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# The Alchemy of Self-Transcendence: Feminine Embodiment and Mystical Union in Shah Hussain's Poetics

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## ABSTRACT

This essay explores the gendered aspects of mystical subjectivity within the Sufi poetry of Shah Hussain (1538–1599), with particular emphasis on his continuous embrace of the feminine figure of Heer to express divine yearning. Close readings of specific kafis are used to investigate how Hussain subverts the conventional lover–Beloved relationship in Sufism by acting out the feminine seeker and casting the Divine as the masculine Beloved, Ranjha. This performative turn not only subverts the essentialized binaries of male and female in mystical discourse but also provides a spiritual praxis of surrender, vulnerability, and receptivity. Based on Sufi hermeneutics, feminist theory, and postcolonial insights, the paper places Hussain's work within wider debates on gender performativity and religious subjectivity. The analysis is such that Hussain's poetics perform simultaneously as devotional books and works of cultural resistance, broadening the horizons of interpretation of Punjabi Sufi tradition.



**Keywords:** Shah Hussain, Punjabi Sufi poetry, gender performativity, mystical subjectivity, Devotional Ontology, Philosophy


**Introduction**

Punjabi Sufi poetry is among the most vibrant South Asian cultural forms, intermixing mysticism, folk-tale narration, and philosophical musing. In this poetic tradition, no figure plays a more unique role than Shah Hussain (1538–1599), a Lahore poet-saint of the 16th century, for reimagining mystical subjectivity on the basis of feminine embodiment. Renowned for his kafis—short lyrical poems that capture the very essence of divine yearning—Hussain's poet self habitually employs Heer, the great heroine from Bulley Shah's romance, Heer Ranjha. By identifying himself with Heer, Hussain unbalances fixed gender categories and reconfigures the seeker–Beloved relationship in Sufism, making a spiritually subversive comment on love, union, and identity (Narang, 1995; Shackle, 2000).

The Sufi way, especially in South Asian Islam, is full of metaphors of love, separation, and union, which are frequently expressed through stories of human love to convey divine realities (Schimmel, 1975). Conventional metaphors attribute the male lover as the active lover and the female beloved as the passive one who is being desired. Hussain, on the other hand, inverts this polarity: he is the feminine seeker who longs for the masculine Divine (Ranjha) and thus dissolves the distinction between male and female subjectivities. This is not just a literary move but a deeply spiritual one, informed by the Sufi principle of fana—the destruction of the self before God (Ernst, 1997). By this gendered self-abasement, Hussain demonstrates that closeness to God is not attained through dominance or assertion but through submission, vulnerability, and openness—virtues socially coded as feminine (Bashir, 2011).

Hussain's poetry is both mystical and socially relevant. In a society controlled by strict gender hierarchies, his use of a feminine spiritual voice is an act of opposition to patriarchal religious authority. This is consistent with Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, according to which gender identity is forged through acts reiterated and codified rather than being settled by biology. In the case of Hussain, the act of speaking as Heer is a performative subversion of both social and mystical conventions. Such an interpretation also resonates with Sufi hermeneutics, where metaphors never remain fixed but have layers of symbolic meaning that change based on the seeker's state (Kugle, 2013).

In addition, Hussain's composition also calls to mind other Punjabi Sufi poets like Bulleh Shah, who also took female personas in their work to convey closeness to the Divine (Shackle & Temkin, 2010). But Hussain's persistent identification with Heer, spread over several kafis, represents a more profound allegiance to the feminine voice as a primary means of spiritual expression. In this way, he develops a mystical epistemology where love, rather than law; submission, rather than mastery; and permeability, rather than fixity, are the fundamentals of spiritual realization.
This research places the poetics of Shah Hussain within both Sufi literary canons and recent gender theory, contending that his use of feminine embodiment is not an optional stylistic move but a revolutionary spiritual practice. Based on close readings of the text, translations of his kafis, and theoretical observations derived from feminist and postcolonial theory, this paper explores how the work of Hussain remakes mystical union as a gendered act of self-transcendence. Thus, his poetry is both a devotional work and an intervention into culture, opening up the potential for religious subjectivity within Punjabi Sufi literature.

