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Between Form and Flame Hegel, Bulleh Shah, and the Mystical Dialectic of Existence

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Abstract

This article develops a cross-civilizational account of existence by placing G. W. F. Hegel's dialectical philosophy in dialogue with the Sufi metaphysics of Bulleh Shah, read through his kalam Behad Ramza Dasda. Reconstructing two genealogies of thought—from Plato to Hegel and from Ibn Arabi and Rumi to Bulleh Shah—the paper argues that both traditions conceive the self not as a static substance but as a site of becoming, constituted through negation, relation, and participation in an Absolute. Hegel's account of self-consciousness and Absolute Spirit is brought into comparison with Bulleh Shah's motifs of fanā–baqā, Ahad/Ahmad, Alif/Meem, and the Divine play of conflict (Musa and Pharaoh, believer and unbeliever). While Hegel seeks rational reconciliation of contradiction, Bulleh Shah foregrounds mystical bewilderment, treating paradox as the privileged space of encounter with the Beloved. The article concludes that their structural convergences and divergences support a deprovincialized metaphysics in which conceptual dialectic and symbolic kalam emerge as complementary modes of articulating existence as an unfolding unity of self, world, and Absolute.

Keywords: *Hegel, Bulleh Shah, Sufism, Dialectics, Existence.*

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1. Introduction

What does it mean for the self to exist, and how is that existence related to an Absolute? This question has animated both Western and Eastern intellectual traditions, yet these traditions are often narrated as if they developed in isolation. In the standard story, Western philosophy moves from Plato to G. W. F. Hegel, culminating in sophisticated accounts of subjectivity, dialectics, and Spirit (Redding, 1996). Islamic and Sufi metaphysics, by contrast, are typically positioned on a different shelf—from Ibn Arabi to Bulleh Shah—and associated with mystical unity, love, and devotional practice rather than with systematic ontology (Chittick, 2008; Abbas, 2016). The result is a fragmentation in which "philosophy" is tacitly coded as Western and conceptual, while Sufism is relegated to spirituality or literature. This article challenges that division by staging a direct philosophical dialogue between Hegel and Bulleh Shah on the nature of existence and the self.

On the Western side, Hegel appears as the inheritor of debates about appearance and reality, phenomena and noumena, subject and object. In the Phenomenology of Spirit, he reconceives the self as a process of becoming: consciousness passes through stages of conflict, "unhappy consciousness," and mutual recognition on its way to Absolute Spirit, where thought and being are grasped as moments of a single rational whole (Hegel, 1977; Maybee, 2016). Selfhood is essentially relational and dialectical; it comes to itself only through its others. On the Sufi side, Ibn Arabi's doctrine of the "Unity of Being" (waḥdat al-wujūd) and his notion of the Perfect Human (al-insān al-kāmil) articulate an ontology in which only God truly is, while the cosmos consists of Divine self-disclosures in manifold forms (Chittick, 2008). Later Sufi poets such as Rumi translate this metaphysics into an affective language of love and separation, in which all creatures long to return to the Beloved (Bilen, 2018). Bulleh Shah localizes these themes in Punjabi vernacular poetry, using letters, everyday scenes, and religious conflicts to dramatize the presence of the Divine in every form (Abbas, 2016; Alam & Rao, 2023).

Even though each tradition has been studied in depth on its own, very little work has brought Hegel and Sufi thinkers such as Bulleh Shah into sustained, text-by-text conversation. Comparative philosophy has tended either to focus on East–Asian/Western encounters or to treat "mysticism" in sweeping generalities, without a rigorous, close reading of specific figures and their ontological architectures (Wong, 2001). Hegel is still frequently cast within a Eurocentric narrative of philosophical progress, while Sufi poets are more often approached as cultural or religious icons than as theorists of existence in their own right (Redding, 1996; Abbas, 2016). This disciplinary compartmentalization obscures deep structural affinities— for example, between Hegel's account of Absolute Spirit and Bulleh Shah's vision of the faceless Beloved beneath the meem—and makes it difficult to imagine a genuinely cross-civilizational metaphysics.

This article addresses that gap by developing a comparative hermeneutic of existence that reads Hegel's conceptual dialectic alongside Bulleh Shah's symbolic kalam, with Behad Ramza Dasda as the focal Sufi text. Methodologically, it aligns with recent calls in comparative philosophy and philosophical theology to move beyond superficial analogies or "influence hunting" and to engage instead in careful, bidirectional analysis of concepts, images, and argumentative structures (Wong, 2001; Clooney, 2010). Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit and relevant writings on religion are examined as a systematic

account of how self-consciousness and Spirit realize themselves through negation and reconciliation (Hegel, 1977; Maybee, 2016). Bulleh Shah's verses are treated not as ornament or sentiment, but as a dense symbolic ontology in which motifs such as fanā–baqā, Ahad/Ahmad, Alif/Meem, Anal-Haq, and the creation of "Musa and Pharaoh" enact a view of existence as a Divine play of hiddenness and manifestation (Rasool, 2020; Alam & Rao, 2023).

The central research question guiding this study is: How do Hegel and Bulleh Shah each conceptualize the self as a site of becoming, and to what extent can their accounts be understood as structurally convergent visions of unity between the human and the Absolute? Three subsidiary questions shape the argument. First, at the genealogical level: how do the trajectories leading from Plato to Hegel, and from Ibn Arabi and Rumi to Bulleh Shah, condition their respective understandings of existence and selfhood? Second, at the methodological level: in what ways do Hegel's conceptual–dialectical prose and Bulleh Shah's symbolic–poetic language function as distinct but comparable epistemic modes for articulating ontological insight? Third, at the comparative level: where do we find genuine structural convergence between Hegel's Absolute Spirit and Bulleh Shah's Beloved—the self realized through negation, contradiction, and self-transcendence—and where do irreducible differences remain, for example between Hegel's rational reconciliation of contradiction and Bulleh Shah's valorization of mystical bewilderment (ḥayra)?

The article makes three related contributions.. First, it deprovincializes Hegel, situating his account of selfhood and Absolute Spirit within a broader, cross-civilizational conversation, and thereby challenging the assumption that his system exhausts the philosophical grammar of existence (Houlgate, 2005). Second, it elevates Bulleh Shah's kalam to the level of philosophical discourse, arguing that Sufi poetic language operates as an implicit metaphysics—a performed ontology that can and should be read alongside conceptual systems (Chittick, 2000; Abbas, 2016; Alam & Rao, 2023). Third, it proposes a "mystical dialectic" of existence that spans both traditions: a vision of the self not as an isolated ego but as a dynamic site of relational becoming in which the boundaries between human and Divine are interrogated, destabilized, and reconfigured.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reconstructs the Western and Sufi genealogies of existence, from Plato to Hegel and from Ibn Arabi and Rumi to Bulleh Shah. Section 3 examines the different "languages of existence"—Hegel's conceptual dialectic and Sufi symbolic poetics—as two modes of ontological disclosure. Section 4 offers a close comparative reading of Hegel's self-consciousness and Absolute Spirit alongside key clusters of verses from Behad Ramza Dasda on fanā–baqā, manifestation, and conflict. Section 5 draws out the implications of this dialogue for contemporary debates on subjectivity, the status of religious language in philosophy, and the deprovincialization of metaphysics, while Section 6 concludes by outlining avenues for further cross-civilizational work on existence and the self.

