

# Mapping Sufism in the West: A Critical Literature Survey

*Tariq Ejaz*

*Assistant Professor, Air University Islamabad, Punjab, Pakistan.*

**Prof. Dr. Mohyuddin Hashmi**

*Professor/Dean Faculty of AIS, AIOU, Islamabad, Pakistan.*

## Abstract

Tasawuf e Islami is one of the essential components of Islamic Sharia without which Islam remains like a body without a soul. This innermost dimension has been emphasized in the principal sources of Islam namely the Quran and prophetic model of excellence. People of Suffa are a particular example of this model. With the growing interest in the subject of Sufism in the West, Western academia approached multiple aspects of its study such as tracing its origin with Christian hermits, greek philosophy, and Hindu mystical outlook. Most recently, the subject focused by the orientalist perspective raised many objections and ambiguities as for as its origin is concerned. The prevailing moral, spiritual, and psychological plights of the Western world approached Islamic spiritual sciences as an antidote for their problems. The present article, titled "Mapping Sufism in the West: A Critical Literature Survey," offers a comprehensive review of the academic and popular literature on the phenomenon of Sufism as it has been understood, interpreted, practiced, and studied in Western academic settings. The study explores the evolution of Western engagement with Sufism, from early Orientalist perspectives to contemporary analyses that not only recognize Sufism's complex and dynamic nature but also demonstrate its quantum of popularity in the West. Although there is an explosion of literature on Sufism that requires critical analysis, because of space constraints, i have selected some key figures for overview and analysis to enable the young researchers to have more avenues to dig into the subject. this survey focuses on the prevailing themes, research methodologies, and gaps in the scholarship, concluding with how Sufism has been showcased and understood in Western scholarship. This survey intends to not only gauge the intellectual terrain but also identify areas for future research, aiming to contribute to a deeper understanding of Sufism's place in Western spiritual, cultural, and academic landscapes in the context of Islamic classical literature on Sufism.

**Keywords:** Susim, West, literature, review, interpretation, academia, spiritual.

### Introduction

Sufism is the practical reality of the term 'Ihsan' narrated in the famous hadith e Jibraeel (Bukhari: ). The objective of Sufism is repeatedly mentioned in the Quran and Sunnah i.e to purify the human spirit from material dirt and liberate it from earthly libidos so that the process of self-purification known as Tazkia can be attained and protected. While viewing a cursory sight on the perception, understanding, and historical development of Sufism in Western literature, it is perceived that the sources of Sufism, from which it was derived and evolved as an institution i.e the holy Quran, prophet's (blessings and peace be upon him) commands and demonstration, lives, and teachings of the companions, people of the bench, rightly guided caliphs and their successors, were not explained and interpreted. Western research is directed to the point that Islamic mystical thoughts are the mixtures of some external philosophies and it was borrowed from Hindu, Christian, and humanistic sciences. The reasons behind projecting this viewpoint might be the issue of accessibility of original Sufi literature to be still published, orientalist's perspective based on hostility and partiality, impacts of long last crusades that polluted the minds of each side towards the other etc. Prof. A.J Arberry and other scholars admitted that it would not be appropriate to form an opinion about the origin of Sufism since many handwritten documents are still lying in Asian and European libraries and a true origin can be traced once these manuscripts get published (Arberry,1942).

The introduction of Sufism in the West was based on probabilities and hypotheses with no definite and authentic knowledge.

When we look at the relationships of the West with the Islamic world after the crusade, it shows that the West restored its relations with the Muslim world through Iran and not through Arabs. They showed their interest in the Persian language, culture, literature, philosophies, and mystical poetry. After learning the Persian language, they accessed and studied Persian literature, visited famous places, monasteries, and Sufi shrines, met with scholars and common people, and wrote diaries, autobiographies etc. Their intellectual and academic activities were confined to Iran only. The only source of information available was Persian literature, intellectuals, philosophers, literary personalities, and Sufis.

### Western connection with Iran

Their primary focus of research interest was in Persian philosophies and poetry and they assumed that the origin of Sufism was also to be traced in the same roots. They concluded that the history of Sufism, its origin, and the development of mystical thoughts depend on Iran. The same viewpoint was composed in their travelogue, diaries, and biographies which spread in the West. To analyze and evaluate such literature, there were no alternative sources available due to the shortage of publishing resources so general readers relied on only one source. The spread of this literature in the European and Western world became the

source of the introduction of Sufism. Later, the same literature served as basic knowledge of Tasawuf.

The other side of the truth is that Tasawuf e Islami originated from the Quran and the sunnah, and Muslim scholars concentrated and developed its principles during the first century and so on in Arabic, like Risala by Qusheri, Al-Lumma by Tusi, Al-Taaaruf by Kalabazi, are of few examples. These primary sources were not accessible to Western writers and their sole source of getting knowledge of Islamic spirituality was Iran since it was at that time a rich source of culture, economy, civilization, religion, and all its branches. So, the picture of Sufism was also portrayed and sketched based on Persian thoughts and culture.

Annemarie Schimmel explains at the beginning of *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* that most of the Western writers relied on Persian sources to define and trace the history of Sufism.

“Most of the information about oriental spirituality, however, was derived from the translations of Persian classical poetry — Saa di's Gulistdn has been one of the favorite books of European intellectuals since Adam Olearius produced its first complete translation into German in 1651. A century later, Sir William Jones at Fort William , Calcutta , fostered the study of Persian poetry, among other subjects, and as a result, the first translations of Hafiz became available in the West. His ideas about Sufi poetry have influenced many English-speaking orientalists, although one may find, in some works on Sufism written during the nineteenth century, rather absurd views in wild confusion”<sup>1</sup>

She expresses her research that roots of Sufism are not non-Arab but go back to Quran and sunnah.