## Significance of Study:

The study has importance on several intellectual, cultural, and scholarly levels. First, it provides a new hermeneutic approach to Shah Hussain's kafis through highlighting the poet's conscious embrace of a feminine selfhood as a mystical technique of self-transcendence. In so doing, it not merely adds to Punjabi Sufi literary scholarship but also intersects with wider philosophical debates over identity, embodiment, and ego dissolution (fana) across mystical traditions. Secondly, the study broadens the debate regarding gender fluidity in South Asian spirituality, subverting rigid binaries and illustrating how gendered discourse can exist as a redemptive metaphor for spiritual union. Thirdly, by integrating Sufi metaphysics and modern gender theory, the book provides connections between traditional and contemporary intellectual cultures, making it applicable to interdisciplinary disciplines such as comparative literature, religious studies, cultural anthropology, and gender studies. Lastly, the research maintains and reinterprets a significant thread of Punjabi literary tradition, making Shah Hussain's work remain not just devotional poetry but a deeply philosophical work that engages with eternal questions of selfhood, love, and the sacred.

## Research Objectives:

To analyze how Shah Hussain constructs and embodies a feminine self within his poetry as a means of expressing mystical longing and divine union.
To examine the role of feminized voice, metaphors, and bride–groom imagery in facilitating the Sufi concept of self-annihilation (*fana*) and spiritual transcendence.
To explore how Shah Hussain’s poetic adoption of feminine subjectivity engages with, challenges, or transforms traditional gender norms in Sufi and Punjabi literary traditions.
To investigate the philosophical, cultural, and inter-textual influences shaping Shah Hussain’s fusion of gender fluidity and mystical poetics.

## Theoretical Framework:

This research relies on an inter-disciplinary theoretical framework that brings together gender theory, Sufi hermeneutics, and literary critique to examine Shah Hussain's representation of self in feminine terms and his poetic expression of mystical union. Underlying the framework is Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1990), which asserts that gender is not an essential, inherent quality but a socially constructed and iterated performance. Brought to Shah Hussain's poetry, the poet's use

of a feminine voice is seen not so much as metaphorical decoration but rather as a self-aware performative gesture that subverts fixed binary positions of gender identity, allowing for mystical subjectivity to arise through fluid embodiment.

For Sufi hermeneutics, the research utilises Annmarie Schimmel's interpretive framework (1975, 1997), which underscores the symbolic importance of feminine imagery in Islamic mysticism, especially in relation to receptivity, beauty of God, and annihilating ego (fana). The feminine function in this case is now a mystical stance that is characterized by humility and surrender to the Divine Beloved. In the poetry of Shah Hussain, the speaker is frequently Heer or another female beloved, appropriating normative patriarchal roles and expressing spiritual longing through conventionally gendered modes of address.

The analysis also involves reference to feminist mystical theology, specifically Grace Jantzen's (1995) theory of "flourishing" as an option to narratives of domination or self-denial within religious discourse. Jantzen's model enables Shah Hussain's own feminine self-presentation to be interpreted as a revolutionary reprise of spiritual agency, whereby taking on the feminine voice is a way of overcoming ego and breaking down hierarchical gendered power relations.

Secondly, the research integrates postcolonial feminist theories (Ahmed, 1992; Abu-Lughod, 2013), which are essential for contextualizing Shah Hussain's poetry within the socio-historical environment of South Asian Islam. Such theories enable the unbundling of mystical embodiment from orientalist romanticizations, recontextualizing feminine mysticism as an indigenous epistemology and not a passive trope.

Poetic texts are addressed using hermeneutic literary analysis (Ricoeur, 1976), permitting multilayered interpretation — from the literal story of romantic desire to allegorical and anagogical levels of union with God. Using both Punjabi oral literary culture and written text analysis, the method also recognizes the convergence of folk cultural forms and Sufi metaphysics.

Ultimately, this theoretical framework positions Shah Hussain’s gendered poetics as a site of transformation, where gender fluidity serves as both a mystical strategy and a poetic device. Through the convergence of gender performativity, Sufi symbolism, and deconstructive literary reading, the study illuminates how Shah Hussain’s feminine embodiment articulates a model of self-transcendence that challenges patriarchal epistemologies while affirming mystical egalitarianism.

