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### Precept, Ascendency and Meaning in Sub-Continental Mysticism: A Post-Structural Analysis of the Poetry of Baba Ghulam Farid and Baba Guru Nanak

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intricacies of mystical precepts, the concept of spiritual ascendency, and the construction of meaning within the poetic works of two seminal figures of Sub-continental mysticism: Baba Ghulam Farid and Baba Guru Nanak. Drawing from post-structuralist theoretical frameworks, especially the works of Derrida and Foucault, the study interrogates the interplay of language, signification, and power structures in the articulation of mystical experience. By employing textual analysis, the paper uncovers how the metaphysical utterances of these poets transcend conventional binaries, destabilize fixed meanings, and foster a dynamic space for spiritual interpretation in the sub-continental mystical tradition.

### **Background of the Study**

South Asia, with its deeply diverse religious and philosophical traditions, has produced many mystic poets who transcended rigid orthodoxy to emphasize universal love and divine unity. Among them are Baba Ghulam Farid (1179-1266) and Baba Guru Nanak (1469-1539) who stand out not only for their spiritual legacy but also for the lyrical beauty and depth of their poetry. While Baba Ghulam Farid contributed to the growth of Sufi Islam through his deeply philosophical and metaphysical poetry, Baba Guru Nanak established Sikhism and laid the foundation for a new religious community, both mystics composed poetry in Punjabi and other regional languages, making their teachings accessible to the masses. Their poetic expressions reflect inner divine experiences, social consciousness, and the quest for truth. By revisiting their works, this paper aims to draw a comparative analysis of their mystical visions, highlighting both convergences and divergences. Islamic mysticism though in ancient times uprooted from numerous non-Islamic sources in Europe. Also there are strong proofs found in India. Currently, it seems that this movement stemmed from early Islamic asceticism because of the rapid increasing Muslim community and its counter reaction against the Christian mysticism. The only term mysticism was a foreign element but all the practices adopted by Muslim mystics were as per the earlier Islamic teachings. Sufis have played an important role in the formation of Muslim society. They educate the masses and highlight the spiritual concerns of the Islam among them. They also penetrate the Islamic genes into Muslims. The mystics carefully observed the divine laws and commands. They never argue for the reason from spirits. The Sufis do not only obey the divine laws but they also have been carrying a responsibility as a large-scale missionary for entire world. Their target audience is humanity not any one religion. And this practice is still active. The central concern of the Sufis is the preaching of the holy image and life style of the Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H). He was the founder of Islam and a great symbol of devotion. The Islamic mysticism thus largely peruses “sunnah” the acts and way of living of Prophet Muhammad. The Persian is considered as the first prominent language Sufis however, it also has strong allies i.e., Turkish, Punjabi, Urdu, Sindhi and Pashto. Mystical ideas spread widely among the Muslims through these languages and its related literatures. Poetry was the first genre in this regard. In few regions, these Sufis have also played a vital role in politics.

**Rabiah Basri r.a :** A prominent figure in history of mysticism from Basra (Iraq) was Rabi’ah’al Adawiyah. She transformed asceticism into mysticism. She was the pioneer of formulation of

love of Allah (God) which promulgates only the true love of Allah regardless of the fear of hell or of the charm of heaven. These mystical trends by Rabi'ah traveled everywhere in the Islamic world for decades. It often exchanges ideas with Christian anchorites. The concentration of Sufism in early generations was "tawakul" an absolute trust in God. In Iraq, a mystic school was established by al-Muhasibi, who believed that the sole value of asceticism is the purification of the soul if one wants to achieve the companionship with God. This school of mysticism focused on strict self-control and psychological insight. The tariqas of Sufism aren't some marginalized communities of Islam. Rather, they are 'schools' or 'orders' that originated around the teachings of a specific sheikh, that is to say, a spiritual teacher that gathered a group of students and transferred his specific interpretations of Islam onto them. In most cases the sheikh also appointed the next sheikh of the community. As such, long silsila's arose, that is to say, 'chains of transmission' from master to pupil. Such master-pupil chains were the dominant pattern of Islam's 'branching out'. This is just as well the case in the subdivisions that aren't grouped under Sufism in the aforementioned diagram. The different categories in the overview above aren't different 'splits' like the schisms in Christian churches. Rather they are different 'schools of thought'. As a result, for example, the Sunni brother- and sisterhoods that are generally placed under the heading of 'Sufism' mostly also follow one of the four juridical-theological schools of thought. (Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki or Shafi'i). As such, the different Sufi tariqas that are separated in the family tree of the aforementioned diagram should actually be placed in different parts of that family tree. To give but two examples: the Mevlevi tariqa in fact belonged to the Sunni Hanafi group (that is to say: they belong to the Sunni branch and upheld a Hanafi jurisprudence) and the Bektashi in fact are a part of the Shia Alevi (that is to say: they belong to the Alevi part of the Shia branch). The opposite is true as well. Groups that are normally not perceived as Sufi tariqas often teach very mystical ideas alongside their other theological and juridical views. Important Islamic figures who wouldn't be described as mystics today often wrote very positively about Islamic mysticism.