2. Genealogies of Existence

2.1. From Plato to Hegel: Western Lineages of Self and Being

The Western lineage that culminates in Hegel's account of selfhood can be traced back to Plato, whose metaphysics of Forms introduces a foundational tension between the changing world of experience and an unchanging order of reality. In his middle-period dialogues,

especially the Phaedo and Republic, Plato distinguishes between the sensible realm of becoming and the intelligible realm of what truly is—Forms that exist auto kath' auto, in and of themselves (Silverman, 2003; Kraut, 2004). The sensible world participates in these Forms only imperfectly, so the task of the soul is to turn away from flux and orient itself toward stable intelligible being. This early separation between being and becoming sets the stage for later questions about how the self relates to what is ultimately real.

Already in Plato, the existential dimension is implicit: if what is most real is invisible and non-sensible, then the human self cannot be merely a bodily thing among other things; it must in some sense be akin to the reality it seeks to know. In cosmological dialogues such as the Timaeus, the world is described as the ordered result of a rational Demiurge imposing form on pre-existent chaos by imitating an eternal model (Silverman, 2003). The cosmos is intelligible because it is structured according to Forms, and the soul is intelligible because it participates, however imperfectly, in that same rational order. Later philosophy will transform, rather than discard, this basic pattern: the distinction between appearance and reality will be recast, for example, as the distinction between phenomena and noumena, or between what is mind-dependent and what is not.

A decisive shift occurs with early modern thinkers such as René Descartes. Descartes' famous cogito—"I think, therefore I am"—marks a turn from a metaphysics of external forms to a metaphysics grounded in the self's own consciousness. In works like the Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy, Descartes seeks indubitable certainty by systematically doubting everything that can be doubted, only to discover that while the existence of the external world may be questioned, the existence of the thinking self cannot (Hatfield, 2008; Newman, 1997). The self thus becomes the first principle of knowledge: a thinking substance distinct from extended bodily substance, characterized by inner awareness.

This Cartesian move introduces two themes that will be crucial for G. W. F. Hegel and for our later comparison with Bulleh Shah. First, existence is no longer primarily a matter of participating in transcendent Forms, but of being a subject that relates to itself in thought. Second, Descartes' mind–body dualism—according to which mind is an immaterial thinking substance and body an extended material substance—raises the problem of how a self can be both in the world and yet ontologically distinct from it (Hatfield, 2008; Newman, 1997). The self emerges as inward, reflective, and in a certain sense estranged from the very world it inhabits—a tension subsequent thinkers will attempt to overcome.

Immanuel Kant radicalizes this inward turn while also limiting it. In the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant's transcendental idealism argues that space and time are not properties of things in themselves but forms of our sensible intuition; the objects we know are appearances structured by the mind's own a priori categories, and we have no direct access to things as they are in themselves (Rohlf, 2010; Stang, 2016). The self, accordingly, is not a substance we can know as an object but the "transcendental unity of apperception"—the "I think" that must be able to accompany all our representations (Rohlf, 2010).

Kant thus maintains a strict distinction between phenomena and noumena, yet he locates the very possibility of objective experience in the synthesizing activity of the self. Existence, for the human subject, is experienced only within the structures contributed by this transcendental self; reality as it is "in itself" remains unknowable. The self is both central and

limited: central because all experience is mediated by its forms of intuition and categories, limited because it can never know itself—or the world—as they are in themselves. This tension between self-constituting activity and unknowable reality sets the immediate stage for Hegel's intervention (Pereboom, 2009; Rohlf, 2010).

With Hegel, the Kantian framework is at once appropriated and overcome. In the Phenomenology of Spirit, Hegel offers a developmental narrative in which consciousness, beginning with naïve sense-certainty, progressively comes to recognize that its categories and forms of knowing are not merely subjective, but expressions of the rational structure of reality itself (Redding, 1996). The sharp Kantian divide between phenomena and noumena is reconfigured: rather than positing an unknowable "thing in itself" behind appearances, Hegel argues that reality is Spirit (Geist), which comes to know itself through the very processes of consciousness, history, and social life (Redding, 1996; Maybee, 2016).

Crucially, self-consciousness emerges in Hegel not as a given property of an isolated subject, but as the result of a dialectical process in which the self encounters itself as an other. In the famous master–slave dialectic, self-consciousness discovers that it can attain a stable sense of itself only through recognition by another self-consciousness; subjectivity is thus inherently relational (Redding, 1996). Spirit realizes itself by passing through stages of alienation, conflict, and reconciliation, ultimately achieving Absolute knowing in which subject and object, thought and being, are understood as moments of a single dynamic whole (Maybee, 2016).

From the perspective of this genealogy, Hegel stands at a point where several earlier tensions converge and are transformed. Plato's distinction between appearance and true being is preserved but internalized: the difference between "mere appearance" and "truth" becomes a difference between inadequate and adequate forms of self-consciousness within Spirit's own development (Silverman, 2003; Redding, 1996). Descartes' discovery of the thinking self as indubitable is retained but stripped of its isolation: the self is now mediated by history, language, and social recognition rather than being an autonomous substance (Hatfield, 2008; Newman, 1997). Kant's transcendental subject, which organizes experience but cannot know things-in-themselves, becomes in Hegel a finite moment of Spirit's self-unfolding, destined to be aufgehoben (sublated) into a higher unity in which reality and rationality ultimately coincide (Rohlf, 2010; Redding, 1996).

What emerges is a vision of existence in which the self is not a static entity but a process: a becoming that moves through negation, contradiction, and reconciliation. To exist, for Hegel, is to participate in Spirit's self-realization, to be a moment in the Absolute's journey toward full self-knowledge (Redding, 1996; Maybee, 2016). Selfhood is thus essentially dialectical: it is constituted by its relations to what it is not, and it attains unity only by passing through division. This will become a crucial point of contact with Bulleh Shah's Sufi vision, in which the self likewise discovers its truth through annihilation (fana), paradox, and a return to the Beloved in whom difference and identity are mysteriously intertwined. Before we can stage that dialogue, however, we must reconstruct the Sufi genealogy from Ibn Arabi to Bulleh Shah, where existence is framed not in the language of Spirit and concept, but in that of Divine unity, love, and unveiling.

2.2. From Ibn Arabi to Bulleh Shah: Sufi Ontologies of Unity and Self

If the Western lineage from Plato to Hegel moves from Forms to Spirit, the Sufi lineage from

Ibn Arabi to Bulleh Shah moves from tawḥīd (Divine unity) to the intimate grammar of love, embodiment, and annihilation. Sufi metaphysics begins not from the problem of knowledge about an external world, but from the ontological primacy of God's Being and the question of how multiplicity can appear without compromising Divine unity. Classical Sufi doctrines such as waḥdat al-wujūd (Unity of Being) and waḥdat al-shuhūd (Unity of Witnessing) articulate different ways of safeguarding tawḥīd while accounting for the manifest diversity of the world (Hidayat, 2024).

Within this tradition, Ibn Arabi occupies a pivotal place. Although he did not himself frequently use the exact phrase waḥdat al-wujūd, later commentators have identified his work as its most influential formulation (Chittick, 2008). In his extensive corpus, Ibn Arabi develops an ontological vision in which only God truly "is," while the cosmos is understood as theophany—continuous self-disclosure of the Divine in infinitely varied forms. Existence (wujūd) belongs to God absolutely; created things possess only a borrowed or relative existence, like reflections in a mirror (Chittick, 2008; Mirzarakhimov, 2025). Recent work has revisited this ontology to clarify that waḥdat al-wujūd is not a crude monism erasing difference, but a subtle account of how multiplicity is rooted in a single, inexhaustible source—an account that remains influential in contemporary Sufi practice and philosophy (Hidayat, 2024; Bukhari, 2025).

