

Research Article

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Qalandariyat: Marginality in the Negative Aesthetics of Sufi Poetry

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Abstract: A major part of Ordinary Aesthetics has been to include the traditionally marginalized aesthetic categories excluded when studying beauty, truth, and goodness. These “negative aesthetics” are implicated in the construction, presentation, and sustenance of marginalized identities. For the purposes of my article, I will be focusing on the effort to incorporate the aforementioned in the study of aesthetics, essentially arguing for them to be inherently valuable and not for the sake of producing a “positive.” To this end and keeping up with the thrust to include other traditions within aesthetics, my article will explore certain strands of Sufi poetry, namely the tradition of *Qalandariyat*, which present marginalized social identities to our awareness and not for the sake of changing or improving them. I will present some samples from the Persian poetry of Hafez and Rumi, as well as Punjabi couplets of Bulleh Shah and Shah Hussain, for a hermeneutic study that grounds the aesthetics of their *Qalandari*-themed literature in the usage of “negative” aesthetic categories. This exercise contains the promise of expanding the horizons for our field of sensibilities, by engaging with those social identities that have remained outside them and that too on their own terms.

Keywords: Ordinary Aesthetics, negative aesthetics, comparative aesthetics, Sufism, Sufi poetry, social roles, political philosophy, social philosophy

Likewise, one day it happened that Mowlana’s wife Kera Khatun-God be pleased with her-with regard to the secret of the Tradition: ‘Most of the people in Paradise are fools’, asked: ‘What does this mean?’ Mowlana replied: ‘If they were not fools, how would they be satisfied with Paradise and rivers? Wherever there is the beloved’s face, what room is there for Paradise and rivers?’ And he said: ‘Most of the people in Paradise are fools, and the Lofty Regions (eliyyun) are for those endowed with intelligence.’

(Shams al-Din Ahmad-e-Aflaki, *The Feats of the Knowers of God*)¹

Even though Rumi maintains the difference between the “fools” and “those endowed with intelligence” in this hagiographical account by Aflaki, what remains is the significance attributed to the former for they inhabit most of Paradise. The original word used in the text is *al-bulhu* in Arabic and *ablah* in Persian. Etymologically both words have the same origin and connote simplicity or foolishness. In other words, it stands for an imbecile person who has ordinary capacities and is not extraordinary or special. If translated as “ordinary fools,” the aforementioned dialogue then has the power to reveal the extraordinariness of these ordinary folks because it is their ordinariness which ensures that they will comprise the majority of inhabitants in Paradise. Thus, this dialogue places the ordinary in the realm of the extraordinary, a move that has captured much attention in recent academic discourse.

At the heart of many academic movements seeking to regain the lost glory of the ordinary such as Care Ethics which calls for ordinary practices of care to be treated as a focal lens or the “affective turn” in Sociology

¹ Aflaki, *The Feats of the Knowers of God*, 273.

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which maps ordinary human emotions and interactions as definitive in socio-cultural discourse is the emphasis on demystifying the extraordinary to pursue the overlooked study of the ordinary. In a similar vein, Ordinary or Everyday Aesthetics also aims to bring the focus of its theory from specialized activities of art which have been extensively explored historically in the field of aesthetics to a more generalized study of ordinary or everyday activities. A part of its venture has been to liberate aesthetic experience from the confines of art museums and galleries to observe its play in regular life, which has also been achieved by turning to the aesthetics of other non-Western traditions which value the ordinary. Another part has been to include the traditionally marginalized aesthetic categories which have largely been excluded when studying beauty, truth, and goodness. Arnold Berleant has termed these categories as “negative aesthetics”;² these are forms of human experience that are not associated with pleasure and agreeableness, which are the categories aesthetic theory was limited to traditionally.

For the purposes of my article, I will be focusing on the latter aspect of Ordinary Aesthetics: mainly the drive to incorporate “negative” aspects of human experience in the study of aesthetics because it may “allow us to explore aesthetic dimension through all corporeal senses.”³ Thus, I will essentially argue for the value of “negative aesthetics” in and of themselves, and not for the sake of producing a “positive” out of it. To this end and keeping up with the thrust to include other traditions and indigenous cultures within the scope of aesthetic study, my article will explore the aesthetics of certain strands of Sufi poetry, namely the tradition of *Qalandariyat*, which present marginalized social identities to our awareness and do so especially on their own terms. Moreover, this is not for the sake of changing or improving them as some other forms of art as a social commentary aim to do.

1 Aesthetics and Sensibility: A Rancièrian Account of Marginalized Identities

Before we begin, it is pertinent to discuss how Ordinary Aesthetics has brought forward the study of aesthetics as a “theory of sensibility.”⁴ This is mainly proposed by returning to the Greek roots of the word aesthetic: *aisthētikos*, which relates to sense perception. Therefore, aesthetics then encompasses *all* forms of experience, whether pleasant, unpleasant, agreeable, or disagreeable because it includes all that “impinges upon the subject’s sensibility.”⁵

In the realm of aesthetics, *what* we sense and *how* we sense it are larger questions tied to broader domains of social, economic, cultural, and political life because our sensory perception is not an isolated activity but rather exists in a dynamic field of interaction between our inner and outer world. As Tolia-Kelly has succinctly summarized, “The sphere of the senses is not beyond the economic or political. It is located within the logics of global economy.”⁶

Perhaps Dewey, whose aesthetic theory is hailed as a precursor to the Ordinary Aesthetics movement, is important to mention here for he located aesthetic experience of a human organism in its surrounding environment in *Art as Experience*. As he famously argued, “Life goes on in an environment; not merely *in* it but because of it, through interaction with it,”⁷ his exposition of experiencing the aesthetic in everyday life centred itself on an appreciation of this experience being grounded in society and community. However, for moving beyond the grounding of aesthetic experience in a collective context and to gain a deeper

2 Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense*, The Negative Aesthetics of Everyday Life.

3 Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 39.

4 Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense*, Introduction.

5 Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 41.

6 Tolia-Kelly, “Rancièrian and the Re-Distribution of the Sensible,” 137.

7 Dewey, “Art as Experience,” 19.

understanding of the logic that connects the questions of *what* we sense and *how* we sense it, it becomes important to turn to the political philosophy of Rancière and its implications for aesthetic theory.

