

Dozakhnama: Reimagining and Reclaiming the Sufi Heritage in South Asia

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

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2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
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Dedication

Before the sacred shrine of Hazrat Shah Sufi Afzal Mahmud (RA), I bow in devotion, where countless hearts find refuge. I dedicate this thesis to my Rezaul Uncle, the peace of my heart, whose eternal love surrounds me like a prayer and gives breath to my being.

This thesis is also for all those who navigate the relentless battle within, carrying the weight of unspoken turmoil in their hearts.

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to examine Sufism and its principles in the context of South Asia through Rabisankar Bal's *Dozakhnama: Conversations in Hell*. This study examines the evolution of Sufism in the Indian subcontinent, tracing its development from the pre-colonial era to the aftermath of the Partition of 1947. Through the imaginative dialogue between Mirza Ghalib and Saadat Hasan Manto, Bal delves into themes of syncretism, spiritual humanism, and the gradual decline of Sufi traditions in the region. The close reading of the text alongside secondary sources on Sufism and its progression in South Asia demonstrates the Sufi concepts of transcending the boundaries of divisive identities i.e., religion, race, societal status, and others; Divine love (*ishq-e-haqiqi*) through worldly love (*ishq-e-majazi*) while celebrating creations and stories; and eternal returning to God. This paper enhances its depth by highlighting the ongoing angst among the people of South Asia, as they lose their harmonious and syncretic Sufi traditions, leading to the violence and marginalization of Sufi rituals and *dargahs*. This scholarly inspection offers a profound understanding of Sufism as a subterranean memory and its significance in healing the region's fractured cultural, philosophical, and political landscape.

Keywords: Sufism, Rabisankar Bal, *Dozakhnama*, Ghalib, Manto, Divine love

Chapter 1

Introduction

Wandering aimlessly on the streets, if you happen to spot someone whom you do not expect to see except in a dream or in a picture, if you actually come face to face with them for a moment, what will you conclude?

-Dozakhnama: Conversations in Hell

*Dozakhnama: Conversations in Hell*¹, an innovative novel by Rabisankar Bal, sets an intriguing tone by juxtaposing the earthly and the eternal, the historical and the mystical through the imaginary dialogue between two revered literary figures, Mirza Ghalib and Saadat Hasan Manto. Ghalib², the 19th-century poet who experienced the declining Mughal Empire as well as British colonization, and Manto³, a 20th-century prominent Urdu short-story writer and playwright who suffered the trauma of the 1947 partition, grapple with reality in flux. Although they belong to two different historical periods, their yearning for transcending cultural, societal, and political boundaries is remarkably similar. Through the integration of Ghalib and Manto as the central characters in the novel, Bal navigates Sufism in South Asia, which conveys the idea of unity, harmony, and tolerance; also struggles due to British colonialism, communal violence, sectarianism, and religious orthodoxy. At the very outset of the novel, the author introduces Sufism's mystical path that emphasizes inner purification and spirituality. Sufism is about

¹Originally published in Bangla in 2010, this novel received the Bankimchandra Smriti Puraskar from the West Bengal Government in 2011. It was later translated into English by Arunava Sinha, co-director of the Ashoka Centre at Ashoka University, and published in 2012.

²Ghalib (1797-1869) is one of the most celebrated Urdu poets but also made a significant contribution to Persian poetry.

³Manto (1912-1955) was born in undivided British India and he migrated to Pakistan during the 1947 partition. He is widely popular for his short stories based on Partition.

experiencing the ultimate Divine⁴ or God through the love and knowledge of humanity.

Throughout the novel, Bal gradually develops the themes of Sufism and shows that Sufism in the land of South Asia is not limited to metaphysical ideas but also intricately woven into the region's cultural, philosophical, and political life. This thesis examines the evolution of Sufism in South Asia by exploring how Sufi-inspired syncretic traditions and spiritual humanism are reimagined, and reclaimed through historical and literary figures like Ghalib and Manto in *Dozakhnama*.

1.1 The Author and the Text

Rabisankar Bal, an Indian fiction writer from West Bengal, built his career as a journalist while authoring more than fifteen novels. Although he studied in science, Bal had a deep passion for painting, music, literature, and world cinema. Apart from *Dozakhnama: Conversations in Hell*, his other novel *A Mirrored Life* (2015)⁵ is also translated in English by Arunava Sinha. In addition, his novel *The Biography of Midnight* was awarded by the West Bengal Government's Sutapa Roychowdhury Memorial Prize. Moreover, his proliferative literary career is enriched with the publication of five short story collections, one volume of poetry, and one volume of literary essays.⁶ In his interview with Jahid Shohag during the visit as a judge of the Gemcon Literary Award in 2017 in Dhaka, he talked about his writings, contemporary literature, readership, and so on. In response to a question about the similar concept (Sufism) in his two novels *Dozakhnama* and *A Mirrored Life*, he said, "I wanted two novels—one that tells the story

⁴⁴In this thesis, the use of the capital 'D' for the word "Divine" refers to God and His nature as a supreme being. The capital 'D' distinguishes the term from its more general use, indicating a specific reference to divinity in a sacred or transcendent sense. Additionally, this capitalization aligns with the common practice in religious, spiritual, and philosophical writings, where the term "Divine" is used to express the sacred essence of God.

⁵*A Mirrored Life* is based on the Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi, whose life is imagined through the eyes of another historical figure Ibn Batuta.

⁶ Find the list of the writings by Rabisankar Bal here https://www.goodreads.com/author/list/6590656.Rabisankar_Bal

of a terrible inferno, and another that tells the story of profound peace”.⁷He also added that many of his admirers and readers could not accept *Dozakhnama* when it was published because it was different from his previous writings. Nonetheless, critics and scholars have widely acknowledged *Dozakhnama* as a groundbreaking work that intricately weaves history, fiction, and philosophy between two covers. In Nabaneeta Dev Sen’s view, this novel “opens up a wondrous door as the history of a people comes alive in all its splendor and agony”. Furthermore, Sunil Gangopadhyay considers *Dozakhnama* as one of the finest literary fictions of 2010. Arunava Sinha, while reflecting on the content of the novel, claims that Rabisankar Bal, through his writing, seeks to inhabit a world deeply enriched by layers of history: his own personal past, the collective past of the culture, and the shared heritage to which all of us belong (Sinha, “Meet the Author”, 9:41-9:51).

1.2 Overview of the Text

The novel opens with the narrator travelling to Lucknow in search of stories about *tawaifs*, the cultured courtesans of 18th and 19th century India, renowned for their artistic performances. However, unable to find any *tawaifs*, he instead encounters Farid Mia, who hands him an old, worn manuscript written by Saadat Hasan Manto. The narrator is utterly surprised, as Manto was never known to have written a novel during his lifetime. Since the manuscript is in Urdu, he seeks the help of his tutor, Tabassum Mirza, to read it aloud so that he can transcribe it. Within the novel, Manto's manuscript presents an imagined conversation between himself and the legendary poet Ghalib from their graves. The narrator translates the manuscript and names it

⁷ Find the interview here <https://www.banglatribune.com.translate.google/literature/interviews/272311/%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A8%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%B7-%E0%A6%97%E0%A6%B2%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AA%E0%A6%9F%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%87-%E0%A6%9A%E0%A6%BE%E0%A7%9F-%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%B6%E0%A6%82%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%B2? x tr sl=en& x tr tl=bn& x tr hl=bn& x tr pto=tc& x tr hist=true>

Dozakhnama. The novel is structured into 42 sections, each brimming with intertextual references, including Sufi tales, historical narratives, Urdu, Persian, and Bengali poetry, the history of the Indian subcontinent, as well as the biographies and literary works of both Ghalib and Manto. To be more specific, the incidents that Bal includes in the novel are drawn directly from real life, blurring the lines between fact and fiction.

1.3 Background and Context

The Islamization of South Asia led to the creation of a unique civilization, separate from “the original cubicle of Islam in Arabia”⁸ while developing distinctly through the Sufi tradition of Persian Islam (Jaffrelot & Lour 2). By the 13th century, the Muslims of South Asia had crafted a “Sufi-based form of spirituality” engaging themselves with the Hindu mystics (the *yogis* and *bhaktas*) through the conversations about “notions of ‘Ultimate reality’ and ‘Existence’ while embracing India as their sacred land, “with its own holy shrines and pilgrimage routes” (2, 7). The Sufi saints, known as ‘Shaykhs’, who came to India from the “Arabian Peninsula, Persia and Central Asia” to preach Islam were welcoming people from all castes and creeds that eventually played the most significant role in forming the syncretic tradition of the subcontinent (3). Moreover, across the expanse of time, the disciples of the Sufis maintained the *dargahs* (mausoleums) which established India permanently as a sacred place for Muslims and a space of acceptance and integration. In fact, India is the middle ground where Sufism makes a balance between strict Islamic laws and Hindu mysticism (Ahmed 131). Besides, the land of the Indian subcontinent became blessed and venerable due to the “popularization of land-related legendary accounts”, such as when it is believed that Adam through whom “the eternal light of Muhammad

⁸After the rule of the fourth Caliph Ali Ibn Abi Talib (661), the Arabian Peninsula lost its control over religious centrality. Furthermore, the South Asian Muslims primarily looked at the Persian world and it gradually led them to develop an “electric Indo-Persinate world” (Jaffrelot & Lour 2).

first manifested” descended to this place after being banished from heaven (Jaffrelot & Lour 5)⁹. Again, the local Muslim rulers were attracted by *wilayat*¹⁰ of Sufi saints initiating the deep relationship¹¹ between the Sufis and royal dynasties.¹² Additionally, the Mughal period witnessed unparalleled patronage of Sufism and the propagation of its doctrines which actually elevated the syncretic tradition of the Indian subcontinent. The Mughals, who were particularly the patrons of the Chishtiyya Sufi order¹³, used to patronize the *dargahs* of the Sufis as they did the holy sites of Mecca and Medina. In fact, the type of cultural environment that emerged due to the influence of Sufism was ultimately labelled as “blasphemous” by the West Asians especially the Ottomans, and Emperor Akbar’s religious views¹⁴ were perceived as a scandal too (6). Again, post-Safavid ruler Nader Shah and Afghans who attacked the dominions of Mughals in the 18th century had to confront the colonial companies especially the British East India Company to keep their influence on the subcontinent. In fact, these particular incidents led South Asian Muslims to seek an association with West Asian coreligionists for “pure Islam” (Jaffrelot & Lour 10). As orthodoxy gained ground in South Asia, the emphasis on “pure Islam” increasingly challenged the region's long-standing syncretic Sufi traditions subtly while

⁹ Famous Sufi poet and disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya, Amir Khusro interpreted hadith (compilation of the teachings and recorded actions) regarding Adam’s arrival in the land of South Asia. Again, 17th-century Islamic scholar Azad Bilgrami made the claim that Adam is the manifestation of Prophet Muhammad as a form of light who (Prophet Muhammad) finally appeared in the physical form in Arabia (Jaffrelot & Lour 5).

¹⁰ *Wilayat* refers to the “Administrative division of a country” (Jaffrelot & Lour ix).

¹¹ Shams al-Din Iltutmish, the founder of the Delhi Sultanate, during his reigning period (1211-1236) realized the importance of Sufis and Sufism while sympathizing with the Hindus by contradicting the orthodox *ulama* (Jaffrelot & Lour 4).

¹² A deep relationship was established between the Sufis and royal dynasties because it was believed that the rulers achieved power because of the blessings of Sufi Shaikhs (Behl 6).

¹³ The Chishti order is one of the most influential Sufi lineages of South Asia that primarily focuses on “piety and immaculate moral conduct” (Nizami n.p.). See *South Asian Islam: A Spectrum of Integration and Indigenization*, Routledge, 2024.

