SUFI WOMEN IN PAKISTAN: 
CASE STUDY OF MAI SAHIBA AND HER SHRINE 
IN DHOK SAHI SHARIF, PUNJAB

Saad Ali Khan 
Gender Studies, 
Quaid-i-Azam University, 
Islamabad

Abstract

Sufism is a mystical thread of Islam, which when practiced as a cultural system, creates Sufi culture, which is considered significantly different from orthodox, normative or official versions of Islam. Women's contribution to this Sufi culture, which often assimilates indigenous cultural values, has not been fully explored, thus causing ambivalence about Sufi women's lives and their roles. This paper attempts to fill this gap by exploring a variety of aspects of Sufi women's role and contribution to the enrichment of Sufi traditions and local culture in Pakistan through the case study of Mai Sahiba and her shrine, Sahi Sharif, in Punjab. This paper has two main sections. Section one, drawing upon secondary sources, highlights complex perspectives on gender and role of Sufi women in general within Sufism. Section two, drawing upon primary textual sources about Mai Sahiba's life and ethnographic fieldwork at her shrine, offers a glimpse of her life and shows how her devotees celebrate her as a Sufi who challenged hierarchical structures that exist within Sufism and in Pakistan.

Keywords

Sufi-culture, women Sufis, Sufi-praxis, shrines, Sufism and Pakistan, Dhok Sahi Sharif
Introduction

Post-secularists' insistence on appropriating religious frameworks to further women rights throughout the Muslim world, and especially in Pakistan, brought new debates and discussions. Subsequently, efforts are being made, including reinterpretation of religious texts, deconstructing gender aspects within religion and reconstituting gender paradigms, to make sense of contemporary religious contexts. Within these discourses, the issue of Sufism, and of women's position and status in Sufism, is a topic, which has caused severe rifts among religious scholars.

Sufism rooted in the Qur'an and the Traditions of the Prophet, guides a person to live a life of austerity and piety with fear of God. In addition to its religious foundations, Sufism today is understood in its social-cultural context. This aspect has led Rozehnal (2009) to comment that “not surprisingly, most anthropological studies of South Asian Sufism concentrate on "objectively" visible phenomena such as saintly charisma and the popular ritual practices at Sufi shrines. In my view, each of these approaches precludes an understanding of the full complexity and multi valence of Islamic sainthood (2009, 13).”

Although both men and women practice Sufism, the presence of women in Sufi literature remains minimal. Scholars like Sayyid Athar Abbas Rizvi (1994) and Carl Ernst (1997) have documented the presence of some prominent female Sufis from the South Asian Sufi tradition. Similarly, scholars, such as Durre S. Ahmed (2002), Afshan Bokhari (2015), and Kelly Pemberton (2006a, 2010b) have recently presented an analysis of women mystics and their shrines in South Asia. A dearth of ethnographic and historical research on the issue of Sufi women in South Asia and in Pakistan remains.

Scholars, such as Carl Ernst (2003) and Nile Green (2008), in their studies on the historical evolution and contemporary form of Sufism, point out some of the significant changes within the thought and practice of South Asian Sufism. Among these changes, according to Ernst (2003), is the increased visibility and participation of women, which is producing a feminist interpretation of Sufism. This change, however, as Ernst observed, should not be seen as something alien to the teachings and practice of Sufism; rather it necessitates more research and work on this aspect to uncover what Cornell describes as “a veiled tradition” (Cornell 1999, 15) within Sufism. This aspect is best illustrated by Rābi`a al`Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya (d. 810) a prototype for other women who want to associate with Sufism (Smith, 2010).

The issue of women within Sufism (Islamic mysticism), marked at the onset with silence and a lack of ethnographic and historical research came to the forefront of a new wave of research interest with the seminal work of Rkia Cornell (1999). Her Early Sufi
Women (1999), an annotated translation of a rare text of as-Sulami’s Dhikr an Niswa al-Muta ‘abbidat as-Sufyyat, is a pioneering effort paving the way for similar endeavours all over the world. Scholars, intellectuals and Sufis have now started to explore issues of gender and sexuality within Islamic mysticism or Sufism. Literature produced since then constitutes a vast universe of knowledge, which is still expanding over this significant subject.

Production of knowledge about Sufism and access to sources that hitherto have remained obscure or hidden has brought the issue of women’s presence, their role and participation in Sufism to the forefront. Although the new interest has generated some important themes, such as conceptualization of gender within Sufi praxis, participation of women in shrines and uncovering misogynistic elements within Sufi discourses, as well as a reconstitution of gender dynamics through feminist endeavours, there is still need for more academic research in this regard. Thus, it is significant to explore and analyze the theoretical understanding or philosophical basis regarding gender and women within Sufism and its relation to or impact on society. It is imperative to observe, however, that due to the broad range of trajectories in this debate of Sufi women, any attempt at generalization, reductionism, and consensus must be avoided as much as possible.