In his essay *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Rancière also relates aesthetics to sense perception. Thereby he argues for the political to be inextricably linked to the aesthetic as it determines what can be seen and heard and he considers aesthetic “as the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience.”⁸ He introduces the term “distribution of the sensible” which represents not only the defined parameters for who and what becomes visible and audible to our sense perception, but as Vilhalem argues it also denotes an implication because the French noun *partage* is also translated as “taking part.”⁹ This partaking can be understood through Rancière’s insistence that the parameters created for the field of sensibility are enforced via the “police order” – the disciplining of bodily perception and maintenance of the social order through “bodies, ideas, feelings, or indeed poetics.”¹⁰ Therefore, bodies and their affects are involved in upholding the same police order that disciplines them and their participation entails that the distribution of the sensible is not an arbitrary force influencing social life but rather implicated in the processes of inclusion and exclusion within the aesthetic field.

This account of social life rests on an analysis of social roles that are distributed by the police order and become integral in reproducing and sustaining the “distribution of the sensible.” As Rancière himself notes:

The police is, essentially, the law, generally implicit, that defines a party’s share or lack of it. But to define this, you first must define the configuration of the perceptible in which one or the other is inscribed. The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.¹¹

This clearly explains why social roles designated to bodies, the subsequent adoption and presentation of identities by these bodies themselves, and the logics by which certain social roles are excluded or marginalized, are essential to be incorporated in any aesthetic theory, a case argued by authors such as Katya Mandoki. She posits how aesthetics play a “constituent role” in various activities of our social lives including “particularly, the presentation of identities.”¹² She terms this “everyday labor of dramaturgically presenting our identities to survive socially”¹³ as the “prosaic” part of aesthetics and this identity she argues is social in its nature because it “depends on others for its consolidation...is granted to us by others since it is the product of negotiations and presentation of the self.”¹⁴

It is interesting to note here that Rancière himself was critical of the emancipatory potential of identity politics because he believed that the delineation of identities led back to policing itself – the regulation of bodies through the roles being assigned to them in the social order.¹⁵ That is why Sociology as a discipline, which according to Rancière wants “to understand [savoir] the rule of correspondence between social conditions and the attitudes and judgements of those who belong to it,”¹⁶ falls into the project of policing. It “enters into a polemical complicity with the Platonic ethical project” because it “wants to claim that what science knows is precisely what its objects do not.”¹⁷ The hierarchies thus produced by “knowledge” creating disciplines clearly stipulate how “disciplines are weapons in a war; they are not tools which facilitate the examination of a territory but weapons which serve to establish its always uncertain boundary.”¹⁸ It is for these

⁸ Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 13.

⁹ Vilhalem, “Everyday Aesthetics and Jacques Rancière,” 6.

¹⁰ Tolia-Kelly, “Rancière and the Re-Distribution of the Sensible,” 127.

¹¹ Rancière, *Disagreement*, 29.

¹² Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics*, xv.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁵ Clarke, “Rancière, Politics and the Social Question,” 16.

¹⁶ Rancière, “Thinking Between Disciplines,” 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

reasons that Rancière advocates for a “poetics of knowledge” which borrows “forms of argument from language and common thought” and becomes a “method of equality.”¹⁹

Notwithstanding his apprehensions regarding the value of discovering and articulating social roles for the sake of emancipatory politics, Rancière still accords significance to “the social weight of things.”²⁰ This means the social order and its accompanying police remain a pivotal aspect in defining social roles for the bodies it regulates. It results in the exclusion of certain bodies which are marginalized and limited to the periphery while certain others take the centre stage. This exclusion, as we shall see, is a crucial aspect of the argument my article is proposing via *Qalandari* poetics because it sets the stage for the representation and radical treatment of marginalized identities in *Qalandari*-themed literature.

The limitations and marginalizations that materialize in everyday activities of social beings can be understood via Rancièrian aesthetics—its notion of the “distribution of the sensible” and the “police order.” As Vilhalem explains:

Indeed, not only is Rancière’s approach linked to artistic practices, but it also enables us to put a finger on “aesthetic effects” that are transversal and potentially extend from artistic practices to a variety of aesthetic experiences that are not necessarily related to art at all. Thus Rancière’s approach privileges art but does not break its continuity with the common sensorium.²¹

To observe how this “common sensorium” is imbued with aesthetic judgments based on moral, value-based, and epistemological preferences, we can now turn to authors working in the field of Ordinary Aesthetics.

2 Ordinary Aesthetics and the Evaluation of Marginalized Aesthetic Categories

As noted earlier, Ordinary Aesthetics has not only contributed to bringing the awareness of the aesthetic in everyday activities, but it has also worked to include the traditionally ignored and marginalized aesthetic categories. In a way, both contributions are linked because what traditional aesthetics once excluded from its study by restricting itself to pleasant aesthetic categories in the high-end chambers of art and creative disciplines is what led to it becoming an elitist or exclusive discipline far removed from the everyday and mundane. That is why Sánchez Vázquez argues for “the ugly, the comical, the sublime, the grotesque” to be included in aesthetic theory because he believed that “man can have aesthetic relations in the everyday through these categories.”²²

Therefore, to have a deeper understanding of aesthetic experience, aesthetics “can no longer justify circumscribing itself to the narrow limits of the ‘Fine Arts’ or to a few categories such as ‘beauty’ or ‘the sublime’.”²³ For it to achieve the latter, Ordinary Aestheticists have incorporated “negative” aesthetics within its domain because for aesthetics to truly be a theory of sensibility it must include all that is available for our senses to perceive. That is why Arnold Berleant argues that aesthetics is not synonymous with beauty and thus introduces his readers to “negative aesthetics” which are “whole domains of sensibility suffused with negative value.”²⁴ He gives spatial pollution or overcrowding as an example because they “produce bodily experience that is oppressive and claustrophobic, as well as physically exhausting.”²⁵ In the same vein, Yuriko Saito in *The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature* argues for aesthetically appreciating natural sites which might not conform to our standards of aesthetic value.²⁶ Other notable authors who have explored the “negative” dimensions of

¹⁹ Ibid., 12.

²⁰ Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, 83.

²¹ Vilhalem, “Everyday Aesthetics and Jacques Rancière,” 7.

²² Vázquez in Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 40.

²³ Ibid., xv.