¹⁴ Being fascinated by Sufism and Hinduism, he formed a new religion called *Din-i-Ilahi* focusing on the notion of “*sulh-i-kull* (all religions were roads to one God)” and he also directed to translate Vedic texts i.e. the *Mahabharata* and the *Panchatantra* from Sanskrit to Persian (Jaffrelot & Lour 7, 8). He was so deeply devoted to the Chishti Sufi order that he made some of his pilgrimages to the shrine of Khwaja Mu’in al-Din Chishti by walking on the burning sands of Rajasthan (Eaton 234).

gradually shifting religious discourse towards stricter interpretations aligned with West Asian influences. Besides, the aftermaths of the Sepoy rebellion in 1857 brought several changes among the Muslims of the subcontinent while threatening Sufism and syncretic culture as they were greatly attacked and confiscated, which eventually turned them into different directions¹⁵. While the variants of Salafism¹⁶ i.e., Ahl-i-Hadith¹⁷ and Wahabism¹⁸ were already influencing the traditionalist revival movement in the post-1857 era, the Deoband¹⁹ movement accelerated it more. Moreover, in late colonial India, Islamic neo-orthodoxy often clashed with modern Hinduism. For example, there were conflicts like the Arya Samaj's campaign for *shuddhi* (reconversion to Hinduism) in the 1920s, and disputes over playing Hindu devotional music near mosques (Mufti 160).

Although the Deobondis acknowledged Sufism as a spiritual field of Islam, they were strictly against the beliefs that the Sufi saints and the cult of Sufis including visiting the *dargahs* of the *pirs* (saints) and *urs* (celebrations marking the anniversary dates of the saints). In fact, the practices that were continuing for centuries in the subcontinent were tagged as “corruption of Islam due to Hinduism” (Jaffrelot & Lour 14). Sufi *dargahs* (shrines) in South Asia serve as spiritual and cultural centres where devotees engage in various practices to seek blessings, express devotion, and experience a sense of Divine connection. Kashshaf Ghani in his book *Sufi Rituals and Practices: Experiences from South Asia, 1200-1400* broadly explores Sufi customs

¹⁵ Many Sunnis tried to follow Constantinople while concluding that India became *dar ul-hurb* (house of war) and others turned to the Arabian Peninsula for ‘true Islam’ (Jaffrelot & Lour 12).

¹⁶ See “Salafism: Generalization, Conceptualization and Categorization” by Jose Wagemakers.

¹⁷ On the Ahl-i-Hadith, see Abou Zahab, Mariam, ‘Salafism in Pakistan: The Ahl-e Hadith Movement,’ in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, London, Hurst, 2009, p. 131.

¹⁸ On Wahabism, see *Oxford Bibliographies in Islamic Studies*,

<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0091.xml>

¹⁹ From Dar-ul-Aloom Deoband, founded in 1861 in the town of Deoband, India, the Deobandi School of thought has derived with the aim of promoting what they consider the ‘authentic’ values of Islam “excluding local values which they consider to have diluted Islam” (Suleman 6). To add, according to Deobond school of thought, the “*pir-muridi* (saint-follower bond) system” is “*bida’at* (impurity and unlawful addition to Islam)” (6).

i.e., *bayt*, *sama*, *zikr*, and so on. Sufism involves “formal initiation” under the guidance of a Sufi master (*murshid*) and their shrine as a dedicated follower (Ghani 1). This formal initiation, known as *bayt* in Sufism is a sacred covenant through which the disciples submit to the guidance of their Sufi masters, seeking spiritual purification and enlightenment. This practice ensures the transmission of esoteric knowledge and ethical discipline from master to disciple. Moreover, the disciples along with the visitors of *dargahs* believe that the Sufi Sheikhs and their *dargahs* have Divine power that blesses everyone regardless of their backgrounds and faith. In fact, the “singularity of the places” holds a special significance in the composite culture of South Asia (Stauth & Schielke 7). Furthermore, the Sufi masters guide their disciples to practice *sama*, *zikr*, and others so that the disciples can attain the knowledge of *tasawwuf* (mysticism). Due to their concerns for this knowledge, the Sufi saints and mystics are addressed as “*ahl al-Khususiyyat*” or the “special ones” (Ahmed 131).

Besides, Ghani observes that *sama* and *zikr*, mystical rituals, and expressions of inner spiritual experience, are essential components of Sufi spiritual training across various orders in South Asia. In Sufism, *sama* (“listening”, “hearing”, and “audition”) refers to listening to music, poetry, chanting, and measured recitation design to bring about religious emotions and ecstasy (*wajd*). This religious ecstasy enables the soul to communicate directly with God” (Gribetz 43). This practice, which later evolved into the public performance of *qawwali*, remained central to the spiritual traditions of the Chishti order (Ghani 4). Moreover, *sama* was a distinctive Sufi practice embraced by some communities and saints but also faced long-standing debates over its religious legitimacy. The main concern was the use of poetry and music, both of which remain controversial in Islamic tradition (Ghani 4). In fact, to this date, these Sufi practices have to deal with religious orthodoxy. However, Sufis defend *sama* based on the prophetic traditions, which

were later adopted by the renowned Sufi master Abu Nasr al-Sarraj (d. 988) in his *Kitab al-luma fi al-tasawwuf*²⁰ (Ghani 15).²¹ Additionally, *zikr* is a fundamental Sufi spiritual practice centred on the remembrance of God, inspired by the Quranic verse in which God directly calls upon His creation to remember Him (Ghani 3). Different Sufi orders have adopted and prioritized these rituals according to their spiritual orientations. For example, Chishti Sufis prefer *sama* as their primary spiritual exercise, and Suhrawardi Sufis practice *zikr* as their devotion to God.

Apart from this, following the 1857 rebellion, as Hindus gained more political and economic power in North India and a new Muslim nationalist ideology emerged by the Indian Muslim intelligentsia, the syncretic and compassionate culture of Sufi beliefs began to be marginalized. Figures like Sayed Ahmed Khan²², Dr. Mohammad Iqbal²³, and others were influential in establishing a concrete collective Muslim identity. Though Sayed Ahmed Khan took pride in Middle Eastern roots, he did not reject Indian identity; rather, he claimed India was Muslims' as much as Hindus'. Again, another founding father of Pakistan Mohammad Iqbal cherished his identity of multi-religious land while taking an interest in Sufi ideologies²⁴.

However, his admiration for Sufi philosophy was deeply shaken by the communal riots that

²⁰ It is translated as the *Book on Glimmerings on Sufism* which is the earliest Arabic text on the principles of Sufism.

²¹ In his text *Kitab al-Luma fi al-Tasawwuf*, Sarraj presents evidence from Hadith in support of *sama*. The Hadith states, “ما اذن الله تعالى لشيء كما اذن النبي حسن الصوت” meaning “God has not given permission so strongly for anything as He has given permission to the Prophets for melody” (qtd. in Ghani 16). Sarraj further supports his argument with an anecdote from the life of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), in which two young girls sang a celebratory song on the day of the Battle of Bu'ath. When Abu Bakr rebuked them for playing the instrument, calling it “*mazamir-i shaitan* (the reed pipe of Satan),” the Prophet intervened, permitting the music since it was a joyful occasion for their tribe (Ghani 16).

²² Sayed Ahmed Khan (1817-1898) was the founder of the Aligarh Anglo-Mahomedan College. Find more about Sayed Ahmed Khan on Aligarh Muslim University's website <https://amu.ac.in/about-us/the-founder>

²³ Dr. Mohammad Iqbal (1877-1938) was a Pakistani poet and philosopher.

²⁴ Iqbal In his Persian poetry collection (1932), *Javed Nama* projects a scene where Jesus and Buddha are sitting before Allah. Furthermore, his poem “Naya Shivala” (The New Temple) urges the Muslims to unite with the Hindus while declaring, “Each dust particle of my motherland is God to me”. He visited the shrine of Nizamuddin Aulia in 1905 and 1908 and also composed an ode to this Sufi saint for interceding when his brother was charged with a criminal case. In fact, this varied spiritual outlook refers to a deep respect for Sufism (Jaffrelot & Lour 31-32).

marked the brink of the 1947 partition. According to the observation of famous historian Joya Chatterji, Sayed Ahmed Khan was the first one to assert that a separate nation should be constituted for the Indian Muslims. Though his claim did not endorse the partition, it was considered the ground of the Two-Nation Theory emphasizing that the Muslims and Hindus were two different nations with distinct cultures, religions, and interests. The Two-Nation Theory was the first step to creating a homogenous Muslim space where ‘Muslimness’ would be preserved.

1.4 Rationale of the Thesis

Although Rabisankar Bal is not widely known in the global literary scene, his novel *Dozakhnama: Conversations in Hell* is still a remarkable work that offers several reasons to engage with it. Although *Dozakhnama* has garnered the attention of the readers and is translated into three languages i.e., English, Hindi, and Urdu, it remains relatively underexplored in academic discourse. This gap in scholarship provides a unique opportunity for further analysis, particularly through the lens of Sufism, a framework that aligns closely with the novel’s thematic concerns and South Asia’s cultural and spiritual heritage. Again, this novel is particularly significant because Sufism is facing a challenging period in current South Asia especially in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan as *dargahs* are being destroyed and accused of ‘religious aggression’ and ‘contamination of Islam’ by orthodox Hindus and Muslims respectively. This thesis focuses on examining how *Dozakhnama* engages with Sufi motifs of cultural syncretism, spiritual humanism, and historical memory to complicate dominant narratives of religious identity and cultural belonging. By analyzing *Dozakhnama*, this study contributes to the ongoing literary discourse on South Asian fiction and provides a nuanced perspective on the role of Sufism in contemporary South Asia, particularly amid rising religious extremism and cultural

homogenization. In short, this research helps the readers to understand Sufism and its importance in the context of contemporary South Asia.

1.5 Methodology

This thesis employs extensive qualitative research to explore Sufism by primarily focusing on Rabisankar Bal's *Dozakhnama: Conversations in Hell* since the novel incorporates more than a hundred intertextual references. This study also draws on secondary sources, especially books, scholarly videos, websites, peer-reviewed journals, interviews, and newspaper articles on Sufism, and its connection to South Asian history and identity. In short, a close reading of primary and secondary sources has been incorporated for critical analysis and supporting the arguments that have been presented in the paper.

Chapter 2

Echoes Across Time: Transcending the Boundaries of Religion, Culture, and Societal Status with Ghalib and Manto

Introducing two literary luminaries Mirza Ghalib and Saadat Hasan Manto in *Dozakhnama* is not an arbitrary choice by Rabisankar Bal. They not only represent the 19th and 20th centuries of South Asia respectively but also symbolize the complex tapestry of South Asian identity—one shaped by the mysticism and spiritual yearning of the pre-colonial era and the other by the brutal realities of 1947's partition and its aftermath. Manto who is an iconoclast does not acknowledge any others' literary influences. However, the only individual he truly admires and admits to being completely in awe of is eminent Persian and Urdu poet, Mirza Ghalib. To add, he shares an affinity with Ghalib since both have struggled to earn their livelihood instead of being prodigiously gifted literary figures. Although they belong to two different eras, they also share similar personality traits along with struggling as individuals, cultural fragmentation, and existential musings. Ayesha Jalal²⁵ in her book *The Pity of Partition: Manto's Life, Times, and Work across the India Pakistan Divide* mentions that Manto is so amazed by Ghalib that for him Urdu poetry does not need any more compositions after Ghalib's (Jalal 63). Moreover, he once stated, "I have had the opportunity to read innumerable Western and Eastern authors, but there is no book that has satisfied my aesthetic sensibility" (Manto qtd. in Jalal 63). In fact, Manto had a deep appreciation for Ghalib's literary creations and used to recite Ghalib's *ghazals* for hours without any pause (Mukherjee 159). Again, his fascination with Ghalib is not limited to the literary level; rather, he connects to Ghalib as a human being and finds him like a guru as Rumi

²⁵ The Pakistani-American historian Ayesha Jalal is Marry Richardson Professor of History at Tufts University. Manto was her father's maternal uncle and married her mother's elder sister Safia with whom she was very close. She grew up with Manto's stories since her childhood (Jalal x-xi).

adores Tabriz. To capture the sensibility and the unreal interaction between Ghalib and Manto, Bal gives voice to Manto's passion in the novel as,

“Who has written this dastan²⁶, really? Is it I, Saadat Hasan Manto or my ghost? All his life, Manto hankered for conversation with just one man. Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib...I've always felt that Mirza and I are two mirrors facing each other. Within both the mirrors is an emptiness. Two voids staring at each other. Can voids have a dialogue between themselves? Many a time have I held solitary conversations with Mirza. He has always been silent. How can he respond from the grave anyway? But now that I have waited so many years, I am sure that Mirza will talk to me. I am in my grave too... All those things that Mirza hasn't been able to tell anyone, that I haven't been able to tell anyone, all – we'll talk of them all as we live in our graves”. (Bal 14-15)²⁷

The fictional communication between Ghalib and Manto, residing in their respective graves across borders, imbues *Dozakhnama* with profound reflective depth. In the novel, the grave transcends its physical limitations, becoming a metaphorical space where temporal, spatial, and existential boundaries dissolve. This resonates deeply with the Sufi concept of spiritual unity and transcendence. By masterfully employing this setting, Bal explores the profound impact of these literary giants on South Asia's evolving identity, shaped by both the syncretic spirit of Sufism and the fragmentation that followed its decline. Hence, this chapter argues about the importance of introducing the historical figures Ghalib and Manto and the significance of them being

²⁶ “[A] dastan is not exactly a novel. In a dastan the story never ends, whereas a novel has a beginning and an end” (Bal 6).