SECTION ONE

Sufi Women and Gender paradigm

Sufism offers a complex understanding about gender and women that significantly influences the status of women. There is both positive and negative understanding of gender within the Sufi-gender paradigm. According to the Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures, “Images of sex, gender, and women in Sufism are complex, comprised of equitable, beautiful, and misogynistic depictions often derived from the very same cosmological gender images...These Images are complex because the same issues in the wider Muslim society are so complex” (2003, 539). Though the Sufis (male) contemplated the divine through the feminine (Silvers, 2007, 537), however "the ideal of the Sufi was always the 'man' or the 'virtuous young man' (Schimmel, 1977, 426).

Scholars working on these themes have found that indeed Sufism has a different approach to the issue of gender from that of formal religions (Kim, 2009). The Sufi-gender paradigm is the amalgam of various aspects that constitute its present form. It is, however, important, as noted by Sa’diyah Shaikh (2012), “to recognize the polyphonous and contradictory currents of gender running through Sufi thought and practices (Shaikh 2012, 35)."
At the core of this paradigm is an understanding of Sufi symbolism that corresponds to the metaphysical dimensions of Sufism. It is argued that these symbols comprise the elements of femininity and masculinity, and viewed together, constitute the whole within each, creating a perfect balance and equilibrium through which the Divine can be approached. One of the critical exponents of this thought, Sachiko Murata, in her seminal work, *The Tao of Islam* (1992), presented the feminine elements in Islamic mystical traditions, mainly through analyzing the works of the famous Sufi, Ibn Arabi, known as Sheikh-e-Akbar. Murata emphasises that, “femininity and masculinity both play essential roles in the Muslim conceptualization of God, the cosmos, and the human soul (1992, 56)”. This conceptualization of God, the cosmos and the human soul, Murata explains, eventually constructs or informs the worldview defined as the Sufi gender paradigm. In a similar vein, Dakake (2002), therefore, concludes, that the powerful symbolism of the feminine in Sufi thought inspired and encouraged women to take up roles as Sufis. Likewise, Schimmel, in her pathbreaking works on Sufism, also highlighted Ibn Arabi’s contribution by saying that “he played a significant role in explaining the importance of feminine element as a component of Divine Reality” (1997, 2-3).

Another significant aspect of this Sufi gender paradigm is its notion of feminine equality and dignity. Sufism’s insistence on the inner self and cultivation of the higher virtues of soul with transformation and purification of *batin* (inner/esoteric) is apparent as Cornell (1999) points to “the prioritization of the inner state that assumes the same spiritual imperative for all human beings, irrespective of whether one occupies a male or female body, signifies one of the organically genderless assumptions within Sufism”(1999, 19).

The above-discussed aspects of the Sufi-gender paradigm generate an elaborate discourse about Sufi women. Of these, the first discourse lays emphasis on Sufi women’s inspirational role for other women and points out that as Sufi masters they also initiate male disciples (Smith 2010; Nurbakhsh 1983). The second discourse argues that Sufism provides a space for women to espouse their full rights (Schimmel, 1997; Heleminski, 2003). Lastly, some scholars, such as Shaikh (2012), say that although Sufism provides gender-egalitarian spaces, a negative understanding of women persists in Sufi thought and practice.

Cornell, further elaborating this dominant Sufi attitude towards women, observes that as “there is persistent and continued mistrust of women and their spirituality among many Sufis,” therefore most Sufi texts do not say much about Sufi woman and keep them 'behind a veil of obscurity' (Cornell, 1999, 19, 85). Schimmel also confirms the presence of misogynistic elements in Sufi thought that associates women with ‘*nafs*’ the lower soul’ which is "the individual representative of the world and its temptations." This *nafs* is also
"compared to a woman who, by her ruses, tries to ensnare the pure spirit and thus bring him down into the trap of worldly life" (Schimmel, 1977, 428).

Women as Spiritual Guides

The above discussion manifests that women's position as spiritual guides, mentoring and leading men and women to the path (tariqa) of Sufism by performing initiation (bai‘at) of disciples in the Sufi order (silsila), is a challenge to the institutionalised and hierarchical practice of Sufism, which rests around the Sufi lodges (khanqahs).

Two underlying assumptions need to be elaborated before discussing women’s position within Sufi orders further: the first relates to women’s role, position, authority, and status within the broader theme of their presence or absence in Sufi literature and in society in general; the second is related to women’s historical and cultural context. As women's gender is constructed within specific cultural contexts, their role as leaders or guides is also informed by their socio-cultural context.

