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Disguising Political Resistance in the Sufi Idiom:
The Kafian of Najm Husain Sayyid of Pakistan


The 1960s were years of cultural and political effervescence in Pakistani Punjab. Local writers, mostly based in Lahore, undertook to give a new literary life to their mother tongue, after decades of eclipse among the Muslim elites caused by the easy adoption of Urdu as a strong identity symbol during the first half of the 20th century.

Under difficult political conditions, specially after the imposition of Ayyub Khan’s martial law in 1959, Punjabi literature in Arabic script started proliferating again in journals and booklets. Poetry and theatre were specially favoured, closely followed by short story, and later on by novel. I shall deal here with one of the collections of poems composed in the mid-sixties by a then young government servant, Najm Husain Sayyid (b. 1936), who was to become a leading figure of Punjabi literature. I shall examine one of his first collections of poetry, *Kafian*, published in 1965, wishing to offer an insight of how, in the Punjab, Pakistani intellectuals of those days invented ways of resisting political and cultural oppression by creating poetical idioms inspired by ancient Muslim Punjabi literature, and specially by popular Sufi poetry.

I shall not try to detect in Najm’s collection the persistence of resisting subaltern discourses, or a sort of cultural hybridity characteristic of postcolonial aesthetics though *Kafian* owes much to the familiarity of the author, MA in English, with Western literature. My study is at crossroads between cultural history and textual analysis, - more specifically “intertextuality” (Kristeva 1969) and the Barthian theory of “scriptibility” (Barthes 1970) on the one hand, and the poetico-historical approach of Victor Hugo’s poetry by Meschonnic (1977) on the other hand: I assume that Najm’s poems in *Kafian* do “read” the poems of the great Punjabi Sufi Poets of the 16th to the 18th century, and that they re-enact their spirit in the way they address the social, cultural and political fabric of the 1960s.

After a few preliminary considerations on the situation of Pakistani Punjab in the 1960s and on Punjabi Sufi poetry, I shall first concentrate on formal aspects, since there seems to be a great gap between the classical *Kafian* of a Sufi like Bullhe Shah (18th century) and Najm’s verses. My attempt at revealing a close parallel in the genetic structure of the two forms will lead me then to scrutinize Najm’s poetical universe, and lastly to establish parallels between the poetical expression of the Sufis’ worldview and that of Najm, with an emphasis on what *Kafian* has to say regarding the act of writing.

The Punjabi Movement

Although Punjabi was at least during the three last centuries an important language of Muslim culture, the situation changed when, at the time of the Indian national movement, the vanguard of the Muslim elite of the Punjab adopted Urdu as its cultural language,

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1 For two good and complementary studies of this movement, see Shackle1970 and Rahman 1996: 191-209.
anxious as it was both at forging itself a distinct and corporate regional identity and at being in tune with the main trend of the Muslim movement in central North India. After the creation of Pakistan and alongside with the state’s promotion of Urdu, Punjabi came to be regarded as a subaltern idiom in that country and vanished as an academic subject in Lahore (Shackle 1970: 243). In 1948, however, some activity did start when Pakistani Punjabi intellectuals, mostly from Lahore and belonging to what could be called in Bourdieu’s terms the dominated pole of the cultural field (Bourdieu 1992: 165-200), decided to work towards making Punjabi the language of education in the Punjab and to encourage publications in Punjabi. Journals began to be published and societies and organizations were formed in the 1950s. The first significant event of this period was the Punjabi Conference held on March, 9, 1956 at Faizabad / Lyallpur, which demanded that Punjabi be used as the medium of instruction at the lower level.\(^2\) This was accepted in principle, although no real change was made, all the more so that West Pakistan was consolidated into a One Unit Province that year (Talbot 1998: 126).

