

# UNVEILING EMOTIONS OF WOMEN: A GLIMPSE INTO SHAH LATIF'S POETRY

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## Abstract

*This study explores the portrayal of women emotions, societal constraints, and unwavering dedication to love in Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai's Shah-Jo-Risalo, particularly focusing on the Sur Suhni. This research is analyzed via poetic verses, metaphors, and literary comparisons, the study also delves into the multifaceted nature of love, the challenges faced by Suhni in her pursuit of Mehaar, and the societal norms that dictate and restrict women agency. This research highlights how Shah Latif intricately weaves emotions of longing, vulnerability, and determination within Suhni's character, symbolizing a broader struggle against societal constraints and the relentless pursuit of love.*

**Keywords:** Shah Abdul Latif, Poetry, Sur Suhni, Women, Emotions, Society

## INTRODUCTION

Simone De Beauvoir's profound assertion, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman," resonates as a powerful commentary on the status of women in patriarchal societies, underscoring the socially constructed nature of gender roles. This statement serves as a poignant backdrop to the exploration of the status of women in the historically rich and culturally diverse region of Sindh, Pakistan.

## Historical Dimensions of Women in Sindh

Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai (1689-1752) and his extraordinary paintings, 'Shah-jo-Risalo', stands out as a seminal creation in Sindhi folk literature. This compiled verse of Shah Latif's is called 'Risalo' because of this 'message'. 'Shah-jo-Risalo' is a charming set of stories and legends, passed down orally in a poetic manner and embraced with the aid of Sindhi folk tradition, taken into consideration a masterpiece of Sindhi folklore, this work challenges the dominant gender dynamics of 18th century via emphasizing the excellence

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and virtues of women. Women are the prime focus of Bhitai's poetry. However, 'Shah-Jo-Risalo' questioned these notions by highlighting numerous characteristics of women. Shah portrays women as lovers- lovers of homeland, passion, and truth. These characters are sincere in their passion and love to the extent that they do not care about the hard realities of society. Women of Bhitai are ready to face any challenge that comes their way.

Annemarie Schimmel's extensive research on Shah Latif and his poetry underscores the portrayal of women as symbolic representations of the human soul, contributing to Sindhi Sufi poetry's distinctiveness. The status of women in South Asia, particularly in Sindh, has historically been marked by marginalization, stemming from entrenched male dominance across all aspects of life. Despite this, women in Sindh have played vital roles in the social structure, contributing to household and agricultural responsibilities. Durant (1954, as cited in Munawar et al. 2020) emphasizes the significant role that women play in shaping society. Bhitai's verses underscore the strong emotional connections between the women of Sindh and their husbands who embark on challenging journeys, depicting their willingness to make sacrifices and offer valuable possessions to the sea. This highlights the deep commitment that these women have towards their families. Traditional customs, like casting roses and oil lamps into rivers, act as expressions of hope for the well-being and longevity of their husbands, as demonstrated by Latif's narrative. In the cultural tradition of Sindh, the concern of women for their husbands is symbolically displayed through specific actions, such as lighting oil lamps and throwing flowers. Latif's verse raises query about a woman's sentiments towards her husband if she refrains from participating in these rituals.

In 2019, Virmani and Rikhi covered Latif's approach toward women in their book, "I Saw Myself", which states that Shah Latif embodies the voices of his legendary women, known as the 'Seven Queens', they represent love and loss and are turned into mythic figures. As one steps into Latif's world, he would be immersed in the profound emotions of longing and pain that echo within the depth of his soul. In Latif's words, "Me; you, everybody, are all modern seekers treading the same timeless paths." Virmani and Rikhi (2019) eloquently express this concept in their work that at times, I embody the essence of Sassui, wandering through a vast, lifeless desert that symbolizes a desolate landscape separating me from my Beloved, marked by emptiness and sorrow. The mountain ignites when it brushes against my pain, leaving the earth scorched.

In certain cases, I assume the role of Ramkali, courageously bidding farewell to my luxurious royal father's palace. Motivated by an insatiable thirst for knowledge, I embark on a transformative journey in search of enlightenment from the revered Nath Panthi yogis.

There are instances when I feel trapped within my own thoughts, similar to Marui, a young village girl forcefully confined by a powerful king in his fortress. Despite her captivity, Marui dreams of returning home, picking fruits with her people amidst the sand dunes, and holding onto hope for a reunion with her land.

