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From Shrine to Text: Translation, Authority, and the Afterlife of Kashf al-Mahjūb in South Asia

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Abstract:

This article examines the transformation of Sufism in South Asia through the translation and circulation of Kashf al-Mahjūb, the eleventh-century Persian treatise attributed to Ali Hujwiri. Rather than approaching European engagement with Sufism solely through the lens of Orientalist appropriation, the article treats translation as an epistemic intervention—an act that reshapes the meaning, authority, and social function of religious knowledge rather than merely transferring it between languages. Focusing on the modern reception of Kashf al-Mahjūb, it traces how translation contributed to the reconfiguration of Sufi knowledge from shrine-centered devotional practice toward scriptural and intellectual discourse. Situating this process within Lahore as an epistemic center, the article examines how the intellectualization of Sufism intersected with the emergence of a Muslim Ashraf whose religious authority increasingly rested on textual literacy, ethical discipline, and Sunni normativity. Through a comparative analysis of Muslim intellectuals such as Wahid Bakhsh Siyal and European seekers including Shahidullah and Faruq Ahmad Faridi, it demonstrates how the same Sufi text generated divergent religious subjectivities. Integrating medieval Sufi memory, Mughal historiography, colonial translation, and postcolonial reinterpretation, the study reframes Sufism not as a tradition in decline, but as one continually re-articulated through text, space, and class.

Keyword: *Sufism; Translation; Kashf al-Mahjūb; Muslim Ashraf; Lahore; Transregional Intellectual History; Religious Space*

Introduction:

Scholarship on Sufism in South Asia has long emphasized shrine-centered devotion[1],saintly charisma, and the social worlds of popular piety. From colonial ethnographies to postcolonial social histories, shrines have been treated as privileged sites where religious practice, political authority, and everyday life intersect. Parallel strands of scholarship have focused on reformist critiques of Sufism, highlighting movements that sought to discipline shrine practices in the name of scriptural Islam, moral reform, or rational religiosity. At the same time, intellectual historians of Islam have drawn attention to the philosophical and ethical

[1] Shrine-centered devotion constituted a lived religious space of embodiment, ritual repetition, and affective attachment.

sophistication of Sufi traditions through close readings of mystical texts, often detached from their social and spatial contexts. While these approaches have generated a substantial and diverse literature, they have also produced a fragmented understanding of Sufism. Devotional practice, reformist critique, and intellectual mysticism are frequently treated as separate—or even antagonistic—domains. Less attention has been paid to the historical processes through which Sufi knowledge itself was reconfigured: how texts were reinterpreted, how authority shifted between embodied devotional practice and textual mastery, and how these shifts intersected with class formation and urban intellectual life in late colonial and postcolonial South Asia. This article examines these processes by focusing on the translation and circulation of *Kashf al-Mahjūb* (c. 1030 CE). It argues that translation did not merely transmit an existing Sufi tradition but actively reorganized the relationship between text, practice, and religious authority. Through translation, Sufism increasingly came to be articulated as a scriptural and intellectual tradition compatible with modern education, ethical self-discipline, and elite respectability. This transformation did not entail the disappearance of Sufism. Rather, it facilitated new forms of religious authority aligned with the aspirations of educated Muslim elites, even as shrine-centered devotion continued to persist in reconfigured forms. [2] Lahore provides a particularly revealing site for this inquiry. As a major center of Muslim education, print culture, and intellectual debate in North-Western British India, the city witnessed intense discussions over religion, ethics, and respectability during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[3] Within this milieu, Sufism was neither uncritically embraced nor categorically rejected. Instead, it was selectively re-scripted: shrine-centered devotion was increasingly viewed with ambivalence, while Sufi texts were embraced as sources of ethical refinement and intellectual legitimacy. Figures such as Muhammad Iqbal participated in this environment, but they were not exceptional; they emerged from a broader context shaped by translation, textual engagement, and debates over Islamic normativity. By examining both Muslim and European engagements with *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, this article demonstrates that translation generated divergent trajectories of religious subjectivity. For Muslim Ashraf intellectuals, translation facilitated the consolidation of a disciplined, scriptural Sufism[4]

[2] In this article, the term *Muslim Ashraf* refers to educated, urban Muslim elites whose social authority rested on access to textual knowledge, linguistic capital in Persian, Urdu, and English, and the cultivation of ethical respectability within emerging norms of Sunni orthodoxy. It comes closest to what Jamal Malik suggests as Colonial Urban Sector: The colonial urban sector refers to educated urban milieus shaped by colonial institutions, print culture, and reformist ethics, within which new forms of Muslim religious authority emerged. Jamal Malik. *Colonialization of Islam: Dissolution of Traditional Institutions in Pakistan.* New Delhi: Manohar, 1996. However, the present study treats the Muslim Ashraf not merely as an institutional location but as a classed moral formation shaped by translation, textual authority, and debates over Sufi normativity.

[3] Historians of colonial Lahore have emphasized the city's role as a center of Muslim education, print culture, and elite political formation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ian Talbot, and Tahir Kamran. *Punjab and the Raj, 1849–1947.* Lahore: Fiction House, 2016.

[4] Scriptural Sufism denotes a mode of tasawwuf articulated primarily through texts, ethical discipline, and interpretive authority rather than ritual practice at shrines.

oriented toward juridical and ethical normativity. For European seekers, the same text often served as a gateway to embodied devotional practice centered on shrines. These contrasting outcomes suggest that translation functioned as a productive and contested process rather than as a linear movement toward abstraction or secularization.