All this cultural activity went along with the formation of various societies such as the Punjabi Group of the Writers’ Guild, formed in the early 1960s with Shafqat Tanvir Mirza as its first secretary, and later on the very dynamic Majlis Shah Hussain (the “Shah Husain Society”, in reference to an extravagant 16th century Punjabi Sufi poet), formed in 1962, which published the first works of Najm. These organizations had often leftist inclinations and were also concerned with raising identity consciousness among the Punjabi people: that is why they were perceived as dangerously ethno-nationalistic and anti-Pakistani by the authorities, all the more so since some of their members were in touch with Sikh intellectuals across the border. In the words of Shafqat Tanvir Mirza, “to support Punjabi language and literature was labelled an anti-state act and in 1959, under Ayyub’s martial law, the Punjabi Majlis, a Lahore based literary organization, was declared a political party and banned” (Mirza 1985). Though after 1962 Ayyub Khan’s regime did make some concessions, such as allowing Radio programs in Punjabi or making provisions for Punjabi to be taught from the sixth to the twelfth class, the Punjabi Group of the Writers Guild was banned in 1963, and the Punjabi Movement became very subdued on the political front, just managing to continue some of its literary and cultural activities.

Throughout the 1960s, Punjabi classics were scholarly edited, notably thanks to pioneering efforts of Faqir Muhammad Faqir,\(^3\) and there was an efflorescence of creative writing in Punjabi, resistance to political and cultural oppression being expressed in subdued or symbolic ways. One of the first outstanding works published was Najm’s *Dulle di var.* Referring by its title to the epics (*var*) of ancient Punjabi literature, this long narrative poem deals in free verses with the rebellion of the folk hero Dulla (Abdallah Bhatti) against the Mughal emperor Akbar. But in the *var* as in the oral tradition, Dulla appears much more as a plebeian leader than as the protesting land revenue officer (*zamindar*) which he was according to the historians (Singh 2001). In a similar manner, a few years later, in his famous play *Takht Lahaur,* Najm used the figure of the popular Punjabi Sufi poet Shah Husain to

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\(^3\) On his work, see Rahman 2002: 398-406.
embody the commitment to an authentic way of life, repugnant to ritualistic bigotry, social conformism and subservience to despotism.⁴

The tradition of Punjabi Sufi Poetry

The very name of the Majlis Shah Husain, which published Najm’s first works, as well as the cultural gathering regularly organized at the tomb of the Sufi poet at the time of his death anniversary, point to the importance of Punjabi Sufi poetry for the people engaged in the Punjabi movement. This poetry has left significant corpuses since the hundred and twelve couplets (doh) and the four hymns (sabad) of Sheikh Farid (d. 1575) preserved in the Adi Granth (“First Book”), the most revered scripture of the Sikhs.⁵ The activists of the Punjabi movement unhesitatingly saw in that Farid the great 13th century Sufi chishti sheikh of Ajodhan (today Pak Pattan) familiarly called Baba Farid, thus giving a very high date to the beginning of Punjabi literature, but neglecting both poetical and linguistic evidence. Farid’s poetry in the Adi Granth sounds in no way as that of such a great spiritual master as the figure of Baba Farid emerging from the reliable ancient Indo-Persian documents discussed by Nizami (1955), and his language is very much of the same type as that of the 16th century Sikh compositions, differing only by its dialectal blend, which is already akin to that of later Punjabi poetry up to middle of the 18th century, with its typical mixture of South Western and Central Punjab.⁶

Punjabi Sufi poets wrote in the narrative form locally called qissa, with Hasham Shah (1753-1823) producing one of the masterpieces of the genre (Matringe 2004), and mostly resorted to the kafi, a poem akin to the folk ballad. The kafis, long transmitted orally, are basically meant to be sung in formal sessions of Sufi singing (qawvali) by specialized practitioners (qawval), in the establishment and under the spiritual authority of a religious master (pir) [Matringe 2000]. The kafis composed by such authors as Shah Husain (16th century), Sultan Bahu (17th century), Bullhe Shah (18th century) and Khwaja ghulam Farid (19th century) denounce ritualistic hypocrisy in the name of a devotional mysticism based on love.⁷ In those texts, the Sufi in his quest for God, speaking of himself in the feminine, often identifies with a heroine of the local love legends desiring to be united with her beloved (Matringe 1992), or with the bride of the spinning wheel songs in order to express his efforts at preparing a dowry of piety and good conduct with a view to his marriage with God at the moment of his death, as in the following passage of Bullhe Shah:

mera eh carxa naulakkha kure
kattadi kattadi pakka kure
mera eh carxa naulakkha kure

⁴ Both Dulle di var and Taxt Lahaur, initially published by the Majlis Shah Husain, ca. 1963 for the first one, and ca. 1968 for the second, have been reprinted together in Sayyid 1977, respectively pp. 5-21 and 22-147.

