



## Performativity, Mysticism, Experience: Making Sense of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan

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### Abstract

*Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (13 October 1948 – 16 August 1997) was a Pakistani musician, known for Qawwali that is the devotional music of the Sufis. He is one of the greatest voices of all times, possessing an extraordinarily tremendous vocal abilities. He had the ability to perform at a high level of vocal intensity for hours and hours. Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan is known as the musician who actually introduced Qawwali music to international audiences, earning him a title of "Shahenshah-e-Qawwali". This tributary article covers different aspects and perspectives of Khan's life.*

### Introduction

My mother's family is from the city of Ajmer, India, the site of perhaps the most famous of all Sufi tombs (Sufism is a mystical branch of Islam focused on the idea of reaching God through forms of personal enchantment, like music). The tomb of Nizamuddin Auliya is the focus of an annual pilgrimage that brings thousands to Ajmer. As a child, I would go to this annual pilgrimage, called the *Urs Mela*, and spend most of the night with my cousins, listening to *Qawwali*, a devotional music intimately tied to the Sufi faith (its roots are in ancient Turko-Persian poetry sung with male choruses, *tabla*, harmonium and handclapping). The singing would start around nine at night and continue till about two or three in the morning, when we would stumble out of compound of the *Dargah Sharif* (the tomb), onto the waiting rickshaws that would take us home. I have memories of swaying to the music, transfixed by the beauty and surrender of the singers, the overwhelming smell of roses, the cool night air. Everything it seemed would be forgotten, when a famous *Qawal* (a *Qawwali* singer) and his party came onstage—elbowing a cousin to get a better view, the sheer beauty of the song offsetting the exhaustion and hunger pangs in the middle of the night. The *Qawwali* would always be sung in a large building attached to the tomb—painted green and gold in the holy colors of Islam—nobody was allowed to sing inside the tomb itself—it was too sacred a space for even devotional music to be sung. This was a tradition, hundreds of years old—that was put aside, for a singer, of unparalleled eloquence and profound grace—Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan.

Known as the greatest exponent of the *Qawwali* (he died at the age of forty eight in 1997), Khan had a dream, that he was singing inside the tomb of Nizamuddin Auliya—a dream, that the *Khadims* (keepers) of the tomb made possible, in this one (and only) exception. In doing so, he began a career that was to take him from regional (and religious) prominence to a preeminent place in the World Music firmament—and for the purpose at hand, here to exemplify the development of a language that married the secular to the sacred; the theological to the sociological. Khan's career can be read as a text that imagines a social/political future that was simultaneous grounded in religion and humanism; empathy and devotion—all framed through a reworking of the question of "love" taken from its assumed place in the realm of romance, and placing it firmly in the space of religion. In all of this, Khan represents, an unusual journey in the presentation/development of authenticity. Following a biographical overview, I will focus on a discussion of the role of religion (Sufism) in Khan's performances—which is at the heart of his "authenticity" (Please note that my discussion of Khan will be abbreviated as compared to the other singers, since many



of the same themes that inform Evora, Ferrer and Toure can be applied to Khan, the exception being the centering of religion—which I will focus on).

### Literature Review

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan was born October 13, 1948, into a family with a 600-year history in *Qawwali*: The art is family-based and hierarchical, and Nusrat was well placed. His father was the eminent singer Ustad Fateh Ali Khan. Intended by his family to be a doctor, Nusrat grew up in Punjab, Pakistan, eavesdropping on his father's singing classes and later studying. His first performance was at his father's funeral in 1964. The singer has said he dreamed of his father placing his hand on his throat, awakening his voice. After this his reputation grew quickly in Pakistan, where he released more than 100 albums and achieved a status as the *ShaheShan*, the King of *Qawwali* singers. In 1985, he performed in England at the Annual World of Art, Music and Dance Festival organized by Peter Gabriel (Spencer, 1997, 29).<sup>1</sup> He died of heart failure Aug. 6, 1997 in London. He was 48. At 350 pounds, Khan had long suffered from health problems related to his weight (Kemp, 1997, 20). I want to suggest that Khan was a complex, multilayered figure, his life and work mobilizing two interrelated elements of the “authentic.” These elements are those of performativity and Sufism/mysticism—each element making up Khan's place in the working of the global postmodern.