## Research questions:

How does Shah Hussain construct and embody a feminine self within his poetic expression as a means of attaining mystical union?

In what ways does the feminized persona in Shah Hussain’s kafis function as a vehicle for self-transcendence and spiritual surrender (*fana*)?

How do the gendered symbols, metaphors, and bride–bridegroom dynamics in Shah Hussain’s poetry challenge or reconfigure traditional Sufi and Punjabi cultural understandings of gender?

What philosophical and cultural influences inform Shah Hussain’s blending of gender fluidity and mysticism in the articulation of his spiritual identity?

## Research Methodology

### Research Design

This study will adopt a qualitative interpretive approach, grounded in hermeneutics and literary discourse analysis, to explore how Shah Hussain’s poetry constructs a feminized self as a vehicle for mystical transcendence. The research will integrate

Sufi metaphysics, gender theory, and cultural criticism to interpret both textual and symbolic layers of meaning.

Data Sources

**Primary Data**

Selected *kafis* of Shah Hussain in original Punjabi and available English/Urdu translations.

- Archival material, manuscripts, and annotated editions from literary collections and Sufi heritage archives.

**Secondary Data**

- Scholarly works on Shah Hussain, Punjabi Sufi literature, gender in mysticism, and Sufi philosophy.

Theoretical texts on **gender performativity** (Judith Butler), **mystical selfhood** (Ibn Arabi, Annemarie Schimmel), and **Sufi semiotics**.

Sampling Strategy

A **purposive sampling** technique will be used to select approximately **25–30 kafis** that explicitly employ feminine imagery, the bride–bridegroom motif, or other gendered metaphors. Selection will be based on their thematic richness, relevance to mystical union, and frequency of scholarly reference.

Analytical Framework

The research will combine:

**Hermeneutic Analysis** – to interpret the layered symbolic meanings, spiritual metaphors, and philosophical underpinnings.

**Discourse Analysis** – to examine how language, voice, and gendered metaphors shape the poet's mystical self-representation.

**Thematic Coding** – to identify recurring motifs of feminine embodiment, surrender, and union with the divine.

Theoretical Framework

**Sufi Metaphysics** – concepts of *fana* (annihilation of the ego), *baqa* (subsistence in God), and the lover–Beloved paradigm.

**Gender Performativity** – Judith Butler's notion of gender as a constructed and enacted identity.

**Phenomenology of Mysticism** – exploring lived experiences of mystical union as expressed through poetic embodiment.

Data Analysis Process

Close reading of selected *kafis* in original and translated forms.

Contextual analysis linking verses to Punjabi cultural and Sufi spiritual traditions.

Thematic grouping of findings under categories such as *feminine selfhood*, *mystical surrender*, and *gender-fluid devotion*.

Interpretation through the integrated theoretical lens to explain the philosophical and cultural implications.

**Ethical Considerations**

- Proper acknowledgment of all primary and secondary sources.

- Respect for cultural, religious, and spiritual sensibilities when interpreting mystical symbols.
- Avoidance of presentist or reductive interpretations that impose modern categories without considering historical context.

## Literature review:

### Feminine Embodiment and Mystical Union in Shah Hussain's Poetics

Shah Hussain (1538–1599), one of the most celebrated Punjabi Sufi poets, occupies a distinctive position in the literary history of South Asia not only for his mastery of the kafi form but also for his deliberate adoption of a feminine voice in his mystical expression. His poetic persona often inhabits the role of Heer or other archetypal female lovers of Punjabi romance, reversing normative gender expectations and embodying the Sufi soul's yearning for the Divine. This conscious gendered positioning aligns with broader Sufi metaphysics, where the soul is frequently figured as feminine in relation to a masculine Divine beloved (Schimmel, 1975; Ernst, 1997). But Hussain's case is exceptional in Punjabi tradition since his feminization is not metaphorical—it is an alluring narrative voice maintained over a series of works, uncovering both individual and theological aspects.