“Sufism traces its origins back to the Prophet of Islam and takes inspiration from the divine word as revealed through him in the Koran”<sup>2</sup>

While establishing her opinion, she quotes many Western researchers such as Louis Massignon who agrees that origin of Sufism is the prophet of Islam.

“Muhammad is the first link in the spiritual chain of Sufism, and his ascension through the heavens into the divine presence, to which the first lines of Sura 17 allude, became the prototype of the mystic's spiritual ascension into the intimate presence of God.”<sup>3</sup>

The change of view point for identifying and linking Sufism with Islam and the prophet of Islam is because many unpublished works written by early doctors of Islamic spirituality are now available and it was not the case before twentieth century.

Sir William Jones is the first orientalist, who was a scholarly personality, well learned and a person of reasonable intellectual depth. His main interest was to draw a comparison between poetry, philosophies and cultural similarities. He

## Mapping Sufism in the West: A Critical Literature Survey

---

was expert of Persian language. From Schimmel's perspective, he is probably the first one who introduced Sufi translation of Persian Sufi poet in the West.

"A century later, Sir William Jones at Fort William, Calcutta , fostered the study of Persian poetry , among other subjects, and as a result the first translations of Hafiz became available in the West . His ideas about Sufi poetry have influenced many English-speaking orientalists, although one may find, in some works on Sufism written during the nineteenth century, rather absurd views in wild confusion"<sup>4</sup>

Another important reference that sheds a good amount of length on the history of Sufism in the West is three volumes *The Heritage of Sufism* edited by Leonard Lewisohn published by Oxford University Press 1999. Although he mentions on the title page of the first volume *Classical: Persian Sufism from its Origin to Rumi (700-1300)* but he explains and connects Sufi history from Persian context. He combined the researches of various Western and eastern scholars. The period 711 AD is actually is second half of first Islamic century. He concentrated on the development of Persian Sufism and was based on old literature. In the words of Lawrence Bruce there is no Persian Sufism separate from its universal attraction driving from one part of the word to the other. The term *Tasawwuf* is used to introduce it as part of Islam prevailing in the Muslim world. Modern researchers went to focus only on Persian perspective of Sufism and not taken it into consideration that what are real roots of *Tasawwuf* and how it got its popularity and on the basis of what features it secured and influenced the majority in every era. This dimension of Islam is beyond from any specific language or region but universal in its scope.

"Even the title "Classical Persian Sufism" is a term of convenience. "Classical Persian Sufism?" From the perspective of those discussed, there is no 'Persian Sufism' separable from *tasawwuf* as a universal impulse pervading all of Dar al-Islam, the global Muslim community. *Tasawwuf* is limited neither to one kind of language, however refined and subtle, nor to one body of literature, however varied and satisfying. It is we who are limited in how we approach *tasawwuf*."<sup>5</sup>

Orientalist perspectives of focusing and projecting Persian literature on Sufism can not be ignored as historical links of West with the Persia are well established. After establishing different chairs of Persian language in Western universities, interest in Persian literature became more dominant. "We are also limited by our focus on the Persian language, Persian actors, and Persian texts, despite the evident organizational benefit and the hoped-for explanatory yield of that stricture."<sup>6</sup>

This approach of studying Sufism by the Western scholars made their research scope with a particular lens not to be magnified to the big ocean of knowledge of Islamic spirituality developed outside Persia.

The greatest scholar of Persian literature E.J. Browne contributed to Persian and continued to R.A. Nikolson who was a major contributor and translator of Rumi and Hujveri.

The first intellectual and academic contact of the Islamic world with the West was through the translation of the poetry of Hafiz sherazi by Thomas Hyde into the Latin language around 1690. He was a linguist, a librarian, and an expert Persian language. He had a deep interest in the Zoroastrian religion of Persia alongside Muslim culture and philosophy and Sufism.

“English orientalist, Professor of Arabic and Hebrew in the University of Oxford, who was the first scholar to attempt to write a comprehensive description of the religion of Zoroaster (1636-1703).”<sup>7</sup>

Having a strong grip on Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, and Latin, he became the forerunner for modern scholars to investigate Persian literature since he himself translated and introduced Persian poetry through Hafiz to Europe.

This was the beginning that how relations started between the West and the Islamic world, particularly with Iran. However, with this stepping stone, further interest in Sufism, its concepts, practices, development, and origin evolved with the arrival of Western travelers, diplomats, businessmen, ambassadors, and visitors who came to visit the east. Persia was a most popular place to visit and particularly the Safavid dynasty time period was an ideal time to learn, meet with scholars, and common folks, and visit shrines. This almost two hundred period of visits to Safavid Persia had an understanding of Islamic culture, its philosophy, its mystical movements, etc. These observations later were documented by European travelers and diplomats which became another important source of knowledge about Islam and especially about Sufis. This information was in chunks. Visit monasteries, meeting with dervish, reading Persian poetry, and individual observation became the source of information for the Western community. This whole journey played a pivotal role to understand Islamic mystical tradition and was taken from the Persian perspective alone.

The rest of the Islamic world and the authentic literature on Islamic mysticism were totally oblivious from the eyes of these Europeans because of the lack of literature or unpublished works of great Sufi masters which are now available to be compared with what was produced in the West during the last four centuries. This partially documented information became preliminary and foundational literature in the West prepared by these travelers as opinion makers about the history of Sufism in Europe primarily based on Persian poetry like Hafiz Sherazi, umer Khyyam, maulana rumi etc.