²⁷ This is the very first line of Manto's *dastan* from Bal's *Dozakhnama*. Interestingly, Manto has never written a novel in real life. However, he wrote the story for the film *Mirza Ghalib* (released in theaters on 10th December 1954). See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k91IYOMWVm8&ab_channel=ZeeMusicClassic

incorporated in the novel *Dozakhnama* to delve deeper into Sufism's syncretic ideology and the sense of disillusionment that arises in its absence.

2.1 Sufism: The Journey of Going Beyond

Sufism is the journey of transcending one's individuality so that one can experience the oneness of God (the ultimate Reality²⁸). Yajñabalka²⁹ says, "There is no individual consciousness when you have transcended everything" (Bal 80). The path of Sufism is uniting with the ultimate Divine by eliminating the ego that is concerned with one's 'individual consciousness' including a person's limited perception of self, shaped by personal identity, ego, and worldly attachments and resists perceiving the 'God's consciousness' which is beyond all boundaries. In fact, when individual consciousness is dissolved, one obtains the vision of God. In other words, in the journey of Sufism, it is most important to transcend everything, i.e., divisions in terms of religion, caste, creed, gender, and so on. Bal in *Dozakhnama* does not attempt to establish Ghalib and Manto as Sufis; rather, he ruminates and reflects on Sufism as a philosophical and spiritual lens through which the characters navigate their existential dilemmas by exploring the human condition and challenging societal divisions.

2.1.1 Ghalib's Syncretism

Islam is not manifested in the same way everywhere, especially in the Indian subcontinent since it spread through Sufism that fosters a pluralistic and syncretic approach to spirituality and communal life. As the great Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya observed, "Har qaum raast raahe, din-e-wa Qibla gaahe," meaning that every community has its own path for reaching

²⁸ The phrase "the oneness of God (the ultimate Reality)" uses 'R' as a capital letter in "Reality" because it refers to God as the ultimate.

²⁹ Yajñabalka is one of the most illustrious Vedic sages mentioned in the *Mahabharata* and the *Vishnupurana* and he also claims the authorship of *Aranyakas* (Rai 75).

God.³⁰ The pluralistic tradition has emerged due to the Sufi saints who embraced people from all faith and walks of life. This spirit of inclusivity and respect for diverse spiritual traditions resonates deeply in the subcontinent's Sufi culture. Reza Shah-Kazemi in his book *The Spirit of Tolerance in Islam* highlights the Quranic perspective on the plurality of faiths, which views human diversity as “the infinitude of divine nature itself” (Kazemi 96). The *Quran* states, “And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the differences of your languages and colours. Indeed, herein are signs for those who know” (qtd. in Kazemi 96). Ghalib’s syncretic worldview reflects this Quranic ethos, as he embraced a spirituality that transcended rigid religious boundaries and celebrated the diversity of human paths to the Divine. Ghalib often called himself “half Muslim” humorously whenever he was asked about observing traditional rules, such as praying, avoiding alcohol, and gambling. In fact, he consistently resisted the idea of ‘Muslimness’ which was imported from West Asia.

Again, Syed Akbar Hyder in his article “Ghalib and His Interlocutors” identifies Ghalib as a symbol of “ethical modernity and a spirit imbued with forward-looking cosmopolitanism” that aligns with Sufism (Hyder 473). Moreover, he also stresses how “Ghalib’s ecumenism became instrumental to the idea of a composite [Hindu and Muslim] religious culture that spurs the very concept of a shared cultural sphere” (473). His perspective about syncretism had fully flourished when he visited Banaras³¹ in late 1826 and stayed there for a month during the reign of Raja Udit Narain Singh. While travelling from Delhi to Kolkata, Ghalib who was facing financial hardships had to stop Banaras for recovery. This place not only provided the poet with physical healing but also elevated him spiritually. He wrote his most famous Persian

³⁰ See Markandey Katju’s “Nizammuddin Aulia and Amir Khusro”, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/satyam-bruyat/nizamuddin-aulia-and-amir-khusro/>

³¹ Vārānasi, also known as Kāshi or Banāras, is revered as the city of lord Shiva. The name *Banāras* derives from *bana*, meaning “always ready,” and *ras*, meaning “the juice of life” (Singh 9).

masnavi³²*Chiragh-e- Dair* translated as “Temple Lamp”³³. This eulogy on the praising of the holy city of Banaras which is the ultimate place of Hindu pilgrimage releases a man from the cycle of birth and death and makes him unite with God. It is often considered the most secular literary composition that has ever been produced by any Indian poet. With powerful metaphors, he depicts the city as a celestial paradise, and while addressing Banaras as Kaaba. He emphasized the shared cultural bonds between Hindus and Muslims and found no difference between Kaaba and Banaras since both places led to God. To reinforce Ghalib’s spiritual synthesis, the author portrays a scenario where he says to Manto, “The Quran is an extraordinary work of poetry for me...Birth and death, love and destiny, the entire universe, are engaged in sport in it. Just like the Vedas and the Upanishads or the Bhagwat Gita or the Zend-a- vesta...” (Bal 137). In his vision, religious ideas are blended and turned into a larger spiritual expression with priority placed on devotion. Although it is completely contradictory to mainstream orthodox Islam, nonetheless, Ghalib as a born Muslim expresses his aspiration to live as a Hindu while observing all the customs and rituals of Banaras. In *Dozakhnama*, Bal does not directly mention Ghalib’s *Chiragh-e- Dair* rather uses it as a setting to capture Ghalib’s emotions. Bal envisions Ghalib saying,

On some nights I would go to the Manikarnika Ghat at midnight and sit on the steps. I had no wish to stir from Kashi. The cool breeze from the Ganga soothed all my dissatisfaction and distraction...The flames from the pyres at Manikarnika burnt down all my yearnings and desires... I even considered throwing away the shell of Islam and spending the rest of my life on the banks of the Ganga with the sacred Hindu mark on my forehead and prayer beads in my hand.

³² Masnavi is a type of poem composed in rhyming couplets.

³³“*Temple Lamp*, consisting of 108 verses, is an exploration of the poet's spiritual voyage into the “ancient temple city of magic”” (Farhan).

May my existence be obliterated, may I be lost like a drop of water in the flowing currents of the Goddess Ganga. (Bal 254)

By imagining himself discarding the “shell of Islam,” Ghalib actually expresses a desire to transcend the confines of institutionalized religion and immerse himself in the pluralistic, spiritually rich culture of South Asia, profoundly shaped by the inclusive traditions of Sufism.

2.1.2 Manto’s Humanity and Disillusionment

Similar to his literary hero Ghalib, Manto also rejects the limitations imposed by conventional beliefs and seeks a deeper understanding of existence, rooted in compassion and empathy for all, regardless of faith or social status. Although his works do not refer to syncretism and blending of cultural ideas directly, he ridicules the values and taboos that society holds sacred, and declares them flawed, regardless of whether one is Hindu, Christian, Muslim, or Sikh. For him, humanity itself is his religion. Even though he never aligned himself with any religious or national identity, Fateh Mohammad Malik³⁴ actually projected Manto as ‘Muslim’ and ‘Pakistani’. Again, Manto’s greatest contribution is his ability to transcend societal divisions and promote a vision of shared humanity by empathizing with the marginalized and oppressed, whom society ignored.

Moreover, Manto’s writings are unflinchingly sharp, unapologetically realistic, and often nerve-wracking in their intensity. Like the omnipresence of God, before whom nothing can be concealed. To add, his stories strip away all pretenses exposing the raw and uncomfortable truths of human existence. Hence, he claims, “On my gravestone it would be written: ‘Here lies Saadat Hasan Manto in eternal rest. With him have been buried all the mysteries of writing stories. Under tons of earth he lies wondering who among the two is the greater writer of stories—Allah

³⁴ Fateh Mohammad Malik is a Pakistani scholar, linguist, and literary critic.

or He” (Bal 14-15)³⁵. Manto does not equate him with God rather he possesses the audacity to hold the unfathomable mysteries of life as the Sufi yearns to glimpse the infinite. This echoes Rumi’s words: “Don’t be satisfied with stories about how things have gone with others. Unfold your own myth.” Manto, like the Sufi, refuses to accept inherited narratives. Instead, he embarks on a bold quest to uncover the raw truths of existence, crafting his own myth through stories that dare to confront humanity’s deepest complexities. In other words, he appears with “Khuda’s madness” which drives him to uncover the hidden truths of life and humanity (Bal 15).

To add, Manto was always tagged as obscene, vulgar, and pornographic for his bold writing that covered prostitutes, criminals, and the marginalized, exposing their lives with relentless realism. For this reason, he was dragged to court several times to obtain legal endorsement for his literary works and their moral critique. In fact, he includes all the people whom the society is ashamed of claiming its own. In fact, his humanism is “bifocal”, which is “in between the angelic and devilish”, since he had “great love and care to the human race” (Gautam 80). Through his portrayal of the marginalized, Manto redefined the boundaries of empathy and moral responsibility in literature. His inclusive attitude is reflected in Bal’s vision, as Manto articulates his perspective on the recurring controversies surrounding his writing. Manto exclaimed,

Do you know what all the people of integrity around me said to prove that I was an obscene writer, Mirza sahib? They had only one question—why do brothels and prostitutes keep featuring in my stories? How can a whore be the central character of a story? Who were these people to raise these questions? Those who puffed up their chests calling themselves progressive,

³⁵This is one of the epitaphs that Manto wrote for him. However, it does not adorn his grave in Milani Sahib Cemetery in Lahore because his sister convinced the family to avoid provoking “religious orthodoxy in the self-consciously Muslim nation state” (Jalal 210). Instead, another epitaph, also penned by Manto and inspired by a couplet from Ghalib, was chosen: “This is the grave of Saadat Hasan Manto, who still thinks his name was not the repeated word on the tablet of time” (210).

chroniclers of the lives of the lower strata of society...to these people, whores were worse than cockroaches in drains. And yet many of them had secretly visited red light areas...Compared to the colourless people around me, those discarded, painted women, their pimps, the flower sellers and kebab-wallahs in those localities all appeared far more alive to me. (Bal 436)

With this powerful declaration, Manto actually challenged both the societal norms and the so-called progressive people who divided humanity based on superficial moral judgments. His inclusive perception was further highlighted in his conversation with the King of Mahmoodabad when he asked Manto why he wrote philosophical stories about the “filthy women” (prostitutes). He replies, “Aren’t ‘they’ among the ‘we’ you talk about...? We can write about farmers and labourers, about barbers and washermen, about thieves and robbers. We’re allowed to spin yarns about djinns and fairies. Then why can’t we write about whores... Let all that’s filthy in our society be gathered in my stories. May all of you see what really lies behind the cleanliness” (Bal 437-438). His embrace of society’s “filth” can be seen as a parallel to Sufi teachings, where the mystic seeks truth in the most unexpected places. Like a Sufi who transcends conventional notions of purity and impurity in pursuit of Divine reality, Manto’s writings become an act of unveiling, forcing society to confront the uncomfortable truths that it prefers to ignore. In one of his short stories titled “The Black Shalwar”, a prostitute named Sultana desires to wear a black shalwar for Muharram. By comparing her life with a railway yard, Manto shows how her life has gone to waste while carrying the “burden of religious and social taboos” (Malghani et al. 70). With a twist, the story reveals that Sultana’s wish to have a black shalwar does not meet reality. In fact, the story allegorically portrays how insignificant a marginalized person’s (Sultana) wish can be. Manto’s relentless pursuit of truth and his refusal to conform to societal expectations echo the essence of Sufi transcendence by rising above superficial divisions to embrace a

universal humanity. However, with the accusation of obscenity for writing “The Black Shalwar” and “Smoke”, Manto was arrested in December 1944.

