"Liminality at Shrines: the tombs of the dead saints"

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Sharp religious categorizations define the ethos of most public worshipping spaces in contemporary Pakistan, a country that was part of India before the partition of the Subcontinent in 1947. As opposed to mosques, shrines have stood as defiant places. Shrines are burial places for the mystics, saints and sufis that are revered and visited by devotees who belong to a broad range of religious, social and ethnic groups. Interestingly though from a historical point of view, the British Colonial ethnographers and sociologists perceived shrines both with suspicion and skepticism. For many, these were damned places where obnoxious activities took place. However, what their perspectives distort is the syncretisim, diversity and plurality that marked the landscape of the Subcontinent before partition. The presence of music, dance and recitation of poetry validate that these are liminal spaces that evoke creativity in religious practices. Images of shrines show commingling of bodies where, on annual celebrations, the entertainers and the visitors dance to the beat of drums and special foods are distributed. The paper brings forth examples on how these burial places for the mystics, saints and sufis have provided refuge to socially and religiously transgressive people. This paper will describe the ways in which shrines evoke human creativity in religious practices. Drawing from posthuman perspectives on ontological liminality that blurs distinctions between self and the other, life and death, the paper specifically analyzes the special event called "Urs" that is celebrated on the the death anniversary of the saint, and understood as the saint's union with the divine. Sadly though, this unorthodox version of Islam primarily associated with the shrine culture has been under direct attack from fundamentalist groups in the form of communal violence and terrorist attacks in the nation-states of India and Pakistan, marring the freedom once available to masses in these liminal spaces.

Shrines are also called "dargahs" in Urdu, which is the national language of Pakistan. Dargahs are the burial places of the saints and sufis that are spread across parts of India and Pakistan. The word "dargah" has been derived from the Persian language and means "royal court", however, since the medieval era, the pre-partition time in India, dargah acquired the connotation of a tomb. Dargahs are considered sacred spaces in a similar way to the mosques or temples. They are tombs of venerated saints that are sometimes bare spaces but other times are architecturally adorned. In predominantly religious societies such as Pakistan, the mosques as sacred places are structured and usually state-funded, institutionalized places of worship. In contrast, the shrines exhibit an openess and an unstructured ethos that provide freedom to visitors to practise their religion. For the longest time, the shrines remained officially undocumented. Only recently, during the orthodox-minded general dictator Zia-ul-Haq's regime, the department called Auqaf was assigned to supervise the "activities" of shrines in Pakistan (Malik 1990, 73)

Despite the recent official interference, shrines or dargahs have continued to provide sanctuary to people who practise religion in acutely diverse and creative ways. In Pakistan, where the vast majority of the population consists of Muslims, the religious categorizations are so stringently defined that there is no chance of finding a Hindu in a Muslim mosque. However, the shrine is the one possible place where, irrespective of the differences in religious ideology, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians have been observed as regular visitors. It is almost impossible to trace the beginnings of shrines and shrine culture, however, the shrines predate mosques in the Indian Sub-continent. Undoubtably this augments the shrines'

controversial history as they are often connected to paganism. Gloria Anzaldua's discussion in *Borderlands* hints at the way " institutionalized religion" often handles its fears of "the spirit world" by stigmatizing it as "witchcraft" (Anzaldua 2007, 37).Correspondingly, the humanist tradition refutes the role of anything beyond the physical, logical and rational. To a large extent, this can be perceived in the perspectives of the British colonialists, who were at a loss to understand the happenings at the shrines.

