

Sufi Women of South Asia

Women and Gender

THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE ISLAMIC WORLD

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Susanne Dahlgren
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Sufi Women of South Asia

Veiled Friends of God

By

Tahera Aftab



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Preface

Academic studies of Sufis and Sufism, since the beginning of the twentieth century, have acquired a growing popularity among scholars and readers. Most of these studies have been limited to the accounts of male Sufis. Such studies, in some instances, even view moral and ethical virtues—which are integral in such narratives—in two separate blocks: as male and female virtues. Trapped by this distorting notion, studies of Islam in general, and Sufism in particular, remain routinely limited to the accounts and attainments of male Sufis; women remain, at best, an addendum. Women, whenever they appear in the pages of such writings, are portrayed as appendages of the male Sufis, mostly exemplifying male piety or projecting female wickedness; depictions of women's characteristics of caring and nurturing are rare. In both these instances, women, as a class, are annihilated. This book brings Sufi women of South Asia to the centre of historical knowledge and restores their rightful status in the growing and expanding literature on Sufism worldwide.

One of the major hurdles in the development of Muslim societies is under recognition of women's potential which results in underutilisation of women's agency, and often exploitation of their labour. The root cause of this underutilisation is the propagation of misogynist thoughts emerging from patriarchal readings of the sacred texts of Islam, giving currency to myths about women being troublemakers and deficient in intelligence. These misogynist interventions in the realm of faith and tradition do not remain limited to sermons delivered from the pulpits or religious discourses; they cross the borders of social perceptions and behaviour. Thus, the dichotomic debate over women's assumed innate disability and deficiency persists, often slowing down women's fair and just participation in community development.

The book that I present to my readers moves away from the traditional craft of writing half-histories of Sufism in South Asia. Discarding this suppressive methodology of writing history, *Sufi Women of South Asia: Veiled Friends of God* presents Sufi women in their full human glory. The present work, thus, is inspired by three goals: first, to search out and collate relevant references found in the South Asian Sufi texts, including hagiographical accounts, about Sufi women; second, to present specific narratives or references about mystic women, and thus to salvage and secure these narratives with the purpose of restoring women's histories; and third, to explore women's understanding of *taṣawwuf* and the way they followed it. The last of these goals is the focal point or the real inspiration of this book, and it runs through the entire text. This

book, therefore, is not just an outcome of spending torturous hours mining and extracting hidden treasures of Sufi women's history, though that is much warranted and even commendable; the book also argues that these salvaged and retrieved narratives of pious women rightfully are part of mainstream Sufi canon. The number of accounts of Sufi women that have been discovered abundantly shows that the narratives of South Asian Sufis that do not include women—or that include them merely as an addendum or as a ploy to glorify Sufi men—merely presents half of history.

My conviction that righteous and virtuous women have existed always and everywhere because all women, like all men, are the progeny of the first human couple appointed by Allah as His *khalīfa* on Earth, led me to begin research for this book with two hypotheses. The first is that women were and are central in the history of the spread of *taṣawwuf* and also in Sufi praxis and discourses. My second hypothesis is that, for some reason, this presence of women is either purposely and consciously concealed or omitted. At the outset, I assured myself that women's stories should not be obliterated. I also believed that the male-authored chronicles have kept such women veiled. I was also convinced that exemplary women, like exemplary men, who are *awliyā'* Allah have always existed and will continue to exist to guide fellow human beings in seeking the Truth. My conviction emerges from my trust in the Word of Allah and my belief that these friends of Allah, by virtue of their friendship with the Divine, the only Reality without shape and form, are humans first and last.

These convictions worked as motivation through the past several years. In searching for, selecting, and studying source material, both textual and oral, I remained careful; as a student of history, the lesson I have learned is that while some texts are written to project and preserve the truth, others are created to erase the truth. Wilful omission, suppression of facts, and a selection of what suits the scribe is similar to withholding testimony and consequently turns history into nothing less than perjury. I must admit that I am cognisant of the inherent challenges that confront the writers of history, as all available sources owe their existence first to selective writing, next to archiving, and then to random indexing.

The present study, *Sufi Women of South Asia: Veiled Friends of God*, takes the form of a historical overview and presents biographical notices of pious and virtuous women from the early tenth century to contemporary times. Biographical notices are analytically integrated and synthesised with the major and foundational Sufi texts, the *maḥfūzāt* and the *tazkirāt*. Recent works are also included to examine the continuity of the earlier traditions that encouraged harbouring gender biases. This book is thus a rereading of the past. This

process of rereading gives new meanings to the older texts and suggests new patterns of social behaviour and fresh modes of thinking.

