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THE SUBVERSIVE DIVINE: A FEMINIST CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE MALE "FEMALE VOICE" IN PAKISTANI SUFI POETRY

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Abstract
This paper utilizes the theoretical frameworks of established Western feminist thought and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar, 2005; Talbot, 1998) to examine the distinct linguistic practices within 18th and 19th-century Pakistani Sufi poetry (Kafi). While Western feminism defines itself through resistance to patriarchal discrimination and language that "otherizes" women, Punjabi and Siraiki Sufi poets—Bulleh Shah, Shah Hussain, and Khwaja Ghulam Farid— paradoxically adopted a female persona (diction, style, and expression) to articulate their spiritual devotion. This paper argues that while the metaphors often reinforce patriarchal definitions of passive femininity, the structural act of a male poet assuming a marginalized female identity operates as a subversive critique of both social dogma and spiritual hierarchy, suggesting an indigenous "feminism" centered on spiritual equity rather than political equality.

Keywords: *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, Sufi Poetry, The Female Voice, Bulleh Shah, Otherization, Gender Equity, Linguistic Determinism.*

1. Introduction: Framing the Paradox

Feminism is not a monolith; rather, it "bears a variety of ideas". A fundamental assertion, however, shared by most feminist beliefs, is opposition to the "social, personal or economic discrimination which women suffer because of their sex" (David, 1989: 2). Central to this analysis is the "otherization" process, defined by Simone de Beauvoir (2009: 303), where men are positioned at the center of the universal, and women are marginalized as the "second sex." This paper investigates how this margin became the spiritual center in the classical Sufi poetry of South Asia. Specifically, we explore the *Kafi* genre, utilized by poets such as Bulleh Shah, Shah Hussain, and Khwaja Ghulam Farid, who intentionally composed poems with "female diction and style" (Jampuri and Anwar, 1993). This creates a unique theoretical conflict: male poets, who hold patriarchal power, voluntarily adopt the language of the "othered" (women) to express their relation to the Divine (the ultimate Masculine/Norm). This study aims to reconcile this practice with the principles of feminist linguistics and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis.

2. Theoretical Framework: Gender and Language

The foundation of this study rests on the concepts of **Gender vs. Sex** and **Linguistic Determinism**. "Sex refers to biological femaleness and maleness... whereas gender refers to traits assign to sex" (Litosseliti, 2006: 10-11). Gender is a social construct. This distinction allows the male Sufi poets to adopt the social constructs of *femininity* (the roles, behaviours, and expectations traditionally associated with females) without possessing the biological sex of a female (Ramzan & Khan, 2024 a,b,c).

Furthermore, this analysis is underpinned by Feminist Linguistics, which posits that language does not simply *reflect* reality (Ramzan & Javaid, 2025); rather, "it functions to impose structure on our perceptions of the world" (Lee, 1992). The theory of linguistic determinism suggests that a "sexist" language structure will cause its speakers to "see and conceive the world in a sexist way" (Mills, 1995: 84). We will apply Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), which provides tools for analyzing how social practices—in this case, spiritual devotion—are shaped by specific "discourse structures" (Lazar, 2005: 4).

3. The Methodology of the Divine "Second Sex"

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The "double edge" of feminism (Zoonen, 1994)—both political interest group and cultural critique—is mirrored in the Sufi context.

3.1 Subverting Masculinity

The text defines masculinity through stereotypes of "strong, brave, independent, dominating, [and] competitive" (Section 1.8.7). Within the patriarchal, socio-religious structure of 18th-century Punjab, these attributes reinforced the male position of dominance. However, to the Sufi, *any* ego or self-assertion is a barrier to Divine union. Thus, the male Sufi needed to shed his masculine, dominating self.

The Sufi utilized the "proverbial location of femininity" (private piety, devotion, and sensitivity) as a powerful symbol (Section "Sufi Poetry of Pakistan"). They transformed the marginalized status of women into an "accessible symbol of tolerant and nurturing faith" (Ibid.). By positioning himself as a woman (a *Gopi* or a *Heer*), the male Sufi adopted the cultural traits of submissiveness (often associated with women) to signify ultimate submissiveness to God.