²⁴ Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense*, The Negative Aesthetics of Everyday Life; Aesthetics & Negativity.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Saito, “The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature,” 103.

aesthetic experience are Forsey who gives a detailed account of the “unpleasant”²⁷ and Korsmeyer who does the same for objects or experiences that produce “disgust.”²⁸

However, the most acute exploration in terms of deconstructing what forms the “positive” or “negative” valuations in aesthetics has been put forward by Mandoki in her book *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaics, the Play of Culture and Social Identities*. To begin with, she scrutinizes the “fetish of beauty” and questions its objectivity by laying bare the evaluation of beauty as based on a common subjective criterion shared by a group of people for interpretation.²⁹ Therefore, she believes “beauty” is more of

an effect of language and not an ontological fact: it results from the conversion of an evaluative adjective (beautiful, true, just, and good) into a noun (beauty, truth, justice, and goodness). It thus appears to have been existing on its own, independently from the subject who, in fact, originally judged something as being good, just, true, and beautiful.³⁰

This points us towards conceiving of beauty, truth, and goodness as categories which are dependent on the subject’s perception, which as Dewey proposed is based on a social context of evaluation and interpretation. Having understood these categories through this lens enables us to realize how these are “linguistic categorizations of non-linguistic experience.”³¹ This subsequently shows that since traditional aesthetics has focused on beauty, truth, and goodness and excluded other forms of sense perception from its study for the sake of these arbitrary categories, Ordinary Aesthetics then has the task to include all forms of experience into its exploration because as Mandoki deems: “if the aesthesis is the aptitude for experience, all experience would be aesthetic and all aesthesis experiential.”³²

Mandoki does not stop merely at the deconstruction of traditional aesthetic categories which have dominated academic discourse because she wants to reveal the underlying epistemology which prefers these categories. She believes this is why “aesthetics has performed a surgical operation of systematic exclusion of all phenomena that are not positive and useful in their supply of pleasure and nice thoughts.”³³ Staying true to her original premise of aesthetic being a study of sensibility, she argues that the field of aesthetics needs to only be concerned with exploring what is available to sense perception and not be involved in judgements which stem from particular values or morality. For example, she appreciates Sánchez Vázquez for his inclusion of traditionally ignored categories in aesthetics but his inability to understand that the “tragic” can also be an aesthetic category simply due to the moral dimension it entails (namely the seemingly callous aesthetic appreciation of a phenomenon which is distressing for those involved in it) is what Mandoki criticizes because for her, “the tragic in real life will necessarily have an aesthetic dimension as long as the sensibility of the subject comes into play by judging something as being ‘tragic’.”³⁴

Through this logic, we begin to see how Mandoki wants to include “negative” categories simply as they are, without any moral or value-based judgement because for her “aesthetic phenomenon need not be immoral but also not moral”³⁵ and their inclusion will help us explore aesthetics “through all corporeal senses.”³⁶

By the same logic then, Berleant’s conception of “negative” aesthetics appears value laden because he proposes to incorporate these marginalized categories yet admits that “moral considerations often intrude into aesthetic situations.”³⁷ That is why he argues that “repugnant objects and malevolent actions presented in an artistic context need to be tolerated for their overall benefit in enlarging the scope of our awareness. Isn’t

²⁷ Forsey, “Collision.”

²⁸ Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*.

²⁹ Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 34.

³³ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁷ Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense*, *The Negative Aesthetics of Everyday Life; Aesthetics & Social Function*.

expanded consciousness inherently valuable?”³⁸ This demonstrates how “negative” aesthetics for the author still carry value-laden interpretation and evaluation and do not carry significance *in and of themselves* but through some other moral/value-based consideration. Similarly, while contemplating unscenic nature, Saito makes an excellent case for avoiding “imposing our own standard of aesthetic value (such as pictorial coherence)” which will eventually enable us to “acknowledge and appreciate the diverse ways in which nature speak.”³⁹ Yet when she comes to natural disasters, it forces her to

take exception to the claim that everything in nature is aesthetically appreciable. Some phenomena in nature overwhelm us with their endangering aspects, making it very difficult, if not impossible, for us to have enough distance, physical and/or conceptual, to listen to and aesthetically appreciate their story. Furthermore, even if we are able to do so, I question the moral appropriateness of doing so.⁴⁰

This possibly points to what Mandoki has investigated in her work as an epistemology rooted in fear or dread of the undesirable which disables us from welcoming any aesthetic exploration of such undesirable phenomena *on their own terms*. I would argue the same for Forsey who makes an explicable attempt to understand the category of “unpleasant,” but steers clear of any discussion of the unpleasant having value *in and of itself*. Rather, as her focus remains on putting forth aesthetic experience as a response, she articulates the unpleasant as a “catalyst of aesthetic action.” In other words, “the unpleasant provides a particular problem that focuses our attention. In so doing, it gives rise to complex and nuanced aesthetic decisions,”⁴¹ which imply that the unpleasant is an aesthetic experience in as much as it spurs us to actively engage with it and strive to change it, as she did by painting her “unpleasant” walls with her choice of colour. Korsmeyer also, who undertakes an oft-ignored task in aesthetics and describes “disgust” as an aesthetic response, provides a well-formulated account of the different types of aversion, yet when she reaches the point where she explains why disgust is significant she claims that: “disgust remains aversive and as such an emotional ‘pain,’ but the knowledge gained by means of it affords enjoyment, as does the second-order reflection on one’s toleration of the disgusting.”⁴² Therefore, even her account of a disagreeable aesthetic category remains mired in an effort to produce something agreeable through it.

For the sake of understanding why and how *Qalandari* aesthetics are radical in their presentation of socially displeasing or disagreeable categories, it is essential to keep the earlier discussion in mind. Our purpose in navigating the epistemological, moral, and value-based preferences in the study of traditionally marginalized categories in aesthetics through the works of the aforementioned authors has been to reveal the prevalent bias in attributing significance to them. As we have explored, negative aesthetics is only considered valuable if it profits the economies of action/activism or knowledge. In some instances, authors insist on privileging “moral” considerations over aesthetic dimensions, which leads to negative aesthetics being diminished in the phenomena it encompasses by excluding certain “immoral” categories. However, what remains largely ignored is the appreciation of negative aesthetics as a sphere of sensibility. Understanding negative aesthetics through such an approach can reveal newer possibilities to our sensorium, and if Ordinary Aesthetics truly aims to bring the study of aesthetics into the realm of the everyday, it must preserve all the sensory experiences it offers and not exclude or make an effort to minimize any on the basis of common sense, rationality, or morality.

It might seem a daunting task, but I believe that Ordinary Aestheticists have already taken a positive step in this direction by turning to non-Western traditions for their understanding of everyday aesthetic experiences. The latter, as opposed to traditional Western aesthetics, have emphasized regular activities as being a locus of aesthetic concerns. This has been studied in the aesthetic dimensions of utensils or tools built by Native Indians or the attention paid to detail in routine activities by Zen Buddhists or Taoists. How such

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Saito, “The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature,” 103.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 109.

⁴¹ Forsey, “Collision,” 21.