The British colonized and ruled over the Indian Subcontinent for around a hundred years before the region was geographically divided into separate nation states called India and Pakistan in 1947 . The British colonists' curiosity about the new people and their cultures in the Indian Subcontinent led them to collect anthropological data on shrines or dargahs. It was during one of the projects that the colonial ethnographer John Campbell Oman (1841- 1911) was taken aback by the scenes at a dargah. Oman, who wrote extensively on Indian Culture, recorded his visit to a festival on shrines. In his words: "On a chragah fair day…the whole distance seems for hours to be almost blocked with the traffic…vehicles of many descriptions (carry) sight seers or pleasure seekers to the mela." The intermingling of people of different faiths surprised the British colonist. Much to his chagrin, he saw "a punjabi theatrical performance", which included "much dancing and singing" at the event (cited in Talbot and Kamran 2016, 211-212). Unable to make sense of the activity that for him should have been religiously inscribed, he was one of many British ethnographers and anthropologists to have felt bewildered by the culture of the shrines. Ian Talbot and Tahir Kamran ascribe this bewilderment to the irreconcilable difference between "British positivist knowledge" and superstitious mystic beliefs in the saints and their devotees (Talbot and Kamran 2016, 140). It is hardly surprising that most of the British colonists labelled the shrines as damned places where obnoxious activities took place. Records reveal that the colonizers placed the shrines as decrepit, dirty and ugly places, a view not dissimilar to the orthodox fundamentalists for whom shrines represent an impious and impure version of Islam.

Shrines are liminal spaces that challenge the networks of classification based on religion, class and ethnicity, and from the earliest medieval times they have appealed to the masses in the Indian Subcontinent who in an otherwise caste-ridden society felt socially marginalized. As mediators between material and metaphysical worlds, the shrines wield great power for the societies' oppressed. The idea of reaching out to God through pilgrimages to shrines is particularly attractive to those who are the oppressed, socially and economically. The devotees are believers in the miracles of those buried in the shrine; they have faith in the spirit of the saints who did not have material power in their lifetimes. In Victor Turner's view, liminal personae are defined as "threshhold people" which include those defined as "structurally inferior" (Turner 2017, 95). The huge presence of devotees from the villages, the poorest people in Pakistan, explains how shrines attract liminal people. Reflecting on the demographics of the shrines, Farina Mir points out that a large number of shrine visitors comprise of the rural population: "Contemporary sources point to the plebian base of mass participation at shrines" (Mir 2012, 110). The poor and the oppressed, the physically or psychologically ailing, all visit the shrines to invoke the blessings of the saints for cure and therapy.

A 2018 study entitled "Cultural Religious perspective on the Sufi Shrines" revealed that a majority of the participants visited Sufi shrines in the hope of a cure for illness and disease (Charan et al 2018). The provision of free food at the shrines is one of the most important aspects and is associated with purging of disease. As Charan, Wang and Yao reveal visitors: "believed that coming to this Sufi shrine, praying here, and eating the consecrated food stuff (Tabaruk) including Langer, sugar and salt will help them treat diseases" (Charan et al 2018,

1085). The free meals are offered to all visitors and devotees irrespective of their class or creed.

Nosheen Ali writes that in the public spaces of the shrines: "New walkers are welcomed, and no membership is needed" (Ali 2016, 24). Another function mentioned by Ali is the interaction between the visitors that helps them counter cultural alienation. The devotees have a symbiotic relationship with the shrine; they keep the activities and the regular rituals at the place active. Ali describes how: "All over Pakistan, Thursday is a day for visiting shrines and paying respect to sufi saints and a day when giving and generosity towards the poor is especially encouraged and undertaken" (Ali 2016, 26). During the annual celebrations at the shrines held on the death anniversary of the saint, "shopkeepers, hawkers, and master singers" participate both "to get spiritual blessings and to earn a profit" (Siddique 2007, 315). The local shopkeepers and hawkers see a spike in sale of the local merchandise, the knickknacks, that include flower garlands, bracelets and bangles, sugary sweets, amulets, oils, etc.

