

Visualizing Sindhi Sufism: Zubaida Birwani's Sufi novel and the Making of Progressive Modernist Female Sufi Identity

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Keywords: Female Sufism, visual culture, Sufi novel, cultural production, progressive modernist

Article Information			
Received	7 th Jan 2026	Accepted	11 th Mar 2026
Published	30 th Mar 2026		

Abstract

This research explores the intersection of contemporary visual culture and Sindhi Sufism through the lens of Zubaida Birwani's Sufi novel *Aaradhni*, written in Sindhi. By focusing on the novel's female Sufi protagonist, it reveals how Birwani's work contributes to the formation of a progressive modernist female Sufi identity. The portrayal of female Sufi figures across various visual cultural mediums, such as television and print media, is examined to assess their impact on the evolution of modernist Sufism in Sindh. Additionally, Birwani's role in promoting her Sufi subjectivity and narrative through appearances on Sindhi TV channels, media coverage of her book launch in Karachi, and contributions to Urdu online visual media is discussed. The study highlights Birwani's pivotal role in shaping a contemporary visual culture, redefining female Sufi subjectivity within a modernist intellectual framework.

Introduction

Writing on anthropological approaches to study Muslims and Islam, Gabriele Marranci (2008) in his seminal book *Anthropology of Islam* has challenged the essentialist discourse and representation of Muslims and has invited attention to recognize Muslims as human beings having feelings and emotions. Marranci's social and anthropological approach to Islam places emphasis on 'Muslims rather than Islam' and the way 'they feel to be Muslim' (2008:7-8). In examining the views of Marranci, what is remarkable for my present research on visualizing Sindhi intellectual Sufism, female voice, and protagonist in Pakistan is the emphasis on exploring the visibility of progressive Sufi cultural identity subjecthood of Muslims. This involves delving into the various ways through which individuals express their Muslim identity. This chapter engages with the diverse interpretations of Islam that, according to Marranci, are, 'affected by personal identity, emotions, feelings, and the environments, rather than simply a rational textual determinism [of the authoritative texts of Islam], or orthodoxy versus orthopraxy' (2008:6-8; See also Shahab Ahmed's (2016) seminal work *What is Islam*).

At the outset, by outlining of Marranci's anthropology of Islam framework that highlights the idea of the different ways of feeling and thinking to be Muslim is meant to start conceptually and foreground the discussion of this paper. In doing so, it brings forth the female Sufi agency as it is produced, voiced, and publicly visualized in Sindhi progressive Sufi Muslim thinking¹ and narrative in Pakistan. It addresses the

¹ On the notions of progressive Sufi Muslim thinking, progressive modernist Sufi, this chapter draws on and is attentive to the theoretical commitment to the development of progressive Muslims/Islam framework especially taken up by Omid Safi in his pioneering edited work *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism* (2003). In this regard, it is attentive to the Muslims' commitment to uplift the humanistic values of justice, equality, plurality, tolerance, inclusion, and peaceful coexistence. As has been aptly discussed by Omid Safi in the introduction, it is time for progressive Muslims to realize and strive for the implementation of a vision of justice, goodness, and beauty that constitute the center/core of Islamic tradition. In this chapter, the idea of progressive Sufi thinking is taken up to demonstrate the tendency and orientation towards openness, diversity, inclusion, and religious pluralism especially in the sense of expressing respect and acceptance towards other religious cultural traditions and histories. For

question of how the Sufi mystical tradition of Islam (Schimmel 1975; Trimmingham 1971; Ernst 1997; 1992; Nasr 2007) in present times has been intellectualized, secularised, and made visible/public by a progressive modernist Sindhi female Sufi writer, Zubaida Birwani, in visual culture i.e., in print, online newspapers, TV, and new social media in Pakistan. In that context, this research centrally examines the visual cultural production and presence of the progressive, secular modernist Sindhi female Sufism. By specifically focusing on visual culture of Sindhi Sufism in the case study of female Sufi writer Zubaida Birwani, it brings together four variegated domains (1) Sindhi language Sufi novel *Aaradhni*² which is taken as a print visual material culture (2) *Soormi* magazine in Sindhi language – a print/images visual material (3) Most significantly, herself as a speaker and interviewee in the Sindhi language TV programs which have been uploaded and circulated on YouTube (4) Public ceremony of Sufi novel/book launch in Karachi – this event shows the visibility of a female Sufism in Sindh within public space.