As a corollary to the above, two inter-connected questions arise: have women been able to work around their gendered status and gain primacy or recognition within the Sufi milieu, and what are the impacts of the particular image of gender within Sufism on women? Before answering these queries, it is imperative to note that power and authority in most cultures is often linked with men, especially in the domain of religion. Shahab Ahmed, explaining the authority that exists within Sufi hierarchical structures, notes that “while Sufism operates in society through the social organization of tariqahs which are the domain for the exercise and enactment of the spiritual authority of the shahyks (Sufi masters) over their disciples, its ultimate conceptual and experiential goal is the freeing of individuals from the bonds of prescriptive authority/orthodoxy” (Ahmed, 2016, 284). Addressing the issue of women’s role and position as Sufis, Jaya Kakkar (2006) questioned the source of women’s authority by raising pertinent queries about women's place in the Sufi hierarchical structures- "do they derive their identity primarily by being mothers, sisters, daughters, or wives? Are there any records of women Sufis who left an indelible imprint on the Sufi movement? Did any of them find adequate mention in the history of Sufism? Or as individual Sufis (Sufi women)? (p.279).

Michel Boivin and Remy Delage’s work (2016) resulted in the production of rich ethnographic literature on Sufi culture in South Asia more recently. Presenting Devotional Islam in contemporary South Asia: Shrines, Journeys and Wanderers, this volume explores various aspects and dimensions of Sufism in contemporary South Asia. Regarding the position of women in Sufi and particularly shrine culture, Boivin comments that research and production of studies on this issue is scant and inadequate. Recommending more
grounded research, Boivin says, “It is important to investigate the place of women’s authority (emphasis added), knowing that the issue has not been addressed much yet. Paradoxically, women are often depicted as being the main and best ‘clients’ of the so-called spiritual guides in Sufi shrines. This is often explained by an argument that women would be more vulnerable to emotion than men would” (Boivin, 2016). Similarly, Kelly Pemberton (2006), while discussing women’s enhanced role not only as devotees but also as spiritual authority (teachers) in shrine spaces in India, argues that women have always, on some level, participated in Sufi ritual life in ways that may seem to challenge or contradict prevalent religious and cultural ideas about gender segregation and women’s subordination to male authority. Her analysis, based on extensive ethnographic work of two shrines in India, explores the role of women in shrine spaces. Continuing the academic legacy of Saba Mahmood (2005), she points out the apparent contradictions between the prevailing discourses and the lived experiences of women in shrine spaces. Omar Kasmani, in his study on female fakirs in Sehan Sharif, Pakistan presents a similar scenario, “Seldom do women of these accounts enjoy an influence over a male in public, and neither do they, unlike the fakirs, take up roles of spiritual authority that are customarily reserved for men” (Kasmani 2016, 57).

Women’s visibility in shrines, a theme studied throughout the Muslim world, in addition to spiritual benefits, offers several other benefits as well (Betteridge, 2017, 14). While it is interesting to highlight reasons for shrine visitation in Pakistan, ethnographies of gender and religion in the context of Islam and South Asia tend to portray female religiosity within women-only spheres.

Sources that contribute to our understanding of women who have pursued the path of piety and chosen to adopt a spiritual journey, show that they were also subject to normative social constraints. Some of them lived regular lives, married and bore children while others lived relatively independent and free from androcentric gender roles (Shaikh 2012, 47). On the issue of attaining spiritual mastery within Sufism, Shaikh argues that spiritual knowledge is fundamentally connected to maleness. To illustrate the profoundly patriarchal nature of Sufism, she says that females who wished for that status could achieve it only by taking on a male persona.

Sufi women in South Asia

Sufism in Pakistan has been an integral part of society for centuries. Ali Asani (2005), discussing Islam in South Asia, argues that the role of culture is the defining feature, especially in the case of Sufism or mystical Islam that has strong relations with culture. Asani identifies two radically different facets of the Islamic tradition of South Asia pitted against each other: one looks towards the ‘universal norms of Arabo-Persian culture’ while
the other seeks to acculturate and root the practice of Islam within the many 'local cultures of the subcontinent' (Asani 2005, 4645). This bond of religion and culture, in the case of Sufism, produces an entanglement, where it is interesting to highlight how Sufi notions and doctrines and local culture mixed to form a distinct form of culture that can be labelled as Sufi Culture.

In the case of Sufism as practiced in the Punjab, Pakistan, Choudhary (2010) argues, “there is a close relationship between the Punjabi culture and the Sufi practices” (Choudhary 2010, 2). Elaborating this close connection between Sufi practices and the Punjabi culture, he says that Sufism and Punjabi culture both have hierarchical elements and due to this commonality, Sufism flourished in Punjabi society. Similarly, focusing on women’s involvement, participation and presence in the shrines spaces of Pakistan and India, Purewal and Kalra (2010) show how these roles are performed by women. Based on ethnographic work and employing secondary sources, their study demonstrates that women’s religious activities are viewed as extension of their cultural responsibilities or roles. Although there is a strong opposition or disapproval of such activities of women in formal, orthodox thought and practice, these practices exist. In both Pakistani and Indian societies, which are highly masculinised, the tendency and desire of controlling women’s bodies as well as their mobility exists. Women’s participation in these highly contested terrains is also a marker of their resilience; however, it is interesting to observe how their active participation is either overlooked by religious authorities or seen as contentious.