⁵ For the textual references and an analysis of Farid’s poems, and for the reason of their incorporation in the Adi Granth, see Matringe 1993.


⁷ The only comprehensive survey of Punjabi Sufi poetry is still Rama Krishna 1938. See also Sharda 1974.
**Formal aspects**

Najm’s poems in *Kafian* have formally nothing of the classical *kafis*. The typical 18th century *kafi* consists of a series of quatrains punctuated by a two verses chorus. The meter has a fixed number of metrical instants; the first three verses of a quatrain rime together, while the last one rimes with the chorus. There is absolutely nothing such in *Kafian* by Najm. All the poems of the collection are written in free verses, without couplets and chorus, and without anything reminiscent of the regular breathing of classical *kafis*. Their verses are strongly irregular as regards length and music, sometimes soft as a lullaby, and sometimes as cacophonous as shrieks of terror. Quite often, a word calls for another or unfolds into a succession of images, and the poem progresses as by waves, each one taking over the preceding one. And sometimes also, a sentence is syntactically incomplete and consists only in parts of a clause, in one or two phrases. Moreover, whereas most of the time the quatrains of a *kafi* are semantically quite separate from one another, all the poems of *Kafian* are clear semantic units. And whereas there is a global uniformity of tone and atmosphere in the ancient Sufi poetry, there are extremely sharp contrasts in Najm’s book, as will be evident from the passages quoted in the following sections of this paper: some pieces are lyrical and others sound like abrupt daily speech, some are humorous and others violent, anguishing, some refer straightforward to common scenes while others are fantasies or have a puzzling halo of mystery.

The formal difference between the poems of *Kafian* and the classical *kafis* is made more obvious by the presence at the beginning of Najm’s book of three poems bearing the name of a particular literary genre: *Ghazal* (p. 7), *Lori* (p. 8) and *Kafi* (p. 9). Formally, nothing distinguishes them from the other poems of the collection, and they have nothing to do with the genre to which they owe their respective titles.

Furthermore, these compositions appear to be antithetical to their eponyms. *Ghazal* has nothing of a love poem based on a traditional repertoire of images. It opens with the door cracking, the coughing and the throat clearing of an urban morning scene. There is, besides, a good dose of subversive humour in beginning a book called *Kafian* with a poem entitled *Ghazal*, the two genres being in a way antithetical. To sum up, one can say that whereas the Indo-Pakistani *ghazal* is the archetypal example of a highly codified Islamic genre indianized in terms of language and sometimes, to some extent, of imagery, the *kafi*, formally a heir to the Punjabi folk ballad, is a typical case of islamizing an Indian genre by using regional language in an easy flow and resorting to a limited repertoire of images and metaphors borrowed from folk legends and daily activities in order to formulate the universal message of Sufi devotion. As for *Lori*, the “lullaby”, it abruptly enjoins a sleeping dog to wake up, in such a way that one could initially believe that someone is being insulted:

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8 Extrait d’une *kafi* de Bullhe Shah interprétée par Nusrat Fatah Ali Khan (Pakistani cassette Royal n° 532, item 1.1, n. d.).
uth ve kuttia jangal suttia
“Get up, dog, jungle sleeper!”

Kafi, lastly, consists in an interrogation on which clothes a lady is going to wear:

ajj main kehre kapre pavan
abb kharabbe
citte
kale
save pile
“Today, which clothes shall I wear?
Two-tone?
White?
Black?
Green, yellow?”

It is thus obvious, from the very first pages of the book, that the gap is immense between Najm’s poems and the classical Kafian, which aim at transmitting the message of Sufism in a poetical idiom easily understood by a village audience and at channelling the whole cultural universe of the listeners towards a Sufi type of devotion to God, and which are a crucial tool in activating the master-disciple relationship (piri-muridi) in the context of the qavvali session (Burckhardt-Qureshi 1986: 103-131). The formal distortion causes a shock and invites at seeking elsewhere a possible kinship between Kafian and Punjabi Sufi poetry.