⁴² Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*, 130.

cultures incorporate negative aesthetics in their worldviews can prove to be foundational for Ordinary Aesthetics in their efforts to value these marginalized categories on their own terms. For the purposes of this article, in the following sections I will bring into the readers' awareness the aesthetic representation of marginalized categories in *Qalandari*-themed poetry, to judge how negative aesthetics has been and can be valuable on its own.

3 Missing Marginality: Aesthetics of Sufi Poetics

Sufism is the spiritual tradition of Islam and is widespread in the Islamicate world. This tradition has spawned various forms of creative arts such as calligraphy, music, and literature. Authors such as Nasr have wonderfully articulated how all these art forms were related to the original intent of this tradition: to remind seekers of the Divine.⁴³ What is interesting to note is that these forms of art penetrated all aspects of the religious lives of the adherents of this tradition, as has been studied by scholars like Renard.⁴⁴ Therefore, the art being produced was circulated amongst the ordinary commoners and had no exclusive audience who judged it based on any arbitrarily aesthetic criterion.

However, in all the scholarship that has been produced to explore the aesthetics of the art springing forth from Sufism, the emphasis remains on beauty or goodness which we have seen has remained an impediment in including “negative aesthetics” within the fold of aesthetic theory. For example, Nasr, when describing a musical instrument crafted by Muslim craftsmen, notes “The beauty of the visible form of the instrument is to complement the sonoral beauty it produces through its interiorizing and inebriating music.”⁴⁵ It is clear that “beauty” as an aesthetic category remains at the forefront of Nasr’s exploration which hinges itself on art being a form of divine remembrance and its beauty reflecting the divine. Another author who attempts to develop a theory of art produced broadly speaking in the Islamicate world and not exclusively within mysticism is Hanash, who removes it from an orientalist gaze and locates it within the worldview of Islam. His account also lapses into evaluating art based on “both beauty and practical usefulness.”⁴⁶ In another attempt at describing the Sufi aesthetics in the poetry of Ibn Arabi and Iraqi, Zargar highlights how their verses are mainly concerned with envisioning the divine in human forms and restricts his aesthetic study to “an evaluative experience of beauty.”⁴⁷ Muhammad Asghar who performed an ethnographic study of the aesthetic dimensions of domestic spaces in Punjab, Pakistan, between 2012 and 2014, also includes “Sufi poster art” in his observations as adding to the “aesthetic quality to the lifestyle of local people,”⁴⁸ where aesthetic is clearly being used in the sense of agreeable or pleasant.

Perhaps, one may turn to Jamal Elias who argues that discussion on Islamic art and visual culture, “are still concerned with highly abstract, philosophical aesthetic theories linking beauty to virtue rather than to embodied or somatic aspects of human experience.”⁴⁹ As discussed earlier, it might follow from linking aesthetics to embodied everyday experience that room is created for the negative aspects of such experiences as well. However, for Elias, the common focus in pre-modern literary aesthetics of the Islamicate world is the generation of wonderment.⁵⁰ For example, he mentions Ibn Sina’s emphasis on the “intrinsic aesthetic worth of the pleasurable sense of awe,” and the knowledge it generates.⁵¹ Thus Elias also does not venture into the domain of negative aesthetics and his focus reminds us of the discussion in the previous section, whereby

⁴³ Nasr, *Islamic Art & Spirituality*.

⁴⁴ Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam*.

⁴⁵ Nasr, *Islamic Art & Spirituality*, 156.

⁴⁶ Hanash, *The Theory of Islamic Art*, 2.

⁴⁷ Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, 6.

⁴⁸ Asghar, *The Sacred and the Secular*, 6.

⁴⁹ Elias, *Aisha’s Cushion*, 149.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

aesthetic categories which produce pleasure are preferred for the sake of a value-based or epistemological concern.

Although such studies are brilliant in their exposition of the underlying everyday and ordinary aesthetics in the non-Western tradition of Sufism, there remains a gap in such literature which does not account for marginalized aesthetic categories. In my article, I attempt to demonstrate how some Sufi poets incorporated these categories in their works and the value that creates in adding to our sensory experience by extending the field of the sensible.

4 Marginal and Mainstream: Merging of Two Seas?

Before I begin to explore marginalized categories in the *Qalandari* tradition of Sufi poetry, it would be an important exercise to locate this tradition within both Persian poetry in particular and the cultural, political, and historical context of Sufism as a social phenomenon in general. This in turn will help me further deepen my hermeneutic attempt at unravelling the aesthetics of marginals in the samples that I will present to the reader. As Shahzad Bashir argues for texts to be treated as historical objects “holding complex places in the social relations of the times in which they were produced,”⁵² this section will similarly aim to place the *Qalandari* poetry samples that will follow it within the larger forces constituting it.

First, I will turn to the tradition of Persian poetry which housed within itself the capacity to accommodate marginal aesthetic categories because of the longstanding custom of ribald literature which presented sexual and sensuous details to its readers. Even though such details were generally considered impious or immodest by the premodern general population they were presented before, their presence in Persian poetry, especially poetry that was written by renowned Sufi mystics of their age, was not considered anomalous. Jabbari points out that such poetry was composed by poets of spiritual fame such as Sa’di but the fact that later hagiographers did not make a note of them was an indication of how they were considered conventional and normal.⁵³ Not only was such poetry the norm, but its aesthetic angle was to produce a “social satire” aimed at hypocritical behaviour,⁵⁴ a feature that stands out for it feeds into the representation of non-dominant social categories. Many of the poets who engaged in this stream of poetry, which traces itself back to the Arabic tradition of *hazl*, were courtly poets writing for elites and princes but that did not deter them from aiming at moral or political satire such as Abu Nuwas.⁵⁵ This goes to show how marginal aesthetics were not considered impossible to assimilate and might have bolstered the subsequent usage of *Qalandari* tropes which defied social norms and mainstream culture. Even though these Persian poets were mainstream in their social and political standing, that did not mean that they were not occasionally paddling in marginal waters.

Next, I would like to focus on Sufism as a collective social phenomenon which had morphed into a religious “establishment” by medieval and early modern periods in the Islamic world.⁵⁶ According to Nile Green, “anti-normative and socially marginal Sufi groups... (as in the case of the medieval *qalandar* movement)” were able to breach social norms and get away with it, mainly due to the power and prestige mainstream Sufism enjoyed.⁵⁷ However, their power was not limited to state and courtly audiences, as they were central to the life of commoners as well through their outreach and between the period 1100 and 1500, they had gained the status of “dominant religious authorities.”⁵⁸ This shows how the image of Sufism as “heterodoxy” in modern popular culture is misleading for a study of a historical Sufi text, because Sufism

⁵² Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 4.