Furthermore, he leaves behind a phenomenal body of literary works based on the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. The brutality he experienced during that time haunted him for a lifetime and also pushed him to create stark and uncompromising narratives that captured the horrors, disillusionment, and fractured humanity of that era. During the fictional conversation with Ghalib, he says, “...if you had seen 1947, Mirza sahib, you would have killed yourself... The world has never seen so much killing, so many rapes, such treachery, all of which began in 1947 on the pretext of there being two nations; today, you lie in a grave in one of those countries, and I, in a grave in the other” (Bal 20). The trauma he went through with partition was vividly portrayed in two of his most famous short stories titled “Toba Tek Singh” and “Thanda Ghosht”. Regarding producing partition stories, Manto once commented, “[i]f you are not familiar with the age in which we live, read my stories. If you cannot endure my stories, it means that this age is unbearable” (Manto qtd. in Saleem et al. 920). Furthermore, his humanist stance is also highlighted through his other statement: “Don’t say that 100,000 Hindus and 100,000 Muslims have been massacred; say that 200,000 human beings have been slaughtered. And it is not such a great tragedy that 200,000 human beings have been butchered but the real tragedy is that the dead have been killed for nothing” (Manto qtd. in Manzoor). The Sufi ideology that had tied the multicultural and multi-religious land was shattered by the violent forces of partition, which not only tore apart geographical boundaries but also fractured the spiritual and cultural unity that had once existed.

Again, with Manto's remembrance of one incident with his friend Shyam, this spiritual disease of hatred for different religions was projected. When he asked Shyam if he wanted to kill Manto for his Muslim identity, Shyam answered, "When I was listening to their stories...how the Muslims killed us...yes, at that time...I could really have killed you then..." (Bal 464). Shyam's transformation into someone who could harbor such hatred for Manto, despite their shared history, reflects the devastating impact of religious sectarianism, which appeared in the absence of Sufi ideals of tolerance, and compassion. Hence, Manto mourned for humanity in *Dozakhnama*, stating, "Having killed Hindus, the Muslims imagined Hinduism had been eradicated; by murdering Muslims, the Hindus thought they had dispatched Islam to its grave...This was not just Partition of India, not just Hindustan ki taksim, this was also partition of friendship" (Bal 462-463). Although he opposed the division and was reluctant to go to Pakistan, he had to leave India ultimately due to his Muslim identity since he sensed the hostility between the Hindus and Muslims after 1947's partition. Nonetheless, in the space of homogenous Muslim identity (Pakistan), Manto was completely disillusioned since he found that the rigid norms of the Islamic society of Pakistan stifled both his creativity and personal expression. In fact, the promises the partition of 1947 made while rejecting the Sufi ethos of unity, proved to be a mirage, leaving behind a society fractured by religious and social divisions. In his essay titled "By the Grace of Allah," he predicted that Pakistan would be so intolerant that it would censor music, literature, and art.³⁶

³⁶ See Sarfraz Manzoor's periodical "Saadat Hasan Manto: He anticipated where Pakistan would go", <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jun/11/saadat-hasan-manto-short-stories-partition-pakistan>

Chapter 3

The Divine Alchemy: The Journey from *Ishq-e-Majazi* to *Ishq-e-Haqiqi*

In *Dozakhnama*, as Ghalib and Manto weave their tales from the otherworldly abyss, love emerges not as a singular experience but as a spectrum of trials, creations, and revelations. The dynamic style of the novel works as a significant instrument for venturing the Sufi concept of journey (*safar*) that includes spiritual exploration and transformation through the layers of fact and fiction. Moreover, Sufism is so diverse that it reveals itself to each seeker in a form that they can comprehend and connect to. Hence, the author incorporates numerous tales into the narrative, each one reflecting different aspects of human experience while acting as a step toward self-realization and a higher understanding of Divine love. In other words, the very formation of the novel is a manifestation of Sufi temperament, intricately tied to the philosophy of spiritual humanism. Furthermore, the vast doctrine of Sufism which is established on the principles of love (*ishq*), has been uniquely unfolded through the symbols of hell (*dozakh*), writing, and stories (*qissa*) in the novel. The journey of Sufism is *safar-e-ishq* (journey of love) and it starts from *ishq-e-majazi* (worldly love), gradually transcending the attachments to the material world and evolving into *ishq-e-haqiqi* (Divine love), where the seeker moves beyond the self and unite with the Divine essence. This spiritual evolution, rooted in the principles of spiritual humanism, reflects the ultimate potential of humanity to attain higher consciousness and unity with the eternal. This chapter illuminates the Sufi themes and principles while providing interpretive commentaries about the symbols and metaphors that Bal includes in *Dozakhnama*. Additionally, this chapter complements Chapter 2 by focusing on Sufi themes and principles that work as transformative forces for Ghalib and Manto to expand their personal and literary worlds in the context of South Asia.

3.1 Dozakh: A Yearning for Redemption

Sufism, in its essence, recognizes suffering as a transformative force for spiritual growth, a burning trial that refines the soul and lights up the fire of Divine love within. In the worldly view, the relationship of love and suffering is paradoxical. However, in Sufi philosophy, suffering is the ultimate gateway that deepens the Divine love. Both Ghalib and Manto have to go through the burning of dozakh (hell) to confront their deepest truths, purify their selves, and transcend illusions of the material world in their quest for meaning and redemption. While reflecting on the suffering of life, Ghalib says to Manto, "...the deeper I went into dozakh during my life, the more it was the memory of love that let me survive" (Bal 185). In fact, love only flourishes when suffering arises through the dissolution of the ego or lower nature. However, "Struggle is unacceptable to ...lower nature; [as] struggle upsets it" (De Salzmänn 18). This intricate bond between love and suffering not only shatters the ego but also accelerates transcendental realization, as Schimmel observes, "Divine love makes the seeker capable of bearing, even of enjoying, all the pains and afflictions that God showers upon him in order to test him and to purify his soul" (Schimmel 4).

3.1.1 Flames of Suffering: Ghalib's Ordeal, and Manto's Trials

Ghalib's life was a relentless struggle against personal and societal adversities, losing loved ones, enduring financial hardships, and grappling with the dissonance between poetic ideals and harsh realities. Orphaned at five when his father, Abdullah Beg Khan, died on a battlefield, Ghalib's earliest encounter with loss came through his mother. The rare moment of love between his parents left a profound impact on him, shaping his yearning for Divine love. This longing was not merely for human companionship but a deeper metaphysical quest, one that he saw reflected in the mystical nature of love itself. His overwhelming expression, "If you had

seen them Manto bhai, you'd have known at once that they were Radha and Krishna...It takes such a long wait for two people to want each other... the way the azan longs to meet Allah" (Bal 51), captures his perception of human love as an earthly reflection of the Divine. In fact, the love between human beings is a passage to the Divine, an act of ego-dissolution that necessitates sacrifice and suffering (Nasr 64). Again, in the Persian poet and Sufi master Ruzbihan Baqli's view, "the love of a human being is the ladder toward the love of the merciful" which Jami elaborates by stating, "Beholding in many souls the traits of Divine beauty, and separating in each soul that which it has contracted in the world, the lover ascends to the highest beauty, to the love and knowledge of the Divinity, by steps of this ladder of created souls" (qtd. in Schimmel 292).

Furthermore, Ghalib's sense of detachment deepened with his mother's preoccupation in the ladies' chambers at the Kale Mahal, leaving him and his siblings emotionally abandoned.³⁷ His lament, "That was probably why Yusuf went mad. Choti Khahum didn't live long, either. Only I was chosen by Allah to be punished, to be charred black in the flames of dozakh, of hell" (Bal 52), reflects the existential burden he carried. Yet, this suffering was not merely a burden but a transformative force in his life. Nonetheless, the mysticism of suffering wrapped Ghalib throughout his life since he perceived pain and suffering as a way of connecting to God. In his view, "We cannot give birth to anything beautiful without causing pain. Then how can God? All games of creation and destruction in his world are played to give birth to new kinds of beauty" (Bal 111). In fact, suffering is not merely a human affliction but rather a Divine act of creation in

³⁷ Ghalib and his siblings spent their childhood and adolescence period at their grandfather's place, Agra's Kale Mahal. His mother used to stay at zenana mahal (private areas reserved for women) and managed tasks related to household affairs, overseeing servants, ensuring the upkeep of the living quarters, and participating in social gatherings, and so on according to the rule of noble and aristocratic households. For this reason, she could rarely spend time with her children.

Sufism. According to Hazrat Shaikh Muhayuddin Abdul Qadir Gilani³⁸, suffering, grief, and trials are the Divine mechanisms: God withdraws all worldly support from His servant so that the individual, stripped of external dependencies, is compelled to turn to Him in complete humility, surrendering fully and redirecting their focus entirely toward the Divine (Gilani 27).

Moreover, losing seven children, along with Arif³⁹ and close family members and friends during the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, filled him with an intense sense of sorrow and desolation. Ghalib's shifting from Agra to Shahjahanabad (Delhi)⁴⁰ was addressed as entering Dozakh since the real "macabre episode" of his life had taken place in Delhi (Bal 86). After getting married to Umrao Begum at the age of thirteen in 1810, he came to Delhi as an aspiring poet and took shelter in his father-in-law Nawab Illahi Buksh Khan's house. However, both his and the city's fate seemed to unravel, as Ghalib faced personal tragedies and monetary challenges, while Delhi began to witness the decline of Mughal power and the encroachment of colonial rule. Although Delhi was a Karbala⁴¹ for him, he could not leave the city. He had to experience sufferings and completely surrender (*taslim*) before the Divine will as an essential stage of his spiritual journey. Therefore, he digested his father-in-law's humiliation and retorted, "I'm a dog too" (Bal 141). By calling himself a dog, Ghalib embraced his fate and aligned himself with the Sufi ideal of surrendering the ego in devotion to God. The mystic Maula Darvish, the guide of the Naqshbandi

³⁸ Hazrat Shaikh Muhayuddin Abdul Qadir Gilani was a Sufi leader of one of the oldest orders Qadriyya. He was also a great scholar and preacher who was born in the town of Na'if, in Gilan, in Persia.

³⁹ His full name was Zainul Abedin Khan who was Umrao Begum's sister's son. Ghalib was extremely fond of him due to his "extraordinary imagination" and sense of poetry (Bal 401).

⁴⁰ Shahjahanabad, now referred to as Old Delhi, is currently located in the Central Delhi district of India. In 1648, Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan shifted the capital of the Mughal Empire from Agra to Delhi.

⁴¹ The Battle of Karbala is a pivotal event in Islamic history that occurred in 680 AD. This battle fought between the forces of Yazid I, the Umayyad caliph, and a small group led by Husayn Ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, is significant for its profound impact on the schism between Sunni and Shia Islam. The enduring legacy of Karbala is a symbol of resistance against tyranny and injustice within Shia tradition. The commemoration of Husayn's martyrdom during the annual observance of Ashura serves as a central element of Shia identity and

order⁴² of Sufis, used to call himself “a dog of the lord”. For Darvish, the idea of unconditional devotion is similar to the loyalty of a dog that serves its master without the expectation of reward in any condition (Bal 380).

Similarly, Manto’s pain, though different in form, was equally consuming. His first descent into ‘dozakh’ occurred when he moved from Amritsar to Bombay at the age of twenty-four, seeking a livelihood. Surviving on a meager salary at the weekly magazine *Musawar*, he endured the harsh realities of slum life. However, the flames of life’s struggles that engulfed him also propelled him toward self-discovery, forcing him to confront the rawest, most brutal aspects of existence. In his imagined conversation with Ghalib, Manto confesses, “Trials, yes my entire life passed in trials, Mirza sahib. I had to stand on trial over and over again simply for the stories I wrote. From childhood, a coil of fire closed in on me” (Bal 100). However, Manto’s ultimate ‘dozakh’ was the partition of the subcontinent, a historical rupture that shattered his soul. The division of the land mirrored a deeper fracture within his own identity, leaving him perpetually displaced. He saw himself as a coward for fleeing to Lahore, a decision he never reconciled with, and one that haunted him till his last breath. Ismat Chughtai’s resentment over his departure, the rejection he faced as a writer in both India and Pakistan and the crushing burden of familial responsibilities led him into a downward spiral, where alcohol became his “final refuge” (Bal 517). His tormented reflections lay bare the depth of his despair:

religious practice. See Richard Kroes’ article “Karbala: A Battle Revisited”, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48578554?read-now=1#page_scan_tab_contents

⁴² Naqshbandi is one of the major orders in the Sufi tradition that was developed “during thirteen through sixteen centuries in the oases of Central Asia” (Weismann 1). The Naqshbandiyya, as a traditional brotherhood, puts a strong emphasis on the necessity for its followers to consistently uphold the principles of the law (*shari’a*). It criticizes Sufis who assert that they are no longer obligated to follow these laws, claiming to have already attained their spiritual goal (Weismann 3).