2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis in this article draws on three interrelated perspectives: postcolonial critique, spatial approaches to religious authority, and studies of transregional circulation.[5] Together, these frameworks allow Sufism to be examined as a historically contingent form of knowledge produced through text, space, and social location. Postcolonial critiques of Orientalism have persuasively demonstrated how European scholarship on Islam emerged within asymmetrical power relations, often privileging abstraction, classification, and textual coherence over lived religious practice. While essential, an exclusive focus on domination obscures how translated knowledge was contested and reworked within Muslim societies. This study therefore moves beyond a binary of Orientalist imposition and indigenous resistance to examine the internal dynamics of knowledge transformation.[6] A spatial perspective[7] further sharpens this analysis, particularly in light of studies of colonial Lahore that trace how urban space itself structured modern forms of authority and discipline.[8] Religious authority is not simply exercised; it is produced within specific spatial arrangements. Shrine-centered devotion represents a form of lived religious space[9] grounded in embodiment, ritual repetition, and affective attachment. By contrast, scriptural and intellectual Sufism operates within a more abstract religious space structured by textual interpretation, ethical discipline, and educational credentials. The movement from one mode to the other does not imply secularization but rather a reclassification of religious legitimacy.

Finally, the article engages transregional approaches that emphasize the circulation of texts and ideas across linguistic and cultural boundaries.[10] Drawing on Faisal Devji's insight that modern Islam is constituted through ethical and political reflection rather than inherited tradition alone, this article approaches translation as a practice that actively reconfigures religious authority rather than merely transmitting it.[11]

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[5] Transregional circulation refers to the movement of texts, ideas, and interpretive frameworks across linguistic, cultural, and geographical boundaries.

[6] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

[7] Henri Lefebvre. *The Production of Space.* Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

[8] William J. Glover. *Making Lahore Modern: Constructing and Imagining a Colonial City.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

[9] Religious space is understood not as a neutral setting but as a socially produced domain in which authority, practice, and legitimacy are organized.

[10] Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63.

[11] Faisal Devji. *A Politics of Indian Muslims.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.

Translation is treated here not as neutral transfer but as an epistemic intervention that reorganizes interpretive communities and redistributes religious authority. When *Kashf al-Mahjūb* was translated into English and later retranslated into Urdu, it entered new circuits of interpretation that reshaped both its meaning and its social function.

Literature Review and Research Gap

Approaching translation as an epistemic intervention and religious space as a site of authority requires rethinking how existing scholarship has framed Sufism in South Asia. While a substantial literature exists on shrines, reform, and mystical thought, these bodies of work have rarely been placed in dialogue with one another through the lens of textual circulation and class formation. Existing scholarship on Sufism in South Asia may be broadly grouped into four overlapping but often disconnected strands. First, historians have examined Sufi shrines as sites of religious authority, popular devotion, and political negotiation, particularly under colonial rule.[12] This work has been especially effective in highlighting the role of law, administration, and state power in reshaping shrine institutions. Its institutional focus, however, has tended to treat Sufism primarily as a spatially embedded devotional practice, paying limited attention to the transformation of Sufi knowledge through textual and intellectual means. A second strand has focused on reform, education, and the reorganization of Muslim religious authority under colonial modernity.[13] While influential, this literature often frames reform and Sufism as oppositional categories, emphasizing decline or displacement. Such an approach risks overlooking the ways in which Sufism itself was selectively reworked and appropriated within new intellectual and social contexts.

A third body of scholarship has treated Sufism as an intellectual and philosophical tradition, emphasizing the metaphysical depth and ethical sophistication of mystical thought.[14] Although crucial for challenging reductive portrayals of Sufism as mere folklore, this work has generally remained detached from questions of class, urban context, and social differentiation. Finally, recent studies have emphasized the transregional circulation of Islamic ideas, situating South Asian Sufism within global networks linking Europe, the Middle East, and the subcontinent.[15]

[12] David Gilmartin. *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. Sarah Ansari. *Sufi Saints and State Power: The Pirs of Sind, 1843–1947*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Gregory C. Kozlowski. *Muslim Endowments and Society in British India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

[13] Jamal Malik**.** *Colonization of Islam: Dissolution of Traditional Institutions in Pakistan*. New Delhi: Manohar, 1996.

[14] Annemarie Schimmel. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975. Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence. *Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

[15] Nile Green. *Global Sufism: Boundaries, Structures, and Networks*. London: Hurst & Company, 2012.

Yet even here, translation is often treated as a vehicle of movement rather than as an epistemic intervention with locally specific consequences. Two gaps therefore remain. First, the translation of Sufi texts has not been systematically analyzed as a mechanism for transforming Sufism from devotional practice into scriptural knowledge. Second, the relationship between Sufism and the emergence of a Muslim Ashraf in urban centers such as Lahore remains under-theorized. This article addresses these gaps by examining how the translation and reinterpretation of *Kashf al-Mahjūb* reconfigured Sufi authority, enabling a classed, intellectualized form of tasawwuf[16] while generating divergent trajectories of religious subjectivity. The historical career of *Kashf al-Mahjūb* provides a particularly effective vantage point from which to address these gaps, as it allows devotional practice, textual authority, and social differentiation to be examined within a single, evolving tradition.