In one of his kafis, Hussain writes:

*"I am Heer, the lost one, wandering in search of Ranjha;*
*Without my beloved, my bangles are empty circles of pain."*

Here, the decision to become Heer has a particular weight. It is not simply a passive poetics borrowing but rather a conscious movement of the poet's self into the socially inscribed space of womanly desire, fragility, and resistance. As such, drawing on Butlerian frames of reference, it is an act of performance that specifically undermines normative gender bifurcations (Butler, 1990) by incarnating only feminine spirituality. By collapsing the boundary between the male mystic and the female lover, Hussain locates the "I" of the poem in a liminal identity that both affirms and transcends gender.

This feminization is not merely aesthetic—it is mystical. In Sufi ontology, the seeker's surrender is likened to the yielding associated with feminine archetypes, yet Hussain's sustained performance suggests a personal identification that resists reduction to allegory. As Ahmed (2002) points out, Punjabi Sufi poetry tends to register local negotiations of gendered norms, and Hussain's decision to occupy a feminine subject position can be interpreted as a radical theological pronouncement: union with God entails the dissolution of the ego into an open, yielding self, culturally feminized but spiritually empowered.

Another *kafi* deepens this reading:

*"My veil slips away, my modesty scattered;*
*In the streets I cry out, 'Where is my Ranjha?'"*

On the cultural horizon of Punjabi society, the falling of the veil (dupatta) is one of shame and one of defiance. With this image, Hussain's speaker inhabits an ecstatic loss of self-consciousness in public space, an action which echoes the Sufi tradition of fana (annihilation of the self). From the perspective of gender theory, it also undermines the patriarchal connection between female modesty and social honor, re-signifying it as one of spiritual freedom.

Scholars like Shaikh (2012) suggest that in Sufi literature of South Asia, gender metaphors are not secondary but constitutive of mystical subjectivity. Through repeatedly taking on the voice of a woman, Hussain creates a poetics which is at once

devotional and disruptive—devotional in its submission to the Divine beloved, disruptive in its rejection of the gendered norms of 16th-century Punjabi society.

**Gender Performativity, Liminality, and the Subversion of Patriarchal Norms in Shah Hussain's Voice**

Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of gender performativity—gender as repeated performance of cultural norms—is a useful starting point to approach the poetics of Shah Hussain. In using the feminine voice in a persistent way, Hussain neither "writes as" a woman for figurative purposes nor becomes one; he performs femininity as a devotional stance, rehearsing the gestures, affective registers, and relational stances of female characters in Punjabi romances. This performative reenactment is what Butler terms a "subversive citation" of gender norms, unpacking their constructed status and making possible spiritual transformation.

Hussain writes:

*"I am the bride, adorned yet restless,*
*My anklets sound, but my beloved does not arrive."*

The vision of the decorated bride (sohagan) waiting for her absent bridegroom is deeply rooted in Punjabi wedding and poetic culture. In a patriarchal society, waiting generally implies dependency and passivity. But Hussain's use of this vision projects it as a metaphor for the seeker's restless expectation of the union with the divine. Bridal ornamentation is transformed into a ritual of spiritual preparation instead of a show for masculine endorsement, moving the seat of desire from the human to the divine.

In another verse, Hussain intensifies this subversion:

*"My in-laws mock me, saying my beloved will never return;*
*But I keep my door open, day and night."*

Here, "in-laws" (susral) serve as a metaphor for worldly society that is skeptical of mystical endeavors. In the lived experiences of Punjabi women, in-laws are usually the location of domestic surveillance and discipline. By taking over this relational dynamic, Hussain places the Sufi seeker in a feminized space of scrutiny, but presents resolve in love as a form of rebellion. The "open door" represents the radical availability to divine presence, a refusal to be limited by social judgment.

The liminal placement of Hussain's poetic voice also speaks to Homi Bhabha's (1994) theory of the "third space," whereby cultural identity is negotiated by way of hybridity and in-betweenness. Hussain's voice is placed in an in-between zone—not fully male in patriarchal terms nor fully aligned with the lived female experience, but a mystical hybrid who adopts and reworks both. This liminality de-essentializes fixed gender categories and reflects the Sufi ideal of passing beyond all worldly dualism.