⁵³ Jabbari, *The Making of Persianate Modernity*, 83.

⁵⁴ Rakowiecka-Asgari, “The Mimesis of Transgression,” 154.

⁵⁵ Tourage, *Rumi*, 15.

⁵⁶ Green, *Sufism*, 6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

remained “an integral and crucial part of the complex intellectual and sociocultural histories of Islamic societies.”⁵⁹

However, the idea of a mainstream institutional Sufism does not negate the presence of internal marginalized groups because, as a social collective, the Sufis were not a homogenous monolithic body. Within Sufism, there were many Sufis who remained averse to contact with political and social elites and preferred to remain on the margins. Karamustafa has explained these movements which remained marginalized as “a kind of renunciation that emerged and spread in Islamdom during the Later Middle Period (ca. 600–900/1200–1500).”⁶⁰ It must be noted though that this socially deviant renunciation “exercised a strong attraction on the hearts and minds of many Muslim intellectuals.”⁶¹ Thus, scholars such as Karamustafa make a strong case for not creating imaginary boundaries between mainstream elitist Sufis and the marginalized ones. Even though the latter were in effect a reactionary movement against the former, Karamustafa demonstrates that their relationship could be characterized as “antagonism...accompanied by respect, at times even admiration.”⁶²

Therefore, I would argue for Sufism in the early modern period to be a “merging of two seas.” There were numerous cases of polarization amongst the mainstream and marginal Sufis but that does not mean a fluidity did not exist. Rather, creating the binaries of mainstream and marginal would be a disservice to the internal variegations of this tradition, which accommodated many figures who cannot be decisively categorized into either category, for example, Rumi, whose poetry we will explore in the next section. As Karamustafa notes, Rumi’s spiritual order (the *Mevleviye*) is generally studied in light of their relations to political elites, but it remains a resounding fact that his order displayed both tendencies: “the arm of Veled” and “the arm of Shams.”⁶³ The former adhered to the tradition of Rumi’s son Sultan Veled and his conformism whereas the latter were the socially deviants following in the footsteps of Rumi’s wandering dervish mentor, Shams of Tabriz. Another example of a poet who escapes neat categorizations is Fariduddin Attar, who “eschewed court life” but nonetheless composed *Elahinama*, a work that was similar in its practical ethics approach to the courtly genre of “mirrors for princes.”⁶⁴ Similarly Hafez, whose poetry samples will follow in the next section was known to be a court poet who received patronage throughout his life, yet he also performed social critique of the established social order through his poetry⁶⁵ because, as Brookshaw notes, not all poetry produced by court poets was for courtly performance.⁶⁶

Hence, as the earlier discussion has shown, reading Sufi poetry especially the poetry which represents marginalized aesthetics needs to be done within its social, political, and historical context but we need not employ binary categorizations to understand these texts. Finally, before we begin exploring the *Qalandari* poetry in the next section, I would like to clarify that my reading of the marginalized social identities in these texts does not strip this literature of the significance and power it enjoyed due to institutional Sufism. The marginal *Qalandari* tradition remained implicated with the larger mainstream Sufi tradition. For example, Shahzad Bashir makes the case for how “poetic rhetoric of interaction between lovers and beloveds” as the metaphor for a Sufi master–disciple relationship served to cement “the construction of large-scale Sufi communities.”⁶⁷ Nile Green also argues for the appropriation of Persian Sufi poetry by Sufis for community outreach and wider appeal:

The larger point is that such poems owed their aesthetic as well as social power to the multiple ways in which their meanings could be understood. For the very ambiguity and double-entendre of the passionate performance of such sung poetry lent the Sufis a highly effective means of community outreach and propaganda.⁶⁸

⁵⁹ Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 11.

⁶⁰ Karamustafa, *God’s Unruly Friends*, 2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 99.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁶⁴ Dabiri, “When a Lion is Chided by an Ant,” 68.

⁶⁵ Brookshaw, *Hafiz and His Contemporaries*, 10.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁶⁷ Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 21.

⁶⁸ Green, *Sufism*, 106.

Paying attention to this relationship between mainstream and marginal can eventually help us develop a more nuanced understanding of marginalized aesthetics in these texts.

More precisely, my article will argue for not removing the inherent tension that exists between the marginal and mainstream. As Lipton has shown in his hierarchy-based interpretation of Ibn Arabi's poetry, even when he accounts for the superiority of *sharia* law in Ibn Arabi's thought, he still leaves room for a "dialectical tension between outward and inward, sobriety and ecstasy, and transcendence and immanence that indelibly marks Ibn 'Arabi's theomonistic language-game."⁶⁹ My interpretation of these historical Sufi texts will not subsume the marginal under the mainstream in its dominant social power games because I will show how the representation of the marginal in *Qalandari* poetry, much like the *Qalandari* movement in real life did not seek to replace the dominant social order or to reform it.⁷⁰ Notwithstanding other forms of Sufi art which might have served a reformist or subjectification agenda, *qalandari* poetry incorporates negative aesthetics as it is and not for the sake of producing a positive through it. Shahzad Bashir uses paintings that were exclusively produced for the elite to demonstrate how Sufi ideas were crucial in the subjectification of the ruling classes,⁷¹ and Dabiri highlights the mirror for princes genre to prove that the inclusion of marginalized identities or characters in Attar's *Elahinama* was to design a discourse of instruction for the addressed princes.⁷² Unlike the aforementioned, the portrayal of marginalized social identities in *qalandari* poetry serves to be a vehicle of expression for including the marginal in mainstream discourse *on its own terms*: a move that we shall see is crucial for Ordinary Aesthetics and its inclusion of negative aesthetics.

5 The *Qalandar* on the Margins: Hafez's Infamy and Rumi's Play-thing

Sufism has a rich history in Persian poetry, where it left a mark through hallmark figures such as Sa'di and Jami. For the sake of this article, we will explore certain verses of Rumi and Hafez with the aim of understanding how they portrayed negative aesthetics in their poetry. While the latter is a much-revered figure universally as well as within the Islamicate tradition for he left behind a corpus of religiously framed poetry appreciated worldwide and locally in his followers of the Mevlevi order, the former remains controversial in terms of whether he really was affiliated with Sufism or was a "libertine."⁷³ The theme we will be exploring is a longstanding tradition in Persian Sufi poetry of which the *Qalandar* is a recurring motif. It is the construction and portrayal of a specific identity: the outcast who remains on the fringes of society.