Ali Hujwiri, *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, and the Early Formation of Sufi Authority

Ali Hujwiri, popular as Data Ganj Bakhsh of Lahore occupies a foundational position in the early history of Sufism in the northwestern regions of the Indian subcontinent. Born in Ghazna in the early eleventh century, he was trained within the Persianate Islamic world shaped by Ghaznavid political authority, Sunni jurisprudence, and emerging Sufi networks. His intellectual formation encompassed legal, theological, and mystical disciplines, situating him firmly within the normative scholarly traditions of his time. His eventual settlement in Lahore placed him in a region characterized by religious plurality and ongoing processes of Islamic consolidation.[17] Hujwiri's historical significance rests primarily on the enduring authority of *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, widely regarded as the earliest systematic Persian treatise on Sufism. The text presents *tasawwuf* as a coherent discipline grounded in Sunni orthodoxy, ethical regulation, and adherence to principles of Sharīʿa. Rather than privileging ecstatic experience or miracle narratives, it organizes Sufi knowledge through classification, doctrinal exposition, and normative judgment. This emphasis on juridical and ethical discipline would later make the text particularly amenable to intellectual reinterpretation. From a historical perspective, *Kashf al-Mahjūb* functioned as a pedagogical text before it became an object of shrine-centered veneration. Its circulation enabled the transmission of Sufi norms in contexts where institutionalized Sufi orders were not yet firmly established. Early Chishti memory supports this interpretation. In *Fawāʾid al-Fawāʾid*, Nizamuddin Auliya refers to *Kashf al-Mahjūb* as an essential guide to the spiritual starter.[18] He also recommended to visit Ali Hujvery shrine to a pilgrim pilgrim who had visited numerous shrines but had not traveled to his shrine in Lahore.[19]

[16] Tasawwuf refers to Islamic mystical practice and thought concerned with ethical self-discipline, spiritual refinement, and proximity to God.
[17] Most of the scholars present this picture.
[18] Muhammad Tufail ed. Naqoosh: Lahore Vol. 1. Lahore: Idara Farogh e Urdu, 1962. p.162.
[19] Amir Hassan Sijzi. *Fawāʾid al-Fuʾād*. Urdu trans. Khwāja Ḥasan Niẓāmī (Sānī Dehlvī) Dehlvi. Lahore: -AlFaisal Publishers. p. 177-78.

Mughal historiography further illustrates the variability of Hujwiri's reception. Abul Fazl presents him as a foundational saint associated with the spread of Islam in the region, reflecting an early-modern understanding of Islamization as a process mediated through saintly authority and moral instruction.[20] By contrast, seventeenth-century reflections by Dara Shikoh, although appreciates the text, he focuses more on the shrine, expressing unease over shared devotional practices that attracted non-Muslim pilgrims.[21]Taken together, these sources indicate that the meaning of Ali Hujwiri's authority was neither fixed nor uniform, but shifted between pedagogical, normative, and devotional registers over time. By the late nineteenth century, these layered precolonial meanings of Ali Hujwiri's authority encountered a radically altered epistemic environment. Colonial scholarship, print culture, and new regimes of education transformed the conditions under which Sufi knowledge could circulate, rendering translation a decisive medium through which the text would be reclassified and reinterpreted.

Translation as Epistemic Intervention: Nicholson and *Kashf al-Mahjūb*

The modern intellectual afterlife of *Kashf al-Mahjūb* is inseparable from the English translation produced by Reynold A. Nicholson (1848-1945).[22] Emerging from a philological tradition that sought to recover Islamic mysticism as a coherent intellectual system, Nicholson's translation privileged doctrinal coherence and metaphysical exposition. In doing so, it reclassified the text within an academic epistemic order that emphasized textual mastery over devotional practice. This act of translation had significant consequences. Detached from shrine-centered contexts, *Kashf al-Mahjūb* became available for new forms of engagement within both European scholarship and educated Muslim readerships. Sufism increasingly appeared as an intellectual tradition compatible with modern education and ethical self-cultivation. At the same time, this abstraction opened the text to critique, particularly from Muslim intellectuals who sought to reassert its Sharīʿatī foundations. While Reynold A. Nicholson's English rendering of *Kashf al-Mahjūb* in the early twentieth century remains the most influential, subsequent English translations and re-editions attest to the text's continued reception in the English-speaking world.[23] Nicholson's *The Kashf al-Mahjūb: The Revelation of the Veiled* was first published in 1911 and later reprinted in editions such as those issued by the E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Trust and Sang-e-Meel in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, indicating the enduring academic interest in his rendering of Hujwiri's treatise.[24] Moreover, several later editions continue to present Nicholson's text in English, often with updated introductions, annotations, or secondary prefaces by contemporary scholars, thereby sustaining its pedagogical presence in modern religious and academic curricula.[25]

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[20] Abul Fazl, *The Akbarnāma of Abul Fazl*, Vol. III, trans. Henry Beveridge (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1907).

[21] Dara Shikoh, *Safīnat al-Awliyāʾ*, Persian text, Kanpur: Matbaʿ Nizami, 1911.

[22] Reynold A. Nicholson, trans., *The Kashf al-Mahjūb (The Revelation of the Veiled): The Oldest Persian Treatise on Ṣūfism*, London: E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 1911.

[23] Muhammad Sultan Shah. "A Study of the English Translations of *Kashf al-Mahjub*." *Journal of the University of the Punjab* 83, nos. 1–2 (2019): 233–248.