With no restrictions or proscriptions, women are the most regular and frequent visitors at shrines. In the predominantly patriarchal society of Pakistan, where the discrimination of women can be grasped in relation to their absence from religious spaces such as mosque, shrines have revealed incredible inclusivity. In worshipping spaces as mosques, women are either not allowed entry or are discouraged from participating in religious gatherings. In apaper entitled " In mosques and Shrines: Women's agency in public sacred spaces", Shampa Mazumdar and Sanjay Mazumdar note that: "Men are required to participate in congregational prayers at the mosque, while women are encouraged to pray at home. When they do attend, they are peripheral, separate, and invisible" (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2002, 166). In some mosques, where women are permitted access, their space is separated from the main praying hall. It is mostly one-third of the total area of the mosque that is approved for the women. The patriarchal modus operandi of a mosque is reflected through other strict prohibitions for the women. For instance, during menstruation women are not allowed to enter the mosque. At other times, the occasional presence of small babies or children accompanying women affects seriousness of women's presence. Mir states that in contrast to the msques: "Sufi shrines were not only ecumenical spaces; they were also among the few institutional sites in colonial society where women were visibly active" (Mir 2010, 108). Mir mentions "The Shrine of Mian Bibi" located at Shah Madar in Hoshiarpur district, which not only houses a female saint's tomb but also has exclusively women devotees visiting the place. At Mian Bibi's Shrine, women are not merely passive participants rather their participation is significantly active. Another shrine considered as a holy place is the burial ground of a female saint, called "Miran Mai's shrine", located in Lyari. Miran Mai's shrine welcomes young newly married couples who particularly pray for their future happiness, health and the birth of children. Lyari is a densely populated town in Pakistan, one that has been home to violence and crime. Amal Hashim, in a short newspaper column, mentions that even at the peak of Lyari's "gang wars" the shrine of Miran Maa was the one place no gang leader dared to desecrate in any form (Hashim 2022).

At shrines, women do not only freely commingle and socialise. More importantly, they have been seen to pray in more personal, spontaneous and creative ways at the shrines. Interestingly, Fatima Mernissi has described the expressive ways of praying among women at shrines; the women devotees "wail, cry, sit silently, complain, directly call out, or give warning out of love" to the saints (Mernissi 1989, 15) This corroborates how outside of strict religious rituals asserted by religious ideologies, the shrines allow devotees to think beyond and practise religion creatively.

At the time of festivals at the shrines, moreover, participation is not exclusive to any one socio-economic class. The rich and the influential can be seen participating in the festivity. This is illustrated by the recent image of the Bollywood actor, Amitabh Bachan, at the Ajmer Sharif shrine in India. This feature is a reminder of Turner's illuminating remark on the holy journey of pilgrimage, during which members of an upper class and members of a lower class might mix and converse as equals, when in normal life they would rarely converse at all or their conversation might be limited to giving or receiving orders: "Such collapsing of classes and occupations in the new community…a full-scale 'Communitas' of equal beings" may be of longer or short-lived duration. According to Turner, within a short lived duration, a sense of Communitas between people is created as the pilgrims: "distance themselves from mundane structures and their social identities, leading to a homogenization of status" (Turner 2017, 163)

The annual shrine festival called Urs or mela provides an array of entertainment to the common people. The rural populace more inclined towards participation in shrine festivities travel long-distances. Most of the annual festival appears like a local musical concert. At the fair, there are regional folk song performances played by the bards or local singers from the villages. There are qawwali, mystical song performances that continue throughout the night. Regula Qureshi describes these mystical qawwali concerts at length: " No festival is complete without a musical concert called sama[….] "it is a serious art meant to arouse mystical emotions" (Qureshi 1993). To understand the place of music in Islam, one must be mindful that in traditional Islamic ideology music is not encouraged and in the orthodox version of Islam music or dance are forbidden. In contrast, however, at the shrines no festival is complete without devotional music and ecstatic dancing called dhamal. Unlike the slow and measured movements of the Turkish sufi dance of the whirling derveshis, one that has caught the attention of the western world, the Dhamal dance has a riotous and wild quality. Dhamal bears a similarity to "tarantella", the southern Italian ritual of dance discussed by Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement in *The Newly Born Woman.* Sandra Gilbert remarks in the introduction to *The Newly Born Woman* that through the rebellious dance celebrations, the repressed subjects, the women, allow themselves to have "an interlude of orgasmic freedom" (Gilbert in Cixous and Clement 1986, xi). Cixous expands this notion in her article "Celebration and Madness" by arguing that these celebrations allow humans to collectively become "instruments of jouissance" (Cixous and Clement 1986, 23). During Dhamal, the ecstatic dancing figures seem to breathe an air of revolt to the beating of drums. To the horror of those who condemn these practices, there are local intoxicants that the devotees accept.

