

The Textual Memorialization of Fātima Bin Sām: A Study of a Woman Sufi Saint

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Abstract – Medieval literary works from South Asia hardly ascribe any space to women in their narratives. In recent writings however, there is a tendency to address this gap. The present essay studies the textual representations of Fatima bin Sam (d. between 1220-1230) in the table talks/ malfūzāt and a biography of Chishtī Saints of the 14th century and analyses the methods by which she is memorialized in the oral traditions at the Chishtī shrines (dargahs). The objective of this paper is to delve into the possible reasons and analyze the literary techniques and strategies through which she is remembered in the aforementioned traditions. The paper argues that the Chishtī Shaikhs of the 13th and 14th century sanctified Fātima bin-Sām as a saint and role model through specific literary tropes and rhetorical devices to motivate and encourage other women to take to the mystic path.

Keywords – Chishtī Shaikhs, Fātima Bin Sām, Sufism, Women in Sufism, Women Saints

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1. INTRODUCTION

Medieval historiographical Sufi texts from South Asia hardly ascribe any space to women in their narratives. In recent writings, however, there is a tendency to address this gap. Such a shift in historiography is possible by acknowledging that every text has its own history of production and can be situated in a specific contextual world in which it is embedded. For a text, a study of its textual process is vital, and historians cannot resign themselves to merely “culling facts” from the text in isolation. Such a methodology permits a worthwhile engagement with “minor” narratives. Especially those narratives that pertain to women, who were generally elided over by broader historiographical procedures. Such interventions reveal the ways in which both gender and spirituality were constructed in relation to each other historically. It bears mentioning that the references to women in medieval Sufi texts are incidental and are inextricably woven into broader narrative tropes, which were intended to either convey a specific doctrinal message or rehearse extant spiritual doctrines and practices. Amidst such scant references to women, women Sufis still occupy a substantial and significant position in their depiction when compared to other categories of women including initiates, nobility, and rulers. These depictions can especially be found in the table-talks (malfūzāt) of the 14th century Chishtī Shaikhs of South Asia. They refer to two women saints, Fātima bin Sām and Rābi’a Basrī.^[1] While the latter is discussed at length and her contributions to the doctrines of *tasawwuf* are detailed, there are only brief references to the former i.e. Fātima bin Sām. Notably, S.A. Rizvi provides an account of her

asceticism and piety with extreme brevity based on the malfūzat of Nizām al-Dīn and Naṣīr al-Dīn Chirāgh Delhi and the *Akhbār al-Ākhiyar*.^[2] *Akhbār al-Akhiyar* is a hagiography (*tazkirāt*) of Sufis compiled in the 16th century.^[3] Rizvi’s work (in two volumes) is capacious on *Sufism* from early times to 1600. However, in his factual account of Fātima bin-Sām, Rizvi has neither considered the textual process nor the contexts in which her textual depiction occurred in the 14th and 16th century texts.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE ESSAY

To my mind, even though the references to Fātima bin Sām are brief, the textual processes through which her memory is passed on discloses important learnings about the way gender and spirituality were constituted in relation to one another in Medieval South Asia. The present essay studies the textual representations of Fātima bin Sām (d. somewhere between 1220-1230) in the table talks/ malfūzāt along with a biography of Chishtī Saints of the 14th century.^[4] The essay also considers her memorialization in a later biographical account from the 16th century in addition to assessing her position in the oral tradition at Chishtī shrines (dargāhs).^[5] Such analyses illuminated the processes by which she is remembered in the aforementioned textual and oral traditions and can serve as a model for understanding the memorialization of other women saintly figures in Medieval South Asia.