A conceptual illustration demonstrating the process of "Otherization" being spiritually subverted. While the physical male retains patriarchal centrality in society (the 'Center'), the male Sufi poet adopts the marginalized female identity (the 'Margin') to access a private, golden center of devotion and spiritual nurturing. This visualization focuses purely on the theoretical concept without non-English or cultural motifs.

4. Case Studies: The Female Voice in the Kafis

To understand how this functions, we apply Feminist CDA to the texts of three major Sufi poets. In these works, the poet is structurally the 'I' (the woman/Heer/Gopi), and the Beloved (the 'You'/Ranjha/Divine) is addressed with a mix of devotion and desperate yearning.

4.1 Bulleh Shah (1680–1757)

Bulleh Shah is perhaps the most famous example of a male poet adopting a gender-subversive persona. When he addresses his spiritual master (Murshid), Shah Inayat Qadiri, he often speaks as a distraught woman. In some performances of his Kafis, he is said to have dressed in female attire and danced to win back his teacher's affection.

His poetry uses the voice of the *Gopi* (cowherd girl) or *Heer* (the tragic heroine) to convey spiritual longing:

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Example (Ascribed to Bulleh Shah, translating the sentiment):
"O Ranjha, do not call me 'Heer'! Call me 'Ranjha' himself. I have repeated the name so often that I have become him. I have merged my existence into his."
Applying our framework: If "anatomy is textuality" (Section 1.8.4), Bulleh Shah's use of the *Heer* identity is a rejection of both biological essentialism and patriarchal ego. He adopts the marginalized "other" status (female/Heer) to perform an act of total "self-negation" (private piety) (Section "Sufi Poetry of Pakistan"). This fits the definition of feminism as "active commitment to equality" (Wood, 1999: 6)—in this case, spiritual equity with the Divine.

A portrait of Bulleh Shah. He is a male figure, but he performs self-negation through an intense, blissful, open-armed posture. This visualization captures his spiritual devotion and adoption of feminine (Gopi/Heer) diction—traits described as private piety. The backdrop is purely calligraphic (English script) without non-English or cultural motifs.

4.2 Shah Hussain (1538–1599)
Shah Hussain (Madhu Lal Hussain) pioneered the Kafi genre. He also used the persona of *Heer* and emphasized the futility of worldly power (associated with masculinity/patriarchy). He speaks through the voice of the young girl:
Example (Ascribed to Shah Hussain, translating the sentiment):
"I am not fit to be your bride, my love. I am full of flaws, a spinner who cannot even spin the cotton. Why did I not learn to spin, so I would be worthy of my Beloved?"
Applying FCDA: In a language that "constitutes gender and produces sexism as a social reality" (Weatherall, 2002), Shah Hussain's female voice accepts the standard of patriarchal devaluation (the "worthless spinner"). He assumes the role of the demure, submissive female However, this *passivity* is transformed: her 'worthlessness' is her greatest spiritual asset, as it allows for total surrender. This performance challenges the cultural preoccupation that only dominant, powerful figures (men) can access the center (God).

4.3 Khwaja Ghulam Farid (1845–1901)

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Khwaja Ghulam Farid, writing in Siraiki, also adopted the female voice, particularly the *Gopi* figure in the *Rohi* (desert) landscape, waiting for the Divine.

Example (Ascribed to Ghulam Farid, translating the sentiment):