It is interesting to note that the *Qalandari* tradition in poetry was mirrored via historical movements in real life that relied on social deviance as an act of renunciation. Karamustafa has traced the origins of such movements and concluded that the establishment of regional empires historically led to more established forms of these movements such as the *Chishtiyah Qalandariyah*.⁷⁴ These movements incorporated "outrageous dress codes,"⁷⁵ as well as other rituals such as "dance and music."⁷⁶ Although Karamustafa believes that the *qalandar* in literature is a lone individual, he does lay open the possibility of correlating these literary figures and tropes to their actual counterparts.⁷⁷ As an example, he cites Rumi's knowledge of and contact with contemporary *qalandars* and supports this with a verse regarding the *qalandars* from Rumi's *Mathnawi*.⁷⁸

⁶⁹ Lipton, *Rethinking Ibn 'Arabi*, "An Ontology of God or 'Religion'."

⁷⁰ Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends*, 13.

⁷¹ Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 19.

⁷² Dabiri, "When a Lion is Chided by an Ant," 66.

⁷³ Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, 6.

⁷⁴ Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends*, 6.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

In literary studies, scholars such as Seyed-Gohrab have studied the deliberate provocations used by Sufi poets in their *qalandari* themes of a “wandering dervish” or “vagabond” who openly provokes orthodoxy.⁷⁹ The first poet to initiate this theme in Persian Sufi poetry is believed to be Sana’i.⁸⁰ This aspect of Sufi poetry served to overturn the dominant aesthetics by bringing to fore those which were traditionally ignored or shunned. As Seyed-Gohrab notes:

Through their positive interpretation of places such as Christian cloister and tavern, and accoutrements such as the bell and belt, mystics created a strong ambiguity, seriously questioning the piety of religious Islamic scholars. The centrality of the Qalandari motifs created an ambiguous space in which the concept of piety could be appraised.⁸¹

As noted earlier, Rancièrian aesthetics can help us understand how such an identity which is deemed not worthy of seeing or listening to is excluded from aesthetic appreciation in society. However, the deliberate presentation of these identities in Rumi and Hafez’s poetry points to a leaning towards negative aesthetics: the often ignored and marginalized categories.

Take for example, the following quatrain from Hafez:

گر همچو من افتاده این دام شوی
ای بس که خراب باده و جام شوی
ما عاشق و رند و مست و عالم سوزیم
با ما منشین اگر نه بدنام شوی

If like me, you have fallen into a trap
O you, who has been destroyed by wine and drinking
We will burn the lover, wayward, drunkard and the whole world
Do not sit with us, if you are not infamous!⁸²

By portraying destruction, drinking, and infamy, Hafez clearly wants to bring to the reader a portrait of an outcast, someone who has shunned social conformity and has been shunned themselves. It is worthwhile to remember here as noted earlier that Hafez was a part of the social orthodoxy for he remained a court poet throughout his entire life. However, he deliberately made use of the ambiguity referred to earlier by Seyed-Gohrab, which is why Lewis credits him with transforming the ghazal into a “deep, complex meditation, at once carnal, socio-political, and mystical.”⁸³ This clearly shows his poetry was not elitist as he regularly indulged in satire against the dominant religious and social orthodoxy. We can also rule out the possibility of it being reformist as he has not been known to have formally joined any organized Sufi order,⁸⁴ which could have propelled him to take up an instructional attitude towards the elite. Hence, we may turn to his texts for underscoring the treatment of marginalized aesthetics in Persian Sufi poetry, *on their own terms*.

Returning to the quatrain, we can observe that while drinking has remained an oft-employed motif in Persian poetry and in Sufi interpretations it has been equated to the inebriation experienced in Divine love;⁸⁵ for our concerns we are not considering the meaning of the metaphor as it will lead us back to the agreeable forms of aesthetics through the sanctity of Divine love in society. We are concerned instead in the poet’s evoking of the reader’s senses in a provocative way, namely the recourse to infamy. For the infamous are the social category of the marginalized and the aesthetic of their identity presentation suffers from social rejection. The example that we chose from Hafez also challenges and subsequently broadens the dominant scope of sensibility which social policing might curtail by not just including the socially marginalized within it but also advocating for it as a criterion for the poet’s companionship.

⁷⁹ Seyed-Gohrab, “Sufism in Classical Persian Poetry,” 190.

⁸⁰ Lewis, “Reading, Writing & Recitation,” 364–9.

⁸¹ Seyed-Gohrab, “Sufism in Classical Persian Poetry,” 191.

⁸² Quatrain no. 42 from Rubaiyat of Hafez, author’s own translation.

⁸³ Lewis in Brookshaw, *Hafiz and His Contemporaries*, 12.

⁸⁴ Brookshaw, *Hafiz and His Contemporaries*, 12.

⁸⁵ Pourjavady, “Love and the Metaphors of Wine,” 126.

Another example, from Rumi's poetry will suffice to present this dominant theme of *qalandariyat* in Persian Sufi poetry. As noted earlier, Rumi defies a neat categorization of mainstream or marginal Sufi. This is nowhere more apparent than in his two major works: the *Diwan* and the *Mathnawi*. The former consists of quatrains and short poems and served to "summon the ecstatic 'finding' (*tawajjud*) of God" employed in musical settings,⁸⁶ which were characteristic of socially deviant groups as explained before, whereas the latter was longer narrative poems which served to disseminate mainstream Sufi doctrine.⁸⁷ It was in the former that Rumi fully employed his wit and mastery for developing ambiguous spaces and Nile Green claims that by his time the Persian lyric had developed into a medium for "daring ideas."⁸⁸ Rumi dared fiercely and found, "transgression of rules, be they literary, linguistic, psychological or social, a liberating experience," which made, "challenging taboos into the sole rule of his poetry and continues to surprise even scholars who have devoted their lives to the study of his work."⁸⁹

His quatrain that I have chosen emphasizes Rumi's portrayal of his own identity as an outcast, even though we know that historically Rumi was not amongst the marginalized by dint of being a well-respected theologian. However, this deliberate attempt at casting himself as one shows the extent to which he wants to include it and value it in his discourse. He says:

زاهد بودم ترانه گویم کردی
سر فتنه بزم و باده خویم کردی
سجاده نشین با وقاری بودم
بازچه کودکان کویم کردی

I was an ascetic, you made me sing
You made me a drunkard and a source of ruckus in gatherings
You saw me sitting on the prayer mat with poise
And you turned me into a play-thing for the children in my street!⁹⁰

Here readers can observe the sense that Rumi creates in the aesthetics of his poetry which becomes the expression to represent the marginalized identities in society. In his efforts to do so, he maps his spiritual journey from one of "poise" – an aesthetic category synonymous with the categories of beauty, truth, goodness – to a status of becoming a mere "play-thing" for children, a category which is socially construed as inferior. Clearly, his words are meant to provoke and shift the dominant sensibilities in society by including himself in the marginalized who are traditionally excluded.