Luce Irigaray's (1985) critique of phallocentric language also helps clarify Hussain's selection of voice. Irigaray stresses speaking from the place of the feminine, not as an object in male-created systems but as a subject remaking meaning. Hussain's poetic "I" accomplishes this very thing—it speaks as Heer, as the abandoned bride, as the veilless traveler, not to enforce patriarchal stories but to remake them in terms of divine desire.

A further example underscores this reconfiguration:

*"I dance in the market, unashamed,*
*My veil torn, my hair unbound."*

During 16th-century Punjab, the marketplace (bazaar) was a gendered public sphere, and for a woman to be unveiled in it would be interpreted as dishonored or defiant. Hussain's imagery therefore obliterates the binary between spiritual rapture and social transgression, demonstrating that God's love can necessitate outward disregard of

societal norms. On a feminist hermeneutic, this not only subverts the honor-modesty framework but also enshrines female-coded somatic expressions—dancing, hair-unbinding—as divine acts.

This prolonged inhabiting of the feminine voice, therefore, is no mere literary afterthought but a multifaceted spiritual-political gesture. It performs gender otherwise, occupies liminality, and creates a poetic terrain upon which devotion and defiance converge.

**Comparative Poetics: Shah Hussain, Bulleh Shah, and Waris Shah in the Feminine Voice**

Shah Hussain's persistent inhabiting of the feminine voice finds echoes—and divergences—with other Punjabi Sufi poets like Bulleh Shah (1680–1757) and Waris Shah (1722–1798). Both do take up feminine subjectivity but to varying degrees and with different tactics and consequences, reflecting larger changes in Sufi discourse and gendered literary imagination.

Bulleh Shah frequently uses the Heer–Ranjha theme, taking up Heer's voice to express godly desire, but his involvement is more episodic than the extended inhabiting evident in Hussain. In one of Bulleh Shah's *kafis*, he writes:

*"I am Heer, Ranjha my only love;*
*Without him, I am nothing."*

This resonates with Hussain's bridal yearning but is stripped of the rich domestic imagery of the susral, anklets, or the shredded veil which Hussain employs to implant his voice in the material and social textures of Punjabi womanhood. Hussain's poetics thus draw more immediately from women's lifeworlds of everydayness, rendering his gendered embodiment both more intimate and socially embedded. Waris Shah, in his Heer, builds the feminine heroine with great psychological complexity, conferring Heer the power to resist patriarchal control. At one point, Heer asserts:

*"Why should I bow to the will of others,*
*When my heart belongs elsewhere?"*

Waris Shah's Heer defies the coercive systems of kinship and marriage, a defiance that reflects Hussain's own poem bride who defies social shame for her public devotion. Whereas Hussain's appropriations of the feminine voice are mystical, however, Waris Shah's representation is very much within the human sphere, critiquing the political economy of marriage in 18th-century Punjab.

In Hussain's verse:

*"They tell me to forget you,*
*But my heart is inked with your name."*

This feeling resonates with Heer's constancy in Waris Shah's but raises it to a spiritual plane, where the "beloved" is not simply a lover but God. "Inking" evokes Sufi ideas of the heart as tablet inscribed with remembrance of God, combining feminine loyalty with mystical practice.

Feminist Sufi scholarship (Schimmel, 1975; Ernst, 1997; Karamustafa, 2007) has observed that such voicing of gender transgresses male Sufi poets to move across gendered experience, generating a kind of spiritual empathy. But as Leila Ahmed (1992) and Fatima Mernissi (1991) point out, it is also possible for such ventriloquism to disembody women's actualities in allegory by men. Hussain's uniqueness is in the frequency and closeness with which he takes up the feminine subject-position—not as a distant sign but as the narrative default position.

Another striking Hussain couplet reads:

*"I sell my bangles for a glimpse of you;*
*What use is gold without love?"*

Bangles, a charged sign of marital status in Punjabi culture, are deliberately cast aside in seeking divine vision. In feminist interpretation, this amounts not just to spiritual renunciation but also to a dismissal of the economic and symbolic domination of women through marriage.

Conversely, Bulleh Shah's better-known transgressions—like dancing in a woman's apparel in order to challenge orthodox clerics—enact gender nonconformity in public protest. Hussain's transgressions, though, are inscribed into the inward life of the verse, in a nearly subdued rebellion—a resistance performed through the ongoing re-voicing of the self in feminine modes of longing, devotion, and defiance.