Central to Ibn Arabi's thought is the notion of the Perfect Human (al-insān al-kāmil), the being in whom all Divine Names are most comprehensively reflected. The Perfect Human is not merely an ethical ideal but an ontological bridge: a barzakh, or isthmus, between the Absolute and the world (Chittick, 2008). Through this figure, the self is reimagined as a locus of Divine self-manifestation rather than an autonomous, self-grounding entity. Recent discussions highlight how this anthropology offers an alternative to modern individualism by construing human identity as fundamentally relational and participatory in the Divine, rather than self-enclosed (Hidayat, 2024; Alavijeh & Amjad, 2022). In this sense, Ibn Arabi anticipates a theme that will later resonate in Bulleh Shah: the self achieves its truth not by asserting independence from God, but by realizing its dependence as the very site of Divine appearing.

The themes of unity and self-manifestation are taken up and re-expressed with a different emphasis in the poetry of Rumi. For Rumi, love (ʿishq) is not merely an emotion but the fundamental ontological force that moves all beings toward their source. His Masnavi repeatedly portrays creation as a drama of separation and return, in which every creature longs to reunite with the Beloved from whom it has become estranged (Bilen, 2018; Mutlag, 2022). Recent ontological readings of Rumi emphasize that, for him, Being and world are inseparable from this dynamic of love: the cosmos is a mirror in which God contemplates Himself, and love is the energy of this self-contemplation (Alavijeh & Amjad, 2022; Farman et al., 2025). Ontology here is already affective and relational; to exist is to be caught up in the movement of love that simultaneously reveals and veils the Beloved.

This Rūmian thematics of love, unity, and self-effacement flows, in transformed form, into the Punjabi Sufi milieu of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in which Bulleh Shah writes. Situated in a context marked by religious plurality, caste hierarchies, and political upheaval, Bulleh Shah uses vernacular kalam to articulate a vision of existence that is at once metaphysical, ethical, and social (Abbas, 2023; Rasool, 2020). His poetry consistently undermines rigid religious boundaries—moving freely between mosque and temple, mullah

and qaazi, Muslim and non-Muslim—and instead foregrounds the presence of the Divine in every face and form. Recent studies stress his egalitarian and humanistic emphasis: Bulleh Shah's negation of the ego (nafs) is inseparable from his critique of social stratification and his call to recognize a shared spiritual humanity (Abbas, 2023).

At the metaphysical level, Bulleh Shah inherits and localizes the doctrine of Divine unity in a dense symbolic vocabulary. Poems that play on letters such as Alif and Meem, or that invoke Qur'anic motifs like kun fa-yakūn ("Be! and it is") and the verse of lan tarānī ("you shall not see Me"), dramatize the paradox of a God who is both faceless and present in every face. The Beloved "lives under the meem," veiled yet intimately near; the Divine is said to become Ahmad and Muhammad, to appear in forms such as the Prophet, the saint, the lover, and even the unbeliever. In this way, the ontological monism of Ibn Arabi is translated into a lived phenomenology of disguise, unveiling, and recognition (Zahid, 2021).

Contemporary scholarship has begun to read Bulleh Shah's verse not only as devotional poetry but as a site of philosophical reflection. Analyses of his religious universalism show how he dissolves rigid communal boundaries by insisting that the Divine is equally present in Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim spaces, thereby articulating a "mystic plurality" grounded in the unity of Being (Rasool, 2020). Eco-critical and sociological readings highlight how his metaphors of nature, gender, and everyday life encode a radical critique of domination and a call to return to unity (Rasool, 2020; Zahid, 2021). What remains less explored, however— and what this paper seeks to develop—is Bulleh Shah's implicit ontology of the self: a self that is simultaneously annihilated in God (fanā) and rediscovered as a transparent locus of Divine presence.

In this Sufi genealogy, then, existence is consistently framed as a movement from apparent separation to realized unity. Ibn Arabi gives this movement a systematic metaphysical expression in the language of waḥdat al-wujūd and the Perfect Human; Rumi gives it an affective and narrative expression in the language of love and separation; Bulleh Shah gives it a vernacular and symbolic expression in the language of letters, masks, and everyday life. Across these figures, the self is never an isolated substance; it is a mirror, a barzakh, a lover, a mask—always already related to an Absolute whose Being is the ground of its own (Chittick, 2008; Hidayat, 2024; Rasool, 2020).

This ontological drama reaches one of its most concentrated formulations in Bulleh Shah's kalam Behad Ramza Dasda . Here the Divine is described as faceless yet ceaselessly taking on faces: hidden in Ahad yet manifest as Ahmad, veiled "under the meem," praying in the mosque yet dwelling in the idol-house, appearing as believer and unbeliever, master and slave, Moses and Pharaoh. Through motifs such as the creative command kun fa-yakūn, the allusion to lan tarānī, and the echoes of Anal-Haq, existence is portrayed as a restless play of disclosure and concealment in which every apparent "other" is finally unmasked as the Beloved in another form (Rasool, 2020; Zahid, 2021). The self's annihilation (fanā) and subsistence (baqā) thus occur not through withdrawal from the world, but through recognizing that each form, each role, and each boundary is already saturated with the presence of the faceless One.

3. The Languages of Existence: Concept and Symbol

3.1. Hegel's Conceptual–Dialectical Language

Hegel's philosophy is often taken as the paradigmatic expression of conceptual thinking: abstract, systematic, and explicitly argumentative. His method is overtly dialectical; he aims to show, in the movement of concepts themselves, how thought necessarily passes through contradiction toward a higher unity. In the Phenomenology of Spirit, this appears as a narrative of consciousness ascending from sense-certainty to Absolute knowing, but the narrative is driven by the immanent logic of concepts rather than by external storytelling (Redding, 1996; Maybee, 2016). Concepts such as being, nothing, becoming, self-consciousness, and Spirit do not remain static definitions; they unfold through self-negation and transformation, revealing their own one-sidedness and pointing beyond themselves (Houlgate, 2005).

For Hegel, the concept (Begriff) is not merely a subjective mental representation but the inner structure of reality itself. Logic, ontology, and epistemology are ultimately inseparable: the same rational structures that govern thought also govern being (Houlgate, 2005; Redding, 1996). This is why the dialectic can function as both a method of thinking and a description of reality's self-movement. The language of the concept is therefore not ornamental; it is the very medium through which Spirit articulates and recognizes itself. To translate existence into conceptual form is, for Hegel, to bring it into the space of rational self-comprehension.

At the same time, Hegel is acutely aware of the limitations of merely formal or abstract understanding. He sharply distinguishes between Verstand (understanding), which fixes categories in rigid opposition, and Vernunft (reason), which is able to hold together and reconcile apparent contraries within a larger whole (Maybee, 2016). The dialectical method is designed to move us beyond the standpoint of understanding by showing how every fixed opposition—subject/object, finite/infinite, self/other—undermines itself when pursued consistently. In this sense, Hegel's prose, however technical, is not a neutral descriptive language; it is performative. It seeks to enact within the reader's thinking the very movement of negation and reconciliation that it describes. Conceptual language here is already a transformative practice.

This has important implications for our comparative project. Hegel's account of self-consciousness, particularly in the master–slave dialectic, is written in strictly conceptual terms, but its object is existential: the struggle for recognition, the experience of alienation, the fear of death, and the longing for freedom (Redding, 1996). The language may be abstract, yet it aims to capture the lived structure of the self's relation to itself and to others. When we later juxtapose this with Bulleh Shah's symbolic language of lover and Beloved, veiling and unveiling, we will not be comparing "philosophy" with "mere poetry," but two different idioms that both address the same fundamental question: how the self comes to itself through its relation to what it is not.