As Seyed-Gohrab has observed, this theme of *qalandariyat* was not exclusive to Persian poetry and soon the influence spread from north-eastern Persia to Anatolia and India⁹¹; therefore we will now turn to two other poets from the South Asian region who have incorporated similar aesthetics in their poetry.

6 The *Qalandars* as Marginals of South Asia: Bulleh Shah and Shah Hussain

Before we begin, it is important to refer to the socio-political context of Punjabi Sufi poetry, especially against the backdrop of marginal and mainstream Sufism to understand the depiction of marginal identities. In South Asia, there were differing manifestations of Sufism across the whole region. According to Nile Green, the two main Sufi orders *Chishti* and *Naqshbandi*

⁸⁶ Green, *Sufism*, 107.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 107–8.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁸⁹ Rakowiecka-Asgari, "The Mimesis of Transgression," 150.

⁹⁰ Rumi, Quatrain no. 1890 from *Diwan-e-Shams*, Rubaiyat. Author's own translation.

⁹¹ Seyed-Gohrab, "Sufism in Classical Persian Poetry," 190.

espoused very different approaches to basic questions of wealth and organization, practice and doctrine. The one avoided rulers, sought God through music and accommodated Hindus while the other cultivated connections at court, condemned music and regularly promoted *jihād* against infidels.⁹²

This represents the similar dialectic that we earlier discussed between mainstream and marginal Sufism, and this flowed into the Sufi poetry that was locally being produced as well. However, here also caution must be exercised for creating any bifurcations amongst the Sufis. As Rizvi notes, even the Sufis in South Asia who were “politically aloof” continued to support the ruling Emperor,⁹³ and the traditional Chishti order which largely refrained from elite circles was considered patrons for the Muslim ruling class.⁹⁴ Another historian details how one of the earlier Chishti shaykhs Nizamuddin Awliya developed strained relations with the then emperor. He attributes one possible cause to be the former’s love for *sama* (music) and the accompanying *raqs* (dance) which was looked down upon by scholars in the religious establishment.⁹⁵ Thus, in the South Asian context as well, it can be surmised that marginal Sufis existed alongside the mainstream ones and generally there was a fluidity which we explained earlier. Amidst such a backdrop, Sufi art and culture was an integral part of the dominant orthodoxy, but the *qalandari* theme in local poetry reflected the socially deviant groups that brought in negative aesthetics *on their own terms*.

The first in the poets I wish to discuss was an eighteenth century Punjabi poet endearingly known among the masses of South Asia as Bulleh Shah. Like most of other Punjabi Sufi poets, he belonged to the *Qadiriyyah*, a spiritual order whose followers wrote poetry suffused with local metaphors such as romantic figures to produce ecstasy.⁹⁶ His poetry characterized a space for the “marginalized characters of society and history” and the “rebel-lovers” that it created “do not adhere to the norms of caste, community, and religion. Rather they condemn such affiliations.”⁹⁷ Furthermore, the *qalandariyat* that flowed into South Asia from the western parts of the Islamic world was met with a confluence of local cultures which meant the resulting concoction was an outlying aesthetic in front of the dominant religious orthodoxy. Karamustafa observes that the socially deviant practices of movements like the *qalandariyyah* usually resulted in becoming the building blocks of “a new Islamic synthesis.”⁹⁸ In the case of South Asia, Suvorova refers to the *qalandar* as the “mendicant saint” and describes how objects of pre-Islamic worship were “imparted to the Muslim saints” and as an example hypothesizes Lal Shahbaz Qalandar’s dance to be a replica of local god Shiva’s cosmic dance.⁹⁹

An appreciation of the eclectic nature of Sufi poetry and praxis in this region also aids in understanding how these poets were attempting to present the marginalized or otherized identities in their words. Take for instance the following verses from a poem by Bulleh Shah:

رائیں سائیں سبھنیں تھائیں رب دیاں بے پروائیاں
سوھنیاں پرے ہٹائیاں تے کوچھیاں لے گل لائیاں

Arayeen (a local caste) and *Sayeen* (a respected nobleman) are all equal as the Lord is indifferent (to status)
Remove the beautiful and embrace the ugly!¹⁰⁰

In a move that radically alters and shifts the perspective on the notoriously endearing aesthetic category of “beauty,” Bulleh Shah invokes the reader to shun this aesthetic and instead “embrace” the marginalized “ugly.” Such a radical step might seem rebellious, or a step taken too far, but in its context of provoking the status quo in society, it works to provide an impetus to the reader for reevaluating their field of their sensibilities. Such a

⁹² Green, *Sufism*, 91.

⁹³ Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 370.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 368.

⁹⁵ Islam, *Sufism in South Asia*, 249.

⁹⁶ Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 437.

⁹⁷ Gaur, “*Lover-Martyrs*,” 225.

⁹⁸ Karamustafa, *God’s Unruly Friends*, 11.

⁹⁹ Suvorova, *Muslim Saints of South Asia*, 187.

¹⁰⁰ Author’s own translation. The Punjabi verses in this article are not referenced as this local poetry has been passed on orally in the form of singing and recitation and no formal records exist.

view does not include the “ugly” or other disagreeable and unpleasant categories to find value through them in terms of their contribution to knowledge or sparking an active response for “improving” them, it does so to simply acknowledge and appreciate the often ignored, rejected, and shunned in society.

Another example of a Punjabi Sufi poet writing to represent marginalized aesthetics is Shah Hussain, who is locally referred to as Madhu Lal Hussain. Living in the sixteenth century, his life as a lowly cotton spinner’s son and later, even after his death, his annual death anniversary festival at his tomb as a culmination or melting pot of multiple cultural sensibilities mark him as an outlier in the face of tradition. For the sake of this article, I wanted to focus on one aspect of his poetry, which is the use of feminine voice.