Studies related to Sufism in Pakistan and women’s role in Sufi traditions are mostly focused on aspects related to women’s shrine visitation and performance of shrine-related rituals. Scholars like Pnina Webner (2007), Shemeem Burney Abbas (2010), Omar Kasmani (2016a, 2012b), and Katherine Ewing (1998) have analyzed women’s role and status within shrines and rituals of Sufism in Pakistan. From a different perspective, Ahmad Salim (2010), while identifying women Sufi poets in South Asia, presented their critical engagement with the issues faced by women at large. Through their poetry, they not only provided mystical guidance to individuals but also remained critical of social evils. These Sufi women poets are also remembered for their contributions in bringing about a change in the social order.

Looking at the role and status of women within a Sufi shrine milieu in South Asia, Kelly Pemberton (2006) highlights the significance of women’s presence in spaces, which otherwise are constructed as patriarchal spaces. Exploring the dynamics of women’s authority and question of succession in Sufi orders, she observes that women’s ability to act as pirs (spiritual guides) depends not only on some direct factors but also on some indirect and inter-related variables. Analyzing the status of women as pirs, their saintly succession, and spiritual guidance, Pemberton explains that the "scope for the women to wield
authority as *pirs* increases with the movement outward from 'standard' definitions of *piri-muridi*.' (p. 66). These variables include 'family, class, and generational factors, marital status and maternity, education, the personality of the woman and her status within the family and/or within the order, the language of the body as it communicates the internalization — or defiance — of prevailing discourses and ideologies about male-female relationships, about Islam’s position on the proper place and comportment of women...' (Pemberton, 2006, 68-69).

**Section 2**

Section two of this paper, under two subheadings, presents research methodology applied to this study and the case study of Mai Noor-un Nisa Begum and her shrine. Pakistan's terrain is dotted with Sufi shrines. These shrines, some centuries old and some of recent origin, are visited by a large number of women who come to seek the blessings and intercession of the Sufi, mostly male Sufis, to redress their everyday woes. Shrines commemorating Sufi women are rare. Those that exist, with few exceptions, are little known. Most have local devotees. Sufi texts, including hagiographical accounts, say little or remain silent about the presence of Sufi women and their shrines. This silence about Sufi women and their invisibility is the motivation behind this research. To seek answers to my queries regarding women Sufis' presence and their role as spiritual leaders and their legacy as Sufi woman within the gendered compartmentalisation of Pakistan's culture, I chose to study the shrine of Mai Noor-un Nisa Begum in a small village named Dhok Sahi (*Dhok* is a Punjabi word for village) near Dina, Jhelum.

**Research Methodology**

**Data Collection**

Data for this research draws upon two sources: primary and secondary printed material, and oral traditions collected through fieldwork at the shrine and in-depth interviews with the shrine visitors and the shrine's managing staff. Before my ten days' long visit to the shrine in December 2017, I was not aware of written sources about the life of Mai Sahiba (the Mother/Respected Lady), the affectionate and honorific title by which Noor-un Nisa Begum is remembered by her devotees. The shrine's custodian introduced me to two books, published by the shrine management, which are not available at bookstalls. Of these two valuable books, one is a biography of Mai Sahiba in Urdu and the other is a voluminous collection (*Diwan*) of Mai Sahiba's verses composed in the Potohari or Pahari-Potowari dialect of Punjab. *Darbar Alia Barilla Shareef*, Gujerat, published the biography in 1999, titled *Jagte rahe kahani* compiled by Muhammad Abdul Majeed Qadri-Chishti. The *Diwan*, titled *Shama-e-Ishq* (Love's Candle), published by Darbar Sagri Sharif Jehlum, bears
no date. In a personal communication, the shrine administrator told me that it was published in 2005.

A field visit generated rich data with the help of semi structured in-depth interviews with 15 women at the shrine premises. These respondents, between 35-50 years of age, were devotees visiting the shrine and the caretaker of the shrine who resided there. Interviewees, identified with the help of five key informants by applying the snowball technique, helped in gathering information about the life and works of Sufi woman in this research.

Mai Sahiba Noor-un Nisa Begum

The life of Mai Sahiba Noor-un Nisa Begum is little known in Pakistan. This research could claim to be a pioneering academic work. Her real name is not known. To her devotees she is primarily Mai Sahiba (the respected lady/the mother) and is also known by various other honorific titles, such as Nurul Asr (the light of times), Sarkar Dhok Sahi Sharif (the mistress of Dhok Sahi Sharif), and Shama-i-sha-i-qaqani (the candle of Divine love).