[24] Dr. Ahmad S. Khan. Book & Author Professor R. A. Nicholson: *Kashf Al-Mahjub — The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism.* (https://pakistanlink.org/Commentary/2021/Aug21/27/01.HTM?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

[25] Ibid. Reynold A. Nicholson (1868–1945) produced the first major English translation, originally published in **1911**, with subsequent editions (e.g., 1936; reprints by the Gibb Memorial Trust and Sang-e-Meel). Nicholson's translation remains the canonical English version in scholarship.

In addition to Nicholson's foundational translation, other English versions, sometimes marketed under titles such as *The Kashf al-Mahjub: The Revelation of the Veiled* and issued in different geographical contexts, reflect efforts by later publishers to make the work accessible to broader readerships beyond specialist Orientalist audiences.[26] Such post-Nicholson circulation illustrates how the translation has become a durable site of interpretive authority, shaping both scholarly and devotional encounters with *Kashf al-Mahjūb* across linguistic and cultural contexts.[27] The authority established by Nicholson's English translation did not remain external to Muslim intellectual life; it provoked a sustained vernacular response that sought to reclaim *Kashf al-Mahjūb* for normative Islamic discourse. While early twentieth-century Anglophone reception of *Kashf al-Mahjūb* was shaped prominently by Reynold A. Nicholson's 1911 translation, the subsequent vernacular reception in Urdu[28]

[26] One can find numerous editions of the translations available in the local market and at the internet. Multiple later editions of his translation were published in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (e.g., reprints dated 2007, 2014, etc.), often retaining Nicholson's text while adding new prefaces or commentary. https://www.goodreads.com/work/editions/518302?page=1&utm_source=chatgpt.com

[27] Dr. Ahmad S. Khan. Book & Author Professor R. A. Nicholson: *Kashf Al-Mahjub — The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism.*

[28] Ibid. Several non-Nicholson English versions, sometimes repackaged under similar titles, circulate in print and digital formats, though they are usually based on Nicholson's translation rather than representing fully new renderings.

demonstrates both *continuity with and divergence from* that framing. Major Urdu editions, such as the translations by Sayyid Muhammad Ahmad Qadri (first published 2002, revised 2012 by Zia-ul-Quran Publications, Lahore) and Allama Fazl-ud-Din Gohar (Zia-ul-Quran, 2010), articulate the treatise's definitions of tasawwuf through terms that emphasize Sharīʿa-aligned knowledge (*ilm*), ethical practice, and juridical discipline, rather than the more abstract philosophical vocabulary often associated with Nicholson's rendering. Earlier vernacular editions — including a 1958 translation published by Madni Kutub Khana (Lahore) and a 1962 edition from Maktabah Thānawī (Deoband) — indicate that Urdu engagement with Hujwiri's text predates the canonical status of the English translation. A comparative reading of a key definition passage illustrates this dynamic: whereas the Persian original grounds Sufism in the integration of knowledge and practice, and Nicholson's English highlights conceptual coherence for academic audiences, Urdu renderings tend to retain the Persian's juridical and moral emphasis in colloquial religious vocabulary. This pattern suggests that Urdu translators were not simply dependent on English models; they worked from the Persian directly while also negotiating the interpretive priorities inaugurated by Nicholson's canonical text. The relationship between the English and Urdu receptions of *Kashf al-Mahjūb* further illustrates how translation generated internal negotiation rather than simple textual dependence. Prefatory materials in major twentieth-century Urdu editions consistently identify the Persian original as the source text and frame translation as a pedagogical intervention aimed at ethical and doctrinal instruction. In contrast to Nicholson's English rendering, which situates Hujwiri within an abstracted discourse of mystical philosophy, Urdu translators tend to preserve the Persian text's juridical and moral vocabulary, rendering tasawwuf through idioms of Sharīʿa, worship, and ethical discipline familiar to Muslim readers. A comparison of the opening discussion of Sufism makes this distinction clear: where Nicholson's language emphasizes conceptual coherence suitable for comparative study, Urdu translations re-embed the text within a normative Islamic moral universe. At the same time, the existence of explicit critiques—most notably in Wahid Bakhsh Siyal's commentary—demonstrates that Nicholson's translation functioned as an epistemic reference point even when it was not a direct source. Urdu engagement with *Kashf al-Mahjūb* thus reflects a dynamic process of appropriation and correction, in which English abstraction and vernacular normativity remained in sustained dialogue. A closer comparison of English and Urdu renderings of *Kashf al-Mahjūb* demonstrates that translation functioned not merely as linguistic transfer but as a site of interpretive divergence. Although Reynold A. Nicholson, Wahid Bakhsh Siyal, and Shahidullah Sabri all worked from the same Persian source, their translations articulate markedly different conceptions of Sufism, authority, and normativity. Nicholson's English translation renders Ali Hujwiri's exposition of *tasawwuf* in a conceptual vocabulary shaped by early twentieth-century comparative religion and philological scholarship. His language privileges coherence, definition, and abstraction, presenting Sufism as a systematic mystical philosophy grounded in ethical reflection and inward discipline. While Sharīʿa is acknowledged in Nicholson's rendering, it does not structure the exposition; juridical references are often subsumed within broader discussions of moral refinement and spiritual realization. The effect is to present Hujwiri as a representative "classical mystic," intelligible within a universalized discourse of spirituality rather than as a jurist-mystic embedded in Sunni legal culture. By contrast, Wahid Bakhsh Siyal's Urdu translation and commentary deliberately re-orient the text toward juridical and ethical normativity. Siyal frequently expands Hujwiri's references to law, discipline, and

