the folk song this act of confronting and demolishing the form is expressed

in the encounter between the lover, the chained tiger; and the existing form of power, narrated through the metaphor of Thanedar, the police chief. The police chief has descended on the hamlet of the lover and wants to rob her of her existential reality. What appears to be the loss at the hands of the Police Chief is actually a precondition for demolishing what is and entering the realm of what is not. The moment the act of abandoning what seems to be being robbed happens, the moment of transcendence from Representation to Agency takes place. The first act of confrontation is the appearance of the Thanedar who is aware of the vulnerability of the lover separated from her love. Since the lover does not belong to the world of *is* she is denied all the rights granted to the ones subscribing to *is*. Thanedar asks for her bracelet and her necklace. She narrates the pain of handing over the bracelet and necklace to her lover and asks him to return. The key question which this situation brings forth is how to interpret the meaning of this loss. This also requires the interpretation of the meaning of metaphor of bracelet and necklace used in these lines and the lovers' response to these losses, and meaning of the act of laughter in the first case and crying in the second.

Bracelet and necklace are extension of the body and linked in a dialectical relationship with the body. These ornaments are source of vitality, object of adoration and intrinsic part of the body. Body in the act of negating its present predicament, negates the existing structure, existing social order, and existing boundaries and invites the assault by various forms of Representation; of existing forms of patriarchy and its custodians. The object of attack is the Agency that longs to unite with the *pardesi*, the outsider and outcast. Bracelet has to be usurped to weaken the will of the defiant, to demean her will, to invoke fear in her, to demonstrate her helplessness and to assert the existing order by robbing her of something so dear and so intimate to her. Bracelet is an ornament decorating the hands of the lover; it signifies human labor because hands symbolize work and bracelets the beauty of what that work produces. Bracelet also symbolizes a bond. This bond was supposed to be a commitment to be in bondage of the existing order. This idea is narrated in the coming line, when the lover states that these bracelets are so precious because they are given to her by her *paika* (parental home). The act of wedding or committing in love is also considered a journey in Punjabi folklore, an act of breaking away from the existing order (*paika*) and moving to a new order (*sahwra*, or in-laws). In tradition this movement from *paika* to *sahwra* is only a change of form. The essence, the relationship, and the order remain the same; only the locale and the characters change. But in the act of love this moment becomes the moment of subversion, a moment of demolishing the

existing bonds.

The Thanedar not only robs the lover of her bracelet but tries to rob her of her necklace. Whereas the bracelet symbolizes the body, the form, the order, the structure, the given; the necklace symbolizes the passion, the soul, the longing to reunite with the *pardesi*, the outsider. It is the act of transformation. *Sahwra* in the traditional sense would mean the new home, but in the act of love it means the new bond, subversion of existing reality, submission to the call of *pardesi*. The significance of the loss of two different ornaments is narrated in the next two lines and sets the tone of interplay between the Agency and Representation. While the lover is being robbed of the bracelet and the necklace, she gives away the bracelet with laughter and the necklace with cries. As the bracelet symbolizes the given order and its protection and rewards, it does not matter if the Thanedar takes away the “bounties” provided by the given order. It is not sufficient for the system to take all the securities offered to its followers away from the rebel. The Order needs inner submission as well. The dreams, ideas and longings have also to be sacrificed, forgotten and abandoned. The longing to celebrate the gift bestowed by the *sahwras*, the world of the Outcast, has also to be abandoned. This means negation of the self, the act of love and act of agreeing to abandon the self. This is where the rebel cries. It must not be taken away from her. The loss of necklace is loss of her soul. That is why in the last line the lover says:

Turn back to me, my soul is eternally sad, turn back your eyes to me my love

The song ends here. Before proceeding further to explore the interplay of Representation and Agency in Punjabi folklore, it is important to say a few words about Representation and Agency in the contemporary context.

