



Anthropocentric universe verses ontological self-effacement: Self-realization as God-Realization in Sufi paradigm

Author: Neelam Mittal, Satyawati College (M), Delhi University.

Abstract: The hermeneutics of life as delineated in Sufi paradigm lays emphasis on lifting the veil of the illusive, delusive superficialities of life. Union with the divine Godhead is possible through a path of self-annihilation and self-effacement. Evanescence of ego and worldly materialistic desires is the prelude to union with the divine Beloved in Sufi parlance. The paper attempts to do a comparative study of the metaphysical contours of two prominent Sufi poets of Sindh and Punjab respectively, Shah Abdul Latif and Bulleh Shah substantiating their parallel mystical journey vis-à-vis inter-textual references to Renaissance anthropomorphic system and Indian Vedantic thought. The centrality hence accorded to human being opens the possibility of dismantling all dichotomies and a complete breakdown of binary opposites; human emancipation from the restrictive and reductive confines of narrow schismatic communal confines opens the path towards union ('wisal') with the divine realm, hence enabling a teleological union with the divine Beloved.

Keywords: self-annihilation, self-effacement, Divine essence, empirical phenomenal world, divine pantheism, unity in plurality, non-dualism, vedantic thought, life-in death, death-in life.

Knowest thou why thy mirror reflects not?

Because the rust has not been scoured from its face.

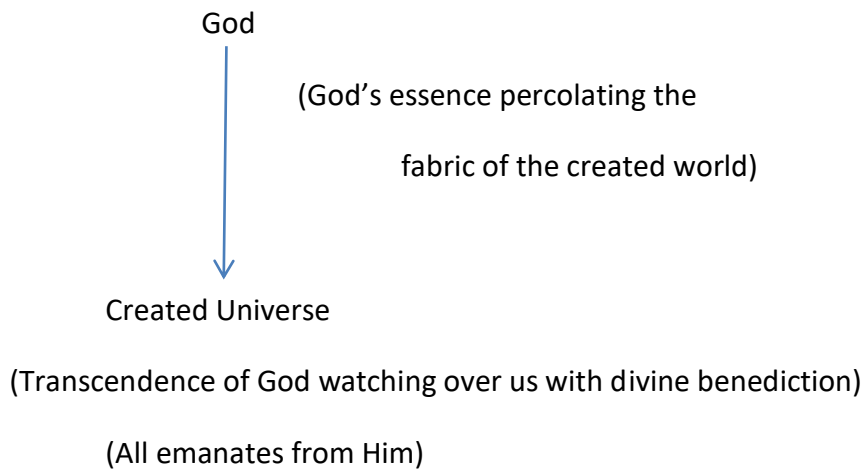
If it were purified from all rust and defilement,

it would reflect the shining of the sun of God.

