



WEAVING WITH NEEDLES AND PENS: SUFISM, SELF-AFFIRMATION, AND WOMEN'S POETRY IN THE INDIAN SUB-CONTINENT

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Abstract: This paper argues that Indian women who composed poetry expressed their identity and personal feelings by using the Persian/Sufi vocabulary that gave words double or even triple meaning; they also twisted the conventional Sufi imaginary according to their own desires. While this modality was common among their male colleagues, women used it to talk publicly about themes that would appear inopportune or even disreputable in a woman's mouth. However, the cultures in which Sufism flourished tended to convey literature in an oral rather than in a written form. Thus, much poetry went lost or scattered, especially women's literary production. No wonder that most of what arrived in a written form to our times belongs to upper class women who had social visibility, power, and access to expensive materials such as pens and papers. Sufism particularly thrived in the Indian sub-continent; therefore, it is no surprise that this region offers some illustrious examples of mystic women. The present paper assesses the works of three women Sufi poets who also enjoyed royal status. The first two, i.e. Jahānārā Begum (1614-1681) and Zeb-un-nisā' Begum (1638-1702) were daughters of Shāh Jahān and Aurangzeb respectively, the Emperors of Mughal India, while the third one is Nawwab Shah Jahān Begum (1838-1901), the crowned ruler of Bhopal State.

Keywords: Sufi women, women's literature in the sub-continent, women & Persian literature in India