## Mapping Sufism in the West: A Critical Literature Survey

---

Three brothers from Britain Sir Thomas, Anthony, and Robert Shelly stayed in Iran for the long period and fully adapted to Persian culture and became so close to the Persian government that later they became their ambassadors to European courts.

The Safavid dynasty's two hundred years period is also understood as the manifestation and patronage of Sufism because some prominent rulers like the founder Safuudin, Shah Ismail the first, and Shah Abbas are quoted as the main patron. This was another argument for understanding Sufism in Persian culture and developed the perception and origin of Sufism in Persia.

One major figure who became the major source of Persian Sufism in the West is Don Joan of Persia.

He was originally a Muslim Orūj Beg and sent as a secretary to some European courts where he was influenced by Christianity and converted to it.

“On the way, he visited ‘Ali Quli Beg, who was receiving Christian instruction from the priests of the Society of Jesus, and it was then that he had a series of revelations and manifestations that led to him convert to Christianity (Relaciones, III.7, fols 167v-168r).”<sup>8</sup>

The book “Relations” produced by him in Europe basically provides information about Iran, its culture, and Sufism during safvid period.

The basic point in terms of understanding Sufism by these people is that they were not primarily scholars or intellectuals or researchers in the field of spirituality. They did not have any such background. The purpose of their visit and meeting with locals was to get some information about various aspects of Persian land.

Their biographical history does not speak about their rich academic career. They were either traders, visitors, travelers, or diplomats to Persian courts representing Western countries.

“Thomas Herbert (1606-82) could “by a little imaginative genealogy” (xii) claim both Edward Herbert and William Herbert, third earl of Pembroke (1580-1630)- the founder of Pembroke College, Oxford and a patron of Shakespeare..... Herbert left on 23 March 1627 and returned 4 April 1630 (xii) to the turmoil of the Civil War, married in 1632, and went on to father ten children”<sup>9</sup>

Thomas Herbert reached in person in 1627. He was a British ambassador and lived there for some years.

He had extensive travels in various parts of Persia with deep concentration on its culture, food, politics, literature because of being keen to get maximum information for his travel journey. While showing a good trend of writing travels, he became very popular and later changed his mind about publishing more documents and books. This travel document was warmly welcomed in

Europe which gave him more popularity. This book also paints the perception of Sufi culture in Persia and its history there known by the local people.

Since he had the diplomatic privilege to visit kings and their advisors which gave him more chances to get the official point of view about various aspects of Persia. He wrote many names of cities and kings to explain his experience and observation. Travel to Persia became a rich source of knowledge about Sufism and later researchers used this book as a source of information.

This was first published in 1629 and later reprinted 1928 Broadway series London. Sir William Foster wrote its introduction. During his travels, he visited many cities like Isfahan, Tabriz and Shiraz etc and met a large range of people from the royal family and politicians to laymen. He commented on what he observed in the Persian court. One of the important aspects of his encounters was his meeting with mystical figures and the famous poet Hafiz of Shiraz. He also observed firsthand rituals and traditional Sufi practices and introduced the spirituality and wisdom of Sufi personalities to Western audiences which served as fundamental information about Sufism, however, the level of authenticity when it is to be compared with that of the original Sufi literature of Islam is under question and criticism after many authentic sources of Sufism are available.

Western scholars have approached the subject of Sufism with a number of perspectives. One point that should be kept in mind while studying the subject is long-term hostile relations between Christianity and Islam, particularly the impact of the Crusades which resulted in the form of an intellectual crusade. The subject of Orientalism was one major cause in defining and forming a distorted image of Islam.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said clearly explains the types and nature of orientalists that their main domain of research was in eastern history, languages, literature, poetry, and philosophies.

Edward Said defines the term in the following words:

“Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient-and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist--either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism.”<sup>10</sup>.

The style of research was to compare and sort out similarities and differences between language, poetry, and philosophies. The primary task of these writers was to identify writing structure, style, and themes covered in their writing. While focusing on various branches of knowledge like hadith, jurisprudence, and exegesis of the Quran, they raised many doubts about their authenticity and originality so much so that the holy Quran was under objections and forms of revelations were linked to epileptic fits etc. The minds behind this intellectual crusade were actually Christian leaders who decided to establish different chairs

## Mapping Sufism in the West: A Critical Literature Survey

---

for learning Arabic so that to counter the Muslim legacy of knowledge. Said further remarks:

“In the Christian West, Orientalism is considered to have commenced its formal existence with the decision of the Church Council of Vienne in 1312 to establish a series of chairs in "Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac at Paris, Oxford, Bologna, Avignon, and Salamanca.”<sup>11</sup>

This historical fact exhibits its manifestation in the writings of orientalist who approached the phenomenon of Sufism from a particular dimension and it was another face of Sufism introduced through the pens of Western scholars. E.W. Said further substantiates the minds and objectives of the founders of orientalism in these words:

“The suggestion was Raymond Lull's, who advocated learning Arabic as the best means for the conversion of the Arabs”.<sup>12</sup>

Development of theories concerning all disciplines of Islam especially Sufism started in the West through their contacts with Persian literature. From William Jones to A.J.Arberry, scholars focused on learning the Persian language, the language of the rulers and elite, especially poetry and, subsequently, culture and traditions. Major works of Western scholarship during their classical period were conducted on Persian poets that also included Sufi poets like Farid ud din Attar, Jalal ud Din Rumi, Hafiz Sherazi and Umer Khayyam and other Iranian poets etc.

They derived and developed notions of Islamic culture, Islamic mysticism, and Islamic philosophy through the source of poetry. Thomas Hyde, who was appointed as professor of Arabic, but his main interest of research shifted from Arabic to Persian literature especially he studied Zoroastrian religion prevailed in Persia. He studied Islamic philosophy, mysticism and culture in context of Zoroastrian philosophies.