When I contemplate challenging societal norms, I adopt the persona of Suhni, standing on the precipice of a turbulent river. Faced with the dilemma of societal acceptance and a husband on one side, and the allure of forbidden love on the other, the decision to leap into the stormy river becomes a courageous act driven by love, ultimately transforming the tumultuous waters into higher ground.

Shah Latif beautifully exemplifies the universality of human experiences through the voices of his legendary Queens. This suggests that the essence of their struggles and desires resonates within us, irrespective of time or place. His touching words possess the capacity to elicit each and every sentiment that a woman experiences, from the depths of hopelessness to the peaks of victory. The poetry of Bhitai celebrates the empowerment of women and their defiance against societal norms. It can be argued that Latif was a poet who gave voices to the voiceless through his works.

Sur Suhni is an extremely popular and beloved folktale in both Sindh and Punjab. This story can be found in *Shah-Jo-Risalo*, a poetic collection by Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, is one of seven (Satt Soormiyoon) well-known tragic romances from Sindh. Latif's one of the most courageous characters, Suhni, is portrayed as a determined and passionate woman. It is the tragic love story of Suhni, a potter's daughter, and her beloved Mehaar, a trader from a distant land. Suhni is married to Dam against her wishes. Consequently, she never accepts him as her husband. She visits her Beloved, Mehaar every night by crossing the river. Latif admires the strength of this woman who is willing to sacrifice everything for love. However, society, family, and friends turn against her. It seems that even nature, the river, the storm, and the whirlpool are all waiting to punish her. Their love is obstructed by societal norms, but they continue to meet secretly, defying all barriers. Suhni, despite facing challenges and the harshness of society, family, and the river, swims across it daily to meet Mehaar. In all these centuries, Suhni's

abode has seen many reincarnations. However, today it is at its most colorful and relevant — she's immortalized by her defiance (Abbasi, 2015).

### **Longing: A Woman's Journey Across the River:**

In 'Sur Suhni,' Shah Latif vividly portrays Suhni's arduous journey across the river, symbolizing the challenges and obstacles faced by women in their pursuit of love.

دَنِي ڏينهن ٿيڻ، ڪو هُ جاتان ڪهڙا پرين؟  
 سَسِين سڄي آهي، واجهائيندي وڃان؛  
 ٽينين سال ٿيڻ، جنين ساعت نه سَهان

“Many days have passed since I saw him; how can I know who he is? Many suns have set while I longed for him. Years have passed without him, away from whom I cannot stand a single moment” [Translation] (Adwani, 2012, p. 176).

These lines evoke a sense of longing of Suhni and prolonged separation from her Beloved, Mehaar. The phrase ‘Years have passed without him’ amplifies the intensity of separation, indicating a prolonged period of absence. This absence is depicted as challenging and unbearable with the phrase ‘Away from whom I cannot stand a single moment,’ expressing the idea that being apart from the beloved is intolerable, causing immense distress. Suhni here portrays a poignant yearning, illustrating the emotional turmoil of being physically distant from her beloved, Mehaar, while deeply desiring his presence.

ڪامان، پڇان، پڇران، لڇان ۽ لوچان؛  
 تَن ۾ تُونس پرينءَ جي، پيان نه ڍاپان؛  
 جي سَمَنڊَ مُنهن ڪريان، توءَ سُر ڪيائي نه ٿئي

“I burn, I am grilled, I am roasted, I writhe, I yearn. My body's thirst for my beloved is not sated by drinking. If I were to swallow a whole ocean, it would not make a single mouthful!” [Translation] (Adwani, 2012, p. 165)

I burn, I am grilled, I am roasted, I writhe, I yearn, these phrases evoke the notion of intense suffering and passionate longing. The imagery of burning, grilling, and roasting signifies the fervent intensity of emotions, depicting a state of internal turmoil and longing that consumes Suhni. Latif implies these expressions to convey the idea of being overwhelmed by overpowering emotions, experiencing inner turmoil that is so profound it feels like being scorched or grilled by the intensity of the longing and desire. "My body's

thirst for my beloved is not sated by drinking". Here, the thirst is not physical but rather an emotional longing. Regardless of how hard Suhni works to satisfy this thirst, whether through physical means or mundane pursuits, it remains unsatisfied. Even consuming something as vast as the ocean would not satisfy this unquenchable desire. This emphasizes the belief that the intensity of Suhni's yearning exceeds the capacity of worldly measurements.

Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai's Sur from "Sur Suhni" effectively conveys the depth of Suhni's emotional yearning as well as the difficulties she encounters in trying to reunite with her beloved, Mehaar. This yearning encompasses a deep yearning for emotional fulfillment and connection, going beyond mere desire for physical presence. Bhittai depicts the intricacy of woman's sentiments, highlighting vulnerability, detachment, and social constraints in their quest for love and satisfaction.

This depiction of a woman's vulnerability and longing is consistent with other works that tackle related issues. Juliet in William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," who expresses an intense yearning for Romeo despite societal obstacles, is a notable parallel. This mirrors Suhni's desire for Mehaar in Shah-Jo-Risalo. Women's longing can appear in a variety of circumstances, including professional goals in which women seek equity, recognition, and equal opportunity. This multidimensional longing highlights a universal component of women lives that extends beyond personal connections to include broader societal and professional implications.

### **Sorrow: Symbolism of the Broken Jar**

Shah Latif implies powerful metaphors, such as the breaking pot, to convey the suddenness and unpredictability of life's tragedies.

گهڙو ڀڳو، مُنڌ مُئي، وسبلا ويا،  
ٽنھان پوءِ سٺا، سُهڻيءَ سڌ ميهار جا

"Once her pot fell to pieces, her props were gone and the woman died. But it was then that Suhni heard the calls of her Mehaar" [Translation]. (Adwani, 2012, p. 148)

The verse describes the symbolic significance of a jar breaking in the tragic story of Suhni's life. Suhni used a jar to cross a river and meet her beloved, Mehaar. Unfortunately, the jar breaks, leading to Suhni's drowning and symbolizing unexpected life tragedies. The broken jar signifies the abrupt end of Suhni's aspirations. Despite her physical demise, Suhni continues to

feel Mehaar's presence, symbolizing resilience and strength in the face of challenges. Moreover, this symbolic portrayal of Suhni hearing Mehaar's calls after her demise can be interpreted as an allegory for the resilience and strength of women. Suhni, even in death, faces her challenges alone, highlighting the solitary journey of women who often confront struggles and adversities independently.

ڪي تران ڪي تار مُون، ڪي سنگهان ڪي سَنگهه؛  
اڏو ڏيڇ م لڳب، مُون هيڪليءَ، ولها

Either let me swim myself or deliver me across. Either let me try myself or make an effort for me. Do not place a barrier in my way, oh my husband, for I am alone” [Translation]. (Adwani, 2012, p. 176).

In this verse, Suhni expresses a deep sense of desperation and vulnerability. She desires the freedom to navigate her challenges. The phrase ‘either let me swim myself or deliver me across’ portrays Suhni’s willingness to face difficulties independently if given the chance. This verse also underscores the sense of isolation and plea for understanding, Suhni’s appeals to her husband, Dam, to not impede my progress towards Mehaar by placing barriers. I am alone, remove these obstacles or assist me to overcome them. The emotion of sorrow and helplessness is deeply ingrained in these lines. Suhni’s words convey a feeling of being left to fend for herself emotionally and perhaps practically as well. There is a sense of longing for understanding, companionship, and support from her husband, which seems unfulfilled.

Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, in his poetry, explores the pervasive theme of human suffering in its various forms—physical, emotional, and spiritual. He delves into the profound impact of agony on individuals and societies, acknowledging its limitless and unending nature. The Surs focus on the emotional landscape of Suhni, depicting her experiences of sadness, frustration, and vulnerability. The imagery of a shattered jar symbolizes the tragic end of Suhni's life and aspirations, as her attempt to cross the river to meet her beloved Mehaar ends abruptly with the jar breaking. The forceful nature of the river represents the challenges in Suhni's journey, and her curse upon it reflects her determination to overcome obstacles. Shah Latif vividly portrays Suhni's emotional turmoil, including frustration, rage, sadness, and powerlessness in the face of hardships.

