

Self to Selflessness: Paradox of Identity in the Mystical Vakhs of Lal Ded

Dr. Ramnita Saini Sharda

Associate Prof. Department of English

Hans Raj Mahila Maha Vidyalaya, Jalandhar , Punjab, India.

Abstract: The concept of self is central to all religious discourse. Quest for identity of the self in relation to the world and the universe as well as with the universal power is primary inquiry in religious discourse. Although every religion dwells on this issue, however, identity and self are complex social constructs as well. Poetry of the mystic women of medieval times embodies this journey of creation of a self and the complete annihilation of identity. The paper looks into the journey from Self to selfness and the paradox of identity evident in the Vakhs of Lal Ded. Lal Ded had to fight the patriarchy in order to first create a strong identity as a Mystic, only then is she able to merge her Identity into the supreme being and totally annihilate the self. The conversion of 'I' 'self' and 'ego' into a void is a complex process that passes through the intricacies of the social system of which the mystic too is an integral part.

Keywords: Lal Ded, Identity, Mystic, Self.

1. INTRODUCTION

All the religions of the world are primarily concerned with the issues of search for the self, the relationship of the self with the universe and the identity of the self in relation to the identity of the universe, and transcendence of the self. At the centre of every religion is the issue of relationship of the self with the universal power. The identity of the self, the relation of the self with the universal other and the tension between the assertion of the self and the annihilation of the self in terms of surrender constitutes the major religious discourse. Each religion of the world negotiates these power structures between the individual self and the universal self. In the process of theorizing these structures, the canonical religions establish certain cosmic hierarchy, and then formulate rituals to attain a place in that hierarchy, finally, these religions pronounce those rituals and ways to be the only reality, the ultimate truth to be believed, followed and lived. Mysticism in all the religions deals with these very issues, but defines identity in a manner that may or may not agree with the established canon; ascertains a personalized relationship with the universal power, by-passes the hierarchy and at times breaks all power structures and addresses the ultimate power directly. Lal Ded, Lalla Arifa, Laleshwari, and Lalla are the popular names given to the fourteenth century mystic of Kashmir. Her story of life is recorded in the consciousness of the people of Kashmir. Like the lives of saints everywhere else, the life of Lal Ded is shrouded in myth, miracle and legend. Her mystical musings are recorded in the form of Vakhs and in her life and vakhs is woven the saga of journey from Self to Selflessness.

There is considerable difficulty applying even the philosophical terms and concepts to a mystical text, for in the mystic's writing, as philosopher Donald MacKinnon notes, "all conventional distinctions between far and near, familiar and strange, natural and transcendent are broken down"[1]. Mystical experiences are personal, momentary and incapable of being shared contemporaneously with another person. For this reason, the mystic's knowledge is outside the realm of even standard epistemology.

Identity of a mystic has the enigmatic quality of identity through annihilation. The submission is assertion; annihilation of the self is the attainment of the self and chief goal of the mystic is losing the identity. This paradox of becoming one by losing the self spells dissent from the canonical religious beliefs. Study of the medieval female mystics brings forth an

interesting factor that they recreated their own unique identity by flouting all the accepted norms of the society, culture, and religion. Identity in case of medieval female mystics has two aspects, firstly Identity as a mystic, and secondly Identity of a mystic as perceived by the mystics herself. The social norms were such that the female mystics had to first establish their identity as a mystic by transgressing the accepted social norms for women. Religion and mysticism was the male domain. The call of the divine was not for the women. As the legend goes, Lal Ded had a very troubled life as a married woman, with her husband being unsupportive and the mother-in-law being very cruel to her. She discarded everything to discover her true self. She discarded her home, her family and even stripped her clothes off and roamed naked in the valley of Kashmir.

Identity refers to our way of understanding who we are and how we connect with other. Lal ded negotiated her identity in such a manner that the creation or even annihilation of the identity became subversive. Lal Ded broke the shackles of Indian Patriarchal system to create a space for herself, she accepted no disciples thus subverted the male sainthood norms wherein there is a guru and his disciples carry forward the tradition, she was able to create such an identity that she became all pervasive in the culture she belonged to, permeated it through and through, became an inseparable part, lending voice to millions of marginalized people, in an otherwise oppressive system. Firstly, she stripped herself off the constructs of the patriarchal system, then established a relationship with the universal other, the dichotomy between the self and the other is resolved through transcendence and she became one with God. The spatial temporal identity is transcended and she discovered true identity beyond space and time.