Representation and Agency

Agency in the contemporary feminist literature is seen as “The capacity for autonomous action in the face of often overwhelming cultural sanctions and structural inequalities” (McNay, 2000). This also implies that Representation stands for conforming to cultural sanctions and social inequalities. Keeping this distinction in mind, Representation and Agency can be described at various levels as the relationship between self and the existing social order, or the relationship between the self and other. Representation may also be likened to the form, the word, the body, the social practices, and Agency to the meaning, the essence, the possibility and the soul. Whereas in the contemporary context Agency is related to

the appearance of Bodies and their performativity (Butler, 2015), in Punjabi folklore the body symbolizes given order and structure, a symbol of Representation. In the folk tradition the concept of Agency is closer to the myth of the Phoenix: the rebel who burns into ashes in its own consuming passion to reunite with the beloved. The lover surpasses the given order by crossing the boundaries of the body itself, by annihilating everything associated with the body, the form and the order and then taking rebirth from its ashes. As beautifully narrated by Hussain: "*udia bhor thia pardes aggay rah agam da*":⁹ the follower of the path is like a bumblebee flying into the "coming moment" (Hussain, 2014).

In this tradition, the celebration of bodies is a celebration of form, the given, the social order of patriarchy. It does not make much difference who celebrates it, the patriarch or the rebel. It does not make any difference if the knife drops on the melon or the melon drops on the knife. Body is form; it is fixed; that is why restricting self-realization to realization of possibilities of the body alone is negation of freedom. Freedom is likened with freedom of soul from the body, negation of form, and the act of being. It symbolizes agency and constitutes the act of freedom. It poses a threat to the existing order, given form, social relations, rituals and prescriptions.

Liberation, unlike the contemporary context, is not an act of rebellion first and union later; it is an act of love first; necessitating defiance and longing for reunion. As put by a contemporary poet Mushtaq Soofi, "*aapni zat sifatoon baher apna aap vikheevay- shala dil aashiq na thevay*"—"in the act of love you see yourself outside yourself, I pray to the lord that my heart does not fall in love" (Soofi, 1975). The act of love is first discovering oneself in the "other" and then breaking away from all the bonds, restrictions, fears and uncertainties to reunite with the other. The pursuit to reunite with the other calls for stepping out of the given moment and existing space. Reunion with the lover is conditioned on the separation from the given. It is surge of the soul to break away from the bond of the body. However, this act of breaking loose from the bodily bonds, which appears to be self-annihilation, is tantamount to self-realization in liberated consciousness. In Sufi metaphor it is likened to a drop of water falling in an ocean. As it drops in the ocean, it loses its form, its very existence comes to an end, but it becomes part of an omnipresent reality.

Guru Nanak Devji presented the same idea in a different way. His couplet, "*Jay tainoo prem khedan da chah, sir dhar tali gali meri aa,*" translates as, "If you have a deep desire to play the act of love, then carry your head in your palm and make the visit to my lane." This couplet was displayed on the title page of the rebel

militant group Ghadar Party's (Mutiny Party) political journal. Ghadar Party was formed after the First World War to overthrow the British rule in India through armed resistance. "Performance" and "solidarity" are not two different moments in this act of Agency as conceptualized by Butler, and in the Marxist distinction between the class in itself and class for itself (Butler, 2015). In taking bodily appearance as performance, the defiance is seen in the act of appearance but it does not automatically lead to the act of solidarity with others suffering from Precarity. The second moment, the moment of solidarity, requires transcending the first moment through the act of deliberation. There is no organic unity between the first and second moment. The second moment has to be introduced as an external condition, not consistent with the first moment. The same problem arises in explaining the transition from "class in itself" to "class for itself" in the Marxist context. While the first moment seems to originate in the concrete material condition giving birth to the idea of liberation, during the second moment the relationship is reversed and the idea seeks to be converted to a bodily form. But the path taken by the idea from self to the other remains unexplained (Marx, 1963).