Did Ismat believe till the end that I was an opportunist who had moved to Pakistan to look after his own interests? Or perhaps she had come to know that alcohol had consumed me completely, that I had no way of returning...I had no wish to stay alive in a country that had heaped nothing but calumny and condemnation on me. And I was only too aware of the burden I was becoming on my family...Neither hatred nor pity—they did not even consider me a human being anymore. (Bal 520)

Just as Ghalib saw Delhi transform from a city of dreams into a personal hell, Manto too found himself trapped in Lahore, a city that offered neither solace nor acceptance. Moreover, this haunting self-reflection encapsulates not only Manto's personal suffering but also the broader disillusionment of a fractured identity, mirroring the collective trauma of partition. Just as Ghalib's suffering became a path to spiritual transcendence, Manto's torment remained bound to his relentless pursuit of truth, a ceaseless reckoning with society's illusions and the shadowed depths of human nature.

Although the relationship of love and suffering seems paradoxical, it is through suffering that the soul is purified and the fire of Divine love is ignited. Bal with the characters of Ghalib and Manto finely highlights this enigmatic relationship of love and suffering while Ghalib asserted, “The older I grew, Manto bhai, the more I felt that Allah is the original agony. Ash-Shahid⁴³. What else but agony can be witnessed in our lives?” (Bal 332). When Ghalib refers to Allah as *Ash-Shahid* and “the original agony”, it demonstrates that God is sufficient as the only witness since He intimately experiences and validates human sufferings. According to al-

⁴³Ash-Shahid, one of the 99 names of Allah, means “The All Observant”, “The Testifier” (In Arabic: الشَّهِيد). This Arabic meaning is translated into English by Rezaul Karim (Ex-imam and khateeb of Central Jame Masjid, Sirajganj, Bangladesh).

Hallaj⁴⁴, a person can only unite with the Divine through the acceptance and longing for suffering since “Suffering is He Himself, whereas happiness comes from Him” (al-Hallaj qtd. in Scimmel 72). In fact, a Sufi seeker accepts suffering as a Divine gift, recognizing it as a means to intensify their yearning (*shawq*) for the Beloved. This yearning, as articulated by Muhasibi⁴⁵, is central to the Sufi understanding of love. This *shawq* is not merely a passive longing but an active alignment of the heart with the will of the Beloved. Muhasibi famously defines love as “for your heart to be in agreement with what your beloved wills” (Muhasibi qtd. in Lewisohn 155). Therefore, Ghalib and Manto did not ask for worldly validation rather sought comfort and spiritual growth in the embrace of Divine suffering, recognizing it as a testament to their own humanity. Manto echoed Ghalib’s and yearned for the Divine as,

The garden of Rizwan⁴⁶...I did not have the right to enter the garden of paradise... Still I prayed to Allah—snatch this black soul, this Saadat Hasan Manto, from the world, for he always forsakes fragrance to chase bad smells...Manto tries to cleanse features blackened with grime because he seeks the original face that lies beneath. Save this devil, this misguided angel, but once, O Lord.
(Bal 195)

Here, Manto’s prayer pulses with the essence of Sufi thought, charting a spiritual odyssey marked by Divine yearning, inner battles, and an unyielding quest for truth. He seeks mercy and approval only from God (*Rizwan*), rather than the society that condemns him, branding him a ‘black soul’. The lifelong struggle of Ghalib and Manto is not only the way to the Divine but also awakes the spiritual humanistic essence within them, which is revealed through their writings.

⁴⁴ Hussein Ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, “the great martyr of Sufis”, was tortured, and executed in 922 due to the allegation of blasphemy as he pronounced *Ana al Haqq* (I am the Truth) (Shah 363).

⁴⁵ Al-Harith al-Muhasibi was an Arab Muslim philosopher, theologian, and ascetic.

⁴⁶ Rizwan (in Arabic: رضوان) means “Acceptance”, and “Satisfaction”. This Arabic meaning is translated into English by Rezaul Karim (Ex-imam and khatib of Central Jame Masjid, Sirajganj, Bangladesh).

3.1.2 Writing as a Way to Eternity⁴⁷

Dozakhnama instates the theme of Sufism shedding light on Ghalib and Manto's timeless creations which mirror spiritual humanism. Bal very artistically portrays how writing is one of the worldly ways of love (*ishq-e-majazi*) that leads to *ishq-e-haqiqi* (love for God). In the novel, the author shows writing as a process of spiritual growth for Ghalib and Manto. Both of them endured struggles and trials in their life but writing became their medium of expressing the Divine attribute which is humanity. Ghalib asked Manto to keep writing because "Writing is the road to the Din" (Bal 153). In response to Ghalib, Manto said, "So there was a path to the Din even for me? Even after all my sins" (Bal 153). It highlights the transformative power that writing holds, offering a path toward spiritual connection even for those who perceive themselves as flawed. The novel starts with Farid Mian's handing over Manto's unpublished novel on Ghalib to the unnamed writer who wants to write a novel on Manto. The very act of passing down Manto's unpublished work actually denotes the Sufi tradition of transmitting sacred knowledge and spiritual wisdom through writing, emphasizing how the written words can serve as the vessel for preserving and sharing Divine truths. Since writing seeks to reach God, it burns the person with the intensity of spiritual passion. For this reason, Ghalib exclaimed, "What a punishment it is to have to keep writing all your life" (Bal 30). The continuous act of writing serves both as pain and solace for Ghalib and Manto. Hence, Ghalib reflects, "My boat sailed on an infinite sea, Manto bhai. The beginning of my lifelong pursuit of what cannot be seen. It was then that the pen became my pennant" (Bal 45). This arduous journey of writing, mirroring the Sufi path of *safar*(journey), a quest to know the unknown (God). The senses cannot grasp the Divine, yet without the Divine, no senses can exist. It is through *Ihsan*, this journey of *ishq-e-majazi* gains purpose. Kadhimi et al. in their article "Islamic Ethics: The Attributes of Al-Ihsan in

⁴⁷Eternity here refers to God: In Sufi thought, God is often described as *الْأَزَل* (Al-Azal), the Eternal.

the Quran and Its Effects on Muslim Morality” explore the aspects of *Ihsan* which literally stands for kindness, compassion, and empathy for all human beings irrespective of their identities (104-105). In other words, *Ihsan* is about practicing goodness in actions and loving everyone because “whatever exists is His reflection or shadow” (Kadhim et al. 105; Chittick 201). Both Ghalib and Manto immerse themselves in the act of creation: ghazals for Ghalib and stories for Manto and each employs their unique artistic styles. In the process of creation, they diminish their *nafs*⁴⁸ and reveal their absolute selves, where there is no pretense; only truth exists. Since nothing but God can only be the Absolute truth, their act of creation becomes a spiritual journey- a means of annihilating the ego (*fana*) and aligning with the Divine (*baqa*). In fact, Bal’s attempt in *Dozakhnama* establishes Ghalib and Manto as Sufi seekers while using them as symbolic figures to accentuate the philosophy of Sufism.

Despite being one of the greatest poets of his era, Ghalib never received the respect and recognition he truly deserved for his ghazals. His life as a poet was marked by constant struggles for patronage and acceptance, as his ghazals, which reflected on philosophy and mysticism, as well as melancholy and longing, often clashed with the traditional literary norms of his time. After 1857, Ghalib was hit by the ugly truth of the materialistic world where survival often took precedence over art, and his poetic genius was overshadowed by the harsh realities of financial instability. For him, poetry as a form of art has a Divine value because “Allah understands poetry” and hence, His words in the *Quran* have been revealed in poetic form (Bal 137). Ghalib’s poetry is the deep observation of humanity and human emotion and hence, Mumtaz Hussain addresses him “the poet of all humanity” (Hussain qtd. in Pue 575). While analyzing

⁴⁸*Nafs* (نَفْس) is an Arabic word that carries dual meanings: it refers to the self, akin to the soul in English, and also to the lower self or base instincts, often associated with the ego (Safvi 269). In this context, *nafs* denotes ‘ego’ or ‘base desires’.

Ghalib's humanistic poetry, Sajjad Zaheer mentions that Ghalib's "spirit of revolt and rebellion, respect for the dignity of man, his abhorrence of smugness and philistinism, his joy in life" are for "striving to create the image of a better and a more beautiful world, of finer and nobler human relations" (Zaheer 120). Ghalib's unwavering commitment to his art reflects his deep-rooted humanism and Sufi sensibility, which sought to transcend the superficialities of courtly praise. Though he secured a place in the court of the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, Ghalib was often humiliated for not composing ghazals that flattered the emperor. Even though his contemporaries like Zauq along with other court poets were completely invested in ingratiating while compromising their arts, Ghalib remained resolute in his poetic integrity. Moreover, at the emperor's command, he undertook the task of documenting the history of the Mughal Empire.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, this task literally burdened the heart of the poet because it forced him to abandon his artistic freedom and indulge in a form of writing that felt disconnected from his true poetic calling, leaving him torn between duty and his creative spirit. He said, "...someone like me couldn't go scouring in the jungle of history...all I can do is write poetry by the light of the heart" (Bal 385). Again, the court politics, marked by favouritism and sycophancy, often marginalized him, highlighting the challenges faced in gaining recognition without compromising their integrity.

...a poet must keep himself away from this jockeying for power... He can spout eloquently in court, he can air his opinion on numerous subjects ... all meaningless... Encomiums for Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar. What more were poets like Zauq sahib, who had sold out to one political power or another...Such a betrayal of the ghazal! Once you've entered politics, you won't even

⁴⁹ Ghalib completed the first volume of writing history which contains the period from Timur Lang to Humayun and titled it *Mihar-e-Nimroz (The Midday Sun)*. However, he could not complete the second volume of writing that he planned to (Bal 384-385).

know when treachery seeps into your blood and spreads through it. Politics is actually a game of changing your mask. (Bal 310)

Ghalib's disdain for politics demonstrates his belief that true poetry transcends worldly ambitions and also emphasizes that a poet's sacred duty is to remain untainted by the corrupting influence of power, much like the Sufi pursuit of truth.

Moreover, by depicting writing as an act of love (*ishq*), creation of beauty, and reflection of the truth, Bal shows how God expresses Himself through worldly creations. First, Divine love destroys everything within the self because “[t]otal love demands annihilation (*fana*)” so that it can be manifested (*baqa*) completely. In other words, the duality between the Creator and the created has to be erased since He declares: “I was a [hidden] treasure that was not known, so I loved to be known. Hence, I created the creatures and I made Myself known to them, and thus they came to know Me” (qtd. in Safvi 66). Additionally, the philosophy of *fana* and *baqa* is elaborated by two Sufi philosophers, Bayazid Bastami⁵⁰ and Junayd al-Bagdadi⁵¹ respectively. Bastami's concept of *fana* reflects the annihilation of the self (*nafs*), as true union with God requires the dissolution of individual identity. The persistence of individuality implies the existence of something other than God, which creates an obstacle to attaining “the complete state of *tauheed*⁵²” (Safvi 62-63).

⁵⁰ Bayazid Bastami, “the first major “ecstatic” Muslim Sufi”, was born at Bistam in Khurasan (eastern Iran). His major contribution to Sufi doctrine discussed the concept of *fana* and he was a highly spiritual man who attained a powerful realization of the union between his human self and the Divine essence (Conway n.p).

⁵¹ Junayd al-Bagdadi was a Sufi mystic born in Iraq and a prominent figure during the early stages of Sufism. As a pioneer of the “sober school of Sufism”, Bagdadi established his concepts of Sufism on eight principles: “submission, liberality, sincerity, patience, separation, woollen dress, wondering, and poverty, as in the lives of the sainthood” (Majumdar 787).