“whose work on the History of the Religion of the Ancient Persians, Parthians, and Medes, published in 1700, little more than a year before his death, may be taken as representing the high-water-mark of knowledge on this subject at the close of the seventeenth century”.<sup>13</sup>

His most important contribution is recognized in the domain of Persian literature especially a thorough and comprehensive accounts of Persian religions that he studies in comparison with Islamic thoughts and philosophies thus, producing his conclusions about Islam with this academic context mixed with other Persian philosophies and religions. This made the way for succeeding orientalist for understanding Islam and particularly its mystical notions. Islamic mysticism and its various branches were not first introduced through classical Sufi authorities like Tusi, Sulami, Qushairi, Ghazali etc who were the pioneers and true contributors of Tasawuf. Islamic rather were encountered with Islamic



mysticism through Persian Muslim Sufi scholars specifically Sufi poets. First academic connection of Muslim literature in published form with European counterparts started through Hafiz's poetry who was translated in Latin. Schimmel mentioned the level of interest in Persian literature in the European intellectual circle as follows:

“Most of the information about oriental spirituality, however, was derived from the translations of Persian classical poetry—Sacdi's *Gulistdn* has been one of the favorite books of European intellectuals since Adam Olearius produced its first complete translation into German in 1651.”<sup>14</sup>

This interaction paved the way for Europeans to have more interest in research of Persian literature and further to develop theories about Sufism because most the high seats of learning Persian in Europe were well established and scholars devoted their research and focused with inter disciplinary and comparative approach to find out number of similarities and common points in prevailing Muslim and non- Muslim literature which helped them to build hypothesis and theories of Islamic mysticism as detached from its original Arab version cultivated in Persian lands.

The second important sources of information made available for research on Islamic mysticism in the West were observations, personal diaries and travelogues of diplomats, merchants and common travelers who remained closely associated with Persian culture, Persian festivals, and their literature. They frequently visited Persia, particularly Safavid Persia, and documented their observations and experiences that they received from any Sufi gathering, and cultural centers. This literature served as a fundamental source for orientalists to perceive Sufism and these three groups opened the avenues for Western scholars to further studies on this subject mainly based on this documented observation

#### **Sir William Jones and his method of Comparative Study:**

Sir William Jones is the first name in this line who lived during 1746-1794 when the eighteenth century came from the middle to its end. He is a well-known academic figure in terms of his interest in the Persian language, its mystical poetry, and the publication of Persian texts in Europe. He was an excellent academic stature and served as a Judge, diplomat, well-known linguist, and poet. In the list of orientalists, he was considered to be the founder and trendsetter of the comparative method of studying religions, culture, literature, and linguistics having expertise in Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit.

“The Welsh legal scholar, poet, and linguist, William Jones, arrived in Bengal in 1783. Already a master of Arabic and Persian, he soon began learning Sanskrit”<sup>15</sup>

With special skills in languages, he connects eastern philosophies especially Muslim poetry, culture, Sufi traditions, history etc to Europe while applying comparative method to highlight commonalities without differentiating the

## Mapping Sufism in the West: A Critical Literature Survey

---

peculiar features of Islamic Sufism I.e its origin from the Quran and sunnah and its earlier masters who substantiated the subject in great depth laying down its principles, methods, and higher objectives. Poetry was his area of interest so he studied Persian Sufi poets like Hafiz and introduced their thoughts as the origin of Sufism in Islam. He composed a Persian grammar dictionary and was well known as Persian Jones.

“He was now one of the most famous Orientalists in Europe, having been given the epithets of Persian Jones and Oriental Jones.”<sup>16</sup>

This in-depth introduction to the Persian language generated interest to Western readers and it was followed by some translations of Persian Sufi poets like his first translation of Ghazals by Hafiz connected the Europeans with the taste of Islamic Sufism.

“Interest in Hafiz in the West started in the eighteenth century when Sir Wi when Sir William Jones translated a few poems in 1771.”..... However, Jones does not rule out the possible mystical interpretation of Hafiz’s poetry. To him, the poetry of Hafiz is a form of meditation on divine perfection.<sup>17</sup>

The trend set by Jones was adopted by various Western writers analyzing Hafiz poetry from differs perspectives. Jones’s contribution of persian literature paved the way for further study and became first hand knowledge for the Western to get to know about Islamic tradition of Sufism, its philosophy, culture. They developed further literature on the basis of what was produced by Jones. About his translation and it impact in the West CC Barefoot and Theo d’ Haen writes:

“Jones communicates Hafiz’s delicate mosaic of sounds and symbols through evocative stanzas. This refreshing hedonistic poem was soon a standard British poem, standing as an exemplar of the later Romanticism in terms of music, imagination, emotion exotic allusions, and simple diction.”<sup>18</sup>

Jones not only provided persian literary taste to his contemporary scholars but also advocated to learn it to discover its richness and eloquence combined with mystical and philosophical knowledge. Michael J. Franklin remarks about his praise to Persian poets in the following words.