3. NATURE OF REFERENCES TO WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL SUFI ISLAMIC TRADITIONS

In the aforementioned texts, Sufi Shaikhs, occasionally accord piety to female relatives of eminent Sufi. This is especially true for Shaikhs Farīd al-Dīn (d.1265) and Nizām al-Dīn as their initiation into the mystic path is attributed to their mothers.^[6] At other moments, the texts dwell on the pietistic perfections of the wives of the Prophet, ‘Ā’isha-Umm al-Mu’minīn (mother of all believers) and Hazrat Bibi Khadija, and her daughter Bibi Fātima al-Zahrā. In contradistinction, Rābi’a Basrī and Fātima bin Sām are celebrated in these *malfūzāt*, as paradigms of spiritual perfection in their own right-independent of kinship relations with pious males.^[7] While secondary material on Rābi’a Basrī abounds there is little on Fātima bin Sām. In spite of this absence, some insights can be drawn through stories and legends that circulate in the traditions of the Early Chishtī Shaikhs, which were reduced to writing as *malfūzāt* i.e., conversations/table talks of the Shaikhs with those who assembled to hear them. Hitherto, these *malfūzāt* have not been closely read with regard to the spiritual life of Fātima bin Sām. This paper intends to fill this lacuna by cobbling together the discussions of the Early Chishtī Shaikhs in the *malfūzāt* of Nizām al-Dīn (1325), Nasīr al-Dīn Mahmūd (d.1356) and Gesū Darāz (d.1422.) as they related to her.

4. THE EARLY CHISHTĪ SHAIKHS AND THE MEMORIALIZATION OF FĀTIMA BIN SĀM

4.1 Poetess and Esteemed Exemplar: Fātima bin Sām in the Fawā’id al-Fu’ād

Amīr Hasan, the scribe for the *malfūz* of Shaikh Nizām al-Dīn, titled *Fawā’id al-Fu’ād*, reports that the Shaikh referred to Fātima bin-Sām in one of his gatherings. The Shaikh discussed her when a woman visited him after nightfall for initiation. The Shaikh initiated the woman while elaborating on the virtues and piety of women. Amīr Hasan, known for his editorial brevity, did not take note of the detailed conversations of the Shaikh on the theme. However, he did mention that on that occasion, the Shaikh talked of Fātima bin-Sām. He informed that she lived in Inderpat and people called her *Amma* (mother) affectionately and that she was a woman of extreme piety (*baiffat*), and goodness (*basalāhīyat*).

Nizām al-Dīn extolled the virtues of Fātima bin Sām to ostensibly encourage the woman spiritual aspirant to tread the mystic path. In this instance, and as we shall see later, Fātima bin Sām is treated as an exemplar through whose exemplification women could be persuaded to join the fold. The Shaikh emphasized her piety by recounting that his spiritual guide, Shaikh Farīd al-Dīn held Fātima bin Sām in great esteem. The Shaikh commending her

asceticism, devotion and spiritual achievements invoked the words of his spiritual master Farīd al-Dīn,

Actually, Fātima bin Sām is a man who is sent in the form of a woman.^[8]

Ān zan (Fātima bin Sām) mardīst ke o rā ke dar sūrat-i zanān furastādah and.

Adding to Farīd al-Dīn’s appraisal of the lady saint, Nizām al-Dīn said “when a lion roams the jungle none asks whether it’s a male a female,” (*shīr az bisheh birūn āyad kasī napursad ke īn shīr nar ast was mādah*).^[9] The purpose of Nizām al-Dīn’s elaboration was to stress that on the path of *tasawwuf*, gender was inconsequential. All that mattered was a strict life of devotion and abstemiousness-regardless of gender therefore even a woman could attain the status of a man.