⁵²*Tauheed* means the oneness of God.

Furthermore, Bagdadi describes *baqa* as the next stage of spirituality, signifying the state in which God unites an individual with Himself after the experience of *fana*.⁵³ This transformative journey from annihilation to subsistence in God is reflected in Ghalib's words: "You have to keep *ishq-e-haqiqi* only for the Lord... there's only [H]e" (Bal 185). Ghalib further states, "The lord did not permit me to take the path of the wandering fakir—all my prayers were ruled invalid. Only, now and then, my heart overflowed when I looked at my creations. This was my limited access to the lord" (Bal 405). Through this statement, Ghalib not only reflects on the process of creation (writing) but also critiques the orthodox, exoteric interpretations of Islam. His form of devotion to God (writing ghazals) is not recognized by conventional religious norms, though these ghazals serve as a deeply personal expression of his intimate connection with the Divine. His perspective transcends formal religious practices, embracing a more mystical and individualized spiritual journey. Frithjof Schuon, a renowned Swiss metaphysician, explains in *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* that orthodox followers, those who adhere strictly to mainstream religious doctrine, often struggle to comprehend mysticism, as it is deeply rooted in personal experience and difficult to express in a way most people can grasp (Schuon xv-xvi). Ghalib therefore despises the outward religiosity and confronts Umrao Begum's traditionalist views: "All I know is that there is no purity in following your Shariyat alone. If the truth only hammers away like a rock, it has no value for me. It's better to live with lies. None of us know where we will be on Judgement Day" (Bal 210). Ghalib's remarks on following rigid laws without having the taste of spiritual experience of the Divine are nothing but wastage. While demonstrating the aspect of humanity in Ghalib's poetry, Kale Shah affirms, "On Judgement Day you only have to be with the lord... You will surely be rewarded for the beauty that you have

⁵³ The philosophy of *fana* and *baqa* is mentioned in the Quran: "Everything is perishing (*fani*) except His Face'; the 'life-in-Him' is *baqa* (continuance)" (qtd. in Safvi 63).

created for the lord” (Bal 381). This idea reinforces that humanity, in its essence, is not confined to the rigid doctrines of religions rather it is found in the sincerity of one’s heart, and the beauty of one’s creations.

Besides, much like Ghalib, who found relief and Divine connection through his poetry, Manto also dedicated himself entirely to his craft of writing stories without any façade, as if manifesting the ultimate Truth⁵⁴. To put it another way, his creations serve as emblems of Truth (*Haqq*), reflecting the Divine essence in an untarnished form. His refusal to mask the hypocrisies of society and his unfiltered storytelling brought him both acclaim and condemnation. In a moment of characteristic wit, he confessed to his sister Iqbal his willingness to be scrutinized, much like how Ismat Chughtai dissected her dead brother in “Dozakhi”⁵⁵ (Bal 343). Furthermore, when Shafia asked Manto about expressing himself, he replied, “Manto lives in different characters. Without those characters, there can be no Manto” (Bal 60), suggesting that his self is revealed and dissolved within his written characters, evoking the Sufi concept of *fana*. Moreover, Manto’s rhetorical question ‘who is the greater storyteller, he or God?’ further coincides with the Sufi idea of *baqa*, where the act of creation becomes the manifestation of Truth (God). In his final days, Manto was consumed by his stories much like a mystic lost in Divine contemplation. His journey of creation resonates with the notion that artistic expression serves as a form of devotion and union with the Divine. In fact, Manto never followed orthodox Islam but sought Divine blessings in a different manner, as his mother instilled in him the belief that invoking Allah's name would protect and guide his work. He wrote numeral 786 in all his

⁵⁴“Truth” is capitalized because it refers to an absolute and transcendent concept rather than just factual correctness. In Sufi philosophy, God is considered *Al-Haqq* (The Truth). To be more specific, “Truth” with a capital 'T' refers to God in this context.

⁵⁵ Indian Urdu short story writer, filmmaker and liberal humanist Ismat Chughtai wrote the short story titled “Dozakhi” about her dead brother Azim Beg Chughtai (Bal 343, 373-374, 420). She shared a close friendship with Manto, built on their mutual passion for bold storytelling and progressive ideals.

manuscripts, a common Muslim practice in the subcontinent as a substitute for 'Bismillah al Rahman al Rahim' (In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful).

Again, Bal highlights writing as an expression in *Dozakhnama* and it is very important in Sufism since expression symbolizes empathy with creation. In fact, Sufis express themselves as a deeper part of participating in the celebration of God's creation. It is a medium to initiate conversations (*guftagu*: گفتگو) with God. The idea of celebrating the Divine through artistic creations i.e., poetry, song, and so on, is strongly inspired by another Sufi philosopher and poet, al-Shushtari⁵⁶, whose mysticism challenges the hypocrisy and lack of genuine spirituality in the Islam practiced and promoted by religious scholars (Let's Talk Religion 28:54). Moreover, the entire universe is created for the purpose of expressing the love for God (*ishq-e-haqiqi*) and the artistic creations are nothing but the expression of Divine love. Hence, Ghalib as a symbolic figure of all artists found ease when he listened to a tale of a singer called Taslim from Rumi's masnavi. Taslim was from Islam's second Khalifa Omar's period and touched the pedestal of fame due to his magical voice and mastery of playing rabab⁵⁷. However, the fading of fame and the nearness of death made him understand the fact that only God is true. He repented by saying, "I have grown distant from the lord because of this rabab. I could not see his beauty because of my voice... While I was busy seeking fame, his caravan went far away" (Bal 411). In response to Taslim, Khalifa said, "It was [H]e who put the rabab in your hand...Allah sings through your voice" (Bal 412). This exemplifies the Sufi belief that expression is the actual celebration through which self-effacement (*fana*) takes place leading to the manifestation of the Divine (*baqa*). While illustrating artistic creations i.e., writing as a way to God, Bal reflects on all the

⁵⁶ To find more about al-Shushtari,

See <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095345317>

⁵⁷ Rabab is a musical instrument.

Sufi practices i.e., *sama*, and *qawwali*, in the *dargahs* of South Asia, which are unaccepted in orthodox Islam but hold deep spiritual significance within Sufism. The Sufi practices carry a humanistic ground because people irrespective of their beliefs participate in these rituals to remember God. In other words, these practices hold “an inner language” of devotion to God that is “beyond the limit of reason” and hence, the ecstatic Sufi rituals and experiences are often misunderstood by orthodox minds (Parman & Marni 23). During the conversation with his wife Umrao Begum, Ghalib says, “...our paths are different. Your Allah lives in the mosque, you read the namaz five times a day for him. Maulvis and mullahs show you the way. And my lord lives in the dargah, where Maula Rumi sings and dances the Sama. My way is not for you, Begum; I seek the lord through pleasure and celebration” (Bal 315). It highlights Ghalib’s perspective on the Sufi ways of seeking Divine connection through joy, creativity, and a more unconventional spiritual path, rather than strictly following prescribed rituals. Instead of in mosques where only Muslims are welcomed, Ghalib finds solace in the *dargahs* where people of all faiths gather to celebrate the Divine.

3.1.2 The Whispering of Love: Stories and Sufism

Sufism has its own definition of literature since through literary expressions it seeks to articulate the ineffable experiences of Divine love. To add, it is the “creed of love” as all Sufis, regardless of the outward distinctions among their schools, treat the theme of love as the central aspect of their practices and philosophy (Shah 311). The region of South Asia which is blessed with countless Sufi saints has been a cradle for spiritual wisdom and harmony, where these saints wove the messages of love. It is the same spirit that Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, affectionately called Garib Nawaz (the friend of hungry people), has conveyed through his stories (Bal 90). For

this reason, while talking about the significance of stories, the dastango⁵⁸ claimed, “How many people really know how to listen to stories, janab? Some scratch their ears, others finger their arse. Their eyes wander. There is an etiquette to listening to a story. You just trust in the lord, so too must you trust in the story and keep listening...stories can restore peace to heart” (Bal 524). The multicultural and multi-religious land of the Indian subcontinent has also provided a fertile ground for the growth of the Sufi literature surpassing the sectarian boundaries. The evening storytelling sessions in *dargahs* are for awakening “the novice to spiritual realities” where the stories are both “entertaining” and “suggestively erotic” focusing on “ascetic self-transformation” (Behl 1). In other words, stories carry a sacredness that moves people toward humanism and spirituality. Reflecting this, Ghalib remarked, “Only in our country is it said that even listening to a story of good deeds can mitigate your sins” (Bal 235). For Manto, stories themselves were a path to discovering the Divine, as he claimed, “Their stories were in search of me for years altogether, and in my journey through these stories I came to believe in Allah one day; only He was their lifelong companion” (Bal 23). In *Dozakhnama*, Bal weaves together a rich tapestry of stories from diverse sources, such as the *Quran*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Upanishads*, Sufi tales from Rumi, Attar, Mir Taqi Mir, folklores, and more alongside the personal narratives of Ghalib and Manto, all converging to illuminate the theme of love.

Moreover, Divine love is beautifully illuminated through the devotional tales of al-Hallaj, Meerabai⁵⁹, and Rabeya of Basra, whose intense devotion reflects the concept of *Wahdat al-Wujud* - the unity of existence⁶⁰. Their longing for union with God transcends the limitations of the material world, as they recognize that all existences are manifestations of the Divine. In their

⁵⁸Find more about ‘Dastango’ in Chapter 4.

⁵⁹Meerabai, a Rajput and Hindu mystic poet, was an ardent devotee of Krishna (Giridhari). According to popular belief, she merged with the image of God (Krishna). See *Oxford Reference* of “Mira Bai”, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100200578?rskey=vuVgUQ&result=4>

⁶⁰ See *Wahdat al-Wujud* (Safvi 68-72).

devotion, they embody the understanding that God's presence pervades all, and through love and surrender, they seek to merge with the singular reality of the Divine. Rumi says, "The lovers of God have no religion but God alone" (qtd. in Safvi 71). By putting light on the devotional stories in *Dozakhnama*, Bal reinforces the Sufi theme of love as "This life of ours-the act of being born" is only for *ishq-e-haqiqi*" (Bal 185). Meerabai's love for her Giridhari, Rabeya's love for Allah, and al-Hallaj's intoxication for *al-Haq* (Allah) actually dissolve the boundaries between the lover and the Beloved, embodying the Sufi ideal that true love is both the path and the destination in the spiritual journey.

Furthermore, the widely cherished genre of Sufi literature is mystical love stories and most of them outwardly depict the love between a man and a woman but metaphorically illustrates the bond between the Sufi and the Divine (Safvi 261). The classic love stories of Laila-Majnu, Yusuf-Zuleikha, and so on are the Sufi tales where the lover perceives absolute beauty solely in the Beloved, remaining indifferent to everything else. In this way, he transforms into the archetypal mystical lover, recognizing God in all things and discovering the Divine not in the external world but within the deepest recesses of his own heart. While discussing Sufi stories, Mohsin Raza Khan, a professor of history at Jindal University, explains how Laila-Majnu's tale (Nizami's version) is actually a mystical love story. Majnu represents the Sufi and Laila is the Beloved (God). In the story, when Majnu is given the letter of Laila where both of their names are written, he tears Laila's name and keeps only his saying that for a lover and the Beloved, only one name is enough (BeerBiceps 26:07-41:35). This symbolically shows Sufis' death in the love of God and living within Him. That is why Ghalib regrets: "If you cannot love like Majnu, I don't call it love. I had dreamt of it, but I could not love like Majnu...It was too arduous path for me. How many of us can train our body and soul to forget ourselves?" (Bal

170). Since the essence of Divine love is difficult to grasp for most people, these mystical love stories are often framed as romantic love tales to make the spiritual concepts more accessible and relatable to a wider audience. In fact, stories hold a special significance in Sufism as they preach spiritual humanism and work as vehicles for transmitting spiritual wisdom, fostering empathy, and cultivating a deeper connection with God through shared human experiences. In fact, through the Sufi stories, one literally attains the knowledge about humanity and its relation to the Divine. According to Mullah Sadra's⁶¹ philosophy of *Harakat al-Jauhariya* (substantial movement)⁶², *ma'rifat al-haq* - "immanent knowledge of humans towards themselves" is essential so that one can "achieve the truth and eternal perfection of [one's] existence" (Qoriyah and Khair 702). When a human being fulfils the stage of *ma'rifat al-haq*, self-realization happens, which is the means to serve humanity and accomplish one's spiritual and moral duties. In short, the Sufi stories are about understanding God and His attributes of loving all creations. Therefore, when someone leads himself to the service of humanity, he practices the Divine attribute- *al wadud* (The Most Loving) (Falihin et al. 54). Thus, Sufi stories not only illuminate the path to Divine love but also inspire individuals to embody this love in their actions.