The annual celebrations are held on the dates that mark the death anniversary of the revered saint which presents an interesting paradox. Shrines advocate the idea of the continuation of spiritual life beyond one's physical existence, thus the celebration of the saint's death on the festival of Urs is also a celebration that places death in a continuum of life. The dead saint's soul is symbolically associated with a bride who is believed to have finally united with God in the event of death. Since red is the most popular colour of brides in South-Asia, the dancers at the festival often put on red coloured tunics or scarves. The emergence of a posthumanist framework problematizes the earlier humanist conceptual divisions between physical and spiritual, life and death, allowing the domain of spirituality to figure as a part of human ontological development. Questioning the humanist ontological construct that posits human beings as wholly rational subjects, it also interrogates the notion of death as a final event. While offering debates and introduction to the contemporary debates on the posthuman, Rosi Braidotti, in *The Posthuman*, reminds the readers that in the present context of the pandemics, of the wars, of the use of drones in conflicts, death and life can be philosophically thought of in a coalescence. The posthuman idea of death helps picture death as a phenomenon

as opposed to a final event. In the context of the death celebration at shrines, the Post humanist perspective on death helps in "thinking with death and not against death." (Braidotti 2013, 129).

Qalandars, the beggar-ascetics, often spotted at shrines are another example of liminal personae, or people belonging to the threshold. Katherine Pratt Ewing, in her book *Arguing Sainthood*, discusses qalandars, the antinomians, at shrines who show up as naked fakirs. Ewing remarks that the qalandar's spurning of proper dress marks their Dionysian impulse to reject all social forms (Ewing 2006, 205). In the chapter entitled " The Qalandar and the proper Muslim", Ewing shares her findings on how society in general view the qalandars as both dangerous and fascinating. The qalandars' unconventional conception of self exemplified through their disregard of a permanent abode, their continuous migration from one shrine to another shrine, renders them unfit to merge and conform to the acceptable standards of a society. At the shrines though, the qalandars are securely retained. Recent scholarship shows how many sufis were in their lifetimes antinomians, figures who transgressed religious sanctions and boundaries. Sufis and saints were rare archetypes who propagated a more inclusive faith, and rarely proselytized. They laid emphasis on equipping humans with empathy so that compassion and kindness could be extended to all.

Historically speaking, the description of the burial places of the mystics reveals how sociological, historical or ethnographic studies have overlooked the role of the shrines as liminal spaces. With a Eurocentric view, British Colonists were unable to understand the diversity and pluralism that was part of the ethos of the Indian Subcontinent; thus their study of Shrines reflects a myopic understanding of places that have defied categorization. It is quite unfortunate that the recent spate of communal violence in India, and terrorist attacks on shrines in Pakistan, have brought orthodoxy and fundamentalist ideas to the fore and have consequently constricted the freedom available at these liminal spaces. A very recent visit to the shrine of Shah Hussain at Lahore in Pakistan affirmed that gender divisions have been placed at the site. The green notice board now says that women are strictly not allowed in the shrine's main arena. In spite of – or perhaps because of – this retrograde restriction, a reinterrrogation of the shrines and shrine culture both in India and Pakistan is crucial.

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