In yet another assembly Shaikh Nizām al-Dīn referred to her as Bibi Fātima and informed the assembly that she was a contemporary of Shaikh Farīd al-Dīn and his brother Najīb al-Dīn Motawakkil.^[10] The Shaikh related that both pious brothers held her in great esteem. He went further to liken the affection between Najīb al-Dīn Motawakkil and Fātima bin Sām to that of siblings. Nizām al-Dīn extolled her spiritual capacity to unveil divine secrets and perform miracles (*kashf wa karāmāt*). He indicated that on account of that virtue, she automatically came to know of the frequent starvations that Najīb al-Dīn Motawakkil and his family suffered. She responded sympathetically to their plight and sent food. One day, when she sent him bread, Najīb al-Dīn Motawakkil prayed:

‘O! God as you make this woman aware of my state

Make the King too mindful of my plight to send me something.’^[11]

Nizām al-Dīn fondly described his frequent visits and interactions with her. He recounted that Fātima bin Sām was quite advanced in age when he met her. Nizām al-Dīn was taken in by her skills as a poetess. He recounted to his audience that she could instantly compose and recite apt couplets for every occasion. The Shaikh on account of his proximity with her, recollected and recited one of the couplets of Fātima bin Sām,

Hum’ishq talab kunī jān khwahī

Her duw talbi walī moyassar nashawad

You desire both love and life

But they cannot be gotten together.^{1 [12]}

The Shaikh acquainted his audience with his close and affectionate relationship with Fātima bin Sām by narrating of how she had once brought a marriage proposal for him. The Shaikh had turned it down courteously apprising her that he had resolved to be single as instructed by his spiritual guide Shaikh Farīd al-Dīn. Then she commended his decision.^[13] Through recounting his own personal interactions with her and attesting to the esteem she was held in by his own guide, Shaikh Nizām al-Dīn produced the image of Fātima Bin Sām as an individual exemplar whose virtues and actions ought to be emulated.

4.2 Paragon of Ascetic Excellence: Fātima bin Sām in the *Khair al-Majālis*

The manner in which the Chishtī Shaikhs memorialized and eulogized Fātima bin Sām suggests that her image was to initiate women into their fold. It appears that by referring to her, the Shaikhs were trying to appropriate her spiritual legacy to perpetuate and propagate the Chishti *tarīqa* (way). This claim becomes manifest from the manner in which Nasīr al-Dīn cited the example of Fātima bin-Sām's rigorous devotion and discipline to illustrate that a Sufi is the master of time (*al Sūfī ibn-i al waqt*). The Shaikh recounted an instance from when Fātima bin Saām was apprehensive that her death was near. Overwhelmed by the thought, she remained immersed in devotion round the clock without food and sleep for forty days. On the fortieth day, when the angel of death (*malk al-mawt*) appeared before her, she pleaded with the angel to spare some time for her to pray. The angel complied and when Bibi Fātima was in prostration praying, the *malk al-mawt* took away her life. Nasīr al-Dīn concluded the narrative with the words of advice for spiritual aspirants that a Sufi is aware that time is precious and uses it for devotion. Thus, the Shaikh commended Fātima bin Sām's rigorous devotion, spiritual discipline and frugal lifestyle as an example for *darweshes* to emulate.^{2 [14]} For Nasīr al-Dīn, it seems that Fātima Bin Sām was not just an individual exemplar for women initiates but was an *excellent* exemplar for *all* Sufis- open to emulation for men and women. The Early Chishtī Shaikh not only helped in building her charisma and mythos for his adherents but transmitted the same by memorializing her as a paragon to be emulated in the broader Chishtī tradition. The larger purpose on the part of the Sūfī Shaikh was to demonstrate how women could take to mysticism and excel, this was broader than her initial estimation as an exemplar for individual women to emulate.

4.3 Unifying Asceticism, Ritual, Miracle, and Verse: Gesū Darāz's Memorialization of Fātima Bin Sām

It seems that after Fātima bin Sām's demise, visiting her tomb had become popular amongst the Chishtiyyas. Gesū Darāz in his *malfūz*, *Jawāmi' al-Kalim* recounts that Nizām al-Dīn visited her shrine whenever he was in a dilemma. Gesū Darāz also visited her shrine as he did of other Chishtī Shaikhs.^[15] He asked his disciples to make offerings and pray at her shrine in the way they did at the shrines of Chishtī Shaikhs on the day they were to get lessons in *zikr*.^{3 [16]} He also mentions that *abdāls* (a kind of *Darwesh*) were a common sight at her shrine.^{4 [17]} These recollections from Gesū Darāz's suggest that he was appropriating her legacy for the Chishtiyyas in a ritualistic manner.