⁶¹Sadr al-Din Muhammad ibn Ibrahim ibn Yahya al-Qawami al-Shiraz, an Iranian philosopher, is popularly known as Mullah Sadra. His major contribution is 'metaphilosophy' that traces its root in "the Islamic revelation and mystical experience of reality as existence" (Cooper n.p.). See <https://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ip/rep/H027.htm>

⁶² According to Mullah Sadra's philosophy *Harakat al-Jauhariya*, the soul's (substance) immaterial journey (movement) from potentiality to actuality symbolizes the perfection of human existence. This process aligns with humanist ideals of being ideal, immanent, and spiritual. It emphasizes the soul's movement toward perfection, influencing both theoretical knowledge (*ma'rifat al-haq*) and practical reason (*ma'rifat al-khair*), which shape human understanding and actions. The concept of *theoretical knowledge* (*ma'rifat al-haq*) refers to the human capacity for understanding the truth of existence and reality. It serves as the foundation for reaching eternal perfection. This knowledge helps humans analyze their existence and material reality, guiding them to distinguish between reality and their existence. It enables them to discover the truth of their being. On the other hand, *practical reason* (*ma'rifat al-khair*) involves the human will and actions based on knowledge. It influences how humans act freely and systematically, determining how they align with reality. Practical reason aims to limit emotional impulses, guiding actions towards fulfilling human values rather than basing them on sensation or pleasure, ultimately contributing to human happiness, wisdom, and social harmony (Qoriyah and Khair 702).

Chapter 4

***Dozakhnama* -A Lamentation: Fading of Sufi Traditions in South Asia**

“The old heart is gone, the mind too

There’s life in the body, like a lamp burning down” (Bal 473).

Historically, Sufism has been a subject of contempt by orthodox religious institutions like Hinduism and Islam but religious orthodoxy fails to recognize hybrid cultures and their values. These values remain a part of Indian culture and the absence of them results in angst which *Dozakhnama* laments. In fact, Sufism is not only highly cultural, mystical, and secluded from society but also an integrated complete part of South Asian history. The thoughtful choice of using Ghalib and Manto as the representatives of the 19th and 20th centuries in the novel, Bal literally demonstrates the condition of South Asia, which comes into being due to the politicization of the region. The identity politics and sense of belonging that inhabitants of this region have experienced over time are extensively highlighted in the novel through the lens of Sufism. In fact, *Dozakhnama* is the ‘subterranean memory’ of South Asia, unearthing the layered complexities of its history. The current context of this region solidifies the significance of the novel as a crucial document that elucidates the enduring relevance of its themes for understanding the intricacies of contemporary South Asia. This chapter investigates the novel’s lamentation about the fading of Sufi traditions in the South Asian context while discussing communalism and religious orthodoxy.

4.1 Memory, Nostalgia, and Politics of Identity

Mirza is lying far away in Dilli, in Sultanji's graveyard near Nizamuddin Aulia, and I, in Lahore, in Mian Saheta's. It was the same country once, after all; no matter how many barbed wires there may be on the surface, in the depths of the earth, it's one country, one world. Has anyone ever been able to prevent the dead from talking to one another?... still we sing our laments...Mirza had never succeeded in flying; nor did I. But now we'll grow wings in the darkness within our graves; friends, we will tell you all those stories that you've never heard before. We'll draw aside all those curtains which you've never peeped behind. (Bal 15)

The passage from *Dozakhnama* beautifully encapsulates the essence of shared memory, nostalgia, and the interconnectedness of identity and belonging. The imagery of Ghalib and Manto speaking from their graves critiques the artificial boundaries and political realities of South Asia. Furthermore, their voices act as conduits, bringing forth stories buried under the weight of orthodox histories and nationalist narratives. Moreover, this memory is not just a repository of the past but also a site of resistance against historical erasure and the divisions imposed by communalism. Through the lamentation for transcending the boundaries, the novel literally calls attention to the compassion, harmony, and love that Sufism mirrors. Sufism practiced in South Asia is often called a 'South Asian variant of Islam' because of its syncretic connection with Hinduism. For example, Nawab Sadiq Jung Bahadur Hilm of Hyderabad's famous *qawwali* "*Kanhaiya yaad hai kuch bhi hamari (O Kanhaiya, do you remember us at all?)*" used to be sung in the *dargahs* which are further explained by Abdul Wahid Bilgrami.⁶³ He interprets elements from Krishna songs as representations of Sufi concepts: Krishna and his other

⁶³ Abdul Wahid Bilgrami, a Sufi saint of Qadiriyya order and writer, wrote *Haqiq-e-Hindi* (1556) where he describes Hindi mystical terms from dhrupad songs in its first section, interprets words from Vaishnavite songs in Braj Bhasha in the second, and provides Sufi meanings for terms used in the Hindi Sufi tradition in the third (Safvi 255).

Hindavi names symbolize the “*insan-e kamil* (perfect human)”, the *gopis* represent “angels or sometimes the reality of life in relation to the unity of Being, the flute indicates the appearance of existence out of the void, Kans⁶⁴ is the *nafs* (ego), while Yashoda⁶⁵ is Divine mercy”, and “Mathura [is] the temporary station in the road to *marifa* while Dwarka⁶⁶ is the permanent station of Sufis” (Safvi 255). This cross-cultural ideology can be a counterpoint to exclusionary political convictions that have risen in this region in recent periods.

The fading of Sufi ideology in South Asia, closely associated with the impact of British colonialism and the ensuing politics of grievances, has indeed contributed to the parochial attitudes prevalent in the region today. The British rule in the Indian subcontinent was instrumental in terms of the decaying of Sufism. In other words, the colonial policies and socio-political upheavals marginalized the inclusive and syncretic principles of Sufism, paving the way for more rigid and exclusionary interpretations of Islam to take root. While reflecting on the British aggression, Ghalib grieved, “Were the British going to bury our culture this way...all the people of Hindustan- Hindu or Muslim, it made no difference- would be sent into exile; we would have to wander about as refugees” (Bal 448-449). The Sufi tradition of stories that spread the message of love, compassion, and forbearance was weakened in the process of concretizing cultural differences in South Asia. In addition, Ghalib remarked,

⁶⁴Kans was Krishna’s uncle who was the brother of Krishna’s biological mother Devaki. He was the oppressive ruler of Mathura.

⁶⁵Yashoda was Krishna’s foster mother.

⁶⁶ The city of Dwarka is situated on the western coast of India. According to mythology, Dwarka was constructed by Vishwakarma, the god of craftsmen in one day. It was the kingdom of Krishna and later submerged into the ocean after his departure from the mortal world. See Dr. Dhaval Kataria’s “Dwarka- History, Mystery and Repository- Confirming the Existence of the Mythical City”.

The British, the goras, took over Dilli after the sepoys rose in mutiny, those were terrible times...all of Dilli seemed to have become a Karbala, and the dastangos⁶⁷ were lost forever too. There was no room for stories anymore in the Englishman's Dilli; as you know, the goras don't want fiction, they want history... Only the history of the British is direct, treading a single path. A story has thousand paths. (Bal 31, 40).

This shows how British colonialism dismantled the cultural and spiritual plurality embodied by Sufism, replacing it with a monolithic narrative that left no space for the shared stories and syncretic traditions that once defined the region. It is, in fact, the colonial strategy to colonize people mentally, exploit, and rule them by formulating colonial discourse and inculcating it in their minds. The decay of Sufi principles started being visible after 1857's Sepoy rebellion, which furthered with 1947's partition of the subcontinent. Bal in *Dozakhnama* laments the fading of Sufism in South Asia. To add, this place has become hostile to integrative self-identity, as Ghalib mourned that: "The mind no longer spoke, no waves crashed on the shores of the heart...Where a cold wind blew all the time, where the fallen leaves could be heard rustling, where the streets were blackened with congealed blood of dead people. Every day was cursed, I knew there was no end to this; it had all been destroyed" (Bal 473). The cultural emptiness and lack of humanity that Ghalib saw in his later years became even more evident during the Partition of 1947, completely consuming Manto and pushing him to reveal the harsh truths of a society divided by identity politics and communal divisions.⁶⁸ In fact, the fragmentation that was

⁶⁷ Dastango is a storyteller in the context of the traditional art of Dastangoi (in Urdu: داستان گوئی), an ancient form of oral storytelling. Dastangos make their living through storytelling (Bal 31).

⁶⁸ There are a number of bloody events that have taken place after 1947's partition. The attacks on Sikhs in 1984 after the assassination of Indira Gandhi; Muslims became the targets of Bhagalpur riots in Bihar in 1989; destruction of Babari Mosque by frantic Hindu communalists in Ayodhya in 1992 and others are the violent manifestations of communal tensions in post-independence India (Bhuthalia 7). Besides, in Pakistan also communal violence and religious orthodoxy are persisted. Pakistan's leaders tried to unify West and East Pakistan under Islam but cultural and linguistic differences led to tensions. Viewing Bangla and Hindu influences as undesirable, they persecuted

created because of putrescence after the fall of the Mughals has been repeated throughout the history of South Asia. For this reason, Urvashi Bhutalia, in her book *The Other Side of Silence*, highlights:

The stories of Partition no longer seemed quite so remote: people from the same country, from the same town, the same village, could still be divided by the politics of their religious differences, and once divided, could do terrible things to each other...I began to realize that Partition was not...a closed chapter of history...brutal political geography infused and divided us still... I could no longer pretend that this was a history that belonged to another time. (Bhutalia 4-5)

Hence, these legacies of division and violence highlight the pressing need to restore and cultivate the pluralistic spirit that was once at the heart of the region's identity.

4.1.1 Waning of Sufi Heritage in Current South Asia

Due to Modi and Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) Hindutva (Hindu Nationalism) ideology, India has become a place of "otherization" where "Dalits, liberals, Christians... but most of all, Muslims" face systemic discrimination, social exclusion, and violence, often being marginalized both politically and culturally in the vision of a homogenized Hindu identity (Waikar 162). In fact, by elevating the Hindu identity as superior, Hindutva inherently constructs a range of identities as undeserving of inclusion within its vision of India. Additionally, Hindutva groups like "the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)" have been criticized for inciting Hindu-Muslim violence by attacking and killing Muslims (162). The Sufi shrines or *dargahs* which are the symbols of spiritual harmony of the multicultural and multi-religious traditions challenge the exclusionary narrative of

Hindus, forcing over 10 million Bangladeshis to flee fearing the dangers of the war (Kundu). Sunni and Shia communities escalated under General Zia's Islamization policies in the 1980s. Shia-killing groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan have targeted Shias, especially Hazara Shias, perpetuating massacres in regions like Quetta, Karachi, and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Khaled 40).