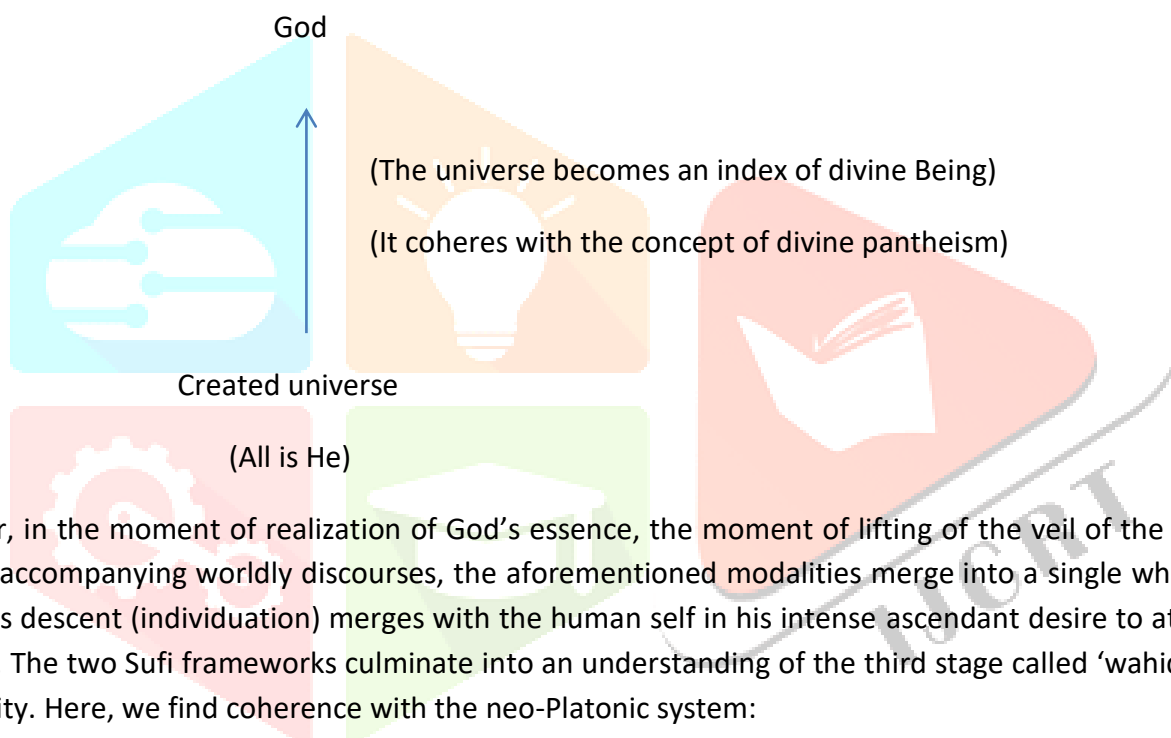
Rumi

It is the veil of the material which needs to be lifted for entering the spiritual realm of divine effulgence. How does a Sufi understand or arrive at one-ness or union with the Supreme Being. What is the modus operandi, what logic behind the attainment of the desired unity with the Supreme Godhead? The question needs to be answered keeping in mind that the Sufi paradigm does not rest on logic or rational thought.

Time and again, the relationship between the creator and creation, the divine Being and the individual soul has been viewed in two formats: one, in which God transcends, circumscribes and envelops the created world. In the present format, a transcendent God manifests Himself in his creation and percolates the fabric of the created world. In Sufi parlance, it is explained through the concept of 'tanazzulat' or descent or individuation of the absolute in the entities of the created world and comes close to the shuhudi concept of "All is from Him".



In the Second format, the created world becomes an index of, points towards and is reminiscent of the divinity of the Supreme Godhead. The empirical phenomenal world leads towards a realization of the creator, the Supreme doer.



However, in the moment of realization of God's essence, the moment of lifting of the veil of the material world and the accompanying worldly discourses, the aforementioned modalities merge into a single whole. The divine self in his descent (individuation) merges with the human self in his intense ascendant desire to attain the divine Beloved. The two Sufi frameworks culminate into an understanding of the third stage called 'wahidiyyat' or unity in plurality. Here, we find coherence with the neo-Platonic system:

"The All-Soul includes and is All-the-Souls"

(Encyclopaedia of Sufism. Ed. Masood Ali Khan and S. Ram. Vol 2. New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 2003.Pg 59.)

The concept of identity between individual souls and the transcendent All-Soul is evinced in Sufi poet, Jami ((1414-92A.D.):

All degrees and hierarchies are but details of the Unity; the many are identical in essence with the One.
(Ibid., pg 59.)

The concept finds an apt endorsement in the non-dualistic ('advaitic') framework of Indian Vedantic thought. The following lines from *Ashtavakra Geeta* express a sense of identification between the divine consciousness and the individual human consciousness.

Ro;k O;k;khfena fo'oa izksra ;FkkFkZr%A

'kq'¼cq¼Lo:iLRoa ek xe% {kqzfpÛlkrkeAA

Tvya vyaaptamidam vishvam protam yatharthtah

Shuddh buddh swarupastwam maa gamah shudrachittam.

You pervade this universe and this universe pervades in you. You are really pure consciousness by nature. Do not be small-minded.

(Ashtavakra Geeta. Trans. Swami Nityaswarupananda. India : Advaita Ashrama, 1953. Pg 12.)

The implication of the afore-cited couplet may well be reinforced with Shah Abdul Latif's supreme enunciation of non-dualism:

From One, many to being came;

'many' but Oneness is;

Don't get confounded, Reality

Is 'One', this truth don't miss--

Commotion's vast display -- all this

I vow, of loved-One is.

(Latif, Shah Abdul. Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif. Trans. Elsa Kazi. West Pakistan: Sindhi Adabi Board, 1965. Pg 168. p32.)