This research study primarily calls attention to the rationalized and secularised role, presence, and visibility of Sindhi female Sufi writer rather than the traditional religious spiritual *murshida*³, *muqaddama*⁴ or woman guide and leader in the Sufi circle as has been discussed by Joseph Hill (2010) on women Sufi leadership in Senegal. In the same vein, this paper also departs from the history, biography, and piety framework of Sufi women in early Islam as has been presented and documented by Helminski (2003) in her seminal work *Women of Sufism: A Hidden Treasure* (See also, in the context of South Asian women mystics and female spiritual authority, Pemberton 2004). This study paper does not account for the idea of the shamanistic religious rituals, Sufism, and women as well which has been discussed by Razia Sultanova (2011) in the historical, cultural context of Central Asia. On the contrary this paper examines the presence and visibility of political, secular modernist intellectualization of Sufi tradition in the literary genre of the novel and the attendant public discourse in the visual space rather than the ritual. The Sufi novel, blog articles in online papers, and TV programs of a female Sufi writer open the inclusive, heterodox, and pluralist discursive space that runs counter to the rigid theocratic interpretation.

Following Victor Turner's (1969) theoretical conceptions, this research paper argues that Zubaida Birwani's Sufi novel *Aaradhni* (2021) employs an anti-structure narrative, challenging rigid Islamist interpretations.

instance, this chapter shows that the lead female Sufi character *Aaradhni* – meaning a female worshiper, devotee, or seeker - has been taken by the author under study from Sanskrit Vedanta tradition. In that regard, the conception of progressive Sufi thinking/narrative in this chapter has been deployed to demonstrate the values and practice of intercultural and transcultural sensibility that transcends the limits of the narrow particularity of religious tradition, but it speaks of humanity beyond fixed religious identity affiliations. Likewise, the notion of progressive Muslim politics connotes the values of openness and inclusion and tolerance. Moreover, 'progressive' conceptualization broadly denotes the rejection of conservative and extremist Islamist religious thinking on the interpretive lines of the Taliban and as a result, portrays the Sufi progressive modernist views against conservative, extremist revivalism. The idea of progressive secular modernist Sufis identifies with the modernizing, non-conformist tendency and orientation in the form of novel writing as well as its applicability as a social thought and philosophy in the current times. For instance, in the *Aaradhni* novel, we will notice the subversive social imagination embodied by female Sufi protagonist that fights against the conservative clerical theology.

² The word *Aaradhni* - meaning female worshiper, devotee or seeker - has roots in the Sanskrit language in Vedic religious culture tradition. It has been taken from the Sanskrit word *Aardhna* meaning worship or devotion. This was confirmed by Zubaida Birwani in a personal communication with me during our WhatsApp audio text conversation on June 30, 2023. In this regard, Zubaida Birwani is of the view that it does not necessarily mean to be associated with Hindi or Hinduism but with ancient Vedic culture which has roots in the Indus Valley civilization. That, she informed, Vedic literature and knowledge were created in the Indus Valley civilization some four thousand years BC on the banks of the Indus River which is located in the present territory in Pakistan and arguably one of the most significant ancient sites of Indus Valley civilization, Moen Jo Daro, is located in the Sindh province of Pakistan. She also explained that the original name of this region which is now called the Indus Valley civilization is the *Sindhu* derived from the *Sindhu* (Indus) river). The *Indus* is the English version of *Sindh* or *Sindhu*. In that sense, it is remarkable to note that Zubaida Birwani is of the view that the word *Aaradhni* has roots in *Sindhu* civilization rather than Hindi or Hinduism. Moreover, it is important to mention that for Zubaida Birwani the use of *Aaradhni* does not refer in any case in the conventional and literal sense of the word the religious worship or ritual of going to and attending religious places. For her, the *Aaradhni* female Sufi character identifies with the notion of the seeker and devotee of the Sufi path, especially the Sufi lover on the path of saving and safeguarding the intellectual tradition of Sufism rather than observing the ritual worship. For that matter, Zubaida Birwani pointed out that in the Sufi novel *Aaradhni* female character does not seem and aim to observe and perform worship or religious rituals. In other words, *Aaradhni* female Sufi protagonist in the novel is on the path of continuing with the tradition of *Mansuri Sufism*.

³ Arabic word for female spiritual guide, master or teacher. This is to point out that in the Sindhi language *murshida* or female guide or master is pronounced *murshidyani*.

⁴ Arabic word for a religious as well as non-religious office title.