A further point is that Hegel's system already contains a reflection on religious language. In his philosophy of religion, Hegel famously distinguishes between the "picture-thinking" (Vorstellung) of religion and the conceptual form of philosophy. Religious images and narratives, he argues, present Absolute Spirit in a sensuous, imaginative way, whereas philosophy presents the same content in the form of the concept (Hodgson, 2005). The task of philosophy is not to dismiss religious imagery but to translate its implicit rational content into explicit conceptual form. This suggests that, from a Hegelian standpoint, symbolic or poetic discourse—like Sufi kalam—need not be opposed to philosophy; it can be seen as a

different articulation of the same Absolute, awaiting conceptual interpretation. Our reading of Bulleh Shah's Behad Ramza Dasda will in part extend this Hegelian insight, while also questioning whether the conceptual can ever fully exhaust the surplus of meaning carried by the symbolic.

3.2. Sufi Symbolic and Poetic Language as Ontology

In contrast to Hegel's conceptual prose, Sufi thought often appears clothed in the language of symbol, parable, and poetry. Yet for the Sufi tradition, this is not a concession to irrationality or mere aesthetic choice; it reflects a conviction that certain dimensions of reality—above all, the relationship between the human self and the Divine—can only be approached through allusion, indirection, and layered meaning (Chittick, 2000; Murata & Chittick, 1994). The Qur'an itself speaks of āyāt—signs—scattered in nature, history, and scripture, and Sufi authors often understand their language as participating in this semiotic structure of reality. In this context, poetry is not merely expressive; it is an epistemic mode.

Sufi metaphysicians such as Ibn Arabi explicitly distinguish between literal and symbolic registers, arguing that the Divine Reality cannot be captured in univocal, propositional terms. Because God is both utterly transcendent and intimately immanent, language must simultaneously affirm and deny, reveal and conceal (Chittick, 2008). The proliferation of metaphors—wine, tavern, veil, mirror, lover, Beloved—is not a distraction from doctrine but the very form in which doctrine can be meaningfully articulated without falling into idolatry of concepts. Recent scholarship on Sufi hermeneutics emphasizes that this symbolic language functions as a kind of "performed metaphysics," inviting the reader or listener into a transformative participation rather than offering a detached description (Hidayat, 2024).

Poetic language in Sufism thus often operates on multiple levels simultaneously: literal, moral, psychological, and ontological. For example, the imagery of love in Rumi can be read as human emotion, but also as an ontological principle that structures the relation between Creator and creation (Bilen, 2018; Alavijeh & Amjad, 2022). The same is true for Bulleh Shah's play with letters such as Alif and Meem or his references to Qur'anic narratives: at one level, these are linguistic and scriptural details; at another, they are condensed metaphysical statements about unity, manifestation, and the self's relation to God (Rasool, 2020; Zahid, 2021).

Behad Ramza Dasda is a particularly rich example of this symbolic density. In this kalam, Bulleh Shah does not present a systematic treatise on ontology; instead, he stages a series of scenes and voices in which the boundary between God and human, believer and unbeliever, sacred and profane, is repeatedly crossed and redrawn. The Beloved is "faceless," yet appears under countless faces; He "lives under the meem," yet flashes forth as the Alif within Muhammad; He prays in the mosque and sits in the idol-house; He speaks as both Moses and Pharaoh, as both Mansur al-Hallāj crying "Anal-Haq" and the crowd that hangs him. These are not merely devotional flourishes. They amount to a poetic enactment of waḥdat al-wujūd: the assertion that only the Divine truly is, and that all forms are His self-disclosures in the theatre of existence (Hidayat, 2024; Rasool, 2020).

To treat such language as philosophical is to recognize that ontology need not always take the form of formal argument. Sufi poetry can be read as what we might call an "implicit metaphysics": a way of showing, rather than stating, how reality is structured. The swirling of images and roles in Behad Ramza Dasda—God as lover and beloved, judge and accused,

Muslim and non-Muslim—enacts an ontological claim: that the self's apparent separateness from God and from others is a temporary misperception, to be overcome through fanā (the annihilation of the ego) and baqā (subsistence in God). Contemporary studies increasingly acknowledge this philosophical dimension, reading Sufi poetry as a form of ethical and ontological critique of rigid religious identities, social hierarchies, and reified conceptions of the self (Abbas, 2023; Naich et al., 2023).

From the standpoint of comparative philosophy, this suggests that Hegel's conceptual language and Bulleh Shah's symbolic language are not commensurable in a simple sense, yet they can be brought into a productive tension. Hegel aims to translate existence into the transparent medium of the concept; Bulleh Shah allows existence to appear in the shimmering, polyvalent medium of symbol and song. Hegel seeks to resolve contradictions within a higher unity through dialectical argument; Bulleh Shah often leaves contradictions in place as a way of drawing the listener into ḥayra—bewilderment—a state that many Sufis regard as closer to truth than premature conceptual closure (Murata & Chittick, 1994). Our comparative task, then, is not to reduce one language to the other, but to ask what each can reveal about the structure of existence and the self that the other tends to obscure.

In what follows, we will read Hegel's account of self-consciousness and Absolute Spirit alongside selected clusters of verses from Behad Ramza Dasda. By attending both to the logic of Hegel's arguments and to the logic of Bulleh Shah's symbols, we aim to show that, despite their different idioms, both are engaged in articulating a vision of existence as a process of self-unfolding in which the self discovers that its deepest truth lies in a unity that transcends the opposition between human and Divine.

4. Philosophical Dialogue: Hegel and Bulleh Shah on the Self

4.1. Self, Negation, and Unity: Fana–Baqa and Dialectical Selfhood

At the center of both Hegel's and Bulleh Shah's thought lies a paradoxical claim: the self becomes itself only by, in some sense, ceasing to be itself. In Hegel's idiom, this occurs through dialectical negation, in which self-consciousness discovers itself in and through its other; in Bulleh Shah's Sufi idiom, it occurs through fanā—the annihilation of the ego—and baqā—the subsistence of the self in God. The two frameworks are not identical, yet they share a structural conviction that selfhood is essentially relational and that genuine identity is achieved only through a passage into what appears as non-identity.

In the Phenomenology of Spirit, Hegel famously describes self-consciousness as "the movement in which this opposition between itself and its object is sublated" (Hegel, 1977). Self-consciousness initially encounters the world as something other than itself, but in reflecting upon this relation, it comes to see that what it takes to be independent reality is, at least in part, its own projection. This movement reaches a dramatic expression in the master–slave dialectic, where self-consciousness seeks recognition from another self-consciousness, only to discover that trying to dominate the other undermines its own need for reciprocal recognition (Redding, 1996; Maybee, 2016). The self cannot be fully itself in isolation; it comes to itself only through an other in whom it sees itself reflected. Negation here is not mere destruction; it is a moment in a larger process of reconciliation in which the self's apparent otherness is integrated into a higher unity.

Bulleh Shah's Behad Ramza Dasda articulates a structurally similar insight in mystical and

symbolic terms. The poem repeatedly undermines the distinction between self and Divine, between human and God, while also preserving a sense of asymmetry. In one recurring motif, the poet insists that the Beloved is both beyond and within the self:

"There is no difference between me and the beloved, the Quran says this alone."

The allusion to scriptural authority here underscores a radical claim: the difference between human and Divine is not a difference of essence, but a difference of realization. As long as the self clings to its separate identity—like Musa who asks to see God and is told lan tarānī ("you shall not see Me")—it cannot behold the Divine; but if it "discards its identity," it discovers that God was never other than the deepest truth of the self. Fanā is thus not a nihilistic self-erasure, but a dialectical moment in which the self negates its false autonomy in order to realize its true identity as a site of Divine presence.