The worldly manifestations ('khalq') of the single essence ('Haqq') camouflage the latter. Uplifting of this veil is the vocation of the Sufi aspirant. The 'many' are understood as not just an extension and manifestation of the 'One', but as essentially identical with the divine Being. Conversely, the realization of this stage of unity at the human end makes up for evanescence of all dichotomies, schisms and dilemmas. This stage is what the eighteenth century mystical saint-poets, Bulleh Shah and Shah Latif, aim at. In this stage of realization of unity of Being, Mansur al-Hallaj proclaims: "an'al Haqq" (I am Truth). The writer of *Gulshan-i-Raz* delineates this state in a lucid description:

'Everyone not harbouring doubt knows that there is only one single existence. But there is no duality for Truth—in that there is no 'I', no 'we' and no 'Thou'. I, we, Thou and he are all one thing. There is no distinction at all in Oneness'. (Ibid., pg 59)

The union between the individual soul and the Over-Soul is achieved through a process which involves:

- (i) Sufi belief in an anthropocentric universe,
- (ii) the need for withdrawal of the self from materialistic worldly existence and annihilation of the egotistic self ('fana'),
- (iii) Culminating in union with the divine Beloved and life eternal in communion with the divine Being.

The first of these steps involves human self-apotheosis and faith in the dignity of human worth. Human being is invested with the faculty of thought and like the English Renaissance belief in the great chain of being, human being is placed between the Gods above and beasts below. He is given a choice to exert his discretion and his faculties in an urge to ascend to divinity or to sink down to bestiality in accordance with human actions and thought processes. This is what Pico Della Mirandola has to say in "Oration on the Dignity of Man":

Oh wondrous and unsurpassable felicity of man, to whom it is granted to have what he chooses, to be what he wills to be!

http://www.andallthat.co.uk/uploads/2/3/8/9/2389220/pico_-_oration_on_the_dignity_of_man.pdf. p 8. Last visited 3rd may 2018)

Further, explains Pico:

...upon man, at the moment of his creation, God bestowed seeds pregnant with all possibilities, the germs of every form of life. Whichever of these a man shall cultivate, the same will mature and bear fruit in him. If vegetative, he will become a plant; if sensual, he will become brutish; if rational, he will reveal himself a heavenly being; if intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God. And if, dissatisfied with the lot of all creatures, he should recollect himself into the centre of his own unity, he will there, become one spirit with God, in the solitary darkness of the Father, Who is set above all things, himself transcends all creatures. (Ibid., pg 8-9)

The glimpse of eternity is reserved for the pure, the one without attachment to worldliness. The reason is established well by Shah Abdul Latif in the *Risalo*. The concept is reminiscent of the Vedantic conception of concurrence between 'mati' (situation of the mind at the moment of the death of human being) and 'gati' (final destiny of the soul) and the following quote from *Ashtavakra Geeta* is pertinent here:

eqDrkftHkekukh eqDrks fg c%4ks c%4kftHkekU;fiA

fdaoUnrhg lR;s;a ;k efr% lk xfrHkZosrAA

One who considers oneself free is free indeed and one who considers oneself bound remains bound. "As one thinks so one becomes", is a popular saying in this world, which is so true.

(Ashtavakra Geeta. Trans. Swami Nityaswarupananda. India : Advaita Ashrama, 1953. P 9.)

This is an anthropocentric worldview endorsed by Indian Vedantic thought and cogently substantiated by Shah Abdul Latif. The tenth century wandering dervish, Niffari, discussed in detail by R.A.Nicholson, is in concord with Latif and Vedantic mystical view. I quote from Niffari:

“And He said to me, ‘I deceive thee if I direct thee to aught save myself”

“And He said to me,’ ‘If thou perishest for the sake of other than Me, thou wilt belong to that for which thou hast perished’. (Nicholson, *Sufism: The Mysticism of Islam*, 843)

Another literary epoch which posits a human centred view of the universe is the English Romantic period. The following lines from Coleridge's “Dejection: An Ode” are worth citation:

O Lady! We receive but what we give,

And in our life alone does nature live,

Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!

(Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. “

Dejection: An Ode”

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43973/dejection-an-ode>. accessed June 16, 2018).

Moving on to the second step in the human attainment of the divine Beloved is self-annihilation, or ‘fana’. For the mystics with firm faith in God, self- annihilation and absolute submission to the will of the Supreme mover of the world is essential to a state of union with Him. This stage is reached through constant practice at self-effacement and through selfless dedication of all human actions to God. Right action, piety and love of all life forms are an essential concomitant of such a person. But those who get hardened in selfishness and abide in sin find it impossible to take the road to self- annihilation. Writes Saadi of Shiraz:

Green wood can be bent;

When it is dry, it is only straightened by fire.

(Shah, Idries. *The Way of the Sufi*. New Delhi: Amaryllis, 1968. P 85.)