Birwani's Sufi-inspired visual and online expressions articulate a unique Muslim identity that transcends strict religious boundaries, promoting pluralism and inclusion. Her work revitalizes rebellious female Sufi characters, highlighting women's visibility and countering religious patriarchy. The appearance and visibility of Zubaida Birwani as a female writer of Sufism in public events such as book launches, TV shows, and literature festivals connote gender sensitivity and women's claim over Sufism and consequently pose a contestation to the male-dominant Sufi structure. This paper shows the Sufi writer and speaker Zubaida Birwani's work as an articulation of the progressive modernist construction and interpretation of Sufism.

The visibility of Zubaida Birwani and her Sufi novel *Aaradhni* came to the fore in the public event of the book launch in Karachi, a metropolitan city and provincial capital of the Sindh province of Pakistan. It was August 2021, Zubaida Birwani, the writer of the Sufi novel *Aaradhni* in the Sindhi language, shared with me and gradually circulated the public announcement on social media as well about the publication of her first debut novel on the subject of Sufism. She shared with me that they are planning the launching event of the novel in Karachi in next month.

Book Launch: Public ceremony of Sufi novel *Aaradhni*



Figure 1. Public Inaugural of Sindhi Sufi novel *Aaradhni* at Arts Council Karachi on October 02, 2021. Speakers including the author Zubaida Birwani (second from left) are seated on the stage.

It was October 02, 2021, the launching ceremony of the Sufi novel *Aaradhni* by Zubaida Birwani was held at Pakistan Arts Council, Karachi. The public event which is literally designated as *Mahuwrat*⁵ or launching of the book was attended by the writer herself along with other literary figures both male and female. In a way, the launch of the Sufi novel at Arts Council Karachi indicated the public announcement, celebration, and visibility of female Sufi writer Zubaida Birwani's literary and intellectual Sufi work. It indicated the secular ritual act of celebrating the work of art and intellectual labor of a writer. Arguably, the public event in the art space of Karachi demonstrated the rational act of modernist Sufism that has emerged in the form of what Carl W Ernst has described as 'the publicizing of a previously esoteric system of teaching through modern

⁵ Sindhi language word for launching or inauguration especially used for literary/book events. It is also used in Urdu and Hindi languages.

communications media' (1997:215). In that context, it's worth noting that the modernist shift in contemporary Sufism has manifested through the rise of new-age spirituality and Sufi movements in both the East and West. This trend, underscored in recent scholarly works on Sufism, accentuates the intertwining of Sufism with pluralistic perspectives. (See, Sedgwick, 2017; Malik and Zarrabi-Zadeh 2019; Malik and Hinnells 2006; Hermansen 2000; Bennett and Alam 2017; Cutsinger 2004).

The public ceremony for the Sindhi Sufi novel by Zubaida Birwani showcased an intellectual, secular modernist performance, and social practice jointly hosted by the literary intelligentsia and modern cultural institutions namely the Arts Council Karachi and MyPublications Sukkur⁶, the publisher of the novel. The public event tended to be a conscious celebration of the secular intellectual cultural production and public visibility of the Sufism.

It appeared in the Sindhi electronic and print media both TV, digital online papers, and offline monthly magazines. For instance, Zubaida Birwani was invited as a guest speaker and writer of the novel in the Morning shows of Dharti TV⁷ on October 05, 2021, and Time News⁸ in the month of June 2022. And the monthly Soormi⁹ or heroine magazine in Karachi printed the December 2021 special issue of Aaradhni to signpost the specific presence and visibility of the Sindhi intellectual modernist Sufi cultural production and female Sufi authorship in current times. For that matter, the December 2021 special number of the monthly Soormi devoted to Zubaida Birwani's debut Sufi novel tends to signify the vibrant intellectual, artistic presence and reception of Sindhi Sufism and the formation of progressive Sufi cultural public sphere in Pakistan. As far as the visual material cultural product is concerned, the monthly Soormi's special number devoted to Zubaida Birwani's Sufi novel printed her photos on the cover as well as inside pages along with opinion and review articles. For instance, the editorial title of the Soormi special number devoted to Zubaida Birwani pointed toward a modernist literary tone. The editorial title identified 'Zubaida Birwani's novel Aaradhni: a fresh fragrance in the literary field' (See, editorial Soormi 2022:2). Professor Nagpal (2022: 6-7), a Sindhi Sikh writer and retired professor of English literature, in his review essay published in Soormi magazine, upheld the idea of Sufi modernism in Aaradhni novel. His view of Sufi modernism in Aaradhni novel is linked to the social potential of esoteric Sufi philosophy to address the crisis of material and corporate development in human society. Professor Nagpal's views call for the reimagining of Sufi modernism in the sense of Sufism's social relevance. He explains in the review essay that,