The subject and the world in Kafian

Analogous remarks can be formulated regarding the surface content of the poems. The subject in Najm’s poems lives in a world and with anxieties which have nothing to do with the stereotypes of the classical poetry. The setting is not rural, but urban or peri-urban, and quite often nocturnal. The poem page 16, for instance, begins with that indication between parentheses:

(Sham da vela. Shahr di kandh ohle ik jana te ik janani)
“(The evening. A man and a woman at the foot of the city wall”).

While roaming around the city, the couple focuses its attention on clothes hanging or piled up for washing. And all of a sudden, the man suggests picking up these clothes, making them into a bundle and setting them to fire, so that they can warm themselves up, - a gratuitous act of the kind so severely criticized by Camus in L’Homme révolté (1951: 123-124).

When a crowd is perceived, it is shown in a fragmentary way, reduced to elements which give an impression of deconstructed subjects:

Shahr ic ja ke akhbian, kann te hatth te pair (p. 26)
“Having gone to the city, eyes, ears, and hands, and feet”.

The whole world at night is seen itself as God’s house falling into ruins (p. 60):
vekho Rabb de bhare bharate ghar da khola ho gya
“Look, the filled up house of God is crumbling down”.

In such an environment, the subject is bodily and mentally wounded. His body is dislocated and out of control, as in the poem where the narrator helplessly sees his right hand seize his left arm and disappear along with it under his dress (p. 60):

mera khabba hatth
banh saije di phar ke palle thalle varia e
hun palle ohle kih hona e
eh oho jane
yan Rabb jane
“My left hand
has seized my right arm and taken it under my shirt;
what is now going on under my shirt,
it alone knows it,
or the Lord knows.”

This body is compared to a cold fire place (p. 63), after having been said in the preceding poem to be have been torn into shreds (mera liro lir sarir, p. 62). This bodily dislocation may result from a savage external aggression by people who reduce the narrator into shreds or impale him (p. 12):

shahr de andar kandhan
paurian carh carh javian kothian utton  ullam ullam avan
cakki de do pur ho ke
mainun bhora bhora kar kar suttan
(…)
thaun tha’in mainun phar phar dar carhavan
ape ap nun tatti sikh te qime vangon
ghut ghut rakhan
“Walls inside the city.
They climb the stairs, sway from the roofs.
Becoming the two wheels of the mill,
they reduce me into a powder which they throw away.
(…)
Elsewhere they catch me and put me on the pale;
I remain like balls of minced meat on a burning skewer,
choking, choking”.

The soul itself is affected by the mercantile and corrupted atmosphere of the surrounding world. In one of the poems (p. 24), the narrator tells the beloved that he can read about their past, their present and their future in the lines of his own hand, but that he will charge her 5 Rs if she wants to know. And in a comment regarding his palm lines, obviously referring to the absurdity of human life, he adds:

eh jangal dian vatan nen
ehnan na kiton auna e – na kite jana e
“These are forest paths, they do not need to come from somewhere, nor to go somewhere”.

Confronted with the unbearable suffering which result from this condition, the narrator reacts in different ways. Sometimes, his discourse is that of violence and absurdity, as in one of the poems referred to above, or in the one where he requests his beloved, who wants to light a fire, to kill him, to cut him into pieces, to set these pieces to fire and to take a firebrand out of that fire in order to set the whole forest ablaze (p. 29). And sometimes, he aspires to a fragile and ephemeral peace, possibly reached in a night which might be the last one. Here for instance is a poem where an ultimate night is requested to settle love’s last accounts (p. 10):

*aaj di rat
bas aaj di rat
mainun hor jivan de
(…)
tun picchle lekhe mere nal muka le
os vele te tainun mera
mainun tera
nan vi yad nahin rahna

“Tonight, just tonight, give me that more to live. (…) You, settle the last accounts with me. In that time, neither will you remember my name nor I yours”.

The perspective of an imminent death, evident from such a poem, goes along with an aspiration at being buried in a calm, lonely place (p. 18):

*mainun othe dabbo
jithe ko’i kuk na ave
ko’i bol na sunia jave
meri minnu

“Bury me where no shriek reaches, no word is heard, my darling”.