The path of love entails liquidation of the ego. Conversely, the only impediment in this path is the crystallization of ego. Moosa Raza elucidates the point with a quotation from the Persian poet Saib:

Neest shu hastiyat az vay rasad

Ta tu hasti dar tu kay rasad

Ta nagardi mahv-i khwaari u fanaa

Kay rasad isbaaat az uzz-u baqa

Become nothing so that your being may come from Him; as long as you exist, how can real existence come to you? As long as you are not absorbed, obliterated and annihilated, how can affirmation ever be granted you by the Almighty and the Eternal?

(Raza, Moosa. In Search of Oneness. New Delhi: Penguin Ananda, 2012. p. 164-5)

In this state, the human seeker tends to feel a sense of identification with all objects of all thought, there is a continuum between the internal and the external and there is a deconstruction of all dichotomies. This is how Jalaludin Rumi expresses the essential non-dualism of empirical as well as discursive binaries; the load and the donkey, the thorn and the rose, the lover and the Beloved, fear and hope lose their significance as binary opposites :

Today I am in such shape

That I can't differentiate

The load from the donkey.

I am in such shape today,

That I don't know which is the thorn

And which is the rose.

My love put me in this shape today.

I don't know who is the Lover

Or who is the Beloved.

Yesterday, drunkenness led me

To the door of the Love.

But today I can't find

The door or the house.

Last year I had two wings.

Fear and hope.

Today, I don't know of wings,

Don't know how to fly,

Don't know of my lost fears.

(Fadiman, James, and Robert Frager, eds. *Essential Sufism*. New York: Harper San Francisco, 1997.pg 38.)

In "Sur Sohini" of Shah Abdul Latif's *Risalo*, Sohini realizes that the baked pot which she uses as a support to cross the river is an obstacle in her union with Sahar. The ultimate union is attained when the unbaked pot splinters, while crossing the river, on the way to her meeting with Sahar:

The means on which she had relied,

Did thrust her in the flood;

And only after she had died

She heard the herdsmen's call.-

(Latif, Shah Abdul. *Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif*. Trans. Elsa Kazi. West Pakistan: Sindhi Adabi Board, 1965. Pg 200.)

Human being braces himself with worldly reinforcements and seeks for succour in worldly props. But till the time he tenaciously holds on to material means for sustenance, with an aim of attaining salvation, the earthly seeker remains separated from the divine Beloved. In the next verse, Latif registers Sohini's realization that

"the jar is broken! let it go

Obstructive screen it was mere-"

(Latif, Shah Abdul. Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif. Trans. Elsa Kazi. West Pakistan: Sindhi Adabi Board, 1965., pg 200.)

The ultimate union is accomplished when the jar gets broken. Sohini does not feel intimidated by the elemental forces of nature. Latif writes in bait 37:

Hundreds were by the river drowned-

But river drowned was by the maid;

The current broke itself instead

By knocking bluntly against the banks.

(Latif, Shah Abdul. Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif. Trans. Elsa Kazi. West Pakistan: Sindhi Adabi Board, 1965. Pg 201.)

Till the time Sasui, the heroine of the folk-lore of Sasui-Punhu, considered herself separate from Punhu, she was in pain. Once she started conversing with her soul, she found Punhu within. What's more, there is a feeling that she had 'become' Punhu:

The clue of Him I got was:" God

does everything pervade;

He Himself is in every blade

Without Him nought exists."

(Latif, Shah Abdul. Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif. Trans. Elsa Kazi. West Pakistan: Sindhi Adabi Board, 1965., p122)

In a parallel enunciation, Bulleh Shah says:

I see Him in every face;

And yet people notice Him not

Here and there it's all his grace.

(Shah,Bulleh. The Mustic Muse. Trans. Kartar Singh Duggal. New Delhi: Abhinav publications, 1996.p 65.)

Whereas to the layman death is a mere deterrent against immoral and impious conduct, the Sufis stand apart from the commonplace in their attitude of embracing, often beckoning, death as the gateway to 'wisaal' or union with their beloved Lord. Huston Smith aptly puts it in the foreword to *Essential Sufism*:

The Sufis are the mystics of Islam. Every upright Muslim expects to see God after death, but the Sufis are the impatient ones. They want God now-- moment by moment, day by day, in this life.

(Fadiman, James, and Robert Frager, eds. *Essential Sufism*. New York: Harper San Francisco, 1997. P ix.)

Says Sant Kabir of the Indian devotional 'bhakti' tradition:

ftls ejus ls tx Mjs

esjs eu vkuUnA

dc effjgw;] dc ikbgw;

iwju ijekuUnAA

Splintering the bonds which tie the human seeker to the memories of the past and to the present pains and pleasures, the seeker moves on to a death-in-life like existence. He hopes for a re-awakening consequent upon the death of the physical self: a spiritual resuscitation and consequent union with God. . Latif says in "Sur Sasui: Madhuri--XVIII":

Who die before death, never will

Destroyed by dying be,--

Who live before second life they see

Will live eternally.