The use of the feminine voice in poetry of South Asia has been extensively documented and studied, with its roots traced back to Bhakti and Hindu devotional poetry.¹⁰¹ Keeping with this tradition, Hussain also generously used this method of vocalizing his thoughts and kept referring to himself as a female as in the following example:

مینوں امیڑ جو آکھدی کت نی
 مینوں بھولی جو آکھدی کت نی
 میں نج کنن نوں سکھی اں
 مینوں رہی نہ کوئی مت نی

My mother asks me to spin the cotton
 My naïve one, asks me to spin the cotton
 I have learnt to spin my own self
 And have lost all senses!¹⁰²

It might not be obvious in the translation, but the addressing pronoun used (نی) in Punjabi is employed by women when talking amongst themselves, showing how Hussain is gendering himself as a female. This literary technique has been termed “vocal masquerade” by Petievich, who attributed it to an attempt at representing “lived experiences of women.”¹⁰³ Other authors such as Gelinias have linked it to a Ricoeurian “mimesis”: a creative imitation to explore the “as if”¹⁰⁴ or “the capacity for the intense emotion” that Hawley and Juergenseymer argue were thought of as “the particular province of women” by the poets and their cultural milieu.¹⁰⁵ Whichever interpretation is ascribed to Hussain’s feminine voice, what remains common is the usage of the feminine to foreground a marginalized segment in society. Whether the feminine was marginalized in terms of their lived experiences as they were within private spaces distant from public eyes, or as the “other” for the dominating patriarchy or simply for their emotionality which was considered exclusive to them as a social identity, Hussain’s poetry becomes a vehicle to include the marginalized or excluded categories in common sensibility.

It is interesting to note how the *qalandari* tradition in Sufi poetry is able to expand the horizons of its readers’ sensibilities beyond the dominant discourse in society and thus it offers its readers the ability to sense aesthetic categories that are often ignored. What is more, it not only brings attention to these categories but also radically advocates for their prioritization over the agreeable or pleasant ones. This is rooted in the *qalandari* ethos, which prefers to remain on the margins, away from the limelight. Now that we have explored different examples from this tradition, albeit in a precursory manner, I would now like to turn to the implications it creates for the modern study of Ordinary Aesthetics.

7 Conclusion: Marginality, Ordinariness, and New Horizons

Returning to the introductory account of Rumi’s “ordinary fools,” to state that the “ordinary” is deeply enmeshed with the “fool” (being referred to as a negative aesthetic category here) would not be an

¹⁰¹ Anjum, *The Virahinī Motif*, 64.

¹⁰² Author’s own translation.

¹⁰³ Petievich, *When Men Speak as Women*, 19.

¹⁰⁴ Gelinias, “Articulating Ontologies of the Everyday,” 101.

¹⁰⁵ Hawley and Juergenseymer, “Mirabai,” 119.

understatement. Throughout this article, we have observed how to turn to the ordinary, regular, and everyday aspects of aesthetic theory would require acknowledging all parts of it – including the ones which are not so pleasant or agreeable. For to ignore the unpleasant and disagreeable is to ignore a large section of human experiences. Likewise, to ignore the “fools” is to render a disservice to any study of the “ordinary” because after all for Rumi they form most of the people dwelling in an exalted place as paradise and for any aestheticist they are part of, if not most of, the human sensorium.

If we were to take the interpretation that Bashir employs for Sufi paintings becoming a subjectification tool, or that Dabiri highlights to understand marginalized categories in Sufi literature as serving reformist agendas, Rumi’s fools would become secondary as their primary purpose would be to offer a social or moral critique of “those endowed with intelligence.” As discussed earlier, ignoring such a socio-political framing of *Qalandari* Sufi literature and its implication with the mainstream is not our objective. Rather, my aim has been to show how notwithstanding these motives, mechanisms, and agendas, another important effect of this stream of poetry has been to bring our attention to those aspects of the human sensorium that remain largely overshadowed by the mainstream.

The designated charge for Ordinary Aestheticists then becomes to include categories such as the “fools” in their discourse, which has been accomplished to some degree. In my article, I hoped to have shown how the actual feat lies in not only describing and exploring these categories but also in appreciating their value for their *own sake* and not for any moral, epistemological, or value-based concern.

The greatest consequence in following such a course of study would be to stretch the boundaries of our sensibilities, by reevaluating the boundaries enforced via social roles and identities. For when we shift our focus from those identities who are audible and visible in the current field of sensibility to those who are not, we would be able to witness the “part of those who have no part.”¹⁰⁶ In Rancièrian terms, such an act is political, whereby politics here refers to emancipatory politics that challenges the status quo. That is why Tolia-Kelly proposes a “*redistribution* of the sensible” which creates spaces “where the palette of sanctioned sensibilities shifts ground to be refigured to incorporate ‘other’ sensibilities and affective expressive politics.”¹⁰⁷

The *qalandari* theme of Sufi poetry fashions itself through these very “other” sensibilities. As seen in the examples shared in this article, *qalandariyat* represents the tradition of incorporating negative aesthetic categories – by focusing on those social roles and identities which remain marginalized in the social order and hence are associated with the “negative” by their exclusion from common sensibilities. Whether it is the “infamous” for Hafez, or the one fallen from “poise” in Rumi, or the “ugly” in Bulleh Shah or the often overlooked feminine in Shah Hussain, all are portrayed to prod and push the boundaries of which identities dominate sensibilities. This becomes an enterprising endeavour because it emplaces sensibilities in and towards those who are “out of place.” It is this being “out of place” that Rancière champions as politics (being used in the sense of emancipatory politics here)¹⁰⁸ and Highmore has suggested to have tremendous significance because it can “alter the realm of the sensible.”¹⁰⁹ The sensible realm that forms the “sensory fabric” of our social life and defines our ways of “being together,” according to Rancière.¹¹⁰ Thus, changing this sensory fabric has consequences for the ways society is structured and functions.

Keeping this framework of altering the sensory fabric in mind, the strident nature of these “out of place” portrayals in Sufi poetry makes sense for it is meant to rescind the pleasant and agreeable aesthetic categories of the good, truthful, and beautiful. This does not imply a reversal of social roles or identities, whereby the marginalized receive priority and a new police order is instated which performs to regulate newer hierarchies. It simply entails an acknowledgement and appreciation of those who never received it and as a result may add to our sensibilities and perceptions what could not have been fathomed in the police order.

¹⁰⁶ Rancière, *Dissensus*, 38.

¹⁰⁷ Tolia-Kelly, “Rancière and the Re-Distribution of the Sensible,” 127.

¹⁰⁸ Rancière, “The Thinking of Dissensus,” 4.

¹⁰⁹ Highmore, “Out of Place,” 107.

¹¹⁰ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 56.

This I believe is the true promise of the negative aesthetics in Sufi poetics. Through its reappraisal of marginalized social roles and identities, it can impart an ethos that can engage with negative aesthetic categories *on their own terms*. If taken seriously, this may usher in newer possibilities for sensory experiences – experiences that were once lying on the margins but could develop into the centre or form a completely new orbit of their own.

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