According to her grave's epitaph, Mai Sahiba was born in 1873 in Dhok Sahi (District Jehlum, Pakistan) in a respected family of farmers. Her mother, Hazrat Mai Panah Bibi was also a God-fearing person who fasted frequently. Most of her male relatives had landholdings and some worked in the British army. Thus, subsequent to the death of her father, her uncle Captain Malik Fazl Khan became her guardian.

Mai Sahiba Noor-un Nisa Begum lived long, for more than a century, and died at the age 101 years on April 8, 1974. Her ancestors belonged to the Qutub Shahi Awan clan of Punjab (Kahani, 32), which originally hailed from Warapura, District Baramula, Kashmir and were great devotees of Hazrat Sultan Bahu. A severe famine in Kashmir forced her paternal grandfather, Malik Sabir, to move to Jhelum, Punjab where he settled down under the patronage of a local landlord. (Kahani, 32-34). Of his four sons, the eldest, Malik Mehr Bakhsh was the father of Mai Sahiba.

As a child of great physical charm, Mai Sahiba was locally known as Baggi, which means a beautiful person. Devotees at the shrine told me that Mai Sahiba was an unusual child, an introvert, spending her time not in fun and frolic but in meditation, and in offering prayers. Throughout her life, Mai Sahiba practiced extreme piety and austerity, the two basic characteristics of the Sufi way. Local legends narrate several miracles (karamat) that she performed. Under the care and guidance of her mother, soon she learned the basics of Islam, including recitation of the Quran. A separate room was set aside for her meditation and prayers. In addition to the obligatory five prayers, Mai Sahiba spent nights
in offering *nawafil* (supererogatory prayers) and hardly slept. Each day she used to recite ten chapters of the Quran and kept fasts on most days of the week. As Allah answered most of her prayers and supplications, she became known as *Musatajabud dawat*, a person whose prayers are answered by the Divine (Kahani, 23, 35-6). Because of continuous and daily recitation of the Quran, she memorised the whole Quran (Kahani, 39). Due to her observance of religious practices and piety, she was called, within her village and in the nearby villages, *Bibi Faqeerani Sahiba*.\(^3\) The author of Kahani, paying tribute to Mai Sahiba's spiritual merits, defines her as a born Sufi woman (*madarzad waliyya*). While she was still a young child, people used to seek her blessings for the eradication of their worries and problems. Once, while she was still a young child, her prayers saved a man from the gallows (Kahani, 36-7).

Gradually Mai Sahiba, while still about thirteen years old, began avoiding human company. She almost became a recluse. In the company of fellow human beings, she felt restless and longed for solitude. Soon she reached the Sufi station (*maqam*) of *sakr*, spiritual ecstasy of being intoxicated with Divine Love. Overpowered by this condition, she would often leave her home and would wander around the deserted hillocks of the neighbourhood all alone, wearing torn clothes, wielding an axe in her hand. She walked so much that her leather shoes would not last for a week. Thus, by the age of thirteen she reached the station of *majzub*, one annihilated by Allah's love. While wandering in the jungles and around the hillocks, she would recite poetry in her soul-touching voice. She composed most of these verses expressing her devotion for Allah and in honour of the Prophet (pbuh) (Kahani, 43-44).

By the age of fifty-eight, in 1931, Mai Sahiba left her residence and moved to live in a nearby jungle under a thatched roof. Her female disciples built a temporary shack for her where a small space was dug out with a temporary cover to make room for her to meditate. Here, she practiced extreme austerity, consuming only a little piece of bread each day (Kahani, 57). Soon, she gave up her jungle residence and moved to live in a graveyard. She refused her brother's offer to build for her a residence of bricks. Women of nearby villages began to visit her regularly, along with their children. Mai Sahiba began instructing children to read the Quran. The number of children learning the Quran increased as some of Mai Sahiba's women companions and disciples also began to teach them (Kahani, 74). Interestingly, among Mai Sahiba's devoted visitors were also Hindus who were school-educated; and some were government employees. So deep was their devotion and reverence for Mai Sahib that after the partition of the sub-continent, although these families left for India, they maintained correspondence until the writing of Kahani (Kahani, 76-77).
In conformity with the local traditions, Mai Sahiba was betrothed to her cousin in childhood. When she grew up, at the insistence of her uncle, she finally agreed to the actual wedding ceremony. However, within no time, about seven to eight minutes, after reaching her husband's home, Mai Sahiba returned home. The marriage was not consummated and she lived a celibate through her life (Kahani, 48-9).

Mai Sahiba was a formal disciple of Muhammad Hafeez Ullah Khan, a Sufi of Barilla Sharif of the Chishti-Qadri silsila, who named her Mai Noor (the Lady of Light). As she was closely associated with the Barilla Sharif branch of the Chishti-Qadri Sufi order, Khawaja Muhammad Rafique, the custodian of Barilla Sharif was present at her funeral. Moreover, he also ordered that her shrine must be administered by women only. Similarly, he also appointed women as the spiritual heirs of Mai Sahiba. Since then, the shrine has been a place for women and administered by women. The Urs of Mai Sahiba is celebrated every year on 8th April, which is her date of death.

