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Lal Aragami's Vernacular Sufi Poetics: Spiritual Vision, Religious Plurality and Cultural Memory in Kashmiri Literature

Mohd Younis Bhat[1]

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government Degree College Tral, (HED) Jammu and Kashmir

Research Scholar, Department of English, Desh Bhagat University

Dr. Aashaq Hussain Zargar[2]

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government Degree College Tral, (HED) Jammu and Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

Lala Aragami, popularly known as Lal (Lala) Aragami or Lala Sahib (Sahib) Aragami, is an important but insufficiently explored voice in Kashmiri Sufi poetry. He is remembered for compositions recited at religious events and shared orally, merging spiritual reflection with vernacular expression and local cultural memory. Although biographical descriptions present him as a prolific poet, his oeuvre has not been adequately documented or critically analysed. This article examines the available textual and bibliographical evidence, focusing on two Kashmiri couplets quoted in published sources: one concerning Kashmiri Pandit devotional practice and the other invoking Goddess Parvati. It considers vernacular expression, oral transmission and cultural memory while distinguishing textual evidence, secondary testimony and critical interpretation. The article argues that Aragami merits closer scholarly attention and that a critical edition, supported by accurate transcription, transliteration, translation and annotation, is essential to understanding his literary contribution.

1. Introduction

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Over a long period of time, Kashmiri literature has evolved by maintaining a balance between the spiritual experience, philosophical reflections, vernacular expression and the life of the region. It is not a narrative that can be told from printed texts alone: poetry has also passed through the oral, the musical, the devotional, and the communal. This written/oral relationship is quite significant in the study of poets of Sufi poetry where its compositions are deeply entrenched in local culture.

Lal Aragami or Lala Aargami and Lala Sahib Aargami are related to Aragam in Bandipora area. There are reports in print that he was a Kashmiri-language Sufi poet and his compositions were sung in Sufi gatherings. In his poem Spiritual Journey, Khursheed Dar writes that his poetry is grounded in the local culture and Kashmiri idiom, and is also influenced by Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit languages. According to another source, many of his poems have not yet been published and his songs are sung at religious celebrations (Dar, n.d.).

The collection Jaam-e-Saqi (Intikhab) is an important primary-source access point. The bibliographical record also shows that the monograph, Lala Aargami, published by Sahitya Akademi in 2002 (Takseen, 2002), is available. Later sources refer to another set, Kuliyati Lala Aargami, published (supposedly) by the Shrine Committee in 2008 (Dar, 2024; Dar, n.d.).

This is a discussion about the connection between Aragami's popular Sufi art and Kashmiri cultural memory. Two couplets of published accounts are of special interest: one to a Kashmiri Pandit girl concerning her practice of devotion and the other, invoking the goddess Parvati (Ambardar, 2020; Dar, n.d.). These verses serve as a concentrated point to consider the impact of his poems on religious imagery outside the limited scope of a particular community. The argument is artificial, confined to what there is to be found in the two couplets, and it does not pretend to be exhaustive since it does not purport to restate the whole of Aragami's poetic philosophy.

2. **Research Objectives**

The present research explores Aaragami's contribution to Kashmiri Sufi poetry, vernacular expression, and local culture, focusing on invocation for religious devotion and the role of oral transmission in cultural memory through two accessible couplets. It also highlights the bibliographical and textual constraints that currently hinder a more comprehensive evaluation of his literary corpus.

3. **Methodology and Scope**

The article adopts a qualitative literary-historical approach combined with close reading. The primary text source is the transmitted collection of *Jaam-e-Saqi (Intikhab)* attributed to Lal Aragami; consequently, uncertain readings are not presented as definitive quotations.

The two complete couplets analysed below are drawn from published secondary sources-specifically Upender Ambardar's Aragam and Khursheed Dar's KashmirPen (Ambardar, 2020; Dar, n.d.). Rather than serving as critical transcriptions of the original collection, they function as textual witnesses preserved in secondary publications. This study carefully distinguishes between primary source facts, secondary source testimonies, and the author's critical inferences. This methodological boundary ensures that certain compositions are not falsely attributed to Aragami and avoids unsupported page references.