Performativity: I never got to see Khan in concert—something I have always regretted. Understanding Khan as a mobilizer of the “authentic” must necessarily begin with the performative index of his songs and the singer as a “text”. *The Boston Globe* described his concerts as “having the energy of a rock'n'roll show, the loose attitude of a house party and the spiritual power of a religious event all rolled into one” (Wald, 2007, 229) His mystique and appeal was centered by the celebratory discourse around his “presence—this was not unique to Khan, many of the famous *Qawwal*'s I had listened to in the *Dargah Sahrif* shared this attribute. There were *Qawal*'s who did not hold your attention—and you could trade punches with a cousin—and then there were the stars that stirred something strange, uncomfortable and wondrous inside you—it was quite literally intoxicating. The experience was fundamentally visceral and mystical at the same time. In sum, assessing the Qawal as a symbol of the authentic is inseparable from the singer's performative index (or to put it differently, the messenger is the message). Viewer accounts of Nusrat reveal a mastery of form and performance:

In performance, Khan, who would sit cross-legged at the center of his backing singers, harmonium players and percussionists, was a prodigious presence, both physically and spiritually. As he sang, he would lift his hands, palms upward, higher with each reach of his voice and curl his fingers into visual representations of the music's snaky twists and turns. His acrobatic voice was at times gruff and edgy; at other times, it soared gracefully over the hypnotic, droning music until it reached undulating, white-hot peaks that transported listeners to another realm (Kemp, 1997, 20)

To be in the presence of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan is a mystical experience in itself. A short, heavy man, Khan sits on the stage with his party, made up of his younger brother Farukh, his nephew Rahat and half a dozen cousins. Waiting for the right moment to sing, he stares intently at the floor. His eyes close as he slowly gestures his hand in front of him, as if to say “The song is about to begin. Please join me and listen.” As the spirit of the music grows, his excitement grows -- ever so slightly. Khan, now swaying his large, majestic torso back and forth, winces while his



left hand flails in front of him. The hypnotized audience rests on each syllable of his words (Carvin, 2007, 1)

Performativity is an integral part of popular culture—as seen across genre (rock n’roll, rap, country music) and in this central sense, Khan’s cross over appeal in the West can be assessed along predictable lines—rapport, intimacy and engagement. But what Khan seems to inspire is in equal part, something that is not usually part of the ambit of performativity in popular culture—a pedagogy derived from a specific liturgical and theological vision, that of Sufi Islam. Here, singing itself is a form of worship, a focus of the authentic that I now turn to:

Sufism/Mysticism: The most famous of Nusrat’s *Qawwalis* include those that are directly aligned with a Sufi/mystical framework for understanding religious experience. “*Qawwali* is a religious institution, invented to spread the religion of Islam,” said Khan in an interview. “The message is unity of God, praise of the Prophet, and other mystical and spiritual themes. We recite mystic poetry and in this poetry our elders have said that a human being can reach the state of God. Because God is in us, and if we can cleanse ourselves from the inside, through the qawwali medium a human being can travel through all those stages and reach that elevated stage which we would probably not be able to reach even through years and years of worship” (Wald, 2007, 229-230)

There are songs like *Shams Ud Doha*, *Badar Ud Doja* (titles for the Prophet Mohammad) that evoke the links between the singer, Mohammad and Allah: “O Lord! Till the time there is life in my body, it should be devoted to you and be an offering to your beloved [Muhammad]. It doesn’t matters if I have anything or not, but I pray *Ameen* that at the time of death, my faith is safe.” In a similar vein, *Ali Maula*, *Ali Maula*, is a paean to the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammad, a figure revered by Sufis. The key verses include: “Ali, the generous monk, Ali, Gods chosen one” and the song’s intoxicating refrain, sung in cycles of increasing velocity: *Shaah-e-mardaan Ali Ali Ali Ali Maula Ali* which translates as King of the brave, Ali, Ali, Ali, Ali, [my] master Ali.”

Sufism is fundamentally humanistic, rather than theological and uses the language of “love” in some significant ways. One key element is the use of the language of “intoxication” itself—where the lines between love for a woman, the love for god, and the love of being in love—are constantly blurred. Many of the other famous *Qawwali’s* by Khan represent this using dense metaphors from a range of influences—cultural, architectural, ecological, experiential. In *Aa Bhi Ja Rut Badal Jayegi*, he sings “I never saw anyone so beautiful [her] body is like the images of Ajanta (murals and carvings in caves in western India) [her] body is like a spell on eyes [her] body is like a song [and] perfumed [her] body is like ecstatic music [her] body is like sweet-smelling moon-light [her] body is like a blooming garden [her] body is like the first ray of the Sun [her] body is like carved statue, eye-catching and arresting like sandalwood like marble. In *Aadmi Aadmi Se Milta hai*, there are some deeply felt expressions of moving beyond the petty, to the universal, a reaching of mutual respect and personal redemption. Some memorable lines that include “I forget his injustice [to me] [when] he meets with such simplicity.” And above all the central mystical refrain of the *Qawwali*: “The one I cannot reach/achieve, even as I try to I meet him. The world fades away when consciousness meets unconsciousness(translations by author and from [www.pakvillle.com/nusrat](http://www.pakvillle.com/nusrat); [www.osa.co.uk/tum](http://www.osa.co.uk/tum) and <http://nusrat.info/category/translations>)

