

EXPLORING FEMALE NARRATIVE IN SUFI LITERATURES OF INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

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Abstract

In the Indian subcontinent, females were able to make their presence felt in most of the Hikayat of Sufis but not very remarkably. The literature which have incorporated the narration of female Sufis actually was there only in the biographies of the prominent Sufi stalwarts like Nizamuddin Auliya, Shiekh Abdul haq Muhaddis, Chiragh Dehalvi etc that too with a slight tinge of misogyny. There were incidences where female spiritual personalities were highly regarded but with an explicit perception of supremacy of men. Whenever someone talks about any highly righteous women, it was interpreted in the literature that personality cannot be a woman, rather she is man under a divine guise of womanhood.

Keyword: (Sufism, Composite Culture, Women, Female Sufis)

1. SUFISM AND COMPOSITE CULTURE

The term mysticism refers a method for accessing the "Reality" with the help of intuition and meditation. The presses of appropriating the knowledge of "Reality" which instigates or ignites the emotional spiritual faculties of the cognitive structure. The latent potential of human-self responds through the process under the guidance of a spiritual stalwarts.¹

The origin of Islamic mysticism i.e. Sufism can be traced right back to the injunctions of Quran. There are numerous examples where Allah exhorts asceticism

encourages oblivion towards the worldly deceptions while on the other hand complements the life of hereafter. Allah in Quran urges a life persistent in its devotion and piety, as it impresses upon the need to shun and abandon hypocrisy, dishonesty and immorality.² Under the influence of these verses, Sufism originated probably in ninth century AD in Arab counties and Persia.³ According to Ghazali, Sufism is all about the learning which one can acquire through his intellect. The Ghazali version of Sufism and mysticism is nothing but an exertion of human cognitive potential into developing the intellectual capital so that one can discover the Providence. The writing of Ghazali on mysticism is logical, analytic and philosophical both in substance and style.⁴ But for the mainstream religious quarters, Sufism smacks of Pantheism the most hated and loathsome crime in Islamic jurisprudence. The inclination of Sufi mystics towards pantheism is more than that of Christian mystics noting that Christianity also vouches for monotheism. Owing to its being an ostensibly blasphemous practice of seeking spiritual comfort, many Sufis fell prey to the Muslim orthodoxy and they were executed. The execution of Abu Yazid Bistani after his declaration "God was in his soul" exemplifies the antipathy for the Sufi practice found among the intellectual elite of the Islamic Caliphate. Al Hallaj had to pay the price for saying "I am the Truth". The interpretation of his statement could be many but his assertion was declared as blasphemous which ultimately lead to his execution in Baghdad in 922 AD⁵ Sufism came in India with the arrival of Islam. The advent of Islam embellished the diversity in religious landscape of India. This contradiction among faiths in the society

¹ Trimmingham, J Spencer (1971), *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, Oxford University Press, London, P-1

² Abu Hanieh H (2011), *Sufism and Sufi Orders: God's Spiritual Paths, Adaptation and Renewal in the Context of Modernization*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Amman, P-19

³ Stace W T (1960), *The Teachings of the Mystics*, The New American Library, New York

⁴ Ibid, p-203

⁵ Ibid PP 201-202.

engendered the genesis of Composite Culture. The predominantly two religious identities ostensibly created a scope of aggravation the social faultlines. Composite culture constructed the concept which resolve this quandary created out of socio-religious contradictions and it alludes towards the peaceful amalgamation of the spiritual essence of both religious folds. This concept encapsulates a variety of different traditions and sects that are intermixture of Islamic and Hindu practices, beliefs and customs⁶. This phenomenon is manifested through different dress codes and culinary styles found among these two communities.

2.FEMALES SUFIS IN LITERATURE

Tasawwuf or Sufism has been traditionally a male dominated area where existence of women is negligible considering the mammoth quantity of Male Sufis. Women as a scholar has contributed a lot to the religious literature of Islamic knowledge by contributing their scholarly insights as well as preserving the source of origin of Islamic jurisprudence i.e. Quran and Sunnah.⁷

After having carved a niche for themselves in the scholarly fields during Islamic caliphate since very early, women also strived hard to appropriate their share of service to the cause of mysticism. Various literatures are there confirming the existence of women Sufis and the philosophical explanation legitimizing their contribution to Tasawwuf. In Malay manuscript, *Hokayate Rabiya*” it was explained that it was possible for women to serve God rather than her husband.⁸