4. **Biographical and Literary Background**

According to published sources, Aragami's given name is Lal Malik, popularly known as Lalla Aargami. As recorded in Khursheed Dar's biographical accounts, he was born in Chattibanday Aragam, Bandipora on 11 March 1923 (Dar, 2024; Dar, n.d.). Born into a modest socioeconomic background with limited formal education, he worked variously as a milkman, labourer and imam (Dar, 2024; Dar, n.d.). These details contextualise his literary activity not within traditional institutional frameworks, but rather with the local community's socio-religious milieu. According to Dar, Aargami began his spiritual journey under Shaban Sahib Slura and subsequently became a disciple of Ama Sahib Kawa, (Dar, 2024; Dar, n.d.). Because these biographical details rely on published testimonies rather than independently substantiated documentary evidence, they must be interpreted accordingly. The reported date of Aragami's death also varies across published accounts: Upender Ambardar gives 1984, whereas Khursheed Dar records 27 August 1988. In the absence of independently verified documentary evidence, this discrepancy cannot be resolved here (Ambardar, 2020, p. 42; Dar, 2024; Dar, n.d.).

Two publications are of particular interest. The Sahitya Akademi catalogue lists a 108-page monograph on Lala Aargami published by the Sahitya Akademi in 2002 (ISBN 81-260-1375-3) (Takseen, 2002). Additionally, in "Spiritual Journey" and "Well Known", Khursheed Dar references Kuliyati Lala Aargami, a collection published by the Shrine Committee in 2008. The colophon and title pages of this latter edition require direct verification before definitive biographical details can be established.

5. **Context of Vernacular Sufi Poetics**

In general, Kashmiri Sufi poetry conveys spiritual and ethical themes through the Kashmiri language and a familiar cultural context. The vernacular serves not merely as a vehicle for translating abstract doctrine, but

as a bridge connecting poetic experience with ordinary discourse, devotional practice, and collective memory. The integration of Kashmiri idioms, alongside the reported influence of Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit vocabulary, is emphasized in Dar's account of Aragami's spiritual journey (Dar, 2024).

Aragami's literary identity is deeply rooted in the language and performance of his work. Because his compositions were traditionally sung at Sufi gatherings and much of his poetry remained unpublished—as noted by KashmirPEN (Dar, n.d.)—the evidence suggests a tradition existing both in oral circulation and on the printed page. This dynamic presents important methodological questions concerning variant readings, performative adaptations, and the preservation of oral compositions.

At present, the available corpus is incomplete, precluding a detailed prosodic analysis. Consequently, any definitive claims regarding Aragami's personal metrical innovations, unique formal system, or stylistic originality would be premature. Existing evidence calls for a more guarded assessment: that his poetry is firmly grounded in the Kashmiri vernacular and the cultural landscape of its intended audience.

6. **Devotional Plurality and Kashmiri Pandit Context**

Perhaps the most important textual evidence available is the couplet quoted by Upender Ambardar in his account of Aragam and subsequently by Khursheed Dar (Ambardar, 2020, p. 42; Dar, n.d.):

Bata Koori Vate Kanie Manj Chuai Dai,

Karee Pooja, Yinai Mushravak Lai.

In this verse, the poet addresses a Kashmiri Pandit girl, urging her to revere the stone idol as her deity with total commitment. Ambardar explains that the poet directs the young girl to pray to the stone deity with undivided attention, an explanation echoed by Dar (Dar, n.d.). Drawing upon these Pandit interpretations, the lines may be rendered in English as: "O daughter of the Pandits, practice with all your heart; pray earnestly to the deity you hold dear."

This rendering remains interpretative because the original Kashmiri wording has not yet been collated against a clear, authoritative print edition. In translating, caution must be exercised regarding dialectal variations in vocabulary, grammar, and precise word meanings to ensure the translation does not assert a higher degree of certainty than the text warrants.

This couplet is unique in its empathetic portrayal of another community's piety, free of mockery. As described in published sources, the speaker encourages the addressee to fully engage in her religious

practices. Its ethical value lies in presenting a devotional ritual sympathetically within a context distinct from the speaker's own religious tradition. While it does not establish an extensive theological framework, it offers a valuable glimpse into a literary engagement with Kashmiri Pandit religious culture (Ambardar, 2020; Dar, n.d.).

7. **God and Culture: A Way of Life**

Ambardar provides a second couplet, which is rendered as follows:

Haran Doh Gaie Praran Yaeti Parvati Lo,

Sonihaer Paad Yaepaar Trav Lotie Parvati Lo.

Ambardar interprets these lines as an expression of reverence toward Goddess Parvati. While the published account establishes the general subject of the couplet, it is insufficient to ensure a confident, word-by-word English translation. Consequently, a literal translation is withheld until the original Kashmiri text can be verified.