(Latif, Shah Abdul. *Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif*. Trans. Elsa Kazi. West Pakistan: Sindhi Adabi Board, 1965. p 132.)

The first couplet presents death-in-life as a state of the death of worldliness and materialism. The second couplet presents a life-in-death state of rejuvenation of life-eternal in the presence of the divine Beloved after the death of the physical self. Death, for the Sufis, is not a deplorable finale of life to be shunned or to be afraid of. It is a cherished prelude to the revivification of life in communion with the divine Beloved:

Die to be beautiful, life is

Hindrance twixt him and you,--

Helpless one, boldly do pursue

Give breath to find friend. (Ibid., p 132.)

In this process of breakdown of binaries, life and death become immaterial. Only the union with God becomes real. The Sufi poet expresses the necessity of unconditional love and unmitigated commitment for the divine Beloved as a pre-requisite for attaining divine proximity and divine bliss. Another Sufi poet, Shah Sharaf (1629-1724 A.D.) refers to "Living after many a death". It is a reference to practicing life-in-death, as a process of becoming free from worldliness and from all desires and rejuvenating the soul into a new life emancipated from reductive worldly confines. It is peculiar to the Sufi saints to re-define meanings of words from an idiosyncratic vantage point. In Sufi paradigm, the meaning of life and death undergoes a change. Life without God's love is death-like and death opens the ingress to a new life of union with the divine source. This is a possibility reserved only for a soul wallowing in love for the divine Beloved. In the supreme moment of union with the divine Beloved, there is an absolute identification between the seeker and the sought and the intermediate channel of acquisition of knowledge.

Kkua Ks;a rFkk Kkrk r'r;e ukLrh okLroe-A

vKkuknHkkrh ;=ksna lksge;Leh fujatu%AA

Gyanam gyeyyam tatha gyaata tritayam naasti vaastavam

Agyaanadbhati yatredam sohamasmi niranjanah II15II (Ashtavakra Geeta, verse 15)

Knowledge, knower and knowable-- these three do not in reality exist. I am that stainless self in which this triad appears through ignorance.

(Ashtavakra Geeta. Trans. Swami Nityaswarupananda. India : Advaita Ashrama, 1953.p 26.)

This is the heart of Sufi understanding of the hermeneutics of human efforts to attain the divine Beloved. Bulleh Shah says:

His name is on everyone's lips,

In you He ever resides.

He is nearer than the jugular vein

And with you He ever resides.

(Shah,Bulleh. The Mustic Muse. Trans. Kartar Singh Duggal. New Delhi: Abhinav publications, 1996. p 191.)

The divine Beloved ever resides with the human lover. But the realization of the same is very important. For this, suggests Bulleh:

Give up indecision, falsehood, pettiness,

Have a taste of ecstasy and fear not.

This is how you reach His palace,

If you see not, speak not, hear not.

(ibid., p 191.)

Sight, speech and hearing are inefficacious in leading to a 'real'-ization of the proximity with the divine Beloved. The realization of the oneness between the knower and the knowable is through the right path and the right knowledge:

He who longs to have His glimpse

Must get on to the proper path,

He is God and God is Him. (ibid., pg 191.)

The seeker and the sought as well as the intermittent path become one in the moment of realization of the unity of being. Knower and knowable become identical in the pure frame of selflessness, love and self-effacement. Asserts Bulleh Shah:

He who loves the Lord becomes the Lord no wonder. (ibid., pg 199.)

In this state, confirms Bulleh Shah:

Ranjha Ranjha kardi ni mai aape Ranjha hoi.

In this process there is a reciprocal desire between the two realms, the human and the divine, for merger with each other. We come across the following lines in sur "Sasui: Abri" of Shah Abdul Latif's Risalo:

Not only the thirsty seek water,

The water as well seeks the thirsty" (Risalo, Sur "Sasui Abri")

The reciprocity of desire between the seeker and the sought, the human and the divine Being is very much palpable in the Indian Vedantic thought. The impulse is exhibited in the devotional bhakti poets as well. The impulse allows for a better scope as well as hope for the human mystic. The quest is cryptic, the terrain unfamiliar and yet the vast and profound corpus of Sufi literature attempts to make the enigmatic factual, the obscure tangible. The path is to be lit not by the factual and the verifiable; instead by the intuitive and the instinctive.