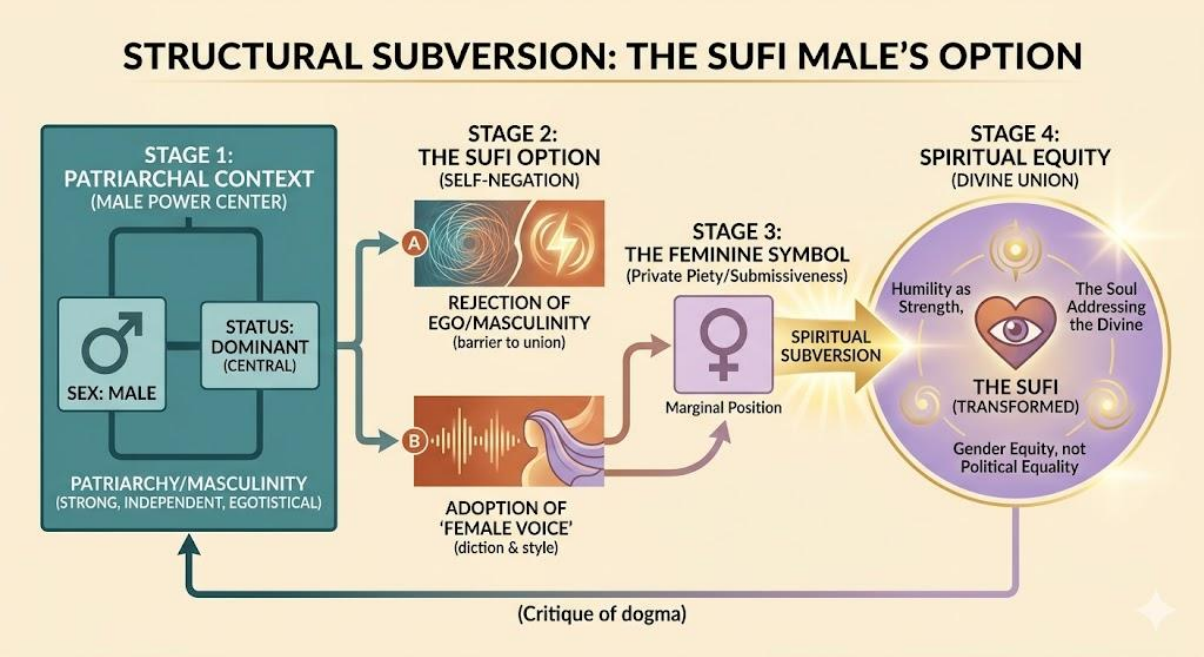
"The hot desert winds blow, the Rohi burns. But I sit in the burning sun, waiting. If you do not come, I will die in this desert. O Ranjha, have mercy on me."

Analysis: In this discourse, "language creates gender divisions" (Talbot, 2010: 15). The male poet *becomes* the vulnerable, sensitive female identity. The 'female voice' is defined by its endurance, sensitivity, and patient suffering—traits traditionally deemed subordinate. By presenting this passive endurance as the apex of spiritual devotion, the male Sufi elevates these 'subordinate' feminine qualities to the status of ultimate spiritual virtue.

5. Summary Analysis: The FCDA of Sufi Subversion

We must address the paradox mentioned in the provided text: within these poems, **"even when the 'female voice' becomes active, 'femininity' remains passive"** This is a critical distinction. The Sufi *acts* as a woman, but the attributes of that "woman" (submissiveness, endurance, humility) are often defined *by patriarchal standards*.

We can visualzie the structural transformation:



A structural flow chart, using abstract symbols (radiant energy) and plain English text, illustrating the process of 'Structural Subversion'. The male Sufi actively rejects 'egotistical masculinity' (a central power) and adopts the 'female voice' (a marginal position). This is not a loss of status, but a powerful 'Spiritual Subversion' (golden radiant arrow) that leads to the ultimate state of 'Spiritual Equity' and 'Divine Union'. This diagram is devoid of non-English script or cultural context.

The provided text explains that "Critiquing the use of men as universal... is not new to feminism" (Section 1.8.2). Our flow chart demonstrates that the Sufi, from within a deeply traditional and patriarchal context, performs this critique by voluntarily moving *from* the universal standard (man/center) *to* the deviation (woman/margin). In doing so, he utilizes the marginalized position of women as the only effective location for achieving true, humble devotion. This supports the argument that **"language... actually brings about and shapes changes in the way we see and think"** (Mills, 1995: 87). The male Sufi poet, by changing his

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'voice' to that of a female, changes how his culture visualizes the path to the Divine: it must be accessed not through dominant masculinity, but through the submissive, enduring virtues traditionally ascribed to femininity.

6. Conclusion: Equity over Equality

Applying the definition of feminist critical analysis (Section 1.8.9.3), this study reveals that while the Pakistani Sufi poetry of Bulleh Shah, Shah Hussain, and Khwaja Ghulam Farid did not aim for *gender equality* (treating men and women the same), it successfully achieved a profound **spiritual equity**. Gender analysis recognizes "the difference in women's and men's lives" to produce "equitable" results. The male Sufi poets recognize the difference—the unique social space of marginalized, private piety that women occupied—and they utilized this very difference to establish a new, subversive form of spiritual equity. Their 'female voice' performs a structural critique of patriarchal authority, ensuring that the Divine remains accessible only through the position of the humble "other"—the woman.

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