Lal Ded vociferously declares that she closed the door to the world outside to awaken to the Supreme power. This act of shutting oneself out from the world is subversive in the way that the entire system that controls the human existence in their worldly mundane affairs is rendered useless. The rigors of the spiritual quest were rendered futile and she had to stretch the human potentiality to its utmost to reach the reserve of power within herself, of which she was unaware. By exploring her own potential she could taste the presence of Divine.

I, Lalla, wore myself down searching for Him

and found a strength after my strength had died.

I came to His threshold but found the door bolted.

I locked that door with my eyes and looked at Him. [2]

The self discovery by shutting the world out, gives her power. She actualized the realization of the difference between self and the Self. She 'wore' her outer worldly identity 'out' to find her inner transcendent identity. This nectar of enlightenment is potentially available to all bodied selves, but very few apprentice themselves to the wisdom lineages. When she sings of this in ecstasy she is awakening the world and at the same time subverting the existing norms of religion that promise a heaven.

I wore myself out, looking for myself.

No one could have worked harder to break the code.

I lost myself in myself and found a wine cellar. Nectar, I tell you.

There were jars and jars of good stuff, and no one to drink it. [3]

She presents self and Self as playing a game of hide and seek, with the twist that each is concealed in the other. When the identity of self and Self is discovered, the game of mutual concealment gives way to merriment. The seeker then found the freedom to switch her roles from mundane self and the real identity as the one who has tasted the nectar of enlightenment.

Wrapped up in Yourself, You hid from me.

All day I looked for You.

and when I found You hiding inside me,

I ran wild, playing now me, now You. [4]

Lal Ded here phrases a passionate testament to the recognition of unity between the seeker and the sought, self and the Self. 'lousy carcass' is the body centered consciousness with its emphasis on personality and individual identity. She is angry with herself for nurturing such a consciousness. When she states this, she is annihilating all barriers raised by the society, subverting all systems that give importance to individual identity, centered on body consciousness.

Lord! I've never known who I really am, or You.

I threw my love away on this lousy carcass

and never figured it out: You're me, I'm You.

All I ever did was doubt: Who am I? Who are You? [5]

Life and soul, that is all she has learnt and body gives nothing, body in worship means nothing but through body one can taste the divine. Rituals hold no good if one doesn't concentrate on breath and soul. Body is an essential means to reach the goal of self realization,

Breath and soul, that's all I've learnt.

Worship your body, it tastes like nothing.

A body in worship, that's no way to bliss.

But it gave me a taste for saying "I am He" [6]

Lal Ded repeats, the finest way of worshipping Shiva is not through rituals and observances, but through the knowledge of radiant mind. [7]

Shiva is worshipped best when thought lights up the Self. [8]

Then we find an evidence of Lal Ded's struggle to rip off her identities to reach her true Self. Jaishree Kak states that the following vakhs are evidence of Lal Ded's trials and tribulations as a woman in medieval society, her awareness of the social construction of gender which she sheds, the shredding of her old identity and the transcendence of socially defined feminine self which she experiences as oppressive. [9]

I, Lalla, set out to bloom like a cotton flower.

The cleaner tore me, the carder shredded me on his bow.

That gossamer: that was I

the spinning woman lifted from her wheel.

At the weaver's they hung me out on the loom.

First the washer man pounded me on his washing stone,
scrubbed me with clay n soap.

Then the tailor measured me, piece by piece,

with his scissors. Only then could I, Lalla,

find the road to heaven [10]

She celebrates the lifting up of the fog and the clearing up of the perception. People recognized her as a mystic, the lover of God, yet this means nothing to her as she has totally annihilated her worldly identity and realized she is nothing and 'He was All'.

When the dirt was wiped away from my mind's mirror,

people knew me for a lover of God.

When I saw Him there, so close to me,

He was All, I was nothing. [11]

She plays with her different identities, a madwoman and her pacifier; she eased the pain by connecting to God. She mingled with the Loved One and all the defilements fell off making her pure and awakening her to her true identity.

As the moonlight faded, I called out to the madwoman,

eased her pain with love of God.