This book, thus, entails the production of a new understanding of the prevalent gendered nature of religious behaviour and practices by reconstructing the lives of pious women. This work primarily is a biographical compendium of women who believed in and practiced asceticism and avoided its public display. To prepare this book, I have drawn on multiple types of source material, written as well as oral, including fieldwork observation which was done primarily in Pakistan—Karachi, Thatta, Makli, Lahore, Multan, and Uchh. Information was also collected with the help of email and WhatsApp. Interviews with shrine managers, staff of the Auqaf Department (the Department that looks after charitable endowments and bequests), religious scholars, and even shopkeepers, taxi drivers, and passers-by in the vicinity of the shrines yielded invaluable knowledge. Finally, this volume is not about women alone, to the exclusion of men; indeed, it seeks to place women in a wider, more inclusive social framework.

My focus throughout this study is not the *ṭarīqa*-based Sufism which increasingly got trapped in highly ritualised performances in the garb of right conduct (*ādāb*). A critical review of how Sufi theses of the different Sufi *silsilas* swayed and guided the course of the cultural ethos of the South Asian Muslim community, however, has remained a quintessential aspect of this study. Thus, this book explores relationships between South Asian Sufism and the Muslim community through the kaleidoscope of women's lives. This volume, I hope, would set in motion a fresh process of scrutinizing the texts and other records in order to understand women's experiences at all levels—mundane as well as spiritual. This scrutinizing process anticipates raising specific questions. Several epistemological questions that might not be considered directly connected with the lives of Sufi women are legitimate questions of crucial significance for a holistic understanding of women's experiences. I expect that these questions would lead to more questions, if not instant answers. One basic question, which is of crucial significance, is regarding the false and erroneous concept of women as the cause of the so-called fall of Adam from Heaven and of the misconstrued deception by Eve of Adam. The second question is why the interpretation of surah 4:34 of the Qur'ān as a verse about women's subordination is not re-examined as a distortion of the message of the Qur'ān and how do these exegeses continue to relegate women into the private spaces? Sadly, and shockingly, male Sufis not only approved these mistaken and misleading interpretations but professed and propagated these fallacies. The third question is regarding women's mobility. Are restrictions on women's mobility

legitimate? The texts, under review in this book, promoted a restricted view of women by professing that virtuous women are women who remain concealed and hidden. Is this view in accordance with the Qurʾān and the Traditions of the Prophet?

I find myself compelled to add a personal note here concerning the popular usage of the word *Sufi*. The traditional *adāb* of South Asian Muslims, which nurtured my being and is reflected in all forms of conduct of the community, expounds two distinctly opposite types of human temperaments (*mizāj*): *Sufiāna*, simple, soft, humble, and subdued; and *sauqiyāna*, commonplace or loud, almost vulgar. Thus, a *Sufiāna mizāj* person would eat moderately, converse softly, and avoid flamboyant behaviour. On the contrary, a *sauqiyāna mizāj* person would devour food noisily, with ostentatious manners. In short, the Sufi way is embedded in the cultural ethos. This cultural ethos is created, nurtured, and transmitted to generations after generations by women in their families. Curiously, despite their negative views of women, male Sufis have also paid homage to this role of women. To illustrate, let me share my personal experience of the Sufi *baraka* in my life. The story goes back to before I was born. The loss of her seven-day-old daughter, her first child, devastated and traumatised my nineteen-year-old mother beyond any imagination. Emotionally wrecked, she would sit cross-legged for months, between the *ʿasr* and the *maghrib* prayers, hoping that the spirit of her daughter would visit her. As the child had died without sucking a drop of breast milk, a rumour grew that it was no ordinary being. A spell had overpowered the baby, it was said. Later, to protect my mother, my paternal grandfather brought her a *tʿāwīz* (protection amulet) from the shrine of his *pīr*, Ḥaẓrat Miān Mastān Shāh.¹ Two years later, when my mother was pregnant with me, she wished to have a daughter. To protect her pregnancy, my grandfather again sought the help from the *dargah*. This time, a holy person arrived and literally punched four iron nails into the four corners of our sprawled house, thus drawing a protective boundary for the safe delivery. The nails were to be taken off on the fortieth day following the birth. All through the period of her pregnancy, my mother was not to cross the sacred line of protection. On my fortieth day, I was taken to the shrine of Bī Mayya, a mystic who is believed to have arrived in Rampur along with the earliest migrants from Buner, Swat.² For the next fourteen years of my