"Zubaida is a Sufi soul by birth. She is the product of that soil which has roots in Shah Karim [grandfather of eighteenth-century Sufi poet of Sindh Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai]. The usual impression is that the Sufis are socially useless and anachronistic. [It is commonly held idea or conception] that they [Sufis] are ascetics and otherworldly people who remain in meditation and observe spiritual disciplinary practices, and the Sufi is the one who denies worldly affairs. [But] this is totally wrong, and an extremely unfounded accusation on Sufis [that they are socially useless people].

Professor Nagpal further wrote that over two decades Zubaida is striving for social welfare, women's dignity, for the issues of fisherfolk coastal communities, and has engaged in the study of the Indus Delta [water, environment, and mangrove forests], fresh natural water reservoirs, lakes which have now been turned into toxicity and have endangered the life of local communities. On the issue of biodiversity, which is under

6 Name of city in Northern Sindh province.

7 Dharti TV is a Sindhi language TV channel based in Karachi.

8 Times News is the Sindhi-language TV channel based in Karachi. It also has a Sindhi language newspaper under the title *Pahenji Akhbar*. And the morning show on Times News in which Zubaida Birwani was invited as the guest was telecasted under the title 'Pahenji Morning or Our morning'.

9 Sindhi word for female hero, a protagonist, or broadly speaking a fighter and defender.

assault, she raises voices for these issues, writes on them, and organizes conferences [on these issues]. I have seen young boys and girls with her who actively work for the social cause of unprivileged and suffering people” (Nagpal 2022: 7, in monthly Soormi).

Arguably, the point of view expressed by Professor Nagpal on Zubaida Birwani's Sufi personhood and her novel illustrates the Sufi modernist and secular reconstruction rather than the other-worldly ascetic, religious pious experience, and authority. The views of Professor Nagpal tend to envision the socially engaged progressive role and presence of Sufism and it is not devoid of social life, community development, and activist engagement on socio-political issues. In other words, Zubaida Birwani's image as a Sufi woman and writer is visualized to take forward the socially or present-day Sufism which is embedded in the socially progressive values such as love, tolerance, inclusion, rights, and duties for humans and other-than human creatures of God¹⁰. In the same breath, another commentary essay in Soormi by Akbar Soomro (2022:19) on the Aaradhni novel of Zubaida Birwani illustrates love, humanism as well as the posthumanist-informed viewpoint of Sufism. Akbar Soomro commented that,

“Sufiyat [Sufism] in fact identifies with the name of fair ethical treatment towards the creatures of God. It is the name of ethical virtues. Sufism is the fulfilment of the rights of God as well as humans. And, in fact, the fulfilment of the rights of God is to fulfil human rights”.

The tolerant, co-existent, inclusive, nature loving, and pluralist artistic expression and intellectual Sufi heritage of Islam in South Asian cultures have inspired progressive-secular modernists, cosmopolitan social thinkers, writers, and artists. For instance, Leonard Lewisohn's (2017) pioneering essay on Rabindranath Tagore's inspiration from Persian classical Sufi poetry, Sukanya Chakrabarti's (2017) on Tagore and Bengali Baul tradition and Fahmida Hussain's (2001) work on the idea of women characters and image in the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif, the 18th century Sindhi Sufi poet, demonstrate myriad ways of engaging with Sufism beyond its hagiographic textuality and otherworldly individual spirituality. These works draw specific attention to conceptualizing the socially progressive, intellectual understanding and modernist reconstruction and vision of Sufi tradition in contemporary times. Likewise, Zubaida Birwani's Sufi cultural production tends to advance the socially relevant contemporary Sufism that conflate with the ideas of secularised literature, artwork, and production of knowledge by a female Sufi writer rather than the propagation of female spiritual religious authority.



Figure 2. Cover image of the monthly Soormi magazine that contains the special number on Aaradhni Sufi novel of Zubaida Birwani.

¹⁰ In this chapter I have drawn attention to Zubaida Birwani's work in the social/community development sector as an environmentalist activist especially for the development of coastal communities and protection of mangrove forests, her bond and belongingness with ecology and ecosystem of sea, River Indus, and their species, life of fisherfolk and their indigenous knowledge. In that regard, she seems conscious of protecting the life of humans and non-human others and arguably tends to think through the posthumanist conception. In the novel, Aaradhni female Sufi character follows the similar thought and action.