'it's Lalla, it's Lalla,' I cried, waking up the Loved One.

I mixed with Him and drowned in a crystal lake. [12]

She even fought the demons and monsters haunting her own soul, the darkness inside

And then I wrestled with the darkness inside me,

Knocked it down, clawed at it , ripped it to shreds. [13]

Lal Ded is aware that the 'crown is the temple of the Self', having become one with the God, having achieved identity with the Divine, the seeker can hardly worship himself, the barriers have crumbled, the Union is perfect, the paradox of self and the other is resolved.

He knows crown is the temple of the Self.

...

He knows he is God, who shall he worship? [14]

There is a complete transformation of the self, whole existence becomes a ritual of prayer and attainment of the divine. Shiva permeates her entire existence and in that expanded state of being and consciousness, every gesture, every act, every utterance expresses the presence of the divine principle.

Whatever my hands did was worship,

whatever my tongue shaped was prayer.

That was Shiva's secret teaching:

I wore it and it became my skin. [15]

Lal Ded declares 'when the scriptures melt away, the chants remain' and 'when chants melt away, mind remains' finally the mind too melts and a void remains, emptied of entire existence just a void, that void is the true identity of the self as well as the Self, the supreme power too is a void. Thought with all its conceptual distinctions is also left behind and all cognitive and affective powers are absorbed into the energy field of the Supreme. When consciousness gets reabsorbed into the Supreme the universe melts back into the Supreme, thereby leaving the elements devoid of their reality.

A Void has mingled with the Void. [16]

And again she states, that even the void melts and only perfection remains, absolute remains, then there is neither the observer nor the observed.

When that Void melts, Perfection remains. [17]

She goes on to explain the true identity as

Neither You nor I , neither object nor meditation,

just the All-Creator, lost in His dreams. [18]

Lal Ded constantly reminds herself of the purpose of life, and implores her mind to beware of being caught in body centered consciousness.

Mind, dream yourself beyond Self and Other.

Remember, this body is just pickings for jungle crows. [19]

Lal Ded again n again implores to look within. Alain Danielou states, “All the teachings of yoga and the process of liberation are witnessed by the yogi in the cavern of his heart as the form of Mahesvara.” [20] To become one with the lord is to become indifferent to the outward form. In her ecstatic state of communion with the Supreme, Lal Ded has stripped herself off all the constructs of identity as an individual separated from the Supreme. Second interpretation is that she has shed the load of convention and code of patriarchal authority that constrains and determines her social behavior. Shiva has no need of the costume of social sanction or conditional protection.

My Master gave me just one rule:

Forget the outside, get to the inside of things.

I, Lalla, took that teaching to heart.

From that day, I’ve danced naked. [21]

Lal Ded then refers to life’s roles as well as the different incarnations of her soul n yet nothing has changed, this ideology certainly subverts all that the material world upholds, and it also questions the validity and importance of the identity that this society burdens one with.

So many roles I’ve played on this stage.

But I’m still the same Lalla, nothing’s changed. [22]

Body centered consciousness is central to the social constructs of identity. Lal Ded deplores the obsession with body as an expression of doomed and futile vanity. The end of this body is ash.

This body that you’re fussing over

this body that you’re dolling up,

this body that you’re wearing to the party,

this body will end as ash. [23]

The journey of Lal Ded from an embodied definite self caught in time and space to an infinite ‘void mingled in void’ is a journey of life facing all the opposition through subversion leading to ultimate liberation. She achieves the ‘nakedness’ of the self by subjugating the patriarchal norms. All that she resorts to comes by as a process through which she passes and gets purified rather than a process consciously initiated to achieve a goal. The search for self-realization and even the quest for wisdom is initially born out of the struggles of life , that lead her to a longing for a stronger self, then it is through the process of self knowledge that the mystic begins to realize the illusory nature of the phenomenal self. The self is not a substance, an unchangeable essence, or an "individual," but a construct, a social construct that gets shaken off her consciousness in due course of time taken in her spiritual journey of seeking an Identity ‘ who am I?’ She gradually realizes that the ‘self’, ‘ego’ or ‘I’ is an illusion. Her selflessness is not equivalent to low self esteem but she has transcended the identity through a very strong identity. That is the paradox; attainment of Self by annihilation of the self and creating an identity by merging into a ‘Void’.

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