The invocation of Parvati is significant for understanding Aragami's cultural consciousness, as it introduces a Hindu religious icon into the poetic universe of a Kashmiri Sufi poet. Read alongside the couplet addressed to a Kashmiri Pandit girl, this verse offers clear indications of engagement with the devotional imagery of multiple religious communities. Together, these examples suggest that familiarity with and recognition of each culture are central to interpreting Aragami's poetry, though the evidence is not extensive enough to claim universal significance.

8. **Poetic aesthetics&local imagery**

A careful examination of a poet's aesthetics will be able to point to diction, rhythm, figurative language, sound patterns, and form in the original poems. According to Dar, Aragami's poetry is rich in Kashmiri idiom, and has been inspired by Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit words (Dar, 2024). KashmirPEN also commends his metaphor and simile (Dar, n.d.). These are useful critical commentaries, but they are only secondary descriptions until they can be supported by a longer series of close readings of a larger group of poems.

It is evident from the two surviving couplets that these are not abstract or placeless spiritual phrases, but culturally situated images. Their references to Kashmiri Pandit devotional context and references to Parvati bring poetic expression to the religious and cultural milieu of Kashmir. This would be better achieved by an

aesthetic analysis of the original texts focusing on patterns of address, repetition, rhyme, rhythm, metaphor, and on the relationship between the spoken and the written.

9. **Oral Performance and Textual Preservation**

Given that people reported hearing Aragami's poetry performed in Sufi gatherings, one could assume that a means of dissemination of poetry involved the preserve of memory and the performance of poetry (Dar, 2024; Dar, n.d.). Poems can be passed down orally, even if they are not a part of popular print publications. Sings and listeners and devotees can help remember the verses with repeated singing and musical presentation.

There are also some textual issues related to oral transmission: variant wording, musical adaptation, uncertainty of authorship, and variations between the printed and performed texts. A critical edition should contain the original Kashmiri script, uniform transliteration, literal and literary translations and variants of the poems as well as mention of the source of each poem. If a composition is recorded orally, the performer and conditions of the recording should also be noted.

10. **Humanities Education and Student Learning**

However, the lack of a poet in the mainstream of academic activity doesn't mean that his poetry is not of a very high quality. Literary visibility can be subject to unequal publication and translation and to uneven preservation. The case of Aragami indicates the need for analysis of the regional and orally transmitted poetic traditions, along with those of widely anthologised poets. The Sahitya Akademi monograph and the report in 2008 of a collection of his works provide good bibliographical indications, but a comprehensive list of his works is still needed (Sahitya Akademi; Dar, “Spiritual Journey”).

The literary heritage of Aragami should not be at the mercy of mere biographical sketch and devotional adoration. It demands a systematic approach to the poems, their language features, literary forms, text variations and connection with the history of the literature of Kashmir.

11. **Findings and Discussion**

Based on the available evidence, there are several findings. First, Aragami is remembered as a Kashmiri Sufi poet connected with the oral devotional circulation (Dar, n.d.). Secondly, two entire couplets that are mentioned in published sources refer to a devotional setting that involves Kashmiri Pandits and the invocation of Parvati provide a specific context for the investigation of religious plurality (Ambardar, 2020; Dar, n.d.). Third, vernacular idiom and figurative richness are indicated in published descriptions but a

larger corpus is needed in order to test the generalisations of style. Fourthly, unpublished poetry is an important scholarly priority due to reports.Fourthly, the reports mean that there is a high priority for preserving text for poetry that has not been published. Lastly conflicting biographical reports illustrate a need for more reliable documentation.

12. **Conclusion**

Lal Aragami merits continued focus in Kashmiri literary studies. The pairing of these couplets implies that his poetry references the religious figures and traditions of communities beyond one's own, while accounts of oral transmission place his work firmly within a living vernacular tradition. These findings must be interpreted with caution, as this study does not claim to offer a representative sample of his total work, a definitive translation of the couplets, or a resolution to his biographical uncertainties.

The publication of critical editions of *Jaam-e-Saqi (Intikhab)* and **Kulivati Lala Aargami,** accompanied by accurate transcriptions, transliterations, translations, textual notes, and biographical documentation, would represent a major contribution to Kashmiri literary studies. Aragami's literary significance should not be confined to local memory and scarce biographical fragments. Through sustained scholarly engagement with his poetry, we can recover an important vernacular voice and integrate it into a more comprehensive history of Kashmiri literature.

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