It also goes along with the desire not to be disturbed at night, with a request to the beloved that she should send away any visitor, telling him (p. 13):

*ghar ko’i nahnin
din carhde nun a jana e axbaran vale
“There is no one at home; 
come at sunrise, newspaper seller”.

Reading Punjabi Sufi poetry and writing

These verses call for comments which bring us to the facet of Kafian with which the present paper is mostly concerned: the way Najm’s work reads Punjabi Sufi poetry. They directly echo the couplet of the great 18th century sufi poet Bullhe Shah which Najm has used as an epigram for his book and which says:

avo avo Shauh ‘Inayat Sa’īn  
par vekho sanun ra’īyan vale hath na la’in  
“Come, come, my Beloved, Master Inayat,⁹  
but see to it that advice-givers do not torment me.”

The disciple invites his Master, but does not want to be disturbed by an advice-giver, a familiar and negatively characterized figure of Sufi poetry. Similarly, for the narrator of Kafian, an undesired visitor is assimilated to a newspaper-seller, someone who, in the Pakistani context of those days, brings official thinking at home. This is clearly a way of answering a situation through a poetical discourse inspired by the ancient Punjabi Sufi poetry so familiar to Najm.¹⁰

Following this track, we are brought towards another side of Kafian. Directly and indirectly, Punjabi Sufi poets are present in the book, and more precisely three of them, already encountered in the present paper: Farid, Shah Husain and Bullhe Shah. Kafian, as we have seen, are marked by shades reminiscent of the dark atmosphere of Farid’s writings and of his meditation on the brevity of life and the ineluctability of death, expressed in his Adi Granth couplets and hymns, through striking images (Matringe 1993: 419-421). One of these couplets and one verse from a hymn are incorporated between quotation marks but without explicit attribution respectively at the beginning and at the end of the poem Lailat al-Qadr “The Night of Destiny”, when the Koranic revelation started (p. 14):

“Farida rati kathuri vandiai sutia milai bhau  
jinhan nain nindravale tinhan milanu kuau”¹¹  
rat ik gandhi  
cittian dhagian andar vali valeti  
citte dhage vekhian sidhe  
kholian ganjalu ganjal  
jeh maj dhage vaddh ke suttan kasturi khille  
na maj dhage vaddh ke suttan na kasturi khille  
hath balan te akhan  
kujh kar na baithin

⁹ Inayat Shah was the spiritual master of Bulleh Shah (see Rama Krishna 1938: 43-49).
¹¹ The quotation is taken from the Adi Granth, pp. 1382 sq., and I have directly transliterated it from that source, but restoring the unnoted nasality of vowels and the reduplication of consonants.
“hatthu na lai kasumbharai jali jasi dhola”\textsuperscript{12}

“‘Farid, musk is released at night. Those who are sleeping do not receive their share. Those whose eyes are heavy with sleep, how can they receive it?’

Night is a hank.
Enfolded in the white threads is a fold.
Looking at the straight white threads,
disentangling the tangled ones.
If I cut and throw the threads the musk is released,
if I do not cut and throw the threads, the musk is not released.
I take it up and say:
do not make a mistake!
‘Do not touch the safflower, it will fade away, dear’ ”.

The initial couplet of Farid exposes the standard Sufi conception of divine grace,\textsuperscript{13} and for the rest, the following interpretation might be proposed. In the context of the Night of Destiny, grace consists for those who stay awake, following Farid’s precept, in seeing a miraculous light at the moment when Koranic revelation began for Muhammad. The ‘white threads’ would be a metaphor for that magical nocturnal light, and the ‘fold’ could refer to the supreme mystery:\textsuperscript{14} only if one cuts across the white threads of light to reach the perpetually unfolding fold of revelation and creation is the perfume of musk released. But like any mystical undertaking, this requires concentration and perceptiveness. Otherwise, the expected spiritual benefit could vanish as the pollen of a safflower touched without delicacy: this is how Farid’s second quotation could be understood; it could also, and simultaneously, refer to the precautions the poet has to take in formulating and revealing his own message, which is, like that of the Koran for the Muslims, one of liberation, as we shall see soon\textsuperscript{15}.