Hegel's dialectic and Bulleh Shah's fanā–baqā converge most clearly around this idea of truth through loss. For Hegel, the self must "die" to its immediate certainty of itself as a simple, self-contained subject; it must pass through experiences of failure, contradiction, and alienation—what he calls the "unhappy consciousness"—before it can arrive at a more adequate understanding of itself as a moment of Spirit (Hegel, 1977; Redding, 1996). The "death" of the naive self is a precondition for the birth of a more expansive self that knows itself as part of a larger rational whole. In Behad Ramza Dasda, this process is narrated through the imagery of lovers, saints, and martyrs—Sabir, eaten by worms yet refusing to dislodge them; Mansur al-Hallāj, who proclaims Anal-Haq and is executed. God "infests Sabir's body with worms" and "has Mansur hanged," yet in another voice, Bulleh Shah insists that it is God Himself who "made Mansur tell the secret of 'I am the Truth'" and who "had himself hanged and stands beside and laughs."

The metaphysical claim here is subtle and powerful: the suffering and apparent destruction of the self are not external to God but occur within the Divine self-disclosure. Mansur's cry "I am the Truth" is both blasphemy from the standpoint of ordinary religious consciousness and truth from the standpoint of mystical realization. Likewise, the slave's labor and fear in Hegel's master–slave dialectic turn out to be the very means through which he attains a deeper self-relation than the master, who remains trapped in a superficial dependence on the other's recognition (Hegel, 1977; Maybee, 2016). In both cases, the one who is negated— the slave, the heretic, the worm-eaten saint—becomes the privileged site of truth. The self discovers itself most fully where it appears most lost.

Another deep resonance emerges in the way both thinkers treat the self's boundaries as unstable and porous. Hegel's later notion of Absolute Spirit involves a reconciliation in which the finite self recognizes that its particular standpoint is only one expression of a universal rational life that transcends any single individual (Houlgate, 2005; Hodgson, 2005). Spirit is not a separate being standing over against finite selves; it is the living whole in and through which they exist. Similarly, in Behad Ramza Dasda, the Beloved is said to be everywhere and everything:

"He himself is the apparent, the esoteric, and then he hides himself.

He is the Mullah, and the Qazi, and he himself teaches knowledge."

and later:

"In whatever direction I look, I find him there,

He accompanies everyone."

Here the distinction between "I" and "He" begins to break down. The Beloved is not an object over against the self; He is the ground of all selves. Yet Bulleh Shah does not dissolve the self into impersonal Being; he speaks of specific figures—Shah Inayat, Mansur, Sabir, Musa, Pharaoh, Rumi—through whom the Divine manifests. The self is both particular and more than particular, just as in Hegel the individual is both a finite consciousness and a moment of Spirit's self-knowledge.

At the same time, there are important differences that prevent a simple identification of Hegel's dialectical selfhood with Bulleh Shah's mystical self-annihilation. Hegel's Absolute remains committed to a rational, conceptual articulation of itself; even religion, in his view, must ultimately be translated into the language of the concept if it is to reach full truth (Hodgson, 2005). Bulleh Shah, by contrast, deliberately leaves certain tensions unresolved. The repeated refrain—"What is my beloved doing, what is he doing?"—invokes the Sufi state of bewilderment (ḥayra) as an appropriate response to the Divine play. Where Hegel seeks to reconcile contradictions in a final synthesis, Bulleh Shah often treats the coexistence of opposites—God as both Ahmad and Ahad, as both Shia and Sunni, as both in the mosque and in the idol-house—as a mystery to be inhabited rather than exhausted.

We might say, then, that both accounts agree that the self's genuine existence lies beyond its apparent separation from the Absolute, and that this realization requires a kind of death to the naive ego. But whereas Hegel narrates this as the progressive self-clarification of Spirit in history, Bulleh Shah enacts it as an intimate drama of love, loss, and recognition in which the ultimate word may not be clarity but adoring astonishment. The convergence between fanā–baqā and dialectical selfhood is real and philosophically significant, but it also exposes the different spiritual sensibilities of German Idealism and Punjabi Sufism: the former trusts the concept to heal division; the latter leans into paradox as the place where the self and the Divine meet.

4.2. Manifestation of the Absolute: Meem, Ahad/Ahmad, and Absolute Spirit

If fanā–baqā and dialectical selfhood reveal how the self becomes itself through negation, another axis of convergence between Hegel and Bulleh Shah concerns how the Absolute itself appears in finite form. Both thinkers insist that the Absolute is not a static, distant beyond; it is a reality that comes to manifestation in history, embodiment, and particular figures. Yet this manifestation does not cancel transcendence: the Absolute remains more than any of its appearances, even as it makes itself dependent on them.

In Hegel's system, this theme is clearest in his philosophy of religion and his account of Absolute Spirit. For Hegel, the Absolute is not merely an abstract unity; it is Spirit (Geist), and Spirit is essentially self-relating. It must "go out of itself" into otherness and return to itself in order to be fully what it is (Hegel, 1977; Hodgson, 2005). Nature, finite consciousness, and human history are not external to God but moments of this process in which the Absolute comes to know itself. In Christianity, Hegel sees the highest "representation" (Vorstellung) of this truth: the doctrine of the God–man (Christ) expresses in pictorial form the philosophical content that the infinite becomes finite and that their unity is realized in a concrete individual (Hodgson, 2005; Redding, 1996). The incarnation is

therefore not an accidental miracle; it symbolically discloses the very structure of Absolute Spirit, which is absolute precisely because it includes its own self-externalization within itself.

This logic of manifestation is rendered in a very different idiom in Bulleh Shah's *Behad Ramza Dasda*, particularly in the verses that play on the relation between Ahad, Ahmad, and Meem. Again and again, the poem insists that the faceless One takes on a face, that the limitless enters the realm of limits:

"In 'Aahad' (God) he mixed 'Meem,'

Now I have found the beautiful friend…

From Ahad (God) he has become Ahmad (Muhammad),

He lives under the 'meem', my beloved."

Here Ahad names God's absolute unity, while Meem—the Arabic letter that begins the name Muhammad—functions as a cipher for embodiment, prophetic form, and veiling. To say that God "mixes" Meem into Ahad is to say that the Absolute takes on a determinate, historical face without ceasing to be Absolute. The formula "He lives under the meem" captures the tension between hiddenness and manifestation: the Divine is not exhausted by the prophetic form, yet that form is precisely where the Divine chooses to dwell. Elsewhere, Bulleh Shah radicalizes this point by invoking the well-known ḥadīth qudsī—"If you were not [O Muhammad], I would not have created the heavens"—to say, in effect, that without this human–prophetic figure, "then God also wouldn't [exist for us]." The Absolute's self-relation is bound up with the existence of a particular human locus of manifestation.

Hegel would recognize a structural kinship here. When he argues that God is not truly God apart from His self-revelation in Spirit, he is making a similarly risky claim: an unmanifest, purely inward God is only an abstraction. God is God only in and through the world, the community, and the self-conscious life of finite spirits (Hodgson, 2005; Maybee, 2016). In Christian terms, this is symbolized in the statement that "God was in Christ," reconciling the world to Himself. In Bulleh Shah's Sufi terms, it appears in the assertion that the faceless One "comes disguised as Muhammad," that "His face glows with light, like that of God Himself," and that "if he isn't God Himself, then he isn't different from God either." The Absolute, in both accounts, is inseparable from its own self-presentation in concrete, finite form.

The poem pushes this logic beyond the singular prophetic figure into the broader field of saints and lovers, particularly in its references to Shah Inayat. Bulleh Shah writes that the "faceless one has taken up a face, and come disguised as Muhammad," and then adds:

"The God placed the mirror of unity before Himself,

And then He has decorated His beloved.

Without form you cannot find God,

His face glows with light, like that of God Himself."