**Spiritual journeys**

Mai Sahiba was a true seeker of Divine knowledge. Rejecting the strict censures on women's travels and mobility, which exist even today, Mai Sahiba travelled frequently to meet her contemporary male Sufis and to conduct spiritual discourse with them. Majeed Muhammad writes that although it was difficult for women to travel, Mai Sahiba's passion for Divine Knowledge and her search for Truth was so overpowering that nothing would deter her from her quest to seek them; therefore, despite hurdles she travelled to far off places to seek guidance from her teachers.

It was her routine to visit all the shrines of the vicinity. Mai Sahiba used to pay homage to all those sacred spaces regularly and always asked for Divine grace and mercy. While on these visits, she took care that her privacy was not breached. She always preferred to remain in seclusion. Within her home, there was a specific room allocated for her, where she prayed and fasted. Later on, she started going into the wilderness and eventually settled into the forest near her village. Rahman Baba, an old man I met at the shrine, told me that from her childhood, she was very different from children of her own age. Even as a child, she had a marked bent towards solitude and meditation. She used to go alone to the caves in the nearby hills to perform meditations (chilla) which lasted for forty days. So great was her trust in God that she never felt afraid of being alone in the caves, even at nights. At times, some stray dogs accompanied her.

Due to Mai Sahiba's austerity, asceticism, piety and renunciation, she was considered as majzub, a person intoxicated by Divine love. Mai Hameeda, a woman who lives at the shrine, narrated a story about her dedication to the Divine and asceticism and...
said, “She asked her brother to build a small room for her within a graveyard. She used to mediate within a grave dug inside that small room. Sometimes she used to remain in that room for days without even drinking or eating anything. After her formal initiation, in the Sufi siskalah, she was asked by her Pir to stop such strict practices. He used to say that you have passed the stage of renunciation.”

**Mai Sahiba’s Poetry**

Although Mai Sahiba was not formally educated, the flame of Divine love transformed her into a poet. Her mystical poetry keeps the flame of Divine love alive. Her diwan\(^\text{10}\) (collection of mystical poetry) contains couplets of a mystical nature that demonstrate her love for the Divine beloved. The collection also contains her eulogies in honour of the Prophet (pbuh) and saints of her spiritual chain. I found four volumes of her diwan and another book of poetry titled Ganje-Ishq Tabah at her shrine. One of the longest poems she wrote, Tauba Nama (the book of repentance) composed as Mukhammas,\(^\text{11}\) is still recited at religious ceremonies.

Following are selected verses from her poetry collection. Most of her poems start with the praise of Allah. In the verses cited below, she is asking the Divine to bestow upon her the strength and power to praise Him infinitely. (All translations are by the author).

*Bukhsh toufæeq zabæ meri nu teri hamd pukaray*

*Taqat daan ata farmao na thakayna haray* (Shama-e-Ishq, p. 1)

(O Allah! Bestow my tongue the Blessing of praising You
Bless it with strength that it would never tire of praising Thee)

*Aesa nasha pilao is nu apna ap najanay*

*Zikar teray thin mast ho jaway na nafa zeyan pechanay* (Shama-e-Ishq, p. 1)

(O Allah! let me be intoxicated (with Thy love) so that I won’t even know myself,
Nor would I care for gains or losses)

Similarly, her poetry articulates deep reverence for her spiritual teacher (Shaykh). She frequently describes herself as a novice who is imperfect and her teacher as the one who has conferred upon her spiritual treasures of both the worlds:

*Kyæun na pak bare laiy jan diyan o*

*Kyæun na husæ nazaray pandiyan o* (Shama-e-Ishq, p. 270)

(Why are you not visiting Barilla Sharif
Why are you not witnessing the mystical beauty therein?)
Kyun itna dil tarsandiyan o
Othay aap Khuda piya vasda aiy (Shama-e-Ishq, p. 270)
(Why do you deprive yourself? The Divine resides therein)

Rab aap barely vasda aiy
Sochna huns nazray vasda aiy (Shama-e-Ishq, p. 270)
(The Divine lives in Barilla
One can see the spiritual Beauty therein)

She was bold enough to criticize the religious orthodoxy of her own times. Through her poetry, she openly criticized those religious individuals who called themselves religious leaders but whose religiosity, in reality, was hollow and superficial. These individuals (mullahs) have used religion for their personal interests only. In one poem she says,

Mulla teri nahi masiti asin varday sadhi masit vakhri
Asin nahi di namaz nahion parhday asiqan di neeyat vakhri (Shama-e-Ishq, p. 697)
(O Mulla! I will never enter your mosque, my mosque is different from yours
I do not pray for the Self; my intent is the intent [of Love for the Divine])