“Thus, he said that the Persian poet Sadi’s (Saidi’s) verses were ‘worthy of our most spirited writers’ (333) and compared an ode by Hafiz to a Shakespeare sonnet.”<sup>19</sup>

He, being a poet and comparatist, introduced Indian, Arabic and Persian romantic poetry to the Western scholarship which had huge impact. The value and intellectual worth of subcontinental literature I the Western land was because of Jones who not only translated Sufi literature but also variety of other poetic tastes that were adopted by his students. People who did not have a chance

to visit India and they translated Persian literature from a textual perspective alone, but the distinction of Jones lies in the fact that he experienced the tradition and culture of Sufis and other Indian civilizational aspects. This is noted by Franklin in his following remarks:

“Jones’s revaluation of Arabic and Persian poetry helped make Coleridge’s critical distillation of Orientalist allegory possible.”<sup>20</sup>

His translations helped in the inspiration to Persian and Arabic literature because of their accuracy in transmission with eloquence both in meanings and words. His comprehensive Persian grammar was widely adopted as a text book for teaching Persian to Western students and establishment of Persian literature and language in Europe. One other source of introducing Persian Sufism in the West was Sir John Malcolm (1769–1833). He was also sent to India as a British statesman and diplomat and historian who was a colleague of Jones. He played a vital administrative role in the East India Company committed to fulfill British interests and objectives and shaped British policy during his stay.

He was born in Scotland and completed his education from the University of Edinburgh. He joined the British East India Company as a writer and later promoted to various administrative roles because of his competence.

“Early Life. John Malcolm was the seventh child and fourth son of George Malcolm (1729-1803) and Margaret “Bonnie Peggy” Pasley (1742-1811). One of ten brothers and seven sisters, he was raised on Burnfoot farm near Langholm, and educated until the age of eleven at the Westerkirk parish school. His teacher, Mr. Archibald Graham, considered him an unruly child.”<sup>21</sup>

During his stay in India he devoted to learning Persian language. After learning Persian, he started meeting with a variety of people to get information about Persian culture, history and religions.

“Malcolm devoted himself seriously to the study of Persian and several local Indian languages. He also became a student of the political history of the Company and its role in India. In 1792, his labors paid off. Lord Cornwallis, whose military encampment at Seringapatam (Srirangapatnam) needed a Persian interpreter to the detachment serving with the Nizam of Hyderabad, asked Malcolm to be that liaison. He served in this capacity until the end of the war.”<sup>22</sup>

He published a voluminous book named as *The History of Persia* which concluded many aspects of Persia.

In this book, he highlights his experience with Sufi traditions and Sufi poets of Iran. This literature and other similar works produced by orientalist served as a foundational substance and knowledge hub which helped in developing the opinions of the West regarding religion, culture, philosophy, poetry, and even Sufism in the Persian context. Malcolm’s *History of Persia* was reasonably

## Mapping Sufism in the West: A Critical Literature Survey

---

loaded with interesting information covering a variety of aspects of Persian life consequently, it was welcomed by all circles of life including government officials, elites, and common researchers. Thus, it became a very popular and reliable source to be quoted with regard to Persian history.

“Several reviews have been published in English of the History of Persia. The first full-length review appeared in 1816, in the Quarterly Review, immediately following the publication of the book in 1815, and the last by Ann K. Lambton, was published in the journal Iran in 1995, proving that the impact of Malcolm’s work had not diminished in close to two centuries since its publication.”

His understanding and interpretation of Islamic Sufism were that it has nothing to do with real Islamic creed and it is something parallel to Islam. In the second volume, he devoted almost more than forty pages to describing his concepts about Sufism where he brings far-fetched ideas and links them with Sufism. He calls the Sufis freethinkers who have contradictions in their beliefs and practice regarding Islam.

“ “[t]here can be no doubt that their free opinions regarding its dogmas, their contempt of its forms, and their claim to a distinct communion with the Deity, are all calculated to subvert that belief for which they outwardly profess their respect.”<sup>23</sup>

James William Graham is another writer who introduced Sufism following the steps of his predecessors, especially Sir William Jones. He also served in the British army and after special training, he was sent in the east India company where he worked in the office of Sir John Malcolm. On the recommendation of his senior, he composed his thoughts on the subject of Sufism which later became a good source for the West. His treatment of Islamic Sufism was similar to that of Jones. He found out some common points of spirituality between Christianity and Sufi practices and concluded that the spirit of Sufism is actually inspired by Christian monks and asceticism.

“Sufism was privileged in Graham’s eyes precisely to the degree that it resembled the true spirit of Christianity. The theological argument that seemed to underlie his entire treatment and which he summarized in his conclusion was that Sufism stood in relation to Islam in a manner that was somewhat analogous to that of Christianity’s relation to Judaism”.<sup>24</sup>

The vision of Islamic Sufism, its origin, and development thus takes start with a limited approach.

This approach travelled to various European countries because of translation works of Persian poetry, Sufi tradition and religion and culture. Since they had no enough access to other sources to trace the reality of Islam and its Sufi wisdom, they mostly relied on what was available through travel records, personal diaries,

and articles and lectures compiled in the form of books. In the same time, German, orientalist Tholuck, is very important who followed the same concept and further acculturated these thoughts to Western academic circle. He was born at Breslau, Germany in March 1799. In some way or other a taste for Oriental literature was awakened in him and he sought from Prof. Kosegarten (then of Greifswalde, but from 1817 till 1824 professor at Jena), who was a great Oriental scholar, the means to carry on such studies.

**Khalil, Atif, Shiraz Sheikh, Sufism in Western Historiography:**

He learnt eastern literature and specialized in Islam and its various branches. He died in 1877. His most influential work in German language named **Sufismus, sive Theosophia Persarum Pantheistica**.

After William Gharm, this was the most comprehensive work ever produced in Europe. The title itself suggests that he was interested to trace the origin of Sufism from other philosophies. The English title of his work is (Sufism, or the pantheistic theosophy of the Persians. The term *Persarum Pantheistica* refers to pantheistic tendencies in Persian Sufism that God is manifested in all things through His creation. Tholuck draws conclusion that Sufism is actually a collection of pantheistic philosophies mixed with Hellenistic sciences and other Christian teachings.