God looks into the "mirror of unity" and adorns the beloved as a reflection. The saint becomes a secondary but real locus of Divine manifestation, a human face in which the faceless God recognizes and enjoys Himself. Ontologically, this is very close to Ibn Arabi's notion of the Perfect Human as the mirror in which God contemplates His Names (Chittick,

2008), but it also resonates strongly with Hegel's view that the community (Gemeinde) and concrete individuals are the sites where Absolute Spirit achieves actual, not merely abstract, existence (Redding, 1996; Hodgson, 2005). The Absolute is not only "up there"; it is realized in and through finite subjects who become transparent to it.

At the same time, Bulleh Shah's deployment of Meem carries a nuance that problematizes any too-quick Hegelian translation. In Behad Ramza Dasda, the Meem is also a veil, a "ghunghat" covering the Divine face. God "lives under the Meem," but the veil is not simply removed; it both hides and reveals. The prophetic and saintly forms are sites of manifestation, yet they also risk becoming idols if taken as self-sufficient. Hence the need for a repeated unmasking: "From within that lovelorn-madman Muhammad, the Beloved Alif (God) flashes forth." The Divine "flashes" rather than remains stably present; manifestation is event-like, disruptive, and never fully domesticated by form. This emphasis on the uncontrollable, ecstatic character of revelation sits uneasily with Hegel's confidence that the Absolute can be conceptually comprehended as a totality (Houlgate, 2005; Maybee, 2016).

We can put the point this way: Hegel's Absolute Spirit needs the world and finite spirit in order to complete itself conceptually; Bulleh Shah's Ahad "needs" Meem in order to be seen and loved, but the relation remains charged with asymmetry, devotion, and risk. For Hegel, the incarnation (and, more broadly, the historical life of Spirit) is a necessary moment in a rational process that can be, in principle, laid out in the language of the concept. For Bulleh Shah, the descent of the faceless One under the veil of Meem is a mystery to be sung, not fully systematized—a mystery that destabilizes the ego and the rigid boundaries of religious identity as much as it clarifies them. Thus, while both thinkers affirm that the Absolute manifests in finite form, the ethos of their affirmations is different: one leans toward rational reconciliation, the other toward mystical intimacy and astonishment.

Despite these differences, the parallel remains philosophically fertile. Both Hegel and Bulleh Shah refuse a purely transcendent deity untouched by the world. Both insist that the Absolute is genuinely at stake in its own manifestations—whether in the God–man of Christian doctrine and the historical community of Spirit, or in the layered figures of Muhammad, Shah Inayat, Mansur, and the anonymous lover in Behad Ramza Dasda. Both, moreover, suggest that to understand the self is to understand its participation in this drama of manifestation: the self is not merely a spectator but a point at which the Absolute comes into presence. In Hegel's terms, the self is a moment of Absolute Spirit; in Bulleh Shah's, the self is the "house" in which the Beloved dwells, the "mirror" in which God sees His own face.

This convergence sets the stage for a final axis of comparison: the role of contradiction and conflict in the world-drama of existence. Hegel famously insists that Spirit realizes itself through historical conflicts—wars, revolutions, religious and political oppositions—while Bulleh Shah depicts the Beloved as simultaneously "Musa and Pharaoh," present in both sides of a struggle. To this we now turn.

4.3. Contradiction, Conflict, and the World-Drama: Musa and Pharaoh, Master and Slave

One of Hegel's most distinctive claims is that contradiction is not a defect of reality but its driving force. Spirit does not develop in a straight line; it unfolds through conflict, opposition, and what he calls the "labor of the negative" (Hegel, 1977). In logic, this appears

as the move from abstract identity to contradiction and then to a higher unity; in history, it appears as struggles between individuals, classes, religions, and states through which new forms of freedom and self-understanding emerge (Redding, 1996; Houlgate, 2005). The world, for Hegel, is a theatre of collisions in which reason realizes itself.

In the Phenomenology of Spirit, this logic is exemplified by the master–slave dialectic, where the encounter between two self-consciousnesses leads to a struggle for recognition. The master wins the contest but becomes paradoxically dependent on the recognition of the slave; the slave, through labor and fear, gains a deeper relation to reality and to himself (Hegel, 1977; Maybee, 2016). The opposition is not static; it is the seed of a transformation in which the "defeated" position becomes the bearer of truth. Hegel generalizes this structure: in ethical life, religious conflict, and political struggle, Spirit "alienates" itself into opposing sides and then overcomes their one-sidedness in a broader reconciliation (Hodgson, 2005). Even phenomena as terrible as war are, in his view, moments in which rigid particularities are shaken, keeping ethical life from congealing into mere habit (Hegel, 1991).

Bulleh Shah's Behad Ramza Dasda presents a strikingly similar vision of reality as a drama of conflict, yet with a different tone and theological horizon. The poem is full of oppositions—Shia/Sunni, mosque/idol-house, believer/unbeliever, master/slave, Rumi/Shami—but rather than taking sides, the poet repeatedly insists that the same Beloved is present in both poles. In one of the most explicit lines, Bulleh Shah asks:

"Musa te Pheron bana ke,

Do ho ke kyon larda?"

"Having created Moses and the Pharaoh,

Why does He become two and fight?"

Here, the familiar Qur'anic story of Moses and Pharaoh is re-read not merely as a moral conflict between prophet and tyrant, but as a paradox of Divine action. God "creates" both sides of the struggle yet appears to split Himself into adversaries. The question is not only ethical ("Why is there oppression?") but ontological ("Why does the One appear as two?"). Conflict is not outside God; it is a mode of His self-disclosure.

This imagery closely parallels Hegel's claim that Spirit must "go out of itself" into otherness and contradiction in order to be fully itself (Hegel, 1977; Houlgate, 2005). Just as Hegel can speak of Spirit dividing itself into opposing principles—say, in the clash between different ethical worlds or religious forms—Bulleh Shah imagines the Beloved as both sides of the conflict: He is Musa and Pharaoh, Rumi and Shami, master and slave, Muslim and non-Muslim. The poem says:

"Sometimes he is a Shia, and sometimes a Sunni.

Sometimes with long matted hair, and sometimes shorn bald.

Sometimes he talks of the Kaaba,

Sometimes he lives in the idol-house."

and later:

"Sometimes he is Rumi, sometimes Shami.

Sometimes he is a master, sometimes a slave.

Sometimes he is the nobility, sometimes the common folk.

He is complete in himself."

Here the Divine is not presented as a neutral spectator above human differences, but as the very life in and through which those differences arise. The contradictions that mark social and religious existence are not simply human failures; they are the masks through which the faceless One appears. Ontologically, this is analogous to Hegel's view that Spirit is immanent in historical conflicts, though Bulleh Shah's language foregrounds the intimacy and scandal of this claim more vividly.

Yet Bulleh Shah also complicates the Hegelian picture. For Hegel, contradiction is ultimately rationally reconcilable: the task of philosophy is to show how opposing forms of life and thought are moments in a single, intelligible process leading to greater freedom and self-knowledge (Redding, 1996; Hodgson, 2005). In Behad Ramza Dasda, by contrast, the poet does not offer a conceptual schema in which contradictions are neatly resolved. Instead, he keeps the listener inside the bewilderment of Divine play. The repeated refrain—"What is my beloved doing, what is he doing?"—does not lead to a clear answer. It leaves the heart suspended in ḥayra, the Sufi state of astonished perplexity, which is often regarded as closer to truth than premature understanding (Murata & Chittick, 1994).

This difference in attitude toward contradiction is crucial. Hegel wants us to know how and why Spirit reconciles its own conflicts; Bulleh Shah wants us to witness how the Beloved plays in opposites and to surrender to that play. When he writes that the Beloved prays in the mosque and then enters the idol-house, he is not merely making a point about religious tolerance, but about the inadequacy of any fixed boundary between "true" and "false" worship. The same God is present, yet the human classifications—Muslim, infidel, orthodox, heretic—are shown to be relative. In this sense, conflict is both real and relativized: it matters ethically (Musa and Pharaoh are not morally equivalent), but metaphysically the One is present in both, sustaining them.