Hindutva. The destruction of the shrine of Baba Haji Rozbih⁶⁹ on 30th January 2024 by Delhi Development Authority (DDA) in the name of “illegal religious structures” has stirred concerns among historians who think that it is a strike against the history that contributed to making India.⁷⁰ Rana Safvi in her visit to the demolished shrine of Haji Rozbih reminisced about Delhi’s Sufi heritage.⁷¹ Apart from this, one of the biggest flashpoints in the ongoing debate over Sufi heritage in India has been the recent controversy surrounding the Ajmer Dargah. It was always a revered place for the people of the Indian subcontinent irrespective of their religious identities. The controversy, sparked by attempts to change the status of the *dargah*, has intensified the already existing tensions around religious sites in India.⁷² The president of an organization named Hindu Sena, Vishnu Gupta has petitioned a case on Ajmer Dargah citing information from the book of Har Bilas Sarda titled *Ajmer: The Historical and Descriptive* (1911) on 25 September 2024 and claimed that Khwaja’s shrine is actually built on a Shiv temple. In his petition, he urged to declare Ajmer Dargah as ‘Sankat Mochan Mahadev temple’ and sought permission for Hindus to worship at the site (TIMES NOW 1:52-4:45). While being questioned on the matter due to pointing at Ajmer Dargah, the amity of Hindu-Muslim is being ruined, Gupta replied, “During partition, Muslims took their right and chose Pakistan according to their religion. Muslims of Hindustan should accept that they are staying here as guests and they do not have any existence here” (BBC URDU 3:30- 4:00). This statement, rife with divisive rhetoric, demonstrates the growing communal polarization and highlights how historical and spiritual sites

⁶⁹Baba Haji Rozbih is considered one of the earliest saints who came to Delhi during the late Tomar Empire and early Chauhan Empire. There is no authentic source regarding where he was from. This oldest Sufi Shrine of Mehruli was attempted to be demolished in 2020 before finally being dismantled in 2024. Find the discussion of Syed Yusuf Shahab, author of the book *The Lost Sufis of Delhi* (2020),

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bU5eNZWWO9g&ab_channel=TheIndianExpress

⁷⁰See Kuwait Times’ news titled “India’s heritage hit by Delhi Development Demolitions”,

<https://kuwaittimes.com/article/11341/world/subcontinent/indias-heritage-hit-by-delhi-development-demolitions/>

⁷¹ See Rana Safvi’s Instagram post https://www.instagram.com/p/C29Qa5DvT9c/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

⁷² See *Kashmir Observer*’s “Ajmer Dargah ‘Survey Plea’ Row: Court Notice Triggers Outrage”, <https://kashmirobsrver.net/2024/11/29/ajmer-dargah-survey-plea-row-court-notice-triggers-outrage/>

like Ajmer Dargah are now being weaponized to further exclusionary narratives that threaten India's composite culture, pluralistic heritage, and unity.

Again, Bangladesh mirrors the struggles seen in India, where religious identity politics have increasingly overshadowed the inclusive principles of Sufism. Sufism and identity politics in South Asia are multi-layered and complex. In India, it is targeted with Hindutva ideology for serving the political agenda. On the other hand, in Bangladesh, which is a Muslim-majority country, the Sufi shrines are deliberately targeted in the name of preserving religious purity, addressing them as *shirk* and *bida'at*. Attacking and vandalizing more than 50 shrines both large and small, in 2024 raised concern for the 3000 *dargahs* all over the country. The caretaker of the Yajoor Darbar Sharif in Nangalkot, Syed Golam Moinuddin Bhuiyan said, "There are ideological differences... We do not follow Wahhabi thought. We believe in Sufism. But does that justify the attacks on us?"⁷³

Moreover, attacking one of the renowned Sufi shrines of Hazrat Shah Poran (RA) in Sylhet for banning music and cannabis in September 2024; demolishing the 200-year-old shrine of Hazrat Shah Sufi Syed Kalu Shah (RA) in Mymensingh while banning the *sama-qawwali* program on January 8, 2025; and so, on all reflect the growing tension between the custodians of Sufi traditions and people seeking to impose a more rigid, puritanical interpretation of Islam (*The Daily Star*; bdnews24.com). Additionally, many people around the country have defended these ravaging incidents and condemned Sufi veneration culture, labelling them 'un-Islamic' and *shirk*. Furthermore, the orthodox Pakistani society also reflects a similar marginalizing attitude which depicts the fading of Sufi tolerance and compassion. For instance, the famous Sufi singer Amjad Sabri was assassinated on 22 June 2016 for "his inclination towards the Shia community"

⁷³ See "Why attacks on shrines remain rampant in Bangladesh?" in *Dhaka Tribune*, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/358520/why-attacks-on-shrines-remain-rampant-in>

(*Dawn*). 15% Shia Muslims in Sunni-majority Pakistan are not only marginalized but also constantly under the threat of violence and persecution, as sectarian animosity continues to fuel targeted attacks and systemic discrimination against them (*The Guardian*). This persistent hostility throughout the South Asian region highlights the fragile state of religious and cultural harmony. In fact, in the politics of identity and belonging, South Asia is losing its Sufi heritage which is an integrated part of its historical fabric.

4.1.2 *Dozakhnama*: Sufism's Aspiration

Both Ghalib and Manto experienced the decay of Sufism and its consequences in their times in the novel, which is more concretized and a common phenomenon in recent South Asia, where the rich spiritual and cultural legacy of Sufism struggles to survive amid rising religious extremism, identity politics, and societal marginalization. To say it another way, the ongoing erosion of Sufi heritage across this region demonstrates the stark contrast between the region's spiritual history and its current political realities. However, Bal at the very end of the novel sets a tone of aspiration in his readers' minds in an increasingly divided world. By highlighting the chaos and distress in the absence of Sufi ideals, the novel emphasizes the need for spiritual humanism and harmonious coexistence. In other words, he refers to Sufi ideology as the ultimate resolution of the divisions, conflicts, and existential crises that plague both individuals and societies. For this reason, the author imagines Manto dreaming of reuniting with the other characters in the novel with solace, hope, and bliss in a celestial manner. In his dream, Manto encountered Kallu, Ghalib's servant, near Jama Masjid, who then led him to a dastango (storyteller) who told them the stories about spiritual humanism, and the eternal return to God, that literally weaved a vision of unity and redemption. He expresses, "It was the fakirs who had told him that lord resides within human beings...We have a single heart. The heart of

Allah...Allah can give light even without a lamp...How much longer will I remain distracted by external form? Give me the strength to think of you, O Lord” (Bal 527,529,530). The wandering fakirs (Sufis) walking in this region, always preach the message of love, unity, and self-realization, urging people to look beyond material differences and discover the Divine essence within themselves and others. In other words, they believed that people should embrace a singular identity as human beings and creations of one God, who resides within everyone and views all as equal. The external forms like identity on the basis of religion or social status, are seen as illusions that distract from the deeper spiritual truth of universal oneness. In Manto’s dream, Bal projects the dastango metaphorically as the Divine to whom everyone has to return while leaving their worldly identities. From his bag, the dastango took out the puppets of *Dozakhnama*’s characters, and the scene was revealed as:

- He was in my bag, and that’s where he’s returned. The dastango extracted a wooden puppet from the bag slung across his shoulder.- Look, mian, this is Dakuki⁷⁴.

-Who else do you have in your bag, mian?

-See for yourself, do you recognize who this is?

- Mirza sahib, huzoor.

-And this?

-Jahapanah Bahadur Shah.

-This?

Kallu leapt up. ‘Manto bhai... you...you...you have become a puppet too?’

⁷⁴ In the novel *Dozakhnama*, Bal mentions Dakuki as a pilgrim. See the story of Dakuki in *Dozakhnama* (Bal 527-531).

Pulling out wooden puppets one after another from his bag, the dastango arranged them around the precincts of the mosque...They had not been soiled by the heat and dust of history. (Bal 531)

In this symbolic act of storytelling, Bal envisions a realm where the burdens of exclusivity of history are shed. In addition, the puppets, untainted by divisive narratives, represent the unifying spirit of Sufism. By placing them around the precincts of the mosque, Bal subtly invokes a sacred space of harmony and stimulates reimagining South Asia's shared heritage of Sufism.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Sufi sheikh Awad al-Din Kirmani believed, “Allah was to be found in this very world-within all the beauties of creation” (Bal 56). It is much like stumbling upon an unexpected encounter, where the unreal becomes momentarily tangible. In fact, the Divine or God is not distant or hidden but present in the very fabric of the world around us and waiting to be recognized in the fleeting moments of life. God as *Wahdat al-Wujud* (the unity of existence), reveals Himself in the transient beauty of existence, urging humanity to seek and embrace the sacred in the everyday. Sufism guides this connection between humans and the Divine without any boundaries of religion, caste, creed, and so on. In other words, individual consciousness needs to be transcended so that the Divine consciousness can be experienced because Divine consciousness includes love, humanity, and unity. Therefore, Ghalib found solace in the performance of *sama* in *dargahs* where people gathered in a shared spiritual ecstasy rather than mosques, transcending their worldly identities and immersing themselves in the rhythms of devotion. While sitting on the steps of Manikarnika Ghat, he went beyond his ‘Muslimness’, embracing a universal sense of spiritual belonging. His syncretic vision came alive in the form of his masnavi “Temple Lamp” which still declares the glory of the shared culture of this region. Again, this act of transcending was further depicted through Manto’s disillusionment and struggle with the fragmentation of identity during the aftermath of 1947’s partition of the Indian subcontinent. Manto with God’s madness reflected the painful process of breaking free from the rigid constructs of religion and nationalism that often obscure the deeper spiritual truths. In addition, he was often criticized as indecent and scandalous for his writings i.e. “The Black

Shalwar”, “Smoke”, “Toba Tek Singh”, “Thanda Ghosht” and others that dared to question the boundaries of morality and challenge society and its mainstream narrative.

To add, the Divine alchemy that Sufism advocates and transforms the human soul through the journey from *ishq-e-majazi* (worldly love) to *ishq-e-haqiqi* (Divine love). Before individuals can experience the Divine love, they need to burn in *Dozakh* (hell) while undergoing the crucible of grief, sufferings, and tragedies of life. Each moment of suffering becomes a step toward spiritual enlightenment, allowing them to transcend the earthly realm and approach the sacred truth of *ishq-e-haqiqi*. Sufi literature serves as a guiding light for seekers by illustrating that love's trials are but Divine tests designed to purify the soul. In the novel, the author shows how both Ghalib and Manto had to bear detachments, financial hardships, and negligence as writers in their times. Their affliction paved the way to God as their creations (Ghalib’s poetry and Manto’s short story) manifested God. Their creations (writings) became the act of overcoming ego (*nafs*) and the expression of the Divine (*baqa*). Bal in *Dozakhnama* projects writing as a powerful symbol to address all the artistic creations through which human beings align themselves with God. Furthermore, the Indian subcontinent which is home to numerous Sufi saints, has long been a centre of spiritual wisdom and unity, where these saints spread love among people. In fact, Sufi philosophy stands on the pedestal of Divine love, and stories in Sufism celebrate love’s role as a transformative power by fostering spiritual humanism. When the reverent tales of al-Hallaj, Meerabai, and Rabeya of Basra depict the intensity of devotion towards God who is all loving, legendary love stories like Laila-Majnu, and Yusuf-Zuleikha represent Divine love in worldly forms. In fact, Sufism rejoices in the theme of love through stories so that people can attain knowledge of humans (*ma’rifat al-haq*) for directing their actions toward the benefaction of mankind (*ma’rifat al-khair*).

Bal's *Dozakhnama* which ruminates on South Asia's latent heritage of Sufism delves into the often-forgotten aspects of the region's spiritual and cultural past. It brings to light the influence of Sufi ideals on syncretic traditions and spiritual humanism that once flourished before being overshadowed by religious orthodoxy, communalism, and political divisions in this region. Therefore, the novel mourns the fading of this inclusive tradition. Incidents like the destruction of Baba Haji Rozbih shrine and the Ajmer Dargah controversy, attacks on Sufi shrines in Bangladesh, and the persecution of Shia Muslims in Pakistan are the signs of the decline of Sufi heritage. The *dargahs* of Sufis which used to be a place for both Hindus and Muslims, are now being segmented in the name of religion. Nonetheless, since Sufism is all about love, compassion, tolerance, and unity, it inherently opposes the forces of hatred, fragmentation, and exclusion that have taken hold in the region. The author not only highlights in the novel how spiritual and societal turmoil can haunt in the absence of Sufism but also gives reassurance that the values of Sufi tradition hold the potential to heal the rifts and restore the fractured identities in South Asia.

To conclude, Rabisankar Bal's *Dozakhnama: Conversations in Hell* enriched with numerous Sufi tales, historical accounts, poetry, and so on, is a sharp knock on the collective consciousness of South Asia, urging to revisit, and reclaim its lost spiritual essence and cultural identity. This thesis contributes to the ongoing discourse on South Asian literature and Sufism by examining the deep-rooted spiritual heritage of the region through the lens of two iconic writers, Ghalib and Manto. In fact, putting light on the current tumultuous state of South Asia which is mostly focusing on the exclusionary narrative in the name of the purification of religion and solidifying the differences between people, this study calls for a return to the inclusive, unifying

principles of Sufism. In other words, it is an attempt to confront all the discourses and narratives that are eclipsing South Asia's rich legacy of Sufism.

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