Gesū Darāz also informed his adherents that contemporary Shaikhs of her time visited her and interacted with her as others had done for the great Shaikhs of Rābi'a's, in her own time. Further the Shaikh exalted the stature of her piety with an anecdote. He recounted that after her demise when Fatimā bin Sām was entering the house of God, the angels stopped her. She refused to budge from there insisting that she would not leave till God came to fetch her. On God's behalf Fātima Zahrā and Khadijā came to fetch her.⁵ Fātima bin Sām prostrated before them in reverence but declined to accompany them. Then God finally beckoned her Himself.^[18]

While the *malfūz* of Nizām al-Dīn and Nasīr al-Dīn were penned in Delhi, Gesū Darāz's was scribed in Gulbarga in 1400. Gesū Darāz had carried on the Chishtī legacy in the period between 1356-98 in Delhi. However, in the wake of Mongol invasions in 1398 he shifted from Delhi in and finally settled in Gulbarga on the invitation of the Bahmani monarch Firūz Shah Bahman.^[19] Hence, in his *malfūz*, *Jawāmi' al-Kalim* there is a constant endeavor to depict himself as the real inheritor of the Chishtī legacy after his Shaikh, Nasīr al-Dīn. He felt the need to assert that as Burhān al-Dīn Gharīb one of the co-disciples of Nizām al-Dīn had already established himself as an exponent of the Chishtī *tarīqa* almost a century prior to him. Consequently, Gesū Darāz was trying to shape a distinct Chishtī consciousness in his *malfūz* on two levels. On one, he attempted to concretize the tradition by exemplifying the words and deeds of his spiritual predecessors. On the other, he tried to signify the rituals and practices specific to the Chishtiyyas. In

¹ The translation of the couplet is mine.

² Nasīr al-Dīn refers to her as Bibi Fātima and not as Fatimā bin Sām.

³ The word *Zikr* means remembrance or reciting the name of God.

⁴ Abdāl plural of bidl means Substitutes or men through whom God keeps the world in existence. At one time there are 70 abdāl in the world, 40 in Syria, others elsewhere. If one dies his place is taken by another.

⁵ Fātima Zahrā was the daughter of the Prophet and Khadijā was his first wife.

the process he too, appropriated the legacy of Fātima bin Sām as well to draw women to his fold.

Distinctly, Gesu Daraz while memorializing her, also attributed the power of performing miracles to her. To that end, he related how once a childless man requested her for blessing to become a father. She gave him an amulet and soon he bore a son, but the child was born without legs. When shown the child, Bibi Fātima bin Sām simply held the boy once and commanded him to play- lo and behold, the child developed legs and began to run. She was highly revered both by the people at large and in the circles of piety.^[20]

While Nizām al-Dīn gave primacy to her virtues of *kashf wa karamāt* and her poetic skills, as the Shaikh was poetically inclined himself and considered *kashf wa karamāt* as a requisite element for a Sufi saint. Nasīr al-Dīn, however, focused on her ascetic virtues, as he believed that ascetic struggle was one of the vital ingredients of darweshī.^[21] The Shaikh himself practiced extreme asceticism in his life and was hailed for it by his spiritual master Nizām al-Dīn. Gesū Darāz, finally, regarded rituals and miracles as vital characteristics of Sufi saints. Consequently, in sanctifying the memory of Fātima Bin Sām as a saint, he attributed miracles to her and instructed his disciples to observe ritual observances in her honour. Fātima bin Sām, for reach of the saints was memorialized in a fashion that emphasized their own distinct understandings of sainthood and virtue- in this regard her legacy had transcended her status of an exemplar to a fluid surface on which the Sufi Tradition itself could be reimagined by way of differing anecdotal emphasis of her scantily documented life.

