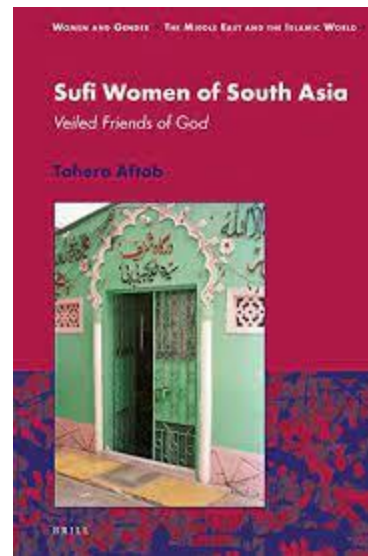


## Book Reviews

Tahera Aftab. *Sufi Women of South Asia: Veiled Friends of God*. Leiden: Brill, 2022. Pp. 600. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-90-04-46717-0. Price: US\$ 228.

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This well-researched and comprehensive (at some 600 pages) volume aims to mine the extensive corpus of Sufi biographical works produced in South Asia in order to recover and assess the roles of females in the Islamic mystical tradition. This study incorporates not only extensive materials drawn from Persian and Urdu sources but also the observations of the author made during extensive fieldwork at Sufi shrines, thereby establishing a record of recent Sufi women in Pakistan. In some sense, the work is itself a *tadhkirah*, particularly the second section (pp. 205–506) that provides translations of the biographical notices of some 134 Sufi women from this region active between the tenth and the twentieth centuries, arranged in some cases chronologically but also according to their roles, marital status, or other factors.



The author is well acquainted with international scholarship in the field, particularly studies of women and Sufism in Islam and she therefore incorporates, both in the introduction and in the well-informed citations, useful material to inform the reader of existing perspectives and potential resources for continuing research in this area.

Throughout the text Aftab is often moved to comment on the negative portrayals of females that are found in these hagiographic texts, both women as imagined in an abstract sense or as playing a role in the narrations of specific events. In addition to the pervasive classical trope of females constituting a distraction for males on the spiritual path, a further detriment to female participation in Islamic mystical

orders was that women were usually barred by cultural and Islamic legal strictures from holding authoritative and public positions, as well as being excluded from most religious spaces due to their sex.

The work comprises two sections. The first “Sufis, Sufism, and Transformations” provides an overview of historical and doctrinal aspects of the topic while covering Sufism and its articulation and practice in South Asia. Following a broad theoretical and historical preface and introductory first chapter, the second chapter considers the main genres of Sufi biographical compendia in the South Asian context such as *malfūzāt* (preserved accounts of Sufi discourses and teachings) and *ṭabaqāt* (collected biographical notices) with special attention being paid to the early classical work on Sufism *Kashf al-Mahjūb* of ‘Alī b. ‘Uthmān al-Hujwīrī (d. 1077 CE) and its unfavourable portrayal of women, and to Amīr Khusrau’s (d. 1325 CE) poetic imagery, analysed by Aftab in terms of its reflecting the author’s patriarchal attitudes.

Three subsequent chapters under the rubric of “The Sufi Gaze” explore “perceptions of women by male Sufis” such as the standard tropes of women as sources of chaos (*fitnah*), being deficient in reasoning, and female figures as personifying the evil world. More specific to the *tadhkirahs*’ textual content are the author’s fourth chapter that reviews and analyses Sufi perceptions of the family i.e., wives and children of Sufis, and the final (fifth chapter) in this cluster that gathers reports about Sufi interactions with maidservants and women of ill repute, who have also occasionally been mentioned in the biographical reports.

In terms of Sufi institutions, Aftab next gathers the material pertaining to women’s presence in Sufi initiatic chains (*silsilahs*) in chapter six including the topics of female initiation (*bay’ah*), women as saints, and the permissibility of deputizing women as successors (*khilāfah*). Chapter seven further considers gendered Sufi institutions by highlighting the topic of the Sufi residential lodge (*khānqāh*) including rare instances of exclusively female lodges along with indications regarding the limited presence of women in mixed residential settings, reflected both in historical accounts from across Muslim societies and in the *tadhkirah* literature. Concluding the “institutional” cluster of chapters, the practices of shrine cultures and the places accorded (or denied) to females within the shrines and their rituals of visitation are reviewed in the eighth and final chapter in this first section.

Part two of the volume treats “Biographies of Sufi Women” by first presenting notices about Sufi women’s lives chronologically organized from the tenth to the twentieth centuries based on translations from existing *tadhkirahs*, many of which are not widely known. Chapter ten

arranges biographical notices of other Sufi women according to various aspects of their status, for example, as *khalifahs*, mothers of Sufis, disciples of their male relatives, being recognized as murshids by their husbands, remaining unmarried, or as *majdhūbs* (being spiritually intoxicated).

The eleventh chapter is based on fieldwork undertaken by the author and in some cases her research assistants who visited shrines in Karachi, Lahore, and Multan between 2004 and 2006. This enabled both the collection of oral histories of female Sufis in these localities and the observation of dynamics surrounding the visitation of their burial sites.

Rather obscure is the next chapter topic of “Sufi Women Identified by Name Only” but this rubric does allow the author to at least list the names of women Sufis mentioned in several regional compendia treating Balochistan, Gujrat, Bengal, Bihar, Bijapur, and Rampur, as well as other localities. Such a strategy of simply naming individuals is actually found within the *tadhkirah* tradition itself.

In the concluding remarks to the volume, the author argues that there is a distinctly female form of *taṣawwuf* operational outside of the institutional frameworks set by the orders and their system of instruction and discipleship (*pīrī-murīdī*). Within this somewhat brief analysis, there appears to be tension due to presenting a positive view of a gendered mystical path of “veiled” and “home-based” female spirituality yet attempting to maintain a sense of women’s agency in pursuing this path at the same time as women were, in fact, in many cases denigrated and restricted from the systems and spaces available to male Sufis.

This work provides a landmark study in South Asian Sufism, especially on women’s roles therein. In the search for a “herstory” of such women, one may compare Aftab’s project to that of Mohammad Akram Nadwi who compiled the biographies of females mentioned as being Islamic religious scholars over the centuries. It should also be observed that academic articles and even monographs on individual Sufi women from South Asia are becoming more frequent, even if they are still understudied, for example, the recent work of Waleed Ziad on Bībī Ṣāḥibah (d. 1803) an Afghan Sufi woman whose influence stretched from Bukhara to Peshawar.

A critical note must be taken of the transliteration of Arabic and Persian names and terms in the volume which not only does not follow standard conventions but is frequently incorrect and internally inconsistent. Hopefully, this can be corrected online and in any future editions.

**Marcia Hermansen\***

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\* Professor, Islamic World Studies/Theology, Loyola University Chicago, Illinois, USA.