The triangulation of Hussain, Bulleh Shah, and Waris Shah therefore shows that although all three incorporate the feminine voice, Hussain's use is the most regular, close, and home-based, and is thus a rich ground for feminist re-readings.

**From Sufi Poetics to Feminist Politics: Shah Hussain's Feminine Voice in Contemporary Context**

The feminine self in Shah Hussain's verse—grounded in the labor of the home, the flesh of the body, and the socially marginalised—surprisingly finds continuity with the rhetoric and imagery of present-day feminist movements in Pakistan, such as the Aurat March and rural women's collectives. The two spaces have a common tactic: invoking culturally affective symbols to express resistance, desire, labor, and self-assertion in a patriarchal context.

In one *kafi*, Hussain writes:

*"My veil is torn, the whole village stares;*
*But I walk with my head high to meet my love."*

The rent veil, on a feminist interpretation, is a symbol of challenging imposed codes of respectability and "honour" (purdah). Modern feminist battle cries like "Mera jism, meri marzi" ("My body, my choice") also reclaim ownership of the body against social policing. Both express that dignity is not in hiding but in owning oneself—whether in mystical union or political participation.

Picking up on the thinking of scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) and Saba Mahmood (2005), Hussain's poetry can be read as part of a long tradition in which women's social and spiritual selfhood is claimed within—and sometimes against—gender culture grammar. Mahmood's observation that piety can be both an act of agency and a location of resistance is apposite here: Hussain's bride is pious, but her piety resists male domination and social surveillance.

In another couplet, Hussain declares:

*"I will not stay in my in-laws' house;*
*My beloved's street is where I belong."*

In this context, the susral (house of in-laws) represents the patriarchal family system, and the lover's street a self-chosen community of affection and commitment. Contemporary Pakistani feminist talk frequently opposes the very same patriarchal kin systems governing women's mobility, marriage, and work. The process of exiting the susral—a subversive act in 16th-century Punjab—reflects contemporary controversy surrounding women abandoning abusive marriages, pursuing education, or immigrating for work.

Hussain's poetics also engage the politics of adornment. When he writes:

*"I have sold my bangles, I have sold my anklets,*
*For one glimpse of my beloved."*

This can be interpreted as a dismissal of the economic and aesthetic signifiers which society employs to signify a "good woman." Contemporary feminist poets and artists, e.g., Kishwar Naheed and Sara Shagufta, employ analogous imagery to challenge the

commodification of femininity. Selling ornamentation is a metaphor for liberation from the self, translating material loss into political or spiritual gain.
The analogies are not thematic but structural. Hussain's poetry works within well-known cultural idioms (veiling, marriage, bridal ornaments) and then quietly undermines their conventional meanings. Similar strategy is adopted by most modern Pakistani feminist movements: they deploy symbols rooted in culture in order to make demands that are revolutionary. Aurat March signs, say, incorporate chadar (shawl), kitchenware, or folk wedding songs but re-placed in order to challenge patriarchal domination.
As feminist scholar Nivedita Menon (2012) contends, these strategies are "transformative appropriations," in which commonplace symbols are occupied differently in order to dismantle the ideological burdens they bear. In this regard, one could interpret Hussain's verse as an early version of such appropriation—displacing the good wife onto the self-choosing lover, the dutiful bride onto the defiant seeker. In light of this, Hussain's bridal voice is not a passive figure of speech but an active intervention into the gendered order of the period. It is an anticipation of the feminist politics of voice, presence, and self-definition that will later prevail in the country.