## Love: Suhni's Profound Devotion to Mehaar

مُحَبَّتِي مِيهَارَ جُون، دِلِ اَنْدَرُ دُونِهِيُون  
اَتِيُو وَجِهِي اَرَم، اُهَاتُو لُوهُيُون؛  
جِي سَاهَرُ جُون سُونِهِيُون، سِيرِ سِرَاوُ تَن كِي

“The fires of my beloved Mehaar burn in my heart. The burning power of love casts those whom it consumes into the torrent. For those who know about Sahar, the river is as smooth as the desert.” [Translation] (Adwani, 2012, p. 156)

"The fires of my beloved Mehaar burn in my heart" alludes to the passionate and intense love experienced by Suhni. The phrase implies that the love for Mehaar is so profound that it engulfs Suhni's heart, much like a burning flame that consumes everything in its path. Later Latif talks about the overwhelming force of love. Love, experienced by Suhni, has the strength to overwhelm and engulf individuals in its emotions and intensity. "For those who know about Sahar, the river is as smooth as the desert" refers to a metaphorical contrast between two seemingly opposite elements - the river and the desert. Sahar, in this context, symbolizes the path of love. While a river typically represents a flowing, unpredictable entity, likening it to the smoothness of the desert suggests that for those who (Suhni) understand or have experienced the nature of love, even turbulent or challenging situations appear calm and navigable.

تَر تَكْرَ تَارِ گَهْرَن، اِي كَاتِيَارِن كَم؛  
دَه دَه پِيرَا دِينَهِن م، دِي دُورِ اِيَا دَم؛  
عَقْل، مَت، سَرَم، تِيِي نِينَهِن نِهَوْرِيَا

“To enter the water quickly is the act of the determined. Ten times a day Dam taunts me. Reason, sense, and modesty are all three destroyed by love” [Translation]. (Adwani, 2012, p. 165).

These lines highlight Suhni's inner conflict and dilemma. Suhni's love for Mehaar is so intense that it overrides her rationality, societal norms, and even self-preservation instincts. She swims across the river using an earthenware pot as a float to meet Mehaar, despite knowing the risks associated with this act. The river that separates them becomes both a barrier and a connection symbolizing their forbidden love. The last lines, Reason, sense, and modesty are all three destroyed by love portray how love can defy conventional norms and overpower one's logic and modesty. Sohni's love for Mahiwal is so intense that it transcends societal expectations and rational thinking, leading her to take risks and challenge societal boundaries. In essence, these lines

encapsulate the emotion of dedication towards the goal, showcasing how love can make individuals defy societal norms, risking everything, including their safety and reputation, to be with the one they love.

ڪاري رات، ڪچو گهڙو، اُٺيٺه اونداهي؛  
چنڊ نالو ناه ڪو، درياءَ دڙ لائي؛  
ساهر ڪارڻ سهڻي، اڏيءَ ٿي اٺي؛  
اي ڪم الاهي، نات ڪنن ۾ ڪير گهڙي؟

“The night is dark, her pot is unbaked, and it is the twenty-ninth night of the lunar cycle. There is no trace of the moon, the river is in spate. Suhni has come for Sahar at midnight. This is divinely ordained; why else would anyone enter the whirlpools?” [Translation] (Adwani, 2012, p. 166)

In this verse, Latif sets a scene of darkness - both literal and metaphorical. It tells the story of Suhni, who has come to meet her Beloved, Mehaar, on the 29th night, even though it is dark and the moon is also not visible. The reference to an unbaked pot suggests that the night is still young, and yet Suhni has already made her journey to meet her Beloved. The verse implies that Suhni's passion is exceptional because she is willing to enter the depths of the water to be with her Mehaar.

The Sur Suhni from Shah-Jo-Risalo beautifully encapsulates the profound depths of love experienced by Suhni for her Beloved, Mehaar. Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai's verses skillfully convey the intensity of Suhni's emotions, emphasizing her unwavering devotion despite external judgments. The portrayal of love as a burning flame within Suhni's heart illustrates the overwhelming passion and all-consuming nature of true love. The verses highlight the difficulties Suhni encountered while pursuing her forbidden love with Mehaar. The darkness, both literally and metaphorically, represents ambiguity and misery. The absence of moonlight on the twenty-ninth night represents an upsetting moment, highlighting a lack of direction in the face of hardship. The rushing river serves as a metaphor for life's hardships, depicting a chaotic and frightening environment. However, Suhni's arrival for Mehaar at midnight represents an unwavering love that overcomes barriers. Suhni's swim across the river with an earthenware pot as a float represents a symbolic gesture of defiance against societal limitations. The verse, "Reason, sense, and modesty are all three destroyed by love," exemplifies how love overcomes rules, overwhelming logic, and modesty and leads people to rebel against traditions. Latif explores Suhni's inner turmoil, illustrating how her passionate love for Mehaar transcends reason and social conventions. You can, however, overcome these obstacles and

achieve what others would not be able to if you have a strong desire and true passion. This expresses ideas that are reflected in other books, such as Emily Bronte's "Wuthering Heights." Characters Catherine and Heathcliff display a consuming, passionate love that goes against social expectations and has disastrous results. "Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same," Catherine proclaims, showing an eternal bond that surpasses social norms and echoing Suhni's unwavering devotion.