It shouldn't surprise, therefore, that 'the religious establishment' was drenched with mysticism in many times and places throughout the Islamic world. The fact of the matter simply is that, within Islam, one can find an abundance of movements, currents, styles, groups and sects that are connected to each other in various ways. And it's simply impossible to extract the mystical groups from the whole. All of this is also clearly visible in the life and the teaching of well known, highly respected and very influential figures in the history of Islam.

## **Al-Ghazali**

At the end of the 11th century al-Ghazali held the most prestigious academic post of the Islamic world at the University of Baghdad. One day, however, he was overtaken by a spiritual crisis. For several years he left his teaching position, wandered around as an ascetic and walked ‘the path of mysticism’. Yet, after this period of mystical wandering, he didn’t decide to completely break with the classical theology of the established order. On the contrary, he then wrote his famous forty volume work: the ‘Ihya’ Ulum al-Din’ (‘The Revival of the Religious Sciences’). Until today it’s one of the most read and most respected works of the Islamic world. It elaborates on a wide range of subjects related to Islam, from moral aspects (such as the etiquette of marriage) over jurisprudence (such as the manner in which religious rituals should be performed) to mysticism (such as contemplations on the 99 names of God). If al-Ghazali became the most influential scholar of medieval Islam, it’s exactly because he succeeded in so intimately intertwining ‘the way of mysticism’ with ‘traditional theology’.

## **Mevlana Rumi**

Rumi is the founder of the famous whirling dervishes. Since he left behind an enormous amount of mystical love poetry, the works of this 13th century mystic are eagerly read by people without any Islamic background. Only one example of some of his verses is the following:

*Be drunk with love,*

*for only love exists.*

*If one asks:*

*“What is love?”*

*Answer:*

*“Pouring away the will.”*

*There is no free will*

*for those who didn’t forsake.*

*Abandon worry*

*and become pure of heart*

*like the image*

*does not leave a trace on the mirror.*

*I asked:*

*“What will it bring me?”*

*No. Let it be quiet.*

*So that the beloved doesn't say:*

*"He keeps no secrets."*

For many decades now, this kind of poetry makes Rumi very popular with a wide audience from New York to Delhi. Because of that, he's often adorned with a sort of spiritual halo that makes it seem as if he's an exceptional and unique Muslim. Yet, even though Rumi is, without a doubt, one of the greatest figures in Islamic history and even though his influence was of enormous influence on Islamic culture in general, he's certainly not the only mystic. The popular literature about Rumi predominantly focusses on his encounter with the unconventional sage Shams Tabrizi. This encounter had a great impact on the life and work of Rumi. It gave rise to a relationship full of mystical love and a deep spiritual search for unity with the divine. Yet Rumi's mystical vision on life did not suddenly drop from the sky when he met Shams. Rumi's father, Baha al-Din Muhammed Balkhi, already was a renowned mystic who often had spiritual visions. Ever since he was a young child then, Rumi came into contact with a mystical vision on life. But still, when he was twenty-five, his father send him to the 'universities' of his day in Aleppo and Damascus to receive a classical theological and juridical training. When one engages with Rumi's most elaborate work — 'The Masnavi' — it's clear that it isn't a collection of verses on love but rather a deep piece of 'instructive' poetry. Most certainly it's one of the most important mystical works, not just of Islam but also of religious history in general, but still it's an educational work, rife with explicit references to the Qur'an and as such presupposes a thorough knowledge of the Islamic way of life. In this respect, people like Rabiah Basri- al-Ghazali and Rumi certainly aren't exceptions. The same is true of many other prominent figures from the history of Islamic mysticism. But for decades now, there has been a tendency to narrowly focus on particular spiritual-mystical aspects of the teachings and lives of some protagonists within the usual descriptions of the Sufis. Other elements, such as their strong 'religiosity' have been largely ignored. In this context, Baba Ghulam Farid, a Sufi saint of the Chishti order, composed his poetry in Punjabi and Saraiki, focusing on themes of divine love, renunciation, and inner purification. Baba Guru Nanak on the other hand, the founder of Sikhism, used similar vernacular languages to propagate a message of unity, compassion, and the transcendence of caste and religious boundaries. Both mystics employed poetry not merely as an aesthetic form but as a powerful medium of spiritual instruction and societal critique.