correct belief through explanatory glosses that clarify their Sharīʿatī implications for contemporary Muslim readers. Where Nicholson's English smooths doctrinal tensions in favor of conceptual clarity, Siyal's Urdu emphasizes boundaries: between licit and illicit practice, between disciplined Sufism and antinomian excess, and between Sunni orthodoxy and heterodox claims. In doing so, Siyal does not merely translate Hujwiri; he positions him as a corrective authority within modern debates over Sufism's legitimacy. Siyal's engagement is explicitly dialogical. His commentary acknowledges the scholarly importance of Nicholson's translation while criticizing its abstraction from Islamic law. This critique is not incidental; it reflects a broader concern among educated Muslim intellectuals that modern representations of Sufism risked detaching spirituality from normative Islamic frameworks. Siyal's translation thus functions as a form of intellectual reclamation, asserting Muslim interpretive sovereignty over a text that had acquired canonical status in English. Shahidullah Sabri's Urdu translation occupies a somewhat different position within this spectrum. While also working directly from the Persian original, Sabri's rendering places greater emphasis on moral exhortation and devotional intelligibility than on polemical correction. His lexical choices frequently privilege terms associated with piety, humility, and ethical comportment, rendering *tasawwuf* as a lived moral discipline accessible to a broader Urdu-reading public. Compared to Siyal, Sabri is less invested in juridical explication and more attentive to the cultivation of affective and ethical sensibility. Nevertheless, like Siyal, Sabri resists Nicholson's abstraction by re-embedding Hujwiri's discourse within an Islamic moral universe structured by worship, obedience, and spiritual discipline. The comparison reveals three distinct translational logics. Nicholson's English -translation universalizes Hujwiri, presenting him as a philosopher of mysticism whose relevance transcends confessional boundaries. Siyal's Urdu commentary particularizes Hujwiri, insisting on his identity as a Sunni authority whose Sufism cannot be separated from Sharīʿa. Sabri's translation mediates between these positions, foregrounding ethical piety without engaging directly in scholarly polemic. These differences are not merely stylistic; they reflect divergent assumptions about audience, authority, and the proper relationship between mysticism and law. Historically, these translational divergences had concrete consequences. Nicholson's version facilitated the incorporation of *Kashf al-Mahjūb* into Anglophone academic and comparative religious discourse. Siyal's and Sabri's Urdu translations, by contrast, shaped Muslim engagements with Sufism in South Asia, contributing to the re-articulation of tasawwuf as a disciplined, ethically grounded, and textually authorized Islamic practice. Translation thus emerges not as a linear movement from Persian to English to Urdu, but as a contested field in which competing visions of Sufism were articulated and negotiated. These translational negotiations acquired their fullest social significance in urban contexts where language, education, and class intersected most intensely—above all, in Lahore.

Lahore as Epistemic Centre, Muslim Ashraf, and the Afterlife of Colonial Epistemes

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Lahore emerged as a critical site for the reconfiguration of Muslim religious authority. Although the figures discussed in this section span the late colonial and postcolonial periods, they are treated together because they operated within intellectual frameworks, linguistic hierarchies, and modes of religious reasoning that were consolidated under colonial rule and continued to shape Muslim scholarly life well after 1947. The persistence of these frameworks—rather than political chronology alone—explains the coherence of Muslim Ashraf engagements with Sufism in Lahore across this transition. One more thing to be noted is that Lahore is approached here

not as a strictly residential category but as an epistemic center whose shrine culture, publishing networks, and linguistic hierarchies structured Muslim intellectual life well beyond the city itself. Texts associated with Ali Hujwiri circulated nationally or even globally, and engagements with *Kashf al-Mahjūb* were shaped by Lahore's symbolic authority even when authors and practitioners were based elsewhere. Figures discussed here should therefore be understood as participating in Lahore-centered intellectual and devotional circuits rather than as members of a geographically bounded urban elite.

Lahore experienced a profound linguistic and intellectual reorientation that reshaped Muslim religious authority during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This period witnessed the gradual displacement of Persian—long the language of courtly administration, education, and Islamic scholarship—by English and Urdu as the dominant languages of elite communication and institutional knowledge. English emerged as the language of higher education, law, and modern intellectual legitimacy, while Urdu increasingly functioned as the vernacular medium of Muslim moral instruction, public debate, and religious pedagogy. The decline of Persian as a living scholarly language did not merely mark a change in medium; it transformed the modes through which Islamic knowledge, including Sufism, could be accessed, interpreted, and authorized.[29] This linguistic shift had significant implications for the Muslim Ashraf of Lahore. As Persian receded from curricula and administrative life, direct engagement with classical Sufi texts in their original language became increasingly limited to specialists. At the same time, the rise of English and Urdu created new hierarchies of access and authority. Texts translated into these languages acquired enhanced legitimacy, not simply because they were more widely readable, but because they aligned with emerging standards of education, respectability, and intellectual competence.[30] Translation thus became a crucial mechanism through which the Sufi past could be re-integrated into modern Muslim life.[31] The intellectual trajectory of Muhammad Iqbal, a significant poet, philosopher and ideologue, of early twentieth century (1877-1938) offers a particularly revealing illustration of this transformation. Iqbal's intellectual production unfolded across three languages—Persian, Urdu, and English—each associated with a distinct register of authority and audience. His earliest major scholarly work, *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, written in English as a doctoral thesis, reflects the epistemic priorities of the colonial academy.[32]