In Punjabi folk and Sufi tradition, self and the other constitute two poles of the same unity. The act of Agency against the Order and against its current Representation means defying both poles and taking a leap from the known to unknown. Defying the order simultaneously means defying the self, conditioned by the existing order. It means demolishing the order, body, form and self at the same time. Transcending the limitations of the order also means transcending the limitations imposed by the body. Self-annihilation as drop of water at the same time means uniting with the other—being part of the ocean. Performance and solidarity are not two moments, they happen simultaneously. Denying order also means annihilating the boundaries of self. This is the act of creating new synthesis by transcending the old synthesis. Since the new is not known, has not come into existence as yet, has not formed, it cannot therefore be represented by body, by the known, by the given. It is a possibility, it is unknown, it has yet to be materialized; therefore it can only be represented by soul, surging high to realize its own possibilities.

Representation and Agency in the folk song

Pardesi is a symbol of an ideal yet to be realized: someone who has separated but not parted. He is there but not there; close but still afar; a lover but more than that

a beloved. He is different from *Musafir* who in Sultan Bahu's words has no traction, is lighter than a straw. "*Shala Musafir Kai na thevey kakh jinhan theen bharey hoo*" (Bahu, 1966). It can more be understood with reference to the relationship between Rumi and Shams Tabriz or in folk tradition between Heer and Ranjha (Shah, 1985). He makes the lover aware of her own possibility and then becomes evasive through the act of separation. Separation and reunion define the context of Agency and Representation. Both in the case of Rumi and of Heer, the lover was an outsider who was rejected in the first instance as someone of no value. However, the outsider's act of relating differently created awareness of a part of the self, hitherto unknown, has the effect of casting a spell on the onlooker who finds him/herself charmed by the outsider to a level where everything else becomes irrelevant. But the charmer has to separate because there is no room in the given order for him to keep the newfound love. In the act of parting the lover becomes irresistible to the beloved. It leads to a situation where the old dichotomy of lover and beloved is transcended in the longing to reunite.

Love is the act of negating the Order. Those who do not yearn for reunion with their love by negating the order do not count as lover. This path has to be travelled alone. Once it begins, whether anyone else joins it or not becomes irrelevant. As eloquently narrated by Hussain, "*Jana te piya ikallay*"—"The path can only be travelled alone" (Hussain, 2014). It is not known. It is not secure. It cannot be premised on asking the other to "return." Returning would mean coming back to the folds of the Order. Order here is represented by the palace, Police Chief, parental family (*pekas*) and in-laws (*sahwras*)—all different forms of preserving patriarchy.

Agency is represented by the Tiger. Agency consists in confronting the Police Chief, surrendering to him the bracelets and the necklace. Laughing and crying are both two different dimensions of the moment of separation from the existing order to reunite with the new. Form as ornament and body again represents existing order. Separation from the order is transcending the compulsions of the body and setting upon the path of reunion. That is why the lover declares that my soul is eternally sad without you. The journey for reunion is journey of the soul. The body is the temple of the soul, but focusing on body can be deceptive. Here it is interesting to note the paradox of the relationship of the custodian of the existing order and its outcasts toward body and soul. Apparently custodians of order display contempt for the glamour and charm of the worldly possessions, power and authority. They seem to be driven by urge to follow the divine. They renounce worldly pleasure and condemn the act of love as pursuit of pleasure and

therefore a base and lowly act. The rebel, on the other hand, is aware of the temporal nature of the form and the existing order, but considers it as a moment in the realization of the sublime. The rebel knows limitations but does not scorn the glitter of the world of form. Awareness of the reality of form is necessary to begin the journey to overcome the limitations of form.