“In his study, Tholuck was able to discern, perhaps for the first time, the seeds of a “mystical” trend in early Islam and even Muhammad himself, but he argued that it quickly transmuted into a pantheistic doctrine that soon came to stand outside the pale of orthodoxy.”<sup>25</sup>

It can be said that Tholuck's approach was the continuity of his predecessors with little more extension in his ideas that he incorporates as per the tradition and principles of all orientalism that lays emphasis to draw common points between various traditions on the basis of similarities.

Their basic interest was not research or study of eastern literature because they were not sent in these countries as students, researchers or for any academic activity but they were primarily sent to serve certain governmental duties like as diplomats, soldiers, businessmen, administrators etc and they worked in the domain of trade, tourism, and culture and they understood local politics and additionally, they took interest in culture, history, philosophy, the religion of Persia and subcontinent. These observations were published in Europe and provided basic material about the culture, history, religion, and Sufi thoughts.

***Travels Through Turkey into Persia and the East-Indies*** is another important work produced by a French diplomat, merchant, and traveler Jean Baptist Tavernier. It was first published in 1684 in London printed for Moles Pitt at the Angel in St. Pauls Church-Yard. He concentrated on social, religious, and economic issues and the landscape of Persia. He collects details of the people he encountered, the landscape he observed and customs and traditions he grasped

from there. He especially mentions the details of ascetics, mystics and poors (Fuqara) and derives that Sufism was originated from Persia and developed as a Sufi movement in various forms and manifestations. He not only describes the accounts of mystics but also his encounters with them whom he calls "Saints". He devoted around 35 pages to narrate his observations about saintly people specially the reverence that devotees pay while visiting shrines. Tavernier mentions his encounter with the Jesuit priest Father Jeronimo Xavier, who had spent many years living among the mystics of the Malabar Coast in India. Father Xavier shared his knowledge of Indian mysticism and philosophy with Tavernier, and his teachings are described in detail in the book. The question of authenticity and accuracy of the observation he had there are doubtful as he compiled these details long after his journey and there is chance of mixing the information. The Encyclopedia Iranica writes about this Travelodge in the following words:

"Here is an abridged chronology, focusing on Tavernier's journeys to India and the Far East while the uncertainties, contradictions, or even impossible points due to errors or inaccuracies on the part of Tavernier or other sources will not be addressed. It must also be noted that Tavernier wrote long after his journeys, 38 years after the first one and 5 years after the last, so he might have misremembered or forgotten."<sup>26</sup>

The channel of information which was considered as historical source to know about the life, culture, society, economy and particularly mystical traditions local Christians and Muslims were presented in a philosophical manner.

Dr. John Frier's *A New Account of East India and Persia* in another addition to learn about the life, culture, politics, religion and philosophy of Persian people. He graduated from Cambridge university and was fellow of Royal Society who travelled and lived in Persia during Safavid dynasty for two years from 1677-1678. His travel history was compiled in four volumes edited by William Crooked reprinted by London society in 1915. This was another influential source for the West to approach the phenomenon of Sufism from Persian perspectives. Fryer's account also contains a wealth of information on the political and economic structures of India and Persia during the 17th century. He describes the British East India Company's trading activities in India, as well as the political and economic relationships between India, Persia, and other neighboring countries.

**Oriental Mysticism: A Treatise on Sufiistic and Unitarian Theosophy of the Persians** written by a well-known British orientalist Edward. H. Palmer published in 1867.

This book explains the basic principles of Sufism especially from the perspective of Pantheism and quotes Persian manuscript treatise by 'Aziz bin Mohammed

Nafasi' as inevitable source to elaborate the concept of wahdat ul wujood and thus links its origin with indo- arian conception of pantheism.

“Palmer went so far as to propose that Sufism in its philosophical formulations was ultimately little more than a “development of the Primæval Religion of the Aryan race,” one which steered a middle-course between the total pantheism of the Hindus and the “deism” of the Qur’an.”<sup>27</sup>

Nineteenth century works and theories on the basis of what was produced by their predecessors paved the way for coining different theories based on racism and linguistics and applied and connected them with regard to Sufism and its relation or lack of relation with Islam or its origin with non Islamic or non arab cultures and philosophies. One of the important trend set by a well known linguist and racist mind is the celebrated Orientalist Ernest Renan (1823–1892). Although he was not a scholar of Sufism but delivered some Sufi thoughts and introduced a new perspective of understanding Sufism. He wanted to establish the linguistic and cultural superiority of indo-arian language and expression over what was produced by Sufi poets of Persia.

“For Renan the superiority of the Indo-Europeans over the Semites lay precisely in the fact that the former had a much more sophisticated and developed imagination and capacity for reason than the latter. They had evolved in a manner in which the Semites, shackled by their own languages and psychological makeup, could not.”<sup>28</sup>

This trend further grown up and became rampant upto no astonishment that different artistic, poetic, and metaphysical language and expression of human life related to transcendent or beyond was portrayed by these authors. Metaphysical and transcendental realities were tried to be comprehended while applying merely logical and rational approach and consequently a tendency of denial of those realities like the word of command, the world of spirit, the world of angels and the divinity were eclipsed. This led Western scholars to look onto Islamic Sufism from empirical and scientific perspective. But Sufism is something which can never be acquired and attained only through logic because it is a sort of approach to get proximity and nearness to God known as divine Gnosis. For, that all Sufis West through the path of practice with utmost desires following the principles provided by the Quran and the sunnah of the holy prophet (blessings and peace be upon him) which Western scholarship lacks vividly.

Here starts conflicts either to accept Sufism or to deny it with no value in the modern time. However, these appeared a galaxy of Western scholars who took the phenomenon of sufism from spiritual and inward aspect of Islam as well.