Darhi noor day than mehndi naal ragna in
Char nafal parh kay toon hooran piya mangna in (Shama-e-Ishq, p. 697)
You dye your beard with henna so that people may say it is the light i.e. noor
And by praying a few times you [are actually] asking for the houris [of heaven]

Asin Rab naal thagi nahion kardai bhayee sadhi aiy pareet vakhri
Mullan teri nahi masiti asin varday sadhi masit vakhri (Shama-e-Ishq, p. 697)
(We do not deceive the Divine; our way of worship is different from yours
O Mulla! I will never enter your mosque; my mosque is different from yours)

Mai Sahiba's poetry is a blend of mystical and spiritual mysteries. Although she was not literate in worldly education, she was well aware of the Quran and the Hadith. Sources tell us that she was blessed from her childhood, and because of her spiritual quest and thirst, she was able to gain guidance from many Sufis of her own times. Her poetry is luminous guiding light for seekers who want the love and blessings of the Divine. Apparently, the language of her poetry is very simple yet contains deep spiritual meanings and mysteries. As mentioned above, her poetry can be classified into many themes; however, there has been very limited work done on her poetry. Much of her work remains unpublished and is preserved only in her shrine complex.
Shrine of Mai Sahiba at Dhok Sahi

Apart from her mystical poetry, which has been a source of guidance for many individuals over so many years, her shrine is a constant source of inspiration and spiritual learning. The shrine complex is an abode for spiritual wayfarers and a social refuge for those who have been outcasts, especially women who have been marginalized within their own homes or spaces. Thus, the shrine complex represents an interesting confluence of mysticism and social integration.

Unlike most Sufi shrines where women’s presence at a shrine complex is disapproved off and their access to a (male) saint's final resting place, i.e. funerary chamber, is mostly prohibited, not only do women visit Mai Sahiba’s shrine in large numbers, but the shrine is managed by women staff only who live on the shrine premises. The last feature, i.e. women caretakers living on the premises and not with their families, makes the shrine unique in view of the patriarchal traditions of Pakistan where a woman living outside her family's four walls is not approved.

Management of the shrine by women alone is another path-breaking feature of the shrine. Viewed within the context of rural traditions where women's work outside family bonds is considered a breach of norms of shame and honour, women as managers is another example of how social scientists have missed noticing the changing trends of Pakistan's social dynamics.

The large presence of women, as managers and as devotees, at Mai Sahiba’s Urs, her death anniversary exemplifies how Mai Sahiba’s call for breaking chains of bondage that keep women hostage to patriarchy continues to inspire rural women. During my interaction with some of the visitors at the shrine, one woman shared her association with the shrine as a place where through her spiritual experience she has a sense of liberation and freedom. Several other women present there, shared similar thoughts.

Women devotees who visit the shrine seek Mai Sahiba’s blessings to solve their day-to-day worries. Of these visitors, as Malik (2014) has noted, "some find relief weeping at Mai Sahiba’s feet; others find hope in the vows they make here and yet more lighten their load by sharing light moments with other visitors." During my study-visit in December 2017, I observed that this shrine is also a place of refuge (called home) for women abandoned by their families due to various reasons. Some of these women have developed a strong affiliation with Mai Sahiba, just as a child has with its mother, and have decided to live here for the rest of their lives in her service. One of these women at the shrine, when asked about her presence and her association with the shrine, told me that she felt cared for and protected at the shrine. She further added that she had decided now to serve other
individuals. Interestingly, the women's community at this shrine not only feels secure under the care offered to them at the shrine but are also spiritually guided by older caretakers. One of the old caretaker women, Mai Hameeda, who has been living at the shrine for more than a decade, also confirmed this sense and told me that the shrine is not only a place of veneration and spiritual blessings, but it is also a shelter for women from worldly woes and afflictions.

The shrine complex, which is the center of cultural and religious life of Dhok Sahi and neighbouring rural areas, is a simple structure, which includes two burial chambers: one for the Mai Sahiba and the other for two of her women disciples, Mai Khadija (d. 1973) and Mai Zubda Begum (d. 1991).

**Her followers and representatives**

Primary sources show that men and women equally venerated her. During her life, she nominated, from among her women devotees and followers, Mai Khadija as her successor and representative to continue her spiritual legacy.

Mai Sahiba's shrine is not only a refugee for marginalized sections of society but also home to many beautiful animals, and birds, especially exotic peacocks. She was very fond of animals, and some of her miracle stories reveal her interaction with animals, especially with stray dogs, when she roamed all alone in nearby jungles and the dogs were her only companions.

According to the present caretaker of the shrine, Mai Sahiba is still venerated by the women of not only local society but also from all over Pakistan. She occupies a central position in the lives of women living in the village. Her life represents a model for rest of other women, to be followed in their pursuit of Divine truth and love. Her life also reveals that a woman can attain spiritual status and position even within the hierarchal Sufi structures that are more inclined to invest spiritual authority in men.