5. THE BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNTS OF FĀTIMA BIN SĀM

5.1 In the Siyar al-Auliya

Siyar al-Auliya is a biography of Chishtī Sufi Shaikhs and their eminent disciples, written around 1360's by Amīr Khurd. The author while describing their lives virtues has provided an extremely brief note for Fātima bin Sām. He refers to the aforementioned statements from Baba Farīd's and Nizām al-Dīn's recollections. He sums up her entire narrative by just mentioning that the Baba Farīd and Nizām al-Dīn referred to her as their sister.^[22] Adeela Ghazanfar has considered this utmost scanty description of the lady saint in the Siyar al-Auliya as an effort to silence her memory as a women Sufi in the South Asian tradition. She contends that there are numerous references to women scholars and Sufis in Baghdad, Syria and Sudan, Turkey and Iran in the medieval period. The effort in south Asia is not so encouraging as the trend is seen in Siyar al-Auliya. Elaborating her claim, she argues that it was on

account of the culture of male dominance leading to subordination of women in South Asia in that period that led to such textual elisions. The hagiographical account in the Siyar al-Auliya appears to confirm that tendency.^[23] To my mind, this elision was also on account of women being denied visible entry into the public spaces in South Asia. Due to their being veiled (*pardah*) they could not interact with people at large to recruit disciples or preach and influence them by their didactics and charisma. Unable to lead a life in the khanqah, which was vital to train disciples in ways of *tasawwuf*, they could not don the mantle of *Shaikhas* in South Asia.

5.2 Abdul Haqq Muhaddis's Memorialization of Fātima bin Sām

Akhbar al-Akhiyar, a compendium of Sufi Shaikhs of South Asia written by Abdul Haqq Muhaddis (1515-1642) in 1580s. It was a biography of Sufis from the 13th century to his own contemporary moment. He was a celebrated *hadis* (sayings of the prophet) scholar of the 16th century. In his efforts, he has summed up the accounts of the aforementioned Early Chishtī Shaikhs to piece together a brief history of Fātima bin-Sām, which celebrated her piety.^[24] The additional information he gives in the *tazkirāt* is about her ideas of charity. He cited Shaikh Nizām al-Dīn Auliya on her ideas of charity, One who gives a bowl of water to the thirsty and a bread to the hungry, God bestows such bounties of both the worlds on him or her which cannot be accomplished even by boundless devotion and fasting.^[25]

The *hadis* scholar does not give the source of the above information. The manner of his reporting however suggests that he was relying on an oral remembrance of the saint prevalent during his times. Most notably, his narrative excludes the episode of the miracle which is discussed at length in the *Jawami'al-Kalim*. This exclusion is curious oriented as his entire career and scholarship disclose keen efforts to reconcile the ideas of *tasawwuf* with Islamic law (*sharī'a*). Even so, the exclusion was probably on account of his being more inclined towards an understanding of *sharī'a* that could not countenance women performing miracles. Muhaddis also depended on oral traditions for his accounts of Fatima bin Sām and discusses the names by which she was referred to by people. He informs us that in popular memory she was referred to either as *Bibi Sham* or *Sayema*. He also takes pains to correct Amīr Khurd when he located her tomb in Inderpat. Muhaddis instead, indicated that her tomb was inside *Nakkhās Darwaza*⁷, adding that Nizām al-Dīn Auliya used to retire there to be engrossed in

⁶ The word darweshī is derived from darwesh which means an ascetic or a poor man. Darweshī connotes poverty and the spiritual life of a Sufi as well.