Female Sufis have contributed a lot to the concept and practiced of Sufism. During the initial days of Sufism, Sufis used to abstain all the physical comfort and worldly recreation, minimize their material possession and make themselves awake in prayer throughout the night at the cost of their health etc. Transforming Sufism into

ecstatic love mysticism is usually ascribed to the credit of Rabia-Al-Adawiyya, probably the most prominent female Sufi who lived in Iraq.⁹ Rabia is only one of the large number of women who participated in early days of Sufism. Majority of them were celibates and practiced extreme forms of asceticism. Female Sufis has asserted independence of their feminine identity by maintaining a celibate lifestyle. Having adopted this practice female Sufis rejected the guardianship of men as well as burdens and duties of being wives and mothers.¹⁰

In spite of a remarkable gender component of Sufi ritual discourse, the role of female Sufis was neglected in scholarly work. This area was not only ignored by native scholars of the subcontinent but western scholars also did not pay heed towards this aspect. The native scholars of the subcontinent ignored it despite the fact that women have done much to educate renowned male Sufis.¹¹ Quantitatively speaking, in most of the Sufi literatures wherein the biographies of prominent Sufis in the subcontinent has been mentioned, the narration of women Sufis was rarely incorporated. For example, in his masterpiece *Akhbarul Akhyar*, Sheikh Abdul Haq Muhaddis Dehalvi who is regarded a revivalist like figure as far as Muslim theological and philosophical thought is concerned, recorded the life stories of 303 spiritual personalities. Out of 303, there was 295 who were male while only 5 females could be able to find their place.¹² The case of Siyarul Aarifin is also not different wherein 13 Sufis were mentioned none of them were female Sufis.

The contribution of women in the movement of Sufism is indispensable and unmatched. Women played a crucial role for the cause of Sufism either as a leading Sufi themselves or nurturing the Sufis as mothers. In *Akhbarul Akhyar* written by Shiekh Muhaddis Dehalvi, the recognition of the fairer sex in the public sphere of life is established through the historical quote given by Sheikh Nizamuddin Auliya- “When the lion emerges

⁶ Furst Katrina Dogger (2010), *Composite Culture: Sant Kabir and Guga the Snake God*, Department of Cultural Studies and Oriental Languages, UNIVERSITETET I OSLO, p-9

⁷ Alwani, Zainab (2013), *Muslim Women as Religious Scholars: A Historical Survey (Muslima Theology)*, Peter Lang AG, p-45

⁸ Hijjas M (2018), *The Trials of Rabia Al-Adawiyya in the Malay World: The Female Sufi in the Hikayat e Rabiya*, Bideraden Tot De Taal-, Land – En Volkenkunde 174-2/3(2018), pp-217

⁹ Ladd, Valerie J. Hoffman, *Mysticism and Sexuality in Sufi Thought and Life*, *Mystics Quarterly*, Vol-18, No-3, P-85

¹⁰ Ibid p-85

¹¹ Ruffle, Karen G, *The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India*, *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, Vol-1 Number-3, PP-133-34

¹² Dehalvi, Shiekh Abdul Haq Muhaddis (2005), *Akhbarul Akhyar*, Akhbar Book Sellers, Lahore

from a forest, nobody asks about its sex. The progeny of Adam should adopt piety and obedience to God whether they be a Men or Women".¹³ Narrating an incidence of a women, Ameer Hasan Sanjari mentioned in his *Fawaidul Fawayed* that a lady came to the Sheikh and pledged her allegiance and total obedince to the authority of Sheikh (pledging allegiance is called Baiyat in Sufi parlance). Thereafter she highlighted numerous features of woman's capabilities. In the course of this discussion she described a story to reinforce her hypothesis. She told that a there was a woman in Inderpat who was fondly called Umar among the masses. Her chastity and sincerity was beyond any doubt. Hearing the name of that woman, Sheikh Fariduddin Qudsullah promptly exclaimed when a Dervishes implore to God invoking their ascription to some righteous people, they actually give preference to righteous women. But he later gave an absurd explanation which smacks of misogyny. He said it is only because righteous women are rarely found in comparison to the abundance of righteous men.¹⁴

Shiekh Abdul Haq Muhaddis Dehalvi included a chapter in his magnum opus *Akhbarul Akhyar* a chapter exclusive for female Sufis. A narration highlighting the spiritual excellence of Sheikh Nizamuddin's mother is as follows-

The mother of Nizamuddin Abdul Moeed was extremely righteous and God-fearing woman and considered a great spiritual personality among the devotees. There was a story popular among the masses that once a drought occurred and supplications of several saints for rain went in vain. The mother of Sheikh Nizamuddin Abdul Moeed took a broken thread of her mother's robe in his hand and prayed to God invoking to the sanctity of her mother's righteousness and to the astonishment to many! it started rain.¹⁵ there was another story narrated in the same book about the mother of Bab Farid whose halo and sublime actually blinded a thief. When the old lady restored his eyesight, thief embraced Islam along with whole of his family.