It should be added, regarding this text, that with great poetical skill, Najm brings in, between the two quotations of Farid, a set of metaphors strongly reminiscent of spinning, which as we have seen was used symbolically by the Punjabi Sufi poets, and specially by Bullhe Shah, but which is conspicuously absent from Farid’s compositions. Through this device, Najm creates a sort of poetical unity, mobilizing in his own writing at the same time Farid and his successors. \textit{Lailat al-Qadr} is thus a nodal poem in \textit{Kafian}, in the sense that, between the protective barriers of Farid’s verses and under the sacred sky of the Night of Destiny it unfolds, precisely, an image of poetic creation which reveals the method of the poet (re-enacting the spirit of Sufis poetry), his care (acting by night, cautiously) and his goal: writing, as we shall see, to undo the knots of oppression, to allow liberty to release its perfume.

As for Shah Husain, who was in love with a Hindu boy, Madho Lal, whose name he prefixed to his own, becoming Madho Lal Husain, and who wrote in praise of the

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Adi Granth} p. 794.

\textsuperscript{13} This conception is antithetical to that of the Sikh Gurus, and called for a critical commentary by Guru Nanak. See Matringe 1993: 434 sq.

\textsuperscript{14} We would hence be close to the “fold” as the structure of the infinite theorized by Deleuze (notably 1969 and 1988).

\textsuperscript{15} In its original context, this verse by Farid is usually understood as a warning against illusion (See Sahib Singh 1962-1964: VI.686).
cannabis decoction called *bhang* (Rama Krishna 1938: 1-26), one of Kafian’s poems is located at his tomb in a suburb of Lahore called Baghbanpura. There, a saintly man addresses a group of followers and begs them to repeat again and again after him (p. 42):

*Rabb kare ko’i hor Ḥusain na hove*

“May God let no other Husain ever exist”,

meaning that such a person as Shah Husain would just not be able to survive in Pakistan…

But above all, it is the very spirit of Bullhe Shah’s poetry which appears to be re-enacted in *Kafian*. Among the Punjabi Sufi poets, Bullhe Shah is the one who mostly resorted to the symbolism of spinning, as we have seen above. In Najm’s *Kafian*; there is a striking occurrence of that symbolism. In the poem page 56, the narrator voluntarily wounds himself, drags out muscular fibres from his flesh and arranges them into a hank, adding this comment:

*bin kattion bin union daj sametia*

“I have gathered my dowry without spinning wheel and without wool.”

A link is thus established between the poems of physical and mental suffering discussed in the first part of this paper and the writings of a Sufi poet who certainly composed poems painfully expressing the pain of separation from God, but who more than any other madly sang the ecstasy of divine union and the constant presence of God in the subject, as in his famous *kafis*:

*mere bukkal de vic cor, ni mere bukkal de vic cor* 16

“There is a thief in the fold of my veil, o there is a thief in the fold of my veil.”

In that very poem, the Sufi claims that the religious differences between Hindu and Muslims have been transcended,17 and that something else (*kujh hor*) has now appeared: we shall soon come back to that.

And indeed, if poems of suffering and absurdity form a large part of *Kafian*, some texts of the volume are clearly readings of Bullhe Shah’s optimistic and confident poetry. In a poem where the narrator says that he feels like crying, he states that no solace can be found in retelling oneself stories of ancient Prophets (p. 17). And in another one, declaring that he has become a Muslim again (which supposes that he had committed apostasy), he refers to his religious culture as to one in which neither the Koran nor the Prophet appear, but in which Muslim *pirs* and Sufis as well as Hindu *sadhus* occupy a place of choice (p. 11), thus assuming the entire mystical heritage of Northern India and reaching a point strongly reminiscent of Bullhe Shah’s “something else”.