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[29] One can see several indigenous urban histories of Lahore, most notably Kanhaiya Lal's *Tārīkh-e-Lahore*, in late nineteenth and early twentieth century depict the city as a long-standing center of madrasas, scholars, and ethical-pedagogical lineages, indicating that textual learning and urban respectability formed an established basis of religious authority prior to colonial interventions. Kanhaiya Lal. *Tārīkh-e-Lahore.* Lahore: Munshi Gulab Singh & Sons, 1882.
Similarly, Muhammad Fauq's *Tazkirat-ul-Ulama*, depict the city as a dense network of madrasas, scholars, and ethical-pedagogical lineages in which religious authority was already deeply invested in textual learning and urban respectability. Muhammad Fauq. *Tazkirat-ul-Ulama* (Lahore: Kashmir Printers, 1920).

[30] Although the figures discussed here span the late colonial and postcolonial periods, they are treated together because they operated within intellectual frameworks, linguistic hierarchies, and modes of religious authority that were consolidated under colonial rule and continued to shape Muslim scholarly life after 1947.

[31] Kanhaiya Lal. *Tārīkh-e-Lahore.* Lahore: Munshi Gulab Singh & Sons, 1882. pp.- 42-50.

[32] Sheikh Muhammad Iqbal. The Development of Metaphysics in Persia. London: E.J. Brill, 1908.

In this work, Iqbal examined the historical development of metaphysical and mystical thought in Persia, situating Sufism within a longue durée of philosophical evolution rather than treating it primarily as a devotional practice. The study analyzed Sufi thought through categories intelligible to modern philosophy, emphasizing concepts, systems, and historical progression.[33] This early engagement proved formative. The contours established in Iqbal's English-language scholarship—particularly his concern with ethical vitality, selfhood, and intellectual rigor—shaped his later reinterpretations of Sufism in both Urdu and Persian. Although his poetic works addressed different audiences and employed distinct idioms, they remained anchored in an understanding of Sufism as a disciplined intellectual and ethical tradition rather than as shrine-centered popular devotion. Iqbal's multilingual production thus exemplifies how the linguistic reordering of late colonial South Asia conditioned new readings of Sufism, privileging textual abstraction and philosophical coherence. Iqbal's trajectory, while unusually influential, was emblematic of a broader Ashraf intellectual orientation shaped by multilingual literacy, ethical reform, and textual engagement with Islamic tradition. Ali Hujwiri and *Kashf al-Mahjūb* occupied a significant position in Muhammad Iqbal's critical engagement with the history of Sufism. In his early scholarly and later philosophical writings, Iqbal repeatedly returned to classical Sufi figures not as objects of devotion but as historical actors whose ideas could be evaluated in light of modern ethical and existential concerns. Within this framework, Ali Hujwiri emerged for Iqbal as a representative figure through whom Sufism could be read as an inward discipline oriented toward moral vitality rather than withdrawal from the world.[34] Iqbal's handling of Hujwiri emphasized what he understood as a latent affirmation of life, agency, and inner will within Sufi thought. Reading *Kashf al-Mahjūb* through a philosophical lens shaped by modern metaphysics, Iqbal interpreted Hujwiri less as a shrine-centered saint and more as a spokesman for an inward ethical force capable of sustaining individual and collective renewal. This interpretive move proved consequential. It allowed Iqbal to insert Sufism into a broader narrative of Islamic intellectual history oriented toward action, creativity, and selfhood, while simultaneously distancing himself from devotional practices that he associated with passivity and social stagnation. The importance of this moment becomes clearer when situated alongside Reynold A. Nicholson's role in mediating both Hujwiri and Iqbal to wider audiences. Nicholson not only translated *Kashf al-Mahjūb* into English but also rendered Iqbal's *Asrār-i Khudī* into English, situating Iqbal's philosophical poetry within the same Anglophone intellectual circuits as classical Sufi texts.[35] This convergence further reinforced a reading of Sufism as a tradition of metaphysical and ethical reflection, accessible through textual analysis rather than devotional practice. Iqbal's influence, however, cannot be reduced to his own writings alone. His intellectual authority and public prominence ensured that his critical engagement with Sufism generated multiple and often conflicting trajectories among modern Muslim scholars.[36]

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[33] Abul Lais. *Iqbal aur Maslak e Tasawwuf*. Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1977.
[34] Ibid. pp.140-190.
[35] Muhammad Iqbal, *The Secrets of the Self (Asrār-i Khudī)*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Macmillan & Co., 1920).
[36] One can see the writing of Muhammad Fauq for the reformist ideas. Muhammad Tufail ed. Naqoosh: Lahore Vol. 1. Lahore: Idara Farogh e Urdu, 1962. p.162-164. Muhammad Fauq's Maasir Lahore got republished in Naqoosh in 1962. Muhammad Ajmal Niazi, Muhammad Din Fauq. Islamabad: Muqtadra Qaumi Zaban, 1987. Fauq's part of history of Lahore also got published as, Muhammad Din Fauq. *Lahore Ahade Mughalia Main*, Lahore: Alam Press, 1927.