### **Courage: In the Face of Adversity:**

سَندو نَمَ دَهَكَارُ، هَدَّهينَ كونهي هَنَ كي؛  
هيءَ پائيءَ سين پانهنجو، پُساڻي نه سينگارُ؛  
كارڙ مُنڌَ ميهارُ، ڪاريءَ راتِ ڪُنَ تَري

“She has absolutely no fear of Dam. She does not let the water wet her clothes. For the sake of Mehaar, the woman crosses the eddies in the dark night.” [Translation]. (Adwani, 2012, p. 162)

The verse begins by highlighting Suhni's lack of fear (She has absolutely no fear of Dam)—referring to her fearlessness in facing the dangers of the river. Despite the fear of drowning or being carried away by the strong currents, Sohni remains undeterred and unafraid. The verse continues with the phrase "For the sake of Mehaar," emphasizing Suhni's deep love for Mehaar. Suhni's love for him is so profound that she is willing to take significant risks and endure hardships to be with him. Crossing the river in the dark night, braving its dangers, and protecting herself from getting wet signify her unwavering commitment to meeting Mehaar. In essence, this verse encapsulates Suhni's courage, determination, and unwavering love for Mehaar, showcasing her bravery in overcoming obstacles, including the powerful river currents, to be with her beloved. It portrays her as a fearless and devoted lover, willing to face any challenge for the sake of love.

ڪڇي ساڻُ ڪهي، پڪو پُڇي نه سُهڻي؛  
لنگهيو لڙُ، لطيفُ چئي، وڃارن وهي؛  
سا ڪئن نينهن ٺهي؟ جنهنڪي نينهن نڌو ڪڻي

“She goes with an unbaked pot and she does not ask for one that has been fired. She crosses the turbulent water, says Latif, and goes to her herdsman. How can she overcome the love by which she herself overcomes?” [Translation] (Adwani, 2012, p. 171)

The unbaked pot symbolizes Suhni's fragility and vulnerability as she traverses perilous waters to reunite with her lover, Mehaar. Bhattai employs the metaphor of "turbulent water" to depict the challenges and dangers inherent in Suhni's journey, delving into the intricate nature of love. Suhni's courageous pursuit of Mehaar, despite the risks, serves as a poignant illustration of love's overwhelming influence, transcending rationality and self-preservation. The concluding question, "How can she overcome the love which she overcomes?" underscores the paradox of love—Suhni, though exposed and risking all for her beloved, cannot resist the compelling force that drives her to daring actions. This emphasizes love's capacity to consume individuals, prompting actions contrary to conventional logic and self-preservation instincts.

Shah Latif effectively depicts Suhni's bravery and the strength of love. Suhni symbolizes unwavering love and determination. The metaphor of the unbaked pot and crossing turbulent waters represents Suhni's vulnerability and challenges. Shah Latif's imagery of the fragile pot and treacherous waters portrays Suhni's emotional state. Suhni's fearlessness in facing danger shows her extraordinary courage driven by love. Crossing the river at night signifies physical and emotional bravery. Shah Latif portrays Suhni's actions as a testament to the power of love. Suhni's willingness to face hardships showcases her deep emotions and commitment to Mehaar.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, Shah Abdul Latif Bhattai's poetry stands as a compelling testament to the enduring strength, resilience, and depth of women's emotions. It challenges societal norms and portrays the intricate complexities of human desires, love, and empowerment. The exploration of Sur Suhni reveals the profound emotional experiences of women, as they dedicate themselves to love and navigate the societal constraints that shape their choices. Latif's portrayal of Suhni's unwavering devotion to Mehaar, despite society's imposed restrictions, represents the inherent strength and determination within a woman's love. Furthermore, Shah Latif's portrayal of Suhni shows the timeless and eternal nature of love, free from societal limits, and showing individuals' unwavering determination in the face of hardships. Sohni's tale has been told repeatedly over the centuries, yet it resonates most vividly and relevantly in today's world, immortalizing her through her defiance.

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