Besides these general types, a precise and emblematic figure for Sufi poets like Bullhe Shah is referred to in *Kafian*: the Baghdadi mystic Mansur Hallaj. We meet him in the poem quoted above in which the narrator is either, like him, impaled by aggressors, or reduced to minced meat. Trying to understand his own fate, the poet asks himself whether he would not

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16 Bullhe Šah 1960 : 298-300.

have repeated the mystic utterance for which officially Hallaj was sentenced to death: ‘anā’l-ḥaqq’ (“I am the Truth”, i.e. “I am God”, p. 12). All this points towards the waḥdat al-wujud (“unity of being”), the key concept of popular Sufism in South Asia, whose popular advocates see in Hallaj its main proponent, and which is precisely the undifferentiated background of Bullhe Shah’s “something else”.

In his poems, Bullhe Shah often deals symbolically with the coming of divine union by using the image of Ranjha, the hero of the most famous Punjabi folk romance, coming clad as a yogi to elope with Hir, his beloved, to whom the poet identify himself. This coming is beautifully expressed by Najm in the last poem but one of Kafian (p. 71), in which the narrator adopts a posture quite analogous to that of the Sufi poet, expressing as to girl-friends his feminine desire to see a ‘he’ coming:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{hun ohde avan da vela hoia} \\
\text{calo sanbhie khalare apne} \\
\text{jad oh ave akhie:} \\
\quad \text{“tusin a’e o ji – a’o baihtho} \\
\quad \text{pairin pa’e ji dhan bhag asade”} \\
\text{“It is now time for him to come;} \\
\quad \text{let me gather all my belongings} \\
\quad \text{so that when he comes I can say:} \\
\text{‘Come, come and have a seat,} \\
\quad \text{I put all that I possess at your feet.”}
\end{align*}
\]

But this apparition is temporary, and finally vanishes, just as the feeling of divine union after a moment of ecstasy. There remains nevertheless a mysterious feeling, haunting the mind of the poet and giving a new turn to his search. He asks himself (p. 71):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{pahilan vaqtan di ko’i hove pushak nirali} \\
\text{yan xabre ko’i tunan manka i hove} \\
\quad \text{“Is it a strange dress from former times} \\
\quad \text{or is it perhaps the gem of some magic?”}
\end{align*}
\]

And that magic (tunan) is precisely the title of the last poem of the collection. A day has passed, night has come and a forgotten memory surfaces in the narrator’s mind, typically expressed by words coming in waves (p. 72):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{rat pa’i – kehri gall si bhull jehri yad a’i} \\
\text{baith ke soco} \\
\text{soc soc ke likho} \\
\text{likh likh apne ap nun akho} \\
\text{cico cic ganderian}
\end{align*}
\]

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18 The literature on Hallaj is enormous, and still overhung by Massignon 1975.

visar gaian so terian
yad rahian so merian
“Night has fallen - what is that forgotten event that has come to my memory?
Sit down and think,
and having written say to yourself:
‘the game of the lines drawn on the walls!
the forgotten ones are yours,
the remembered ones mine’.”

These verses refer to a Punjabi game in which children of one group draw lines on walls while those of another one have gone to hide. Children from the hiding group then come back and try find all the lines and erase them. The book thus ends up with words which sound like a Punjabi folk song and which celebrate the resurrecting power of writing, to some extent in a Proustian or Baudelairian manner. What is interesting for our purpose here is that these lines provide the key to the interrogation raised in the preceding poem. The magic through which a contribution can be made is writing, and more precisely writing in the sense of making “writable” in the Barthian sense the Punjabi Sufi poetry of Shah Husain and Bullhe Shah.

The poem of page 58 had already referred to that special power of writing, sharply contrasting two types. The narrator feels imprisoned because the letters of certain writings – no doubt those of the religious and political establishment – have built up a brick palace without a door, and he says to himself:

hun kehri parhan kitab
jihde vic
ikk ikk akhar vakha vakha ho ja’e
te chitan vicon bahar-var
kadi suraj carhda labhe
“Which book should I read now,
in which
each and every letter would be aloof,
and from these spots
sometime would be found
a rising sun outside?”

The book made of such liberating ‘magical’ letters could very well be Kafian itself, read while being written, as Louis Aragon said about his own novels in Les Incipit, and emerging as a cry of hope from within the chaos of the present (p. 61):

kapre, chutian cizan, vastan
phol phol
ik hatth likhi
“Clothes, scattered things of all sorts;
but rummaging:

20 Aragon 1969.
In his book on linguistic consciousness and literary readings, Harald Weinrich has put forward the idea that language and literature are the two sides of a single coin, meaning in a somewhat circular way that linguistic consciousness is forged through extensive literary readings, and that reading literary works in depth supposes an acute linguistic sensitivity (Weinrich 1989). This applies very much to the Punjabi poetry of Najm, whose craftsmanship postulates a linguistic mastery shaped by the frequentation of the great classics of the language. Like the Sufi poets, Najm, in Kafian, resorts to the speech and the realities of his region and his time, on the one hand in order to say ‘no’ to official language and to ready-made religious and political thinking, and on the other hand in order to coin a plea for liberation. The speech of his time includes world contemporary poetry, which allows Najm to create a shock through the contrast between the title of his book, suggesting the aura of a great poetical tradition from the past, and unexpectedly modern forms of writing. And that very contrast by itself is an invitation at tracing the modalities of the presence of Punjabi Sufi poetry in Kafian: the happy few Punjabi intellectuals who formed the natural readership of the book did assuredly not fail to do so. That presence, as we have seen, is to be sought in an attitude, a quest, and in the traces of an immediate fraternity. Describing the situation of his narrator while he meditates his appeal and has a vision, Najm shows him in a posture that makes him the spiritual brother of a praying Sufi, between earth and sky, in a poem entitled Mor (“Peacock”, p. 46):

\[
\text{main asman de thalle -} \\
\text{bhun de utte -} \\
\text{rukh de nal khalovan -} \\
\text{akh na mitan na kholan na partavan-} \\
\text{jan vekhan tan kih vekhan -} \\
\text{ik ill ko’i udadi jave -} \\
\text{jehda na ko’i agga na ko’i piccha bas ‘ku ku’ akhove -} \\
\text{“I am under the sky,} \\
\text{on the earth,} \\
\text{leaning against a tree.} \\
\text{I do not close, open or move my eyes;} \\
\text{when I see, what do I see?} \\
\text{A bird flying away,} \\
\text{Without front nor back, simply shrieking ‘Koo, koo’.”}
\]

This shriek is humorously the same as the one which, in a quatrain by Omar Khayyam, a bird lets out while sitting on the wall of a ruined castle, and which in Persian means “Where? Where?” But as we have seen, for the poet of Kafian, writing has the power

\[\text{In qaṣṣ ke bar carx hamı zad pahlu / bar darge-ye u šahān nehdändı ru / diđım ke bar kongereheš fāxte-i / benešaste hamı goft ke ku ku ku ku (Khayyam 2002: 40) “Yon palace, owering to the welkin blue, / Where kings did bow them down, and homage do, / I saw a ringdove on its arches perched, /And thus she...}\]
to project one beyond the present crumbling down of God’s house. The purpose of the book is made explicit by the poems quoted at the end of the last section of this paper: it is liberation, smashing the prison walls, producing the vision of a rising sun. Given the author’s commitments and the circumstances of his writing, one is inclined to think that this liberation is both that of a suppressed language and that of a suppressed people. But formulated as it is, and relying as it does on a profound reading of Punjabi Sufi poetry, the message has a universal value. The continuing influence of Kafian bears testimony to that fact. Najm’s book in its turn became a source of inspiration for other poets, notably those opposed to Zia-ul-Haq’s severe dictatorship in the 1980s (Talbot 1998: 254-286), which combined marshal law and Islamic fundamentalism. A little more than twenty years after the first edition of Kafian, the Urdu poet Sarmad Sahbai, for instance, published a lyrical collection entitled Nili ke sau rang (“Hundred shades of Blue”, Sahbai 1986), which incorporates poems entitled Kafi quite similar in tone to those of the ancient Sufi poets, as well as poems which assume the whole religious and cultural heritage of Northern India, including both local and pan-Indian myths and figures (Buddha, Mahavira, Krishna, Hir and Ranjha, Mira Bai, Nanak...).

Bibliographie


made complaint, ‘Coo, Coo, Coo, Coo’ ” (English translation by E. H. Whinfield, quatrain n° 392, http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/omarkhayyam-rub2.html).


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