1 The shrine is in Kemri, Rampur (State), UP.

2 The shrine, or *ziyārat*, of Bī Mayya, is within the compound of a small but beautifully sublime mosque in Mohalla Bazar Mullā Zarīf, my ancestral home in Rampur. Bī Mayya was a male Sufi who always dressed as women do and wore glass bangles of the *dhānī* colour (green shade of paddy or rice plants) and a headscarf of the same shade. As my grandfather used to spend his nights praying in this mosque and used to serve the shrine (voluntarily) and

life, on my birthday, a set of the finest green glass bangles and a headscarf of green-coloured muslin, kept in a basket full of scented flowers, was offered in thanksgiving as a *nazrāna* at the *ziyārat*. Women of the family were strongly discouraged from visiting the shrine, though it was just across the road. The feminine of the Divine, thus, through the intercession of Bī Mayya, remains part of my existence, though *Allah hath power over all things* (surah 2:109).

In conclusion, I would like to share with my readers the history of the making of this book. My interest in the study of women Sufis began a long time ago when the late Professor Muhammad Mujeeb, whom sadly I could not meet personally, suggested in his foreword to my book *Women Mentors of Men* that to the list of women enjoying earthly power, I should also add women from other classes as well. His observation that “Shaikh Nizamuddin’s mother, for instance, would be a very instructive subject to discuss as she is one of many whose lives are memorable”³ remained etched on my mind all through the last several decades. I explored libraries and archives for books in South Asia and elsewhere to identify works related to the lives of South Asian Muslim women. I did find some, but if any reference to Sufi women was found, it was more as a gesture of offering respect, praise, and adulation.⁴ Their histories, and their contributions to the development and growth of discourse on spirituality, were missing. Since then, several studies dealing with women and spirituality have been published. While I offered several courses and seminars on Women in Islam and Women and Religion and remained mentally engaged with Sufism and the Sufis, I kept postponing my study of Sufi women. Once the weight became almost unbearable, I began to shape my thoughts into words. The present work, thus, while it lessens my burden, accumulated by neglecting and postponing research that is close to my heart, attempts to erase or at least minimise the neglect of the illustrious pious women. It also finally gives me the opportunity to thank the late Professor Mujeeb.

The book aims to attract readers from varied backgrounds and affiliations—scholars of Islam in all geographies, students of comparative religions, feminist scholars, scholars of women’s history, and of course all those who are travellers on the path of knowledge. At the risk of sounding vain, this biographical compendium of South Asian pious women is unique in its contents and

recited the Qur’an by its side, therefore when he passed away at the age of one hundred and four years, he was rewarded an exceptional honour. Though his last resting place was already there in the ancestral burial ground, at the insistence of those who offered prayers at this mosque he is laid to rest next to Bī Mayya.

3 Tahera Azmat, 1970. *Women Mentors of Men*. Ujjain: Siddhartha Prakashan.

4 See Introduction in my book, *Inscribing South Asian Muslim Women: An Annotated Bibliography & Research Guide*. (Leiden: Brill, 2008.) where I have highlighted these issues.

presentation. This book, in essence and in form, is the long-awaited, modern-day *tazkira* of *awliyāʾ Allah*. I feel honoured to present stories of women *awliyāʾ* from South Asia for the first time for wider global readership.

The Structure of the Book

This preface introduces the book *Sufi Women of South Asia: Veiled Friends of God*, which indeed is unique and the first of its kind in terms of the number of biographies of Sufi women and their shrines. The book covers the vast geographical expanse of South Asia from the eleventh century to the early twentieth century.

The introduction sets the scene with a brief overview of the recurrent theme of the book, unveiling the presence of Sufi women. It identifies the key factors that shaped women's lives at the nascent stage of the growth of the Muslim community in Hindustan and continued to play the most significant role in gender equation within the society. Review of selected recent scholarly works and modern research studies relevant to my work is offered. Next, I have added a note on research methods and process adopted for the completion of this book.

The main body of my study is divided into two parts; each set offers a narrative which, though different in themes examined and discussed, is threaded with the other. Part 1 consists of eight chapters. Chapter 1, which sets the scene, has four subheads. The first part of this chapter presents an assessment of the evolution of the Muslim society in South Asia, with a brief but critical assessment of women's presence in the emerging Muslim community of South Asia. Allied to this theme, the book looks next at the arrival of the Sufis, both male and female, under separate subheads. This overview is followed by a brief study of Sufism, its meanings and concepts, as explained and taught by the early Sufi Shaikhs in South Asia. With an analytical approach, this chapter examines two terms: Sufism and *taṣawwuf*, which are the two most familiar terms in studies on Islamic mysticism. With reference to the expositions of the two terms by celebrated Sufi Shaikhs, this chapter shows that while Sufism puts emphasis on the Sufi *ṭarīqas* with their Shaikh-created rules, *taṣawwuf* exists without any hierarchical control over other human beings. It is simply obedience to the Divine. These three themes set the scene for the development, growth, and maturation of ideas and concepts, and for the interplay of power and authority within the spiritual and profane spaces.