Aaradhni and progressive modernist construction of Sufism

Arguably, the modernist interpretation of Islam in relation to diverse aspects and imagination of Muslim societies, communities, and thoughts may be said to demonstrate a contrast to conservative, extremist, and orthodox clerical Islamists. The Sufi tradition tends to pose a contrast by presenting a critical explanation and reconstruction of Islam. In contemporary times, globally, academic discourse has come to the fore about Islam and Muslim communities that demonstrate progressive, inter-faith harmonious dialogical traditions of thought (See, Safi 2003; Sikand 2004).

In that context, the academic work on the Sufi tradition as multifaceted and progressive voice of Islam has become identified with the most popular intellectual and philosophical discourse and social practice. For example, the contemporary modernist construction of Sufism is instantly conceived to be beyond the conventional ideas and practices of a Tariqah/silsilah – Sufi order headed by a Murshid or Sufi master and followed by a Murid or disciple and its hierarchal succession in the social structure. Contrary to this, contemporary Sufism is interpreted as an intellectual and philosophical movement that contains the potential to have an agency to awaken human consciousness for socio-political change. While presenting his views on Sufism in relation to popular Islam and modernity, Dutch anthropologist Martin van Bruinessen (2009) has cited in his writing ‘Sufism, popular Islam and the encounter with modernity’ that in late twentieth century Sufism, particularly the Sufi orders, has once again shown revival among the intellectuals and educated masses of the Muslim communities. His views show that among the modernist rational circles and scholars¹¹ of the Muslim world, Sufism was often loathed as an irrational school of thought based upon its popular beliefs and practices of superstition. Bruinessen pointed out that the religious reform movements of Islam have had an attitude of rejection towards Sufism. In the same connection, Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell (2007) in a scholarly edited volume Sufism and the ‘modern’ in Islam have brought together pioneering contributions that pointed towards a complex debate on Sufism, reform, and modernity in Islam and Muslim societies (See, for instance in this edited volume, Bruinessen 2007; Silverstein 2007; Villalón 2007; Howell 2007; Genn 2007).

Continuing with Bruinessen and Howell’s study on Sufism and modernism, if we consider contemporary contributions made in the fields of creative culture, literature, art, music, and film in the twentieth century, we can find ample evidence and numerous examples of the intellectual modernist Sufi cultural production. For example, Elif Shafak, the renowned Turkish novelist, author and cosmopolitan political thinker, human rights activist, and advocate of feminism and multiculturalism, her novel the Forty Rules of Love (2011) critically informed Sufi subjectivity and dialogue that takes issue with the conservative clerics. The philosophically articulated poetry of eminent Persian Sufis of the Muslim world, Jalaludin Rumi, Hafiz Shirazi, Saa’di, and Attar among others have become widely known among the academic and artistic circles of the Western world (See, for instance, an edited volume on Hafiz and classical Persian poetry, Lewisohn 2010).

The brief overview in the preceding paragraphs points toward modernist reading and reconstruction of Sufism in global cultural translation contexts and is quite helpful to understand the visibility of the production of Sufi enlightened thought in current times by progressive modernist literary circles in the Sindhi

¹¹ By the modernist rational and scholars, I aim to point toward non-theologian secular nationalists and leftists as well as the broad category of people associated with academia, civil society, human rights, minority rights, and feminist movements. For instance, in post-independence Pakistan, in the Sindh province, the Sindhi secular academic intelligentsia has reinterpreted and reconstructed Sufi tradition in that direction. Rasool Bux Palejo (d. 2018), Sindhi progressive, left leaning intellectual and politician, in his interpretation of Shah Abdul Latif the Sufi poet of Sindh has called attention that he was poet of marginalised social classes. Likewise, in Punjab province, the Punjabi secular academic intelligentsia has portrayed Punjabi language Sufi poets as intellectuals and philosophers rather than miracle-making spiritualists. For instance, in the context of Punjab, Javed Kazi has contributed a book in the Urdu language ‘Punjab Ky Sufi Danishwar – the Sufi Intellectuals of Punjab’ republished by Fiction House, Lahore in 2015.

language and literature in Sindh in Pakistan. Zubaida Birwani's Sufi novel *Aaradhni* and her visibility as a progressive modernist interpreter of Sindhi Sufi tradition is an important case in point.