Jean Chardin (1643-1713) is one of the most celebrated travelers originally French and worked as an official state jeweler for the crown of England. He was considered to be the expert of the Persian language and way of life. He produced

## Mapping Sufism in the West: A Critical Literature Survey

---

voluminous books of the culture, history, and religion of Persia having a great influence both on French and British scholars, and was deeply praised and acknowledged by his successors like Voltaire, sir William Jones etc and they consulted his work as a basic source of information. He visited Persia and India during 1665 till 1677 and spent many years there. John Emerson edited his travelogue.

“A jeweler’s son with an excellent education, Chardin traveled with a Lyon merchant to Persia and India in 1665. At Eṣfahān, Persia, he enjoyed the patronage of the shah, ‘Abbās II. On returning to France (1670), he published an account of the coronation of Soleymān.”<sup>29</sup>

The confidence, grip, and extensive knowledge about each aspect of Persian life he gained during his stay in Persia was the reason that later scholars took his works as an authentic source of knowledge on the subject. Since he had good terms with Safavid rulers so enjoyed the privilege to access all major and minor notable places, institutions, religious schools, Ulemas, businessman, Politian, economists, legislators, bureaucrats and all important elements of the state. About his life in Persia, Iranian encyclopedia comments in the following words:

“He claimed that he had gathered a great deal of material on his first voyage but still did not consider that he knew enough to publish a detailed account (I, p. xxxvii). On his second voyage he made every effort to enlarge his understanding, trying to learn everything about which Europeans might be curious (I, p. xxxviii)..... his work was read and commented on favorably by a number of great 18th-century figures like Charles-Louis de Montesquieu, Edward Gibbon, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and William Jones.”<sup>30</sup>

His collection of travels were published with two different titles one as *Sir John Chardin’s Travels in Persia* and its introduction was written by Brigadier-General Sir Percy Sykes and published by The Argonaut Press London in 1927. The second account of travels titled *The travels of Sir John Chardin into Persia and the East-Indies* a very extensive detail of four volumes first published in 1686 in Westminster and London. During his travels in Persia, Chardin observed and wrote about the customs, politics, and daily life of the Persians. He also explored the region and documented his observations on the geography, flora, and fauna of the area.

Although, he was not interested primarily to learn about Sufi tradition he met with mystical figures and made it part of his travelogue. For example, he writes about his encounters with Sufi mystics in Persia and the spiritual practices and beliefs of the followers of the various religions he encountered during his travels. While taking special interest in the esoteric dimension of Islam, he describes



spiritual meditation, Sufi practices religious chants, and community visits to tombs for the sake of spiritual purification. Since he also visited and documented the religious practices of the Hindu and Buddhist religions like yoga meditation and their mantras etc.

This document added much to the history of Sufism in the West. All the discussion made above reveals one fact that source of mystical knowledge in the West was only Persia, or India because no relations of these travelers have been identified with other parts of Muslim world or no literature of Sufism was available to be consulted to make another opinion of its origin and development. Whatever they studied in the East, they produced its teachings of Islam and transmitted it to a new generation who relied on and developed their concepts after reading this material with the reference to Persia alone. The interesting fact that one can trace from these travels is none of these historians mentioned their visit to Baghdad although in its early period, it was part of Persia which later became the great center of learning Islamic traditions, no visit to Kufa, Damascus, Makkah and Madina which makes their point of view about the origin of Sufism incomplete and partial.

The second important point to be kept in mind is that none of these scholars studied the Quran, the sunnah of the holy prophet (blessings and peace be upon him), and even did not touch glorious time of Islamic history like the caliphate, their successors and successors of the successors.

The impact of these travel documents can be found on a large scale in a big number of books, compendiums, and encyclopedias developed in later periods. The Heritage of Sufism edited by Leonard Lewisohn is one of the important sources to study Sufi history. All volumes revolve around Persia while making any concepts, although the title gives the hint and impression that it covers the first-century literature of Sufism practically it denotes Persian literature of Sufism.

“Although most of the articles concentrate either on Persian language sources or on the somewhat indeterminate geographical domain of 'Greater Persia' (with the notable exception of the final volume, to be discussed further below), the category of 'Persian' or 'Persianate' Sufism remains elastic, yet coherent, enough to encompass articles that acknowledge the importance of writings in other Muslim languages and the practice of Sufism among non-Persians.”<sup>31</sup>

The image of Sufism would have been different if these Western scholars would compare Persian Sufi literature with other centers of high learning and approached classical Sufi literature, its historical roots and development. Coffee houses, restaurants, and general public gathering places have been quoted to be the centers of learning religion as well as moral stories with the lessons of renunciations, longing for God, and gnosis told by baggers (Dervishes) became

the sources to derive the concepts of Sufism and their spiritual practices. Chardin is the first amongst the travelers who after visiting some Sufi shrines, and meeting with Sufi personalities mentioned Abu Saeed bin Abi-ul Khair (357-440 ) a Persian Sufi to be the founder of Sufism whereas hundreds of prominent Sufis belonging to Persian land like Bayazid Bistami came before Abu Saeed bin Abi-ul Khair. He belonged to the fourth century and is introduced in Europe to be the originator of Tasawuf whereas Islamic Sufism was in full bloom two hundred years before him. Spiritual personalities like Hasan Basri, Abdullah bin Mubarak, Bishr al Hafi, Zunnoon Misri, Sufyan Sauri, Ibrahim bin Adham, Fuzail bin Ayaz, Junaid Baghdadi, Imam Shafi, Ahmed bin Hamble are few of the galaxy who approached the phenomenon of Sufism from the esoteric perspective and have written hundreds of books on the principles of Sufism, code of conduct from scientific and logical aspect purely derived from the Quran and the sunnah of the holy prophet (blessings and peace be upon him). This theory was refuted by Western researchers in the twentieth century after research in the field of Sufism expanded in Europe. Mehmood Shabistry, *Gulshan e Raz* (Rose Garden of Secrets) was first translated in the French language by Jean Chardin. He introduced it as the source of Islamic theology, philosophy, and Sufism being one doctrine of Islam. The themes of this poetry book focus on mystical traditions, and other sub-branches of knowledge that can be studied in line with Sufi practices in Islam whereas philosophy, theology and Sufism belong to three different domain of knowledge. From the French language, it was translated in other European languages. Winfield translated it into the English language.