There is also a shared sense, in both Hegel and Bulleh Shah, that the marginalized side of a conflict often carries a deeper truth. Hegel's master–slave dialectic famously reveals that the slave, through labor and fear, acquires a richer grasp of reality and of himself than the master, who remains dependent on another's recognition (Hegel, 1977; Maybee, 2016). Bulleh Shah repeatedly sides with figures who are outwardly condemned or humiliated—Mansur al-Hallāj, Sabir with his worms, the lover who defies social and religious norms. In Behad Ramza Dasda, he says of Mansur:

"He called Mansur the king of theologians,

He himself made Mansur tell the secret of 'I am the Truth.'

He had himself hanged,

And he himself stands beside and laughs."

The heretic becomes the instrument of Divine self-revelation ("He himself made Mansur tell…"), and the execution—like the slave's subjection—is transfigured into a scene of truth. God is both the one who speaks through Mansur and the one who laughs at His own self-

hanging, much as Spirit in Hegel is both the finite struggling consciousness and the whole process that encompasses the struggle.

At the same time, Bulleh Shah's world-drama is more openly tragic and playful than Hegel's. Hegel speaks of the "cunning of reason," whereby reason uses the passions and conflicts of individuals and nations to achieve its own ends (Hegel, 1991). The language is cool, almost clinical. By contrast, Bulleh Shah's depiction of the Beloved "creating Musa and Pharaoh" and then "becoming two and fighting" is charged with emotional perplexity: "What is my beloved doing?" The poet does not offer the comfort of seeing all conflict as transparently justified by a rational teleology. Instead, he shows how love persists in and through a world that often appears senseless, calling the seeker not to conceptual mastery but to surrender and trust.

We can thus summarize the contrast as follows: for Hegel, contradiction and conflict are necessary moments in Spirit's rational self-realization; for Bulleh Shah, they are the masks and gestures of a Beloved whose reasons cannot be fully captured, only adored. Both see existence as a world-drama in which the Absolute is at stake in finite oppositions, and both affirm that truth lies not in denying conflict but in passing through it. Yet where Hegel leans toward conceptual reconciliation, Bulleh Shah leans toward a mystical acceptance of paradox—an acceptance that destabilizes rigid identities (Shia/Sunni, believer/unbeliever, mosque/idol-house) and invites a deeper recognition of the Divine presence in every face and every struggle.

In bringing these perspectives together, we do not claim that Bulleh Shah secretly "teaches" Hegelian dialectics, or that Hegel foreshadows Sufi metaphysics. Rather, we suggest that they share a structural intuition: that existence is a dynamic, often painful interplay of opposites in which the self, and the Absolute itself, are revealed. Their differences— conceptual clarity versus symbolic bewilderment, rational teleology versus love's inexplicable play—are not obstacles to comparison but part of what makes the dialogue philosophically rich. It is in the tension between these two visions of the world-drama that a genuinely cross-civilizational understanding of existence as becoming begins to emerge.

5. Implications and Reflections

The comparative dialogue between Hegel and Bulleh Shah is not merely an exercise in intellectual curiosity or historical reconstruction. It carries significant implications for how we understand the self, the Absolute, and the practice of philosophy in a world marked by plurality, alienation, and persistent East–West binaries. Bringing these two thinkers into conversation allows us to rethink three interrelated domains: the nature of subjectivity, the status of religious and poetic language in philosophy, and the possibility of a genuinely cross-civilizational metaphysics.

First, the convergence between Hegel's dialectical selfhood and Bulleh Shah's fanā–baqā invites a reconfiguration of the modern notion of the self. Much of modern Western thought, especially in its post-Cartesian forms, has tended to conceive the self as an autonomous, self-grounding subject whose rationality is defined in contrast to dependence, relationality, and transcendence (Hatfield, 2008; Rohlf, 2010). By contrast, both Hegel and Bulleh Shah present the self as essentially relational and decentered. For Hegel, the self is constituted through recognition; it discovers itself only in and through its others, and ultimately in the life of Spirit that exceeds any single individual (Hegel, 1977; Redding, 1996). For Bulleh

Shah, the self finds its truth only by relinquishing its claim to independent existence and realizing itself as a locus of Divine presence. In both accounts, the self is a site rather than a foundation: a place where a larger life—Spirit or the Beloved—comes to manifestation.

This has direct implications for contemporary debates on subjectivity and alienation. In social and political theory, alienation is often described as the experience of being cut off from others, from meaningful work, or from a shared world of significance. The models of selfhood we have traced suggest that such alienation is not merely a psychological disorder or social malfunction; it is a distortion of the self's ontological structure. If the self is constituted by relations—to other persons and to an Absolute ground—then any attempt to secure itself as an isolated ego will necessarily generate anxiety, violence, and a sense of emptiness. Hegel's "unhappy consciousness" and Bulleh Shah's tormented lover are not marginal figures; they are diagnoses of a condition that becomes particularly acute in modernity. To reimagine the self in terms of participation, recognition, and fanā may therefore offer resources for responding to contemporary experiences of fragmentation without collapsing into either individualism or collectivist subsumption.

Second, the comparison challenges the hierarchical distinction between conceptual and symbolic discourse that has long structured philosophical practice. Hegel himself, as we have seen, draws a distinction between the "picture-thinking" of religion and the conceptual articulation of philosophy, yet he also insists that both aim at the same Absolute (Hodgson, 2005). Our reading of Behad Ramza Dasda takes this insight further by treating Sufi poetic language not as a mere precursor to philosophical clarity, but as a complementary mode of ontological disclosure. The symbols of Alif and Meem, the scenes of Mansur's execution and Sabir's worms, the oscillation between mosque and idol-house—these do not simply illustrate previously established doctrines. They are the medium in which metaphysical, ethical, and existential truths are enacted.

Recognizing this has methodological consequences. It suggests that philosophy need not restrict itself to explicit argumentation or abstract concept-formation; it can also engage with forms of discourse that work through narrative, metaphor, and song, without thereby abandoning rigor. Just as Hegel's conceptual language aims to perform the movement of dialectic in the reader's thinking, Bulleh Shah's symbolic language aims to perform the movement of fanā–baqā in the listener's heart. Both are transformative practices as much as they are descriptive accounts. This does not mean that all poetry is philosophy, or that conceptual analysis is dispensable, but it does mean that a philosophy that ignores symbolic and religious forms of expression risks blinding itself to powerful modes of truth.

Third, the dialogue between Hegel and Bulleh Shah contributes to ongoing efforts to deprovincialize metaphysics and to rethink what counts as "philosophical" in a global context. Hegel has often been read—critically or uncritically—as a thinker of European universality, whose system marginalizes non-European traditions or subsumes them under a teleology centered on the West (Houlgate, 2005; Hodgson, 2005). Sufism, conversely, has frequently been confined to the domains of "mysticism," "spirituality," or "literature," rather than being recognized as a serious contributor to ontological and anthropological debates. By placing Hegel and Bulleh Shah side by side as interlocutors on existence and the self, we disrupt both tendencies: we refuse to treat Hegel as the measure of all philosophy, and we refuse to treat Sufi thought as merely expressive or esoteric.

Rather than adding Islamic or Sufi material as an external "case study" to an essentially Western framework, this article suggests that certain core questions—What is the self? How is it related to the Absolute? How do conflict, suffering, and contradiction belong to reality?—have been addressed with comparable depth in different idioms. The goal is not to homogenize these idioms or to claim a secret identity between Hegelian dialectics and Sufi metaphysics, but to identify structural affinities and productive differences. In doing so, we contribute to a model of comparative philosophy in which traditions are neither sealed off from one another nor flattened into a bland universalism. Instead, they confront one another as partners capable of mutual illumination and critique.