¹³ Rizvi, Saiyid Athar Abbas (1978) *History of Sufism in India Vol-1*, Musnhiram Manohar Lal Publishers Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, p-401

¹⁴ Sanjari, Ameer Hasan (2003), *Fawaidul Fawaid*, Maktaba Zawiya, Lahore. PP-164-165

¹⁵ Dehalvi, Shiekh Abdul Haq Muhaddis (2005), *Akhbarul Akhyar*, Akhbar Book Sellers, Lahore, pp-565-70

Imam Rabbani Mujaddid Alfesani was also one of the most prominent Sufi stalwarts in Indian Subcontinent. His wife comes from a noble and affluent background, but she supported Imam Rabbani all along his hardships which was acknowledged by people from all walks of life. But there are many Sufi literatures wherein she was described as an extremely righteous and courageous woman. She was the main source of motivation and inspiration for Mujaddid. The will of Imam Rabbani to his wife before his death was the testimony of love and intimacy between two great spiritual giants. He said to his wife I want to be shrouded under the Kafan bought by you with the amount of Meher that I have given to you.¹⁶

Apart from that, there was a salient figure among the Sufi fraternity i.e. Bibi Fatma Saam. The mention of Bibi Fatma Saam is found in the biographies of several disciples of Nizamuddin Auliya also. Sheikh Nizamuddin Abdul Moeed was seen time and again supplicating to God sitting at the side of Bibi Fatma's tomb. Sheikh Nizamuddin Auliya used to say that "when the lion emerges from a forest, nobody asks about its sex. The progeny of Adam should adopt piety and obedience to God whether they be a man or women"¹⁷

Hazrat Khawaja Naseeruddin Mahmood Chirag Dehalvi have recorded in his book *Khairul Majalis* a real story about an extremely righteous woman whom people fondly called Mama. Once upon a time, Maulana Fakhruddin Razi went to meet her. She asked to Maulana, "O Fakhruddin, do you discern God?" He replied that he had already written numerous books on the erudition and discernment of God. Mama responded with riposte that stunned the saint and he acknowledged her learnedness.¹⁸

In his book *Sairul Auliya*, Shiekh Nizamul Haque Waddin narrates that his mother a spiritual authority whenever he faces any difficulty, solution was shown in her dream. She herself predicted about his fame and reputation. Even though there was no sign of improvement of their

¹⁶ Ikram, Sheikh Mohammad (2005), *Raude Kausar*, Idara Saqafate Islamia, Lahore, P-331-32

¹⁷ Rizvi, Saiyid Athar Abbas (1978) *History of Sufism in India Vol-1*, Musnhiram Manohar Lal Publishers Pvt Ltd, New Delhi. P-401

¹⁸ Dehalvi, Hazrat Khawaja Naseeruddin Mahmood Chiragh, *Khairul majalis*, Wahid Book Depot, Karachi, P- 278-79

financial and other hardships. Their impoverishment and deprivation only aggravated but his mother insisted on his bright future, which ultimately proved right. Apart from her mother, Sheikh also mentioned various metaphysical and spiritual achievement of Bibi Zulaikha.¹⁹

Thus in the subcontinent, females were able to make their presence felt in most of the Hikayat of Sufis but not very remarkably. The literature which have incorporated the narration of female Sufis actually was there only in the biographies of the prominent Sufi stalwarts like Nizamuddin Auliya, Shiekh Abdul haq Muhaddis, Chiragh Dehalvi etc that too with a slight tinge of misogyny. There were incidences where female spiritual personalities were highly regarded but with an explicit perception of supremacy of men. Whenever someone talks about any highly righteous women, it was interpreted in the literature that personality cannot be a woman, rather she is man under a divine guise of womanhood.

¹⁹ Meerkhord, Sayed Mohammad Bin Mubarak Kirmani, *Sairul Auliya*, Mushtaq Book Corner, Lahore, P-237