Madhu Lal Hussain has beautifully captured this existential attitude by saying, "*Koori dunya koor pasara jeon moti shabnam daa*" (Hussain, 2014): "This world with its entire sprawling splendor is unreal as a drop of dew." It looks magnificent, no doubt, but it has come into existence to vanish. It is beginning of the end, not the end of the beginning. Custodians of the order uphold its sanctity by insisting on compliance with the form in the name of rejecting it. Here the question of Agency is not articulated as in Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak, 1988). The right question is—can those who do not speak be counted as Subaltern?

Conclusion

Love is the act of becoming aware of one's inner beauty. This awareness takes place through contact with the other. The other is the mirror that reflects the beauty hidden in the depths of self. This awareness ignites the spark to seek union with the other. However, this moment of awareness connects with the moment of union by crossing the barriers erected by gender, caste, class and status. All these elements define the identity of the lover under patriarchy. In the longing for union with the other, the lover must renounce their given identity. It is the death before the rebirth. It is not a union of bodies, because bodies, like all other forms, are shackled in the structure of given social order. In the moment of transition the inner light has to shed its outer form. That is how the soul can continue its journey. The glitter of the body, like the splendor of a drop of dew, is transitory, unreal and deceptive. Only the bond between souls is everlasting. It happens by relinquishing form. That is the true love of Punjabi folklore.

Notes

¹ The word used in the song is *pardesi*; it literally means a person who has gone out on a journey to a foreign land. This might mean a distant hamlet, an estrangement from the lover, or separation caused by social barriers beyond the control of both the lovers.

² This text is based on an oral performance of the song. For a documented version see Soofi, Mushtaq, Bar Dey Geet, Punjabi Adabi Board, 1984. The original song in Farsi script is as follows:

مڑ کے لاء مڑ کے لا پر دیا وے اکھیاں مڑ کے لاء
 مڑ کے لاء وے میں جو تیں آکھیاں، وے اکھیاں مڑ کے لاء
 مڑ کے لاء وے مھلاں وے بچواڑے، وے اکھیاں مڑ کے لاء
 بدھا کھلوتا شینے وے، وے اکھیاں مڑ کے لاء
 نتھا کھلوتا تھانبار وے، وے اکھیاں مڑ کے لاء
 جھ دیاں سنگدا چوڑیاں وے اکھیاں مڑ کے لاء
 گلے دا سنگدا ہار وے، وے اکھیاں مڑ کے لاء
 بس کے دتیاں چوڑیاں، وے اکھیاں مڑ کے لاء
 رو کے دتبار وے، وے اکھیاں مڑ کے لاء
 پیکے گھر دیاں چوڑیاں وے اکھیاں مڑ کے لاء
 سوہرے گھرا ہار وے وے اکھیاں مڑ کے لاء
 مڑ کے لاء وے میں جو تیں آکھیاں، وے اکھیاں مڑ کے لاء
 مڑ کے لاء سدا ادای روح وے، وے اکھیاں مڑ کے لاء

³ These five rivers are Ravi, Chenab, Sutlej, Sindh and Jhelum.

⁴ This folk saying was narrated to me by Master Wahid Bakhsh, a teacher at Government Middle School, Sarai Sidhu. For original text in Farsi script, see note 2.

⁵ See Saeed Bhutta, *Kaimal Kahani* (Lahore: Sanjh, 2006).

⁶ Donating 2.5% of one's personal savings every year as charity to the state or directly to the needy as an obligatory form of worship in Islam and is known as *Zakat*. It actually means something that purifies you. The purpose of all forms of worship in Islam is self-purification. Obligatory forms of worship are known as *shariah* and the esoteric path of self-purification is known as *tariqa*, followed by Sufis and transmitted by them to their selected followers as a blessing.

⁷ Pir Pagara and his *Hur* movement were labeled "The Terrorists" by H. T. Lambrick in his book bearing the same title (London: Ernest Benn Ltd., 1972).

⁸ See also Najam Hossein Syed, *Recurrent Patterns in Punjabi Poetry* (Lahore: Justin Group, 2003).

⁹ For original in Punjabi see note 2.

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