In Pakistan, the Sindhi progressive modernist writers and intellectuals such as Birwani continue to construct and cultivate strong roots of Sufi identity and progressive narrative. They articulate and associate a progressive public narrative of Sufism based on loving, tolerant, and peaceful values and as a result, present dissent against the conservative and extremist clerical narrative of Islam and militarism. It may be argued that Zubaida Birwani's engagement with Sufism tend to induce the progressive and liberal Sufi ethos. In the following part of this paper, I discuss the main ideas contained in Zubaida Birwani's Sufi novel *Aaradhni* in which the lead female Sufi protagonist *Aaradhni* – the female worshiper or seeker of the path – has been visualized/conceptualized. In the Sufi novel, Birwani has creatively weaved a female Sufi protagonist *Aaradhni* that gives credence to a female rather than male-centric Sufism.

As demonstrated above, the novel presents the rational and progressive interpretative ¹² lens of Sufism, aside from its political activist form, because the author herself has worked as an environmental social worker and activist. Zubaida Birwani has worked for a long time on environmental issues related to the sea, lakes, and river-based coastal communities in Sindh.

I highlight the modernist Sufi perspective presented by Zubaida Birwani in her novel, where characters embody community-building, plurality, and inclusivity across religions. They effectively eliminate antisocial vices like hatred and prejudice, illustrating Sufism as a contemporary social awareness movement. Birwani reinterprets the historical figure Mansur Hallaj, replacing the unruly Sufi tradition with a progressive social ideal. Protagonist Mansur Hussain embodies modernism and rationality, challenging conservative clerics and engaging with students in university settings rather than traditional religious institutions. The characters of Mansur Hussain and *Aaradhni*, the hero and heroine of the novel, represent protest, reform, modernity, and potential which reflect the relationship between Sufism and social progressivism and reformist values for readers. It can be argued that the author has endeavoured intellectually to junction Sufism with modern society's progressive philosophical need.

Another example of this confluence of Sufism and socially modernist values is found in the construct of characters and certain critical phrases which appear at different places in the novel. For example, in the beginning passages, the author discusses the character of Ahmad Shah that demonstrates the modernist construction of Sufism. Birwani writes that Ahmad Shah was a virtuous Sufi man composed of a compassionate nature; he was against the tradition of Piri-Muridi – traditional and hierarchical authority and relationship of Sufi master-discipleship found in Sindh and other places. Unlike them, he worked as a tailor instead of accepting the alms and charity of his disciples. The character of Ahmad Shah of Ghatunagar ¹³ is a symbol of goodwill, selfhood, rationality, and dignity in the novel. The author presents Ahmed Shah as a figure of positive social virtue, distinct from the hierarchical relationship of Pirs and Murids, earning his livelihood through labor instead of reliance on devotees. The novel's progressive portrayal of Sufism, particularly on page thirty-one, depicts Shah Abdul Latif as a Sufi master who transcends traditional Pir-

¹² The rational and progressive interpretative lens of Sufism points toward the trope of Sufi sociopolitical thought rather than seeking superstitious, miracles, and the intercessory spiritual powers of Sufi saints. It refers to the rationalization of Sufi tradition at the hands of modernist intelligentsia such as Zubaida Birwani under study in this chapter.

¹³ The author of the novel creatively takes the Ghatunagar – meaning place/locality/neighbourhood of Ghatu – from the story of Ghatu in the Sindhi Sufi poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, eighteenth-century Sufi poet of Sindh. *Sur Ghatu* or the melody of Ghatu is about fisherfolk divers of Karachi. It may be said that the author of the novel has reintroduced maritime and fisherfolk related heritage in Sindh and as a result, has reclaimed the Sindhi roots and identity of Karachi. In this connection, it may be argued that the Sindhi Sufi literary tradition tends to inspire, reconstruct, and celebrate the history and identity of labour class that is indicative of progressive intellectual construction of Sufism.

Murshid norms. Aaradhni, the female protagonist, voices a reformist perspective, arguing that the Pir-Murid system has harmed society by trapping the downtrodden in religious superstition, preventing them from grasping its underlying wisdom.

The characters of Mansur Hussain, his friend Shibli Kabir and their teacher Professor Shams Jalal in the novel draw inspirations from the non-conformist Mansurian¹⁴ Sufism. They are visualized as key figures contesting clerical extremism and religious conflict. In contrast, the leading female character, Aaradhni, draws her primary inspiration from Rumi and Shah Abdul Latif. Unlike traditional narratives, these characters are not leaders of religious institutions like madrassahs or Sufi khanqahs. Instead, they operate in modern secular academic settings, such as universities and research institutes. They work as anthropologists and environmentