Discourses of Learning and Love: Sufi Paths in Pakistan

Mahwash Shoaib

Your love makes me dance wildly, so wildly
Your love has set station in my heart
I have drunk the cup brimful of poison–
Healer, come quick or I’ll die
Your love makes me dance wildly, so wildly
The sun hides, the blush remains
For one glimpse, I would give my life for you
Master, my mistake I didn’t come when you called
Your love makes me dance wildly, so wildly
Mother, don’t keep me from this path of love
Who could turn around boats that have departed?
Foolish me, I went with the boatmen
Your love makes me dance wildly, so wildly
A peacock cries in the thicket of love
Where my dear love lives is Qibla and Kaaba
You wounded me and never asked
Your love makes me dance wildly, so wildly
I, Bulleh Shah, sit at Shah Inayat’s door,
He who dressed me in robes red and green
Where I struck my heel dancing, I found my beloved
Your love makes me dance wildly, so wildly

In versions of a song popular through three centuries, Sufi poet Bulleh Shah sings of a love that makes him dance with such abandon that only his beloved can come and heal his agony. That Bulleh Shah, born to a prestigious family, had chosen for his spiritual guide
someone from a lower class was disgraceful enough, but what he did next to win his teacher’s heart was outrageous. Annoyed by his arrogance that prevented his disciple from overcoming his ego, his teacher Shah Inayat had banished Bulleh Shah from his company. Bulleh Shah learned the dances and idioms of dancing girls; then, discovering that Shah Inayat would be attending a festival at the shrine of a saint, he dressed himself in women’s clothing and danced and sang before his teacher for forgiveness. The woman in his song becomes a symbol of the soul yearning to reach its destination, union with God, and ready to endure any pain to do so. She pines for her beloved, drinking the cup brimful of the poison of separation; regretful, she is willing to give her life for a glimpse of her master at whose bidding she didn’t come; she is willful enough to break away from family and tradition for her love; she is by turns coquettish, “the sun hides, the blush remains,” and, ultimately, content at reaching fulfillment of her desire. The sojourn of love that leads the woman to find her beloved in her heart and the Qibla (the direction of the Kaaba) unmoored geographically and located in the beloved’s domain, begins and ends with the rapturous dance of the spirit that lifts the veils of doubt and this transcendence leads to communion. The language of religion and love mix in shocking patterns, the soul and the body so close in ecstasy, the profane and the divine fused so organically that life and death are resolved in the song and dance of the poet to find a way to God.

As heterodox forms of Islam, Sufi approaches challenge orthodox, institutionalized religion, create bridges of understanding with other belief systems, and contest the supremacy of the instruments of state control. Some Sufi articulations, positioned simultaneously against and for empire, are inflected by interaction with practices of materialist power. Considered internalized dimensions of Islam, Sufisms employ rituals of remembrance in zikr (meditative chanting and repetition) and muraqaba (contemplation), create profound relationships between the shaykh (teacher)—and eventually the pir (descendant of saints)—and murid (disciple), and encourage ziyarat (pilgrimages) to Sufi tomb complexes. Medieval Sufi mystics sought to spread Islam peacefully on the Indian subcontinent, articulating a belief that contained universal elements of compassion and love. Among their modes of persuasion was the blending of preaching with sufiana kalaam (mystical poetry) and devotional music (especially through kafis and qawaalis), crossgendered personae, and conventional tropes and symbols. Sufi poetry and music beget a particular kind of ecstasy, earthly forms that bring the listener closer to divine