Many of his followers—particularly those writing in Urdu and English within reformist and modernist frameworks—extended his critique into a more categorical suspicion of Sufism, especially in its shrine-centered forms.[37]

[37] Interestingly, Muhammad Fauq treated Ali Hujvery more like an Alim (scholar) than a Sufi figure. Muhammad Fauq. *Tazkirat-ul-Ulama.* p. 5.

In their writings, Sufism increasingly appeared as an impediment to moral discipline and rational religiosity, and devotional shrine practices were treated as residues of an uncritical past. At the same time, Iqbal's own remembered affinities with certain Sufi figures and sacred spaces complicated this reception. Accounts of his respect for selected saints and his symbolic engagement with shrines circulated alongside his philosophical critiques, sustaining a limited but persistent devotional memory within modern Muslim discourse. These memories did not restore shrine life to its earlier centrality; rather, they produced what might be described as attenuated devotional spaces, preserved more as cultural and symbolic references than as authoritative religious institutions. In this sense, Iqbal's engagement with Ali Hujwiri and Sufi history functioned as a hinge rather than a rupture. His work did not simply reject Sufism, nor did it sustain traditional devotional forms. Instead, it generated a divided legacy in which Sufism was simultaneously intellectualized, critiqued, selectively remembered, and socially marginalized. This ambivalence proved influential for the Muslim Ashraf of Lahore, for whom Iqbal's thought offered both a philosophical justification for re-reading Sufi texts and a rationale for distancing religious authority from shrine-centered devotion. Within Lahore's Ashraf milieu, similar dynamics were at work. Educated Muslims encountered Sufi tradition increasingly through English and Urdu texts, often mediated by translation and commentary. Muslim Ashraf intellectuals operating within Lahore-centered epistemic and devotional circuits, such as Muhammad Fauq (d. 1945) and Wahid Bakhsh Siyal (d. 1994) operated within this linguistic economy, seeking to reclaim Sufi authority by translating and explaining classical works like *Kashf al-Mahjūb* in Urdu while simultaneously responding to English scholarly representations. The shift away from Persian therefore did not sever ties with the Sufi past; rather, it required that past to be re-scripted in languages that carried modern intellectual and social capital. If translation enabled educated Muslim elites to move away from shrine-centered devotion toward textual discipline, it simultaneously opened a different path for European readers encountering Sufism from outside inherited Islamic practice. The same translated text thus generated trajectories that diverged sharply depending on social location and prior religious formation.

European Seekers and the Return to Embodied Devotion

European seekers who encountered Sufism through English translation followed trajectories markedly different from those of Muslim Ashraf intellectuals. Whereas educated Muslim readers often approached Kashf al-Mahjūb as a text requiring juridical and ethical clarification, European seekers encountered the same work as an entry point into lived religious practice. Their engagements highlight how translation did not produce uniform outcomes but generated divergent forms of Sufi subjectivity shaped by social location and prior religious formation. The trajectories of Shahidullah Faridi (1917-1978) and his brother Faruq Ahmad Faridi (1913- 1945) illustrate a distinctive pattern of European engagement with Sufism in the mid-twentieth century. Born and educated in Britain, Shahidullah Faridi encountered Islam and Sufi thought primarily through English-language texts before converting to Islam and later relocating to Pakistan around 1950s. His subsequent religious life was marked by sustained devotional attachment to the shrine of **Ali Hujwiri** in Lahore, where textual interest gave way to embodied ritual practice. As Robert Rozehnal has shown, the significance of the Faridi brothers lies not in their doctrinal innovation but in their movement from textual abstraction to shrine-centered piety, a trajectory that contrasts sharply

with contemporary Muslim Ashraf engagements with Sufism in South Asia.[38] European engagement with Sufism in the early and mid-twentieth century unfolded within a markedly different social and intellectual horizon from that of Muslim Ashraf readers. For figures such as Shaykh Shahidullah Faridi (1917-1978) and Faruq Ahmad Faridi (1913-1945),[39] Sufism was initially encountered not through inherited religious practice or vernacular pedagogy, but through English texts that presented Islamic mysticism as a universal ethical and spiritual tradition.[40] Nicholson's translation of *Kashf al-Mahjūb* played a central role in this process, rendering Ali Hujwiri intelligible within a conceptual vocabulary familiar to European readers trained in philosophy, literature, and comparative religion.[41] For these seekers, the abstraction characteristic of the English translation did not generate anxiety over Sharīʿa or juridical normativity. Rather, it functioned as a point of accessibility, allowing Sufism to be approached without prior immersion in Islamic law or communal practice. Sufism appeared as a disciplined spiritual path grounded in ethical refinement and inward transformation, a framing that resonated with broader European quests for meaning outside institutional Christianity. In this context, *Kashf al-Mahjūb* operated less as a normative Islamic manual than as a guide to spiritual self-cultivation. Significantly, this textual encounter did not culminate in sustained engagement with Sufism as a purely intellectual or philosophical tradition. Instead, for both Shahidullah Faridi and Faruq Ahmad Faridi, the English text served as a gateway to embodied devotional practice. Their journeys eventually led them to Lahore and to the shrine of Ali Hujwiri, where textual interest was translated into ritual participation, spiritual allegiance, and everyday religious discipline.[42]

The shrine, rather than remaining marginal to the intellectualized Sufism encountered in translation, became central to their religious lives. This movement—from text to shrine—stands in contrast to the trajectory observed among Muslim Ashraf intellectuals. Whereas