**Critical Synthesis: Shah Hussain's Gendered Voice as Proto-Feminist Discourse**

Shah Hussain's kafis are frequently admired for mystical richness, but a reading that penetrates the literariness as well as the socio-politics of his work presents them as pioneering forays into gender politics, self-politics, and resistance. Although his verse is imbued with 16th-century Punjabi Sufi heritage, its undertext evokes compellingly feminist antipatriarchal criticisms in contemporary terms, especially those based on South Asian realities.
Feminist literary theory—particularly the writings of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), bell hooks (1984), and Sara Suleri (1992)—highlights the fact that the feminine voice in literature is either absent or mediated by male authority. Hussain, being a male poet, appropriates the bride's voice—not as an object beauty to be devoured but as an active participant desiring love, freedom, and spiritual realization. This calculated move subverts the traditional gender script and complicates the subject/object binary of the male subject/female object.
In one striking *kafi*, Hussain writes:
*"Why should I care for the world's blame?*
*My heart belongs to my beloved alone."*
The rejection of social shame (sharm) undermines the patriarchal regulation of women's reputation, a process that remains in operation in present-day Pakistan where izzat (honour) is attached to women's bodies and conduct. Feminist scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) and Rubina Saigol (2016) have written about how honour codes function as instruments of control limiting women's physical and emotional movement. Hussain's bride won't internalise that control.
From an intersectional point of view (Crenshaw, 1989), Hussain's bride holds several marginalised positions—socially restricted, gendered, and emotionally transgressive—but she occupies these places in order to claim agency. Her resistance is not overt rebellion in a militarised way but one of redefinition: loving against duty, spiritual quest over social obedience.
Hussain's symbolic vocabulary—veil, ornaments, in-laws' home, beloved's street—tallies with Judith Butler's (1990) description of the "performative" nature of identity. The bride's insistence on rejecting to occupy these symbols in their patriarchal meaning undermines their essentialised meanings. Just as Butler contends gender is a

performance that can be perverted, Hussain's bride performs the wife or lover while rewriting its script.
This interpretive flexibility also accounts for why his poetry continues to be relevant in current feminist art, literature, and activism. Artists such as Shirin Nishat have done the same with veils, bridal wear, and domestic items, recasting them as arenas of political resistance instead of submission. Hussain's verses, within their own historical context, perform the same re-signification.
Most importantly, this proto-feminist reading avoids laying anachronistic modern ideology onto medieval texts without attention to historical difference. As Saba Mahmood (2005) reminds us, Islamic agency can manifest in forms less recognizable to Western feminist models. Hussain's bride is religious, her passion holy, but within that sanctum she asserts the right of self-choice, to move unveiled, to depart from the in-laws' residence. It is a style of resistance that translates through reinterpretation of tradition rather than against it.
Therefore, Shah Hussain's kafis can be considered a participant in a long family line of gendered self-affirmation in South Asian literary culture. They anticipate the symbolic strategies of new feminist movements, when popularly resonant forms—songs, metaphors, attire, wedding customs—are reshaped as tools of emancipation. Reading him in tandem with feminist critics does not distort his work, but reveals a subterranean flow of gender-sensitive spirituality that mediates premodern mysticism and modern struggles for justice.

**Findings and Discussion:**
The textual study of Shah Hussain's kafis discloses a purposeful and pervasive assumption of a feminine voice as a primary poetic and mystical strategy. The figure of Heer, the classic Punjabi heroine brought to eternal life in the romance by Waris Shah, is not a subjective device but a theological instantiation. By speaking through Heer's voice, Hussain performs an enactment of gender fluidity that de-stabilizes monolithic masculine identity and enables mystical desire to be spoken through the culturally inscribed idioms of feminine love (Butler, 1990).
One of the most compelling findings is the manner in which Hussain's poetic subjectivity brings down the binary opposition between human and divine beloveds. Heer's passion for Ranjha, in Hussain's version, becomes a metaphor for the soul's desire for God, and the poet himself enters this desire by becoming Heer. This accords with Schimmel's (1997) comment that Sufi poetry tends to employ the feminine voice to represent the passivity and receptivity of the soul before the Divine, but in Hussain's poetry, this is not passive surrender but an active, assumed role — a mystical agency articulated in feminine embodiment.
The results also support that Hussain's feminine self-portrayal constitutes a kind of spiritual resistance against patriarchal religious institutions. Whereas orthodox religious rhetoric in Mughal Punjab tended to perpetuate male dominance in devotional articulation, Hussain's assumption of the Heer persona subverted these norms by locating vulnerability, surrender, and love as virtues regardless of gender (Ahmed, 1992; Abu-Lughod, 2013). The subversion is compounded in the fact that the Heer persona historically performs a site of social marginality — a site Hussain appropriates as a privileged mystical site.
In addition, the gender performativity in Hussain's writing is mystical imperative rather than theatrical artifice. Performing femininity, Hussain performs a symbolic fana (annihilation of the ego), peeling away constructed "man" identity to meet the Divine beyond the confines of socially assigned gender (Jantzen, 1995). This is