Hence, this study seeks to analyze their poetry through the lens of post-structuralism, focusing on three interrelated dimensions: precept, ascendancy, and meaning. The concept of "precept" refers to the didactic and ethical dimensions of their mystical teachings. "Ascendancy" denotes the spiritual elevation and the transformative journey of the self. "Meaning" concerns the interpretative openness of their poetic expressions, particularly how signification operates beyond stable referents in their verses. The post-structuralist framework, primarily drawing on Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, helps elucidate how these mystics used language not to solidify metaphysical truths but to disrupt conventional epistemologies. In doing so, their poetry creates a dynamic and interpretative space that challenges the authority of both religious orthodoxy and linguistic finality. Consequently, this research further contributes to the broader understanding of sub-continental mysticism and its relationship to postmodern thought. It seeks to bridge the gap between indigenous spiritual traditions and contemporary critical theory, offering new avenues for interpreting mystic literature in a global academic context.

### **Literature Review**

According to Nasr and Leaman (1996) the concept of mysticism in Islamic point of view is conventionally connected with "Hikma". It is both philosophy and wisdom simultaneously. This notion can easily be found in Quran and all Islamic teachings are based on the doctrine of "Hikma". Through the achievement of this one can find out straight way to God. Islamic philosophers and mystics often presented references of the holy verses of Quran for those who can recognize the emblematic and obscure meaning of them;

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth, the likeness of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp, the lamp is a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star kindled from a blessed tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil well-nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it; light upon lights; God guides to His light whom He will. And God strikes similitudes for man, and God has knowledge of everything. (Qu'ran 24:35)

It elucidates that God is the sole centre of the brightness of this universe. He is the only master of every creation. And he is the supreme architect and unique craftsman with no example in this whole universe. It furthers that the creativity of God is not judgmental. Nobody can even think to produce a small feather of a fly but God. His sovereignty and art is transcendental. Furthermore, the light of wisdom created by Him only touches the selected ones who strive for it.

Since a numinous outlook, according to Mehdi (2019) all developments regarding philosophical and intellectual dynamics of mysticism have been done under the Islamic milieu. Therefore, it should be observed as rational lexes of the mystical elements in Islamic surroundings. Additionally, by nature, these elements are of two unconventional types in Islam. Virtually, Sufism propagates the arcane facet of Islam that is pure in form whereas, prominent features of Islamic mysticism were tentatively unified into the Islamic rational convention. Islamic spirituality, thus, positions on two stakes. First one is purely practical and the other is conceptual. It advocates that the obscure insight can be achieved through practical wisdom. This practical acumen consisted on inward refinement and self-denial. It works through a conceptual approach that is not restricted to conversational intellectual.

Some more scholarships on Sub-continental mysticism span historical, theological, and literary domains. Works such as Shackle's (1976) "Punjabi Sufi Poetry" and Grewal's (1998) study on the Sikh tradition provide vital insights into the historical and cultural contexts of Farid and Nanak. Nizami (1992) examines Baba Farid's life and contributions to Sufi mysticism, while Singh (2004) explores the nation-building role of Guru Nanak's teachings.

However, fewer studies have employed post-structuralist frameworks to analyze their poetry. Barthes (1977) and Derrida (1976, 1978) have not been systematically applied to South Asian texts, despite their potential to elucidate the fluidity of mystical signification. This study addresses this gap by synthesizing these theoretical perspectives with a close reading of Farid and Nanak's verses.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To examine the ethical and spiritual precepts articulated in the poetry of Baba Farid and Baba Guru Nanak.
2. To analyze the concept of spiritual ascendancy and its representation in their mystical expressions.
3. To explore how meaning is constructed, deconstructed, and disseminated in their poetic language through a post-structuralist lens.
4. To situate their poetic contributions within the broader socio-religious context of medieval South Asia.