*Glimpses of life and Manners in Persia* was produced by a British diplomat lady Sheil who visited Persia during mid- 19th century and stayed for four years. These glimpses highlight gender segregation, politeness and etiquettes, clothing, hospitality, family life, social and political issues, understanding of religion. She observes that mystical branch of Islam was very popular in Persia. She notes that there were many Sufi orders and mystics of each order were highly respected and visited by frequently. She wrote about their rituals like whirling of dervishes etc. This book was published by John Murray, Albemarle Street in 1856. From chapter five onwards, she describes some Islamic tradition and rituals like azan, Shrine of a prophet, rituals of Muharram, muslims fasting, various kinds of dervishes, and their ceremonies, freedom of religious opinions, customs of sending corpses to Kerbella, persian bagger, Dervish Ali etc. These travel documents became primary source of popular life of the Persians in the West.

### **Conclusion**

With the above-mentioned discussion, it can be stated that a fresh and objective study on the subject of Sufism with critical appraisal is direly needed in order to introduce the western society the true nature and objectives of Islamic spiritual

science to be benefitted from and to avoid the projection of distorted image of this very radiant and bright side of Islam.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Schimmel, A. (2013). *Mystical dimension of Islam*. P. 8. Noura Books.
- <sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p, 24
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p, 27
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p, 8
- <sup>5</sup> Lewisohn, L. (2018, April 30). *The Heritage of Sufism*. P, 21, Simon and Schuster.  
[http://books.google.ie/books?id=Yh-9DwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=978-1851681884&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs\\_api](http://books.google.ie/books?id=Yh-9DwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=978-1851681884&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api)
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p, 21
- <sup>7</sup> HYDE, T. HYDE, THOMAS.
- <sup>8</sup> Günther, S., & Lawson, T. (Eds.). (2017). *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam (2 vols.): Volume 1: Foundations and Formation of a Tradition. Reflections on the Hereafter in the Quran and Islamic Religious Thought/Volume 2: Continuity and Change. The Plurality of Eschatological Representations in the Islamicate World* (Vol. 136). Brill.
- <sup>9</sup> Aksan, V. H. (2015). Herbert, Sir Thomas. *Travels in Africa, Persia, and Asia the Great. Some Years Travels into Africa and Asia the Great, especially describing the famous Empires of Persia and Hindustan, as also divers other Kingdoms in the oriental Indies 1627–30. 1677 version, with ed., intro. and notes by John Anthony Butler. Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme*, 38(1), 179-181.
- <sup>10</sup> Said, E. W. (1977). Orientalism. *The Georgia Review*, 31(1), p. 2.
- <sup>11</sup> Said, E. W. (1977). Orientalism. *The Georgia Review*, 31(1), p.41.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p, 331.
- <sup>13</sup> Browne, Edward Granville, ed. *Materials for the Study of the Babi Religion*. P. 41. The University Press, 1918.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p, 8.
- <sup>15</sup> William Robertson, October 2009, Early Orientalism and the "Historical Disquisition" on India of 1791, *The Scottish Historical Review*, Vol. 88, pp. 289-312, p.297, Edinburgh University Press
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid*, p,40
- <sup>17</sup> Salami, Ali, 2016, *The Selected Poems of Hafiz*, p,15, Mehrandish Books Tehran – Iran
- <sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p 16

## Mapping Sufism in the West: A Critical Literature Survey

---

- <sup>19</sup> Franklin, J. Michael, First published 2006 , Romantic Representations of British India, Routledge publishers, London & New York, pp,116
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, pp, 119
- <sup>21</sup> Encyclopedia Iranica, Manoutchehr Eskandari-Qajar
- <sup>22</sup> ibid, p, 13
- <sup>23</sup> . Malcolm, sir John, The History of Persia: From the Earliest Period to the Present Time, vol,2 p,382, London: John Murray and Longman; reprint, Tehran: Imperial Organization for Social Sciences, 1976
- <sup>24</sup> Khalil, Atif, Shiraz Sheikh, Sufism in Western Historiography: An Overview, University of Hawai,Press, January,2016, p197
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, p, 197
- <sup>26</sup> Widiyanto, A. (2016). The Reception of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Ideas within the Indonesian Intellectual Landscape. *Studia Islamika*, 23(2).
- <sup>27</sup> Ernst, C. W. (1994). Traditionalism, the Perennial Philosophy and Islamic Studies. *Review of Middle East Studies*, 28(2), 176-180.
- <sup>28</sup> Aslan, A. (2013). *Religious pluralism in Christian and Islamic philosophy: the thought of John Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr*. Routledge.
- <sup>29</sup> Quadir, T. M. (2011). *Modern science and the environmental crisis: the traditional Islamic response of Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Birmingham).
- <sup>30</sup> Siregar, H., & Soemitra, A. Asfa Widiyanto.
- <sup>31</sup> A. Husain. Adnan, Review: The Heritage of Sufism, Middle East Studies Association Bulletin , Winter 2001, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Winter 2001), pp. 204-207, Published by: Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23063467>