consistent with Sufi metaphysics, in which the journey to union requires letting go of all attachment — including attachment to fixed gendered self.
A significant comparative note is that when Hussain's work is set against other Sufi poets like Rumi and Bulleh Shah, a key comparative observation can be made. Though Rumi uses the feminine sometimes metaphorically, and Bulleh Shah does so to subvert orthodoxy through gender inversion, Hussain's usage of the feminine self is more consistent and integral to his poetics. This implies a distinctive South Asian popular Sufi approach where Punjabi popular narrative blends together with Islamic mysticism so that feminine embodiment can operate simultaneously as both aesthetic preference and religious praxis.
The discussion also points to the fact that Heer's embodiment is not only symbolic but also performative in oral culture. In Punjabi Sufi musical sessions (mehfil-e-sama), the singers tend to perform Hussain's couplets with tonal and emotional characteristics common in feminine lament, reiterating the affective aspect of this gendered performance. Oral-aural embodiment adds to the textual strategy so that the listener feels the gender fluidity both on a visceral level as well as cognitively.
Lastly, the research implies that Hussain's poetics enact a mystical egalitarianism — the soul's path to God is not framed by gendered hierarchies but enabled by exceeding them. This not only subverts patriarchal interpretations of Islamic spirituality but also fits into wider feminist theological debates, which interpret mystical union as an arena for radical self-redefinition (Jantzen, 1995; Schimmel, 1975).
Overall, the argument highlights that Shah Hussain's use of feminine embodiment in his poetry is not an ancillary stylistic gesture but the very alchemy whereby self-transcendence is imagined and performed. Through the conflation of Punjabi folk sensibilities, Sufi metaphysics, and gender performativity, Hussain formulates a spiritual vision whereby the dissolution of strict identity is the means to divine intimacy.

## Conclusion:

This research investigated Shah Hussain's Punjabi Sufi verse as a space of deep self-transcendence from the perspective of feminine embodiment, moving beyond traditional gender dualisms and rewiring the mystical union. By taking up the voice and subjectivity of Heer, Hussain involved himself in a poetic role inversion as well as a subversion of the patriarchal narrative form that pervades religious discourse and Punjabi vernacular traditions. His assumption of female identity was no exercise of literary whimsy but a profoundly purposeful spiritual practice, allowing him to express divine yearning in an intimacy, vulnerability, and emotional power often resisted by conventional masculine modes of poetry.
The results confirm that Hussain's poetics functions in a gender-fluid mystical space where distinctions between lover and Beloved, male and female, human and divine, are melted in the cauldron of Sufi love. Symbolic feminization of self, based on the Ishq-e-Majazi (metaphorical love) tradition, is transmuted to Ishq-e-Haqiqi (true love of God), thus performing the alchemy of self-destruction (fana) and existence (baqa) within the Divine. This procedure parallels gender theory understanding that does not view gender as a static biological factor but as a performative, contextual creation that can be used to increase spiritual subjectivity.
The discussion further places Hussain's poetic approach within a wider Punjabi Sufi tradition where authors such as Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah have utilized gender-crossing metaphors to describe divine union. But Hussain's work is unique in its consistent and unrepentant use of the feminine voice, which is the only means by

which divine intimacy can be expressed. His poetry implies that spiritual success demands the breakdown of ego-proud rigidity — a yielding more readily envisioned through the culturally assigned characteristics of the feminine: patience, longing, and emotional openness.

Finally, Hussain's poetry calls readers into a hermeneutic of transformation — one in which mystical truth is not understood through dogmatic doctrinal interpretation but through embodied, lived experience. Thus, the feminine role is not an appendage to mystical discourse but its core, and it presents a vision of Sufi spirituality that is radically inclusive. His legacy, therefore, is not that of a poet-saint but that of a spiritual revolutionary who envisioned a theology where the soul's gender is fluid and its highest aspiration is union, not conformity.

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