devotion. He also reflected on its dilapidated condition.^{8[26]}

6. THE CHISHTĪ ORAL TRADITION AND FĀTIMA BIN SĀM

The oral tradition prevalent in the circle of the present Chishtiyyas too suggests that the efforts to preserve the memory of Bibi Fātima bin Sām as a saint continue today. The official custodian of the shrine (*Pīrzada*) of Nizām al-Dīn and its head is popularly known as *Sajjāda Nashīn* (one who sits on the prayer carpet). In a conversation, the present *Sajjāda Nashīn*, Khwāja Syed Mohammad Nizami informs that Fatima bin Sām was a disciple of Farīd al-Dīn Ganj-i Shakkār like Nizām al-Dīn Auliya. Ergo they are considered as spiritual siblings. This detail finds no mention in the works of the aforementioned Early Chishtī Shaikhs. To my mind, it was natural for camaraderie of Fatima bin Sām with Farīd al-Dīn to shift to Nizām al-Dīn as he emerged as the pre-eminent saint of the Chishtī *tarīqa* in Delhi in the thirteenth and fourteenth century. Fatima bin Sām and Nizām al-Dīn were more proximate in death as compared to Farīd al-Dīn whose shrine is in Ajudhan (Pakpattan).^[26] While the *dargāhs* of Fatima bin Sām and Nizām al-Dīn are in Delhi.

The Sajjada Nashīn further elaborated that when people approached Nizām al-Dīn Auliya to make supplications to God for the fulfillment of their wishes. He advised them to pray at Bibi Fatima's shrine for their prayers to be answered quickly. Mohammad Nizāmī also claims that the Chishtī *pīrzadas* of Nizām al-Dīn *dargāh* constructed the tomb of the lady saint. He mentions of the close ties between the two shrines in the management and veneration of the shrines. He reflects that till until recently, the caretakers of her tomb were also the Chishtī *pīrzadas*. But over time, the link withered and now the Delhi Waqf board tends to her shrine. Nevertheless the Nizami *pīrzadas* continue venerating her by putting the *chādar* on her *dargāh* on the 16th and 17th of the month of *Sha'bān* every year. *Sha'bān* is celebrated in the Sufi as well as wider Islamic traditions on account of Prophet's practices. It is the eighth month in the Islamic calendar and precedes the month of Ramazan. The prophet fasted during this month as a rehearsal for the ensuing fasting. *Sha'bān* is also considered sacred, as the prophet had changed the direction of prayer (*Qibla*) from Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem to Kaaba in Mecca as instructed by a divine revelation.

7. CONCLUSION

The Chishti Shaikhs of the thirteenth and fourteenth century primarily sanctified Fātima bin-Sām as a role model to motivate and encourage women to take to the mystic path. By the thirteenth century Rābi'a

sanctification had been well accomplished and asserted. The Chishtiyya felt the need to acknowledge the Sufic accomplishments of Fātima bin Sām who was far more proximate and familiar in time and space to their audience than Rābi'a. They wished to communicate to their mystically inclined women that sainthood for women did not commence and end with the Rābi'a Basrī. Any woman who treads the path with sincerity, devotion and leads an ascetic life and approaches God with selfless love could attain the stature of Fātima bin-Sām of Delhi. In the sanctification of Fātima the role of Early Chishtī Shaikhs is critical as they kept alive the memory of her *kashf*, *karmāt*, rigorous devotion, asceticism among their followers. In doing so, they also remade her legacy to mirror their own preoccupations in the wider Sufi Tradition. The later biographers of the Sufis provide brief accounts of the saint, which remain largely synoptic and only offer minor revisions to the narrative of the Early Chishtī Shaikhs in order to fit their own contemporary sensibilities. Finally, Fātima bin Sām continues to be remembered by the present Chishtiyyas with deviations from the accounts of the Early Chishtī Shaikhs to harmonize her legacy with the geographical indices and spiritual practices that continue to this day.

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⁸ The saint lies buried in a locality now known as Kaka Nagar in present day Delhi.

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