**Conclusion**

This article presents the continued legacy of Sufi women in South Asia and Pakistan through the story of Mai Sahiba. However, it is a mere beginning in recounting the narratives of women Sufis and requires more exploration and research. For instance, while some available research concerns Sufi women’s contribution to Sufi literature in the form of poetry, their contributions in prose remains under researched. One can hope that emerging interest in exploring vernacular literature would result in identifying Sufi-women authored texts.
As said before, one of the driving forces for this research is to demonstrate recent renewed emphasis on debates regarding gender and women within Sufism. These debates over the period have produced gender-egalitarian possibilities as well as complex imagination(s) about gender, and more specifically about women within Sufi thought and practice. The diversity of these perspectives about women articulated within Sufism both inscribes and affects not only women’s position, status and roles, but also women’s activity in spheres other than Sufism.

Mai Sahiba’s case study reveals several interesting aspects. Through a close examination of her life, we come to know that she lived an independent life centred on her own beliefs about Sufism and women. These beliefs, incepted through interaction with other Sufis (male) of her time, established the acceptability of women’s journeys within Sufism. Similarly, her poetry also reveals how she viewed the world around her, her association with Sufism and the meaningful life she lived as a women. Her case study illustrates that as a Sufi guide and master she was convinced that as life lived in this world is an integral part of the life afterwards, women must have full access to opportunities and make their own decisions. Her shrine reflects this belief, as it is now not only a place of veneration and spiritual guidance but also a refuge for many women of the locality. Every year, her Urs (death celebration) represents gender-egalitarian possibilities within our society, challenging perceived notions of womanhood and femininity.

Challenges of field work

In conclusion, I will offer a few words about the challenges that I encountered during my field visit of the shrine at Dhok Sahi Sharif. Of these, the foremost was as a male researcher and is related to my access and entry to the female-dominated shrine. However, during my initial visits, I was successful in cultivating and building rapport with the present caretaker Sufi woman at the shrine. After several meetings, this rapport-building effort melted the ice and created good personal relationships with the shrine caretakers, which facilitated my access to information necessary for conducting this study. In closing this paper, I would also say a word about the presence of valuable historic source material that is still lying with the custodians of Sufi shrines in Pakistan. Researches, academic institutes, and libraries and museums must move quickly to preserve this vast archival material before it gets lost.
Endnotes

1 These variables include immediate factors like their social roles, complicity in upholding the supremacy of men and auxiliary spaces that they create, while indirect variables are much more complicated and varied, including family, class, education, language among many others. For details, see Kelly Pemberton, 2006. "Women Pir's, Saintly succession and spiritual guidance in South Asian Sufism," The Muslim World, 96, 61-87.


3 Faqerni is the feminine term for faqeer, which literally means a beggar or a poor person. In Sufi terminology and in Islamic traditions, a faqeer is an ascetic who has renounced the world.

4 He is the descendent of Maulvi Abdul Ghani Chishti of Barilla Sharif who was Khalifa of Pir Sihal Sharif. Barilla Sharif is also famous for its association with a 72-yard grave (supposed to be the grave of son of Hazrat Adam). Not much research has been done on this particular Sufi shrine. For details see the work of Khan, Sarfraz and Sajid, Mirza Rizwan, “The essence of shrines in rural Punjab: A case study of shrine at Barilla Sharif, Gujrat, Pakistan”, humanities and social science journal, (6)1, 66-77, 2011.

5 Urs is a word derived from Urus that mean related to marriage. However, Urs as a Sufi ritual is the annual death celebration of Sufis at their shrines. The death of Sufis is considered their union (marriage) with the Divine (beloved). See Elias, Jamal (2010) Key themes for the study of Islam. New York: One world Publications, p. 23-45.


7 Rahman Baba. (December 16, 2017). Interview by the Author.


9 Hameeda. (December 10, 2017). (Interview by the Author).

10 For details, see the Diwan, “Sham-e-Ishq” compiled by the administration of Barilla Sharif, Gujrat. There have been several works of poetry attributed to Mai Sahiba, which were later collected and compiled in one book form. This compiled book has been published by Barilla Sharif. The copies of this diwan are accessible at the shrine of Mai Sahiba.

11 Mukhammas is a poem of five-line stanzas in which all five lines of the first stanza follow the same rhyming scheme, but in subsequent stanzas, the fifth line follows the rhyming scheme of the fifth and last line of the first stanza. Sufis who composed poems in honour of Hazrat Ali, the fourth Caliph, used this form of poetry.
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**Saad Ali Khan** is a lecturer at the Centre of Excellence in Gender Studies at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, and Ph.D. scholar at the National Institute of Pakistan Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University. He has been associated with the Centre for the last four years, where he has taught courses including Gender and Mysticism, Gender and International Politics, and the Social Construction of Gender, among others. In his Ph.D. research, he analyses gender dynamics within the Sufi culture of Pakistan with a special focus on contemporary Sufi women and their role in Sufi culture.