Chapter 2, which is divided into nine subheads, presents an assessment of Sufi sources. This chapter examines, with reference to selected texts and their

authors, how the concept of men in authority and women in obedience was codified in the Sufi canons. The first category of these texts emerged from the spoken word of a Sufi Shaikh. The spoken words were recorded on paper by a scribe, recalling what was said earlier. These spoken words soon transformed themselves into solid works of manuals on ethics, morality, and spirituality. This chapter examines how and under what forces the direction of gender dynamics of the emerging South Asian Muslim society were shaped and formed. These gender dynamics have not changed much over the centuries and continue to remain in effect even today. An appraisal of major trendsetters in establishing conservative gender norms is also included here and linked with the absence or scarcity of women's visibility in the Sufi canon. Finally, a brief appraisal of shrines as sources for the identification of Sufi women who are omitted or not found in the texts is added. The importance of shrines, both as a source for compiling Sufi women's biographies and as sacred spaces for the expression of their spirituality, is highlighted.

Next, I present an assessment of how all women are viewed through the male Sufi's gaze—as inherently feeble in intellect and innately trouble-causing, and who can only be tolerated at the lower levels of social, political, and religious hierarchies. Women as the cause of Adam's Fall from Heaven, women as *fitna*, as an embodiment of evil and as devoid of reasoning, intellect, and proper understanding of faith is critically evaluated in this chapter.

Next is an analysis of male Sufis' perception of their family responsibilities, the women of their families, their attitude towards married life and sex, and care of their children. Chapter 5 is an appraisal of a much-neglected issue related to fallen women and women-slaves and maidservants. Women's initiation, or taking an oath of allegiance into the Sufi order, is examined in chapter 6. Chapter 7 presents a brief overview of Sufi abodes, lodges, and *khānqāhs* which emerged as icons of spiritual authority, separating the sacred from the profane, and raising structures that stood next to mosques but often attracted larger attendees. This chapter concludes by looking at women's lodges or *khānqāhs* and their presence at the male Sufi *khānqāhs*. Chapter 8 examines controversies about shrine visitation. This chapter symptomizes the everlasting glory of Sufi *darbārs* and *ziyārats* which sanctify the landscape of South Asian Islam, and it examines women's presence at shrines and studies the continuous debate over shrine visitation, particularly by women as an irreligious act. Throughout my analysis of the primary sources, I have been watchful in reading the texts by visualising the producers of these discourses, the scribe of the texts and their first audiences, in the context of gender dynamics and the cultural-social ethos of the period of their production.

Part 2 of the work, the essence of this research, shows how women, overriding male power structures of authority created and sustained by rituals, negotiated with the male paradigms of spirituality and connected with the Divine. Thus, applying their self-agency, these women silently created a space for themselves where they sought the Divine, away from public gaze and male scrutiny. Here, divided into several chapters, I have presented 134 biographical notices of Sufi women. Chapter 9 consists of 83 notices, 63 of which are from the tenth century to the early twentieth century and an additional 20 for which the dates are not known or confirmed. Chapter 10 includes notices of 83 Sufi women according to their specific status: nine Sufi women Khalifas; one Sufi woman who held spiritual sessions for women; five Sufi women who performed *bai'at* at the hands of their Sufi fathers/husbands/sons/brothers; nine notices of Sufi women who are mothers of Sufi men and women; one Sufi woman who was recognised as *Murshid* by her husband; narratives of three Sufi women who did not marry; exceptional case studies of two Sufi women who performed duties as managers of male Sufis' shrines; nine stories of intoxicated Sufi women; three young girls who were endowed with the charismatic powers of an excellent Sufi; one Sufi woman who is known to have a *khānqah*; stories of two women who preferred death to a life of dishonour; a Pashtun Sufi woman who wrote a book of instructions for Sufi men; the narrative of a Sufi woman who wrote the only Sufi *tazkira* and her autobiographical experiences of becoming a devout Sufi; and finally the amazing story of a sixteenth-century Sufi woman who revoked her pledge, led an agitation movement amongst the male Sufis, and finally earned success in her mission.

Chapter 11 presents biographical narratives of seventeen Sufi women based on oral traditions and through the studies of their shrines. This study draws upon my several visits to women's shrines in Karachi, Multan, and Lahore. The most fascinating aspect of this chapter is the real presence of women within the spiritual environs of today.