## Research Gap

Existing research on South Asian mystics has largely been theological or historical, with limited engagement from contemporary critical theory, particularly post-structuralism. While there are studies on their influence and historical roles, little has been done to interpret their poetry as sites of linguistic subversion and meaning-making within postmodern paradigms. This study fills that gap by bringing Derridean and Foucauldian insights into dialogue with indigenous mystical expression.

## Delimitation of the Study

This research is limited to the poetic works of Baba Ghulam Farid and Baba Guru Nanak. It focuses exclusively on selected verses available in Punjabi, Saraiki, and their available English translations. The study emphasizes literary and theoretical analysis and does not delve into ritualistic or doctrinal interpretations of Sufism or Sikhism. Furthermore, it restricts itself to post-structuralist frameworks and does not engage with other critical paradigms such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, or feminism.

## Methodology

Comparative analysis as a methodology involves systematically comparing two or more entities, variables, or options to identify similarities, differences, and patterns. It's used to make informed decisions, identify trends, and understand the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches. Consequently, in this research paper, we adopt comparative analysis under the lenses of post-structuralism to show case mystic approaches used by both of the poets.

## Data Analysis

The poetry of both mystics articulates profound ethical precepts grounded in compassion, humility, and devotion. Baba Farid's use of metaphor and allegory to advocate detachment from worldly pleasures and Baba Guru Nanak's emphasis on Naam (Divine Name) as the ultimate ethical anchor reflect a mystical morality that transcends dogma.

Baba Farid states:

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਜੇ ਤਉ ਖਟਣ ਵੇਲ ਤਾ ਤੂ ਰਤਾ ਦੁਨੀ ਸਿਉ ॥

فریدا، جے توں کھڑچن ویلا تے تُوں رتا دُنیا سے نال

"Farida, do good deeds that will last, This world is but a moment, swiftly passed." (Elahi, 2018)

Baba Guru Nanak asserts:

ਸਚਹੁ ਓਰੈ ਸਭੁ ਕੋ, ਉਪਰਿ ਸਚੁ ਆਚਾਰੁ ॥੫॥

سچوں اوہلے سبھ کو، اُتے سچ آچار

"Truth is high, but higher still is truthful living." (Guru Granth Shib, p.62)



These precepts operate on a pedagogical level, guiding the seeker toward ethical self-formation. However, from a post-structuralist view, they also reveal the instability of moral authority. The moral aphorisms function within a relational web of signifiers where meanings are contingent upon context, intention, and reader reception.

Ascendency in mystical traditions often implies a transcendental movement of the soul toward unity with the Divine. In Baba Farid's poetry, ascendency is depicted as a process of self-negation, pain, and surrender:

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਤਨੁ ਸੁਕਾ ਪਿੰਜਰੁ ਥੀਆ ਤਲੀਆਂ ਖੁੰਡੀਹਿ ਕਾਰਾ ॥

ਅਜੇ ਸੁ ਰਬੁ ਨ ਬਾਹੁੜਿਓ ਦੇਖੁ ਬੰਦੇ ਕੇ ਭਾਗਾ ॥

فریدا، جدائی دی تپش دل نوں سواہ بنا دیندی اے،

پھر وی ہس پیندا ہاں، کیوں جو اوہدی یاد وچ میرا محبوب وسدا اے

"Farida, the pain of separation burns my heart, Yet I smile, for in it, my Beloved dwells." (Talib, G.S. 1973)

Baba Guru Nanak, on the other hand, frames ascendency as immersion in the Divine Word (Shabad):

ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਏਕੁ ਪਛਾਣਿਆ ਸਬਦਿ ਰਤੇ ਭੈ ਭਾਉ ॥

گُر مُکھ ایک پچھانیا، شبدِ رتے بھئے بھاؤ۔

"He who realizes the Word, realizes the Lord." (Singh, G. 2000)

Through a post-structural lens, these articulations resist linear teleologies of spiritual progress. Rather than presenting a fixed endpoint, the journey of ascendency is recursive, marked by perpetual deferral. The mystic is never fully merged with the Divine; the unity is always already postponed, echoing Derrida's concept of the unattainable center.