My favorite *Qawwalii* remains *Kali kali zulfoh ke phande na dalo* which translates as “these eyes, these black eyes, do not ensnare me, let me live” but signals much more—a collapse of the love between a man and a woman with the passion for God and the sheer pleasure of being in the moment of mystical intoxication. It has two of the most profound



lines I have heard in any song: “*Yeh unki kahani, Unhikoy Mubarak, Tumhari Jawani, tumhi ko mubarak, Hamari taraf se nigah he hato lo*” which translates (poorly) as “I congratulate you on your story, I congratulate you on your future, your youth. Please look away from me.” It is a stirring lament to the fate of all humans—the coming of old age, the beauty and arrogance of youth, the love for something in the past. In the tone and rendition of the song there is an acceptance of one’s life and even a resigned pleasure of the future—a coming to terms with death and the ultimate union with God.

The language of mysticism is fundamentally at odds with institutionalized religion. As Khan put it, “our elders created this medium that goes beyond religion—its is basically regarding the relationship between a human being and God. Anybody (not just a Muslim) can strive to reach God, and *Qawwali* is a medium to do it” (Wald, 2007, 231). What makes Sufism perhaps unique is in the terminological and sociological collapse of the categories of “love”—where each *Qawwali* works at two levels—the personal and the divine, where to speak of love for one’s partner is also to speak of love for the divine. The verses from one such *Qawwali* show how this is made manifest. The *Qawwali* begins with a narrative question common to mystical rhetoric: “Sometimes I looked for you here, and some times there. You are not, yet you are at every place. You are a puzzle.” The *search* for meaning rather than its uncritical acceptance is a central to the both Sufi and mystical inquiry—separating it from mainstream theological expression (which assumes an unknowable God). The next verse is even more telling in its sociological indictment: “I looked for you in the houses of worship, but couldn’t find you. Yet I found you residing in my heart. You could not be found either in a temple or Ka’bah. But you could be found in a broken heart.” Here the *Qawwali* offers a polemic that for the lack of a better word is “political”—engaging with the superficiality of religious ritual—the bedrock of its institutional practice—and assurance of the true value of religion—its groundedness in the reality of personal emotion. It is this simultaneous personalization and universalization of religion that is at the heart of Khan’s authenticity. The last verse of the *Qawwali* provides a full complement to the psychological vision that Khan provides: “With what splendor you can be seen in every speck. You are a puzzle. Sometimes you are hidden as non-existence and somewhere you appear as existence.” This profoundly epistemological query—at the heart of much mystical and meditative practice in the modern world—links the music of Khan to the world he came to represent—that of religion and humanism.

It is not surprising then that the discourse-surrounding Khan—in both interviews by him and commentaries by other artists—the mystical/spiritual context is closely related to issues of performance. “I have never heard so much spirit in a voice,” Peter Gabriel said in a prepared statement released two days after Khan’s death. “My two main singing inspirations, Nusrat and Otis Redding, have been the supreme examples of how far and deep a voice can go in finding, touching and moving the soul” (Kemp, 1997, 20). In an interview, Khan said, “To be a *Qawwal* is more than being a performer, more than being an artist. One must be willing to release one’s mind and soul from one’s body to achieve ecstasy through music. *Qawwali* is enlightenment itself” (Carvin, 2007, 1). What makes Khan different from other *Qawwal*’s of the past is his use of the mystical tradition of Sufism, to speak a global language. As Kemp (1997) put it, “for a musician so deeply rooted in tradition, Khan was surprisingly open to experimenting with contemporary technology and Western styles in order to get his music to larger audiences. Although he sang in his native Urdu, Khan wanted his music to communicate in a way that transcended language. Khan likened his music to a bridge that brings different cultures, different religions and people of different ethnic groups to the same central point (Kemp, 1997, 20).

**Conslusion and Suggestions**

In sum, I would like to suggest that Khan centered performativity as an liturgical experience that transcended the specific religious idiom and became a language of its own—by not just engaging the viewer as an audience but as a participant, invoking a kind of “high” that resonated across the cultural and linguistic boundaries that separated him from many of his listeners. Under Sufi doctrine, the performer is the instrument through which a conversation between the divine and the secular are created/maintained and sustained. Here the collective engagement of the audience is not the practiced body movement of rock concerts, but the manifestation of an energy that for the lack of a better (more sociological) category, can be called “spiritual.” This *experience* was the heart of his “authenticity.”

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<sup>i</sup> Khan's soundtrack work brought him the most attention among Westerners. In 1994, his voice was layered into the score for Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*. Perhaps the most touching of Khan's soundtrack contributions were his duets with Vedder on two songs, "The Face of Love" and "The Long Road," for the score of Tim Robbins' 1996 film, *Dead Man Walking*. Khan also sang on Gabriel's soundtrack to Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*.