Finally, the joint emphasis on conflict and paradox in both Hegel and Bulleh Shah offers a counterpoint to contemporary desires for stability, purity, and unambiguous identity. Hegel teaches that Spirit cannot realize itself without passing through division; attempts to maintain a static harmony untouched by contradiction are, for him, forms of abstraction or self-deception (Hegel, 1977). Bulleh Shah, in his own voice, insists that the Beloved is present in the very conflicts—Musa versus Pharaoh, Shia versus Sunni, believer versus infidel—that human beings experience as fractures. Neither thinker glorifies suffering or injustice, yet both suggest that a world without tension would be a world without depth. Existence is a "world-drama" in which truth and reconciliation do not arise in spite of conflict but through it.

For a contemporary audience navigating political polarization, religious violence, and identity anxieties, this is a hard but necessary lesson. It implies that the impulse to purify the world of ambiguity—to separate cleanly the righteous from the unrighteous, the "true" community from the "false"—may itself be a distortion of reality's structure. Both Hegel's dialectical reason and Bulleh Shah's mystical bewilderment counsel a more patient engagement with complexity: a willingness to see how the other side, the enemy, the heretic, or the excluded may embody a moment of truth that one's own standpoint cannot yet accommodate. This does not collapse moral distinctions, but it does relativize the absoluteness of our own claims and invites us into a more humble posture before the unfolding of Spirit or the play of the Beloved.

In sum, the comparison between Hegel and Bulleh Shah allows us to reconceive existence as a dynamic process of self-unfolding in which the self is both decentered and transfigured, language is both conceptual and symbolic, and the Absolute is both hidden and manifest in the conflicts of history and the intimacies of love. It suggests that any attempt to think existence today must reckon not only with the legacy of European idealism but also with the rich ontological resources of Sufi thought and other non-Western traditions. To stand "between form and flame" is, in this sense, not merely to juxtapose Hegelian system and Punjabi kalam, but to inhabit a space where their lights intersect and where the mystery of Being in becoming can be glimpsed, if never finally grasped.

6. Conclusion

This article set out from a simple but demanding question: Can Hegel's dialectical account of selfhood and Bulleh Shah's Sufi poetics of fanā–baqā be read as structurally convergent visions of existence as becoming? To answer this, we reconstructed two distinct genealogies of thought—one running from Plato through Descartes and Kant to Hegel, the other from Ibn Arabi through Rumi to Bulleh Shah—and then traced how they converge and diverge around three axes: the nature of the self, the manifestation of the Absolute, and the role of

contradiction and conflict in the world-drama.

From the Western side, Hegel appears as the inheritor and transformer of a long struggle with the relation between appearance and reality, subject and object, phenomena and noumena. In his hands, the self is no longer a static substance but a process: a dialectical becoming in which self-consciousness emerges through negation, recognition, and reconciliation within Absolute Spirit. From the Sufi side, Bulleh Shah embodies a tradition that has wrestled with the tension between Divine unity and the multiplicity of forms. Drawing on Ibn Arabi's waḥdat al-wujūd and Rumi's metaphysics of love, Bulleh Shah's Behad Ramza Dasda presents existence as a ceaseless play of veiling and unveiling, in which the faceless One appears under countless faces, including the self's own.

In bringing these trajectories into dialogue, we argued that both thinkers undermine the modern ideal of an autonomous, self-grounding ego. Hegel's self is constituted through its relations to others and ultimately to Spirit; Bulleh Shah's self discovers its truth only by relinquishing its claim to independent being and recognizing itself as a locus of Divine presence. The language is different—conceptual dialectic versus symbolic kalam—but the structural insight is similar: the self becomes itself by passing through a kind of death to its own separateness. Hegel calls this the labor of the negative and narrates it through the unhappy consciousness and the master–slave dialectic; Bulleh Shah enacts it through the imagery of fanā and baqā, of Mansur's execution and Sabir's worms, of the lover who is annihilated and yet sustained by the Beloved.

We also found a deep resonance in their treatment of the Absolute as self-manifesting. Hegel insists that Absolute Spirit is not complete apart from its self-externalization in nature, history, and finite consciousness; God is God only in and through His revelation. In Behad Ramza Dasda, the same structure appears in the Sufi key of Ahad and Ahmad, Alif and Meem: the faceless One "mixes Meem into Ahad," lives "under the Meem," and comes disguised as Muhammad. The Absolute is not a distant, untouched beyond but a reality that takes on human faces and depends, in a certain sense, on them to be seen and loved. Yet where Hegel tends to trust the concept to articulate this process, Bulleh Shah foregrounds its mystery, treating manifestation as a flash, a veil, a risk, rather than a fully systematizable movement.

The third axis—contradiction and conflict—revealed both the strongest convergence and the sharpest difference. Hegel holds that Spirit realizes itself through historical oppositions; contradiction is not an accident but the motor of development. Bulleh Shah echoes this intuition when he portrays the Beloved as simultaneously Musa and Pharaoh, Shia and Sunni, believer and unbeliever, master and slave. The world's conflicts are not outside God; they are the masks through which He appears. Yet here, too, their sensibilities diverge. Hegel's dialectic aims at rational reconciliation, showing how conflicts are ultimately integrated into a higher unity. Bulleh Shah, by contrast, leaves the seeker in ḥayra, bewilderment: "What is my beloved doing, what is he doing?" The contradictions are not dissolved into conceptual clarity but inhabited as the very space where love and recognition unfold.

Taken together, these points of contact and divergence yield several broader conclusions. First, they allow us to reimagine the self not as an isolated center of control but as a relational node within a larger life—whether named Spirit or the Beloved. Such a view has critical implications for contemporary experiences of alienation, fragmentation, and identity anxiety. Second, they invite a wider understanding of philosophical language. Hegel's conceptual

prose and Bulleh Shah's symbolic kalam, far from belonging to separate domains of "philosophy" and "mysticism," can be seen as complementary ways of doing ontology: one through explicit argument, the other through enacted, poetic metaphors that reshape perception and desire. Third, the comparison contributes to a deprovincialized metaphysics, in which Sufi thought is not relegated to spirituality or literature but recognized as a serious partner in fundamental questions about existence, and in which Hegel is released from the role of purely European arbiter of universality.

This study does not claim to have exhausted the possible relations between Hegelian dialectics and Sufi metaphysics, nor to have resolved all tensions between them. Important questions remain: To what extent can the Sufi valorization of bewilderment be reconciled with Hegel's commitment to rational self-transparency? Can the asymmetry of Creator and creature in Islamic theology ever be fully squared with Hegel's speculative identity of finite and infinite? How might other Sufi figures—such as Rumi, Hallāj, or contemporary Sufi thinkers—further complicate or enrich the picture we have sketched? And conversely, how might later post-Hegelian critiques of system and totality speak back to Bulleh Shah's trust in the ultimate unity of all opposites?

What this article has sought to offer is not a final synthesis but a framework for thinking across traditions. Standing "between form and flame"—between Hegel's system and Bulleh Shah's kalam—we glimpse a shared intuition: that existence is an unfolding in which the self, the world, and the Absolute are bound together in a drama of estrangement and return, concealment and revelation, conflict and reconciliation. To attend to that drama simultaneously in the language of the concept and in the language of the kalam is to take a step toward a more genuinely global philosophy of existence—one in which the West no longer speaks alone, and the mystical voices of the Sufi East are heard not as echoes on the margin, but as co-authors of the question of Being itself.

7. Conflict of interest

8. Funding

9. Data availability

Data will be furnished upon request.

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