[38] Robert Rozhenal. Islamic Sufism Unbound: Politics and Piety in the Twenty First Century Pakistan. NY: Plagrave Mcmillan, 2007.
[39] Rozhenal mentioned their names as, John Gilchrist Lennard and John William. However, archival sources don't give clarity for their British names. Ibid.p.63.
[40] Ibid. p.64
[41] Ibid. p.165.
[42] Ibid.

figures such as Wahid Bakhsh Siyal (1910-1998) engaged *Kashf al-Mahjūb* in order to regulate, discipline, and re-anchor Sufism within Sharīʿa-centered normativity, European seekers moved in the opposite direction. For them, the translated text facilitated entry into devotional space rather than abstraction away from it. The shrine functioned not as a site of excess requiring correction, but as a locus of spiritual authenticity and embodied meaning. This contrast underscores a central argument of the article: translation did not determine a singular meaning or outcome. The same English rendering of *Kashf al-Mahjūb* produced divergent religious subjectivities depending on the reader's social location, religious background, and ethical aspirations. Among educated Muslim elites, translation provoked efforts to reclaim normative authority through textual discipline. Among European seekers, it enabled a turn toward devotional practice and shrine-centered piety. Sufism, in this sense, remained a flexible and adaptive tradition, capable of generating multiple forms of religious life even within the shared framework of a single translated text. The divergent trajectories traced above did not remain confined to individual religious lives but also shaped the contours of postcolonial scholarship on Sufism. The European movement from text to embodied devotion, alongside Muslim efforts to reassert normative textual authority, created a complex intellectual field in which Sufism appeared simultaneously as philosophy, ethical discipline, and lived piety. It was within this layered context that postwar European scholars approached Sufi texts, negotiating between earlier Orientalist abstraction and the lived religious traditions they increasingly sought to understand on their own terms.

8. Conclusion

Tracing these intersecting trajectories across medieval, Mughal, colonial, and postcolonial contexts reveals that Sufism's modern history cannot be captured through a single narrative of decline, reform, or abstraction. This article has examined the modern reconfiguration of Sufism in South Asia through the translation and circulation of *Kashf al-Mahjūb*. Rather than treating translation as a neutral act of transmission or as a unidirectional imposition of Orientalist knowledge, it has approached translation as an epistemic intervention that reshaped the relationship between text, shrine, and religious authority across multiple historical contexts. By situating Ali Hujwiri within a longer historical arc, the article has shown that the meanings attached to his authority were never fixed. Medieval reception emphasized *Kashf al-Mahjūb* as a pedagogical text within Sufi instructional culture, as evidenced by its endorsement in *Fawāʾid al-Fawāʾid*. Mughal historiography, particularly in the writings of Abul Fazl, remembered Hujwiri as a foundational figure in the moral establishment of Islam in the Lahore region, while Dara Shikoh's reflections reveal early modern anxieties over shrine-centered devotion and porous religious boundaries. These precolonial layers underscore that tensions between textual normativity and devotional practice predated colonial intervention. The colonial translation of *Kashf al-Mahjūb* by **Reynold A. Nicholson** constituted a critical turning point by reclassifying Sufism as an object of intellectual and comparative inquiry. Nicholson's rendering facilitated the text's circulation within Anglophone scholarly networks, abstracting it from its juridical and ritual contexts and establishing a durable mode of reading centered on philosophical coherence. Subsequent English circulation stabilized this interpretive frame, making it available to diverse audiences beyond the academy. Yet this abstraction did not go uncontested. Urdu translations and commentaries demonstrate that Muslim intellectuals actively negotiated the authority of the English translation. Figures such as Wahid Bakhsh Siyal sought to re-anchor Hujwiri's Sufism within Sharīʿa-centered normativity, while other Urdu translators

emphasized ethical instruction and devotional intelligibility. These engagements reveal translation as a site of internal Muslim debate rather than passive reception. The contrast becomes especially clear when juxtaposed with the trajectories of European seekers such as Shahidullah Faridi and Faruq Ahmad Faridi. Encountering *Kashf al-Mahjūb* through English translation, these figures moved from textual abstraction toward embodied shrine devotion, reversing the direction taken by educated Muslim elites. The same translated text thus generated divergent religious subjectivities, shaped less by translation itself than by social location, prior religious formation, and ethical aspiration. Postcolonial scholarship further consolidated these layered receptions. The work of scholars such as Annemarie Schimmel (1922-2003) exemplifies an effort to recover the intellectual depth of Sufi texts while remaining attentive to their ethical and symbolic dimensions. Her scholarship neither simply reproduced Orientalist abstraction nor fully embraced vernacular normativity; instead, it occupied an intermediate position that reflects the accumulated effects of earlier translational encounters. These trajectories suggest that Sufism in South Asia did not undergo a singular transformation transformation from devotion to text or from practice to abstraction. Rather, it was repeatedly re-articulated through shifting configurations of translation, class, and authority. *Kashf al-Mahjūb* functioned at different moments as a pedagogical manual, a symbol of Islamization, an object of shrine devotion, a canonical academic text, and a resource for modern Muslim reinterpretation. Recognizing this multiplicity allows us to move beyond narratives of decline or reform and toward a historically grounded understanding of Sufism as a dynamic and adaptive mode of Islamic knowledge production