Lastly, in chapter 12 a list of names of thirty-two Sufi women from different regions of South Asia is added, with no major details. These names are extracted from texts, including one manuscript. Also included, extracted from *Tawārīkh ā'ina-yi taṣawwuf*, an 1893 hagiography of the Ṣābirī *silsila*, is a list of 107 Sufi women, along with their dates of birth and death, places of their birth and death, and location of their shrines, along with their hierarchical/spiritual status. I must point out that in addition to the biographical notices this book presents, there are many more scattered and hidden in vernacular texts and in local legends, waiting to be redeemed from obscurity. I must also say that this last subchapter, though it offers sparse information and consists mostly of names only, still carries great significance. I interpret this scanty information

as historic evidence of the presence of more Sufi women in more areas of South Asia. The usual practice is to present such information in the form of an appendix. I have opted not to relegate these entries to an appendix. I believe that sketchy narratives and accounts of life stories of Sufi women are not a criterion for their allocation to an appendix; indeed, they reflect more on the nature and method of historiography in general, and the writing of women's history in particular, and far less on the merit of these women of piety.

All entries are in alphabetical order by giving the name of the Sufi woman as it appears in the primary texts, inscriptions, oral traditions, and other sources that I have accessed. I have given dates of birth, death, and *'urs* (celebration of death anniversary at the shrines), if available. Biographical notices vary in length, depending on the availability of information.

A brief conclusion brings the book to its end. To help the readers have a smooth and comfortable reading of the book, I have also added a glossary of words and terms in Persian, Urdu, and other local languages.

Acknowledgements

I would not have thought of writing this book had the late Professor Muhammad Mujeeb not suggested to me to study the life of Bibi Zulaikha, the mother of Ḥaḏrat Nizāmu'd-Dīn Awliyā'. Though I began reading about this pious woman, I kept postponing my writing. Finally, I decided that it was time to finish writing this book and thereby honour the memory of Professor Muhammad Mujeeb.

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Figures

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Abbreviations

AA	<i>Akhbāru'l Akhyār</i> by Shaikh 'Abu'l-Ḥaqq Muḥaddis Dihlawi
FF	<i>Fawa'idu'l fu'ād</i> of Hasan Sijzi
Hujwīrī	<i>Kashfu'l Mahjūb</i> (nuskhā-ye Samarqand)
Jamālī	<i>Siyaru'l 'Arifīn</i> of Jamālī Kambo Dihlawi
KM	<i>Khairu'l Majālis</i> of Ḥamīd Qalandar
Nicholson	English translation of the <i>Kashf al-Mahjūb</i> by R.A. Nicholson
NU	<i>Kitāb Nafahātu'l Uns</i> of 'Abdu'r Raḥmān Jāmī
SA	<i>Siyaru'l Awliyā'</i>

Note on Transliterations

All translations in the book are my own, unless otherwise indicated. Dates in the text are given according to the Common Era date. Hijri dates followed by a slash precede the Common Era dates.

All titles of works cited, non-English words and phrases, and transcribed words in the text appear in *italics*. In my transliteration, I have adhered to the South Asian usage of the spoken and written Persian and Urdu words. I have not italicised or transliterated words, such as Sufi. For example, I use *Ḥaẓrat* and not *Ḥaḍrat*, *zīkr* and not *Dhīkr*; similarly, in this text it is *bid'at* and not *bid'a*, and *bai'at* and not *bai'ah*. However, I have retained the spelling of Ḥadīth. Brackets [] are used to indicate this author's additions not found in the original text.

Note: Passages from the Qur'ān are identified by chapter and verse in the brackets within the text. Translations of the Qur'ānic verses are cited from Abdullah Yusuf Ali's interpretation, unless otherwise specified.

ب	b	ظ	z	Urdu Vowels	
ت	t	ع	‘	چ	ch
ث	s	غ	gh	ٹ	ṭ
ج	j	ف	f	ڈ	ḍ
ح	ḥ	ق	q	ڑ	ṛ
خ	kh	ك	k	ں	ñ
د	d	ل	l		
ذ	z	م	m		
ر	r	ن	n		
ز	z	ه	h		
س	s	و	w		
ش	sh	ء	‘		
ص	ṣ	ي	y		
ض	ẓ				
ط	ṭ				

For diacritical marks and Romanized versions, I have used the following dictionaries:

A Dictionary of Urdū Classical Hindī and English, by John Platts. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal (1993).

A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary, by F. Steingass. Lahore: Sange-e-Meel Publications (2000).