Language in mystic poetry does not merely signify; it evokes, disrupts, and exceeds. The Sufi and Bhakti traditions are rich in paradox, negation, and symbolic inversion. Baba Farid often uses negation to express divine presence:

ਮੈਂ ਮੈਂ ਨਹੀਂ, ਤੂੰ ਤੂੰ ਨਹੀਂ,

ਇਹ ਰਕਸ ਵਿੱਚ ਮਿਟ ਗਈਆਂ ਸਾਰੀਆਂ ਵੱਖਰਾਵਾਂ।

میں میں نہیں، تیں تیں نہیں،

ایہ رقص وچ مٹ گئیاں ساریاں وکھراواں

"I am not I, nor you are you, In this dance, all distinctions undo." (Jiménez, J. R. 2003)

Similarly, Baba Guru Nanak challenges ontological binaries:

ਨਾ ਕੋ ਹਿੰਦੂ ਨਾ ਮੁਸਲਮਾਨ ॥

نہ ہندو ہے، نہ مسلمان

"There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim, All are one in the eyes of the True One." (Singh, K. (2004)

These expressions deconstruct religious identity, emphasizing a non-dual ontology. Meaning, here, is not fixed but diffused across an intertextual field. The use of vernacular languages such as Punjabi, Saraiki, and Persian further destabilizes canonical boundaries, allowing for polysemous readings. The syncretic milieu of medieval South Asia, marked by Islamic, Hindu, and indigenous spiritual traditions, provides the socio-historical backdrop for this poetry. Both Baba Farid and Baba Guru Nanak challenge hegemonic religious narratives. Their verses function as acts of resistance against Islamic orthodoxy and Brahminical hierarchy. Foucault's theory of power/knowledge is instructive here. The mystic's discourse, though marginalized, constitutes a form of counter-power that redefines authority. By privileging personal experience over institutional dogma, they create alternative epistemologies of the sacred.

The mystic's speech is simultaneously a withdrawal and an assertion. Silence is a recurring motif in both poets' work. Baba Farid often implies that silence is more eloquent than speech:

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਬੋਲਣਿ ਬੋਲਣਿ ਬੋਲਿ ਪਛੁਤਾਈਐ ॥  
ਅਕਲ ਤੇ ਕਮਾਈਏ ਜੇ ਕਹੀਏ ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਜਾਣੈ ॥

فریدا، بول نہ اگر گل بات دکھاوے،

چّی حکمت اے، سچائی وچ گہری

"Farida, speak not, if words wound, Silence is wisdom, in truth profound." (Singh, G. 2000)

Baba Guru Nanak similarly upholds the virtue of inner silence:

ਜੇ ਬੋਲਦਾ ਉਹ ਨਹੀਂ ਜਾਣਦਾ,  
ਜੇ ਜਾਣਦਾ ਹੈ ਉਹ ਚੁਪ ਰਹਿੰਦਾ।

جو بولدا اوہ نہیں جانتا،

جو جانتا ہے اوہ چپ رہتا

"One who speaks does not know, He who knows remains silent." (Singh, G. 2000)

From a post-structuralist angle, silence is not an absence but a form of resistance to the tyranny of signification. It represents the limit of language, where meaning breaks down and the ineffable emerges. A key post-structural insight is that texts have no single meaning. The poetry of Baba Farid and Baba Guru Nanak invites multiple interpretations. Their verses are often layered with esoteric symbolism that defies reductive readings. Their works are dialogic in nature, engaging with the divine, the reader, and the self. This openness aligns with Roland Barthes' concept of the "writerly text," which invites the reader to co-create meaning rather than passively consume it.

## Conclusion

By applying post-structuralist theories to the mystical poetry of Baba Ghulam Farid and Baba Guru Nanak, this paper reveals the richness and complexity of Sub-continental mystical

discourse. The categories of precept, ascendancy, and meaning are not stable compartments but interwoven strands in a dynamic semiotic tapestry. Their poetry, deeply rooted in sub-continental history and spirituality, transcends linguistic and religious boundaries to offer a vision of the divine that is at once intimate and infinite, structured and subversive. Consequently, this research contributes to the broader field of comparative mysticism, literary criticism, and South Asian studies by highlighting the potential of post-structuralist approaches to uncover new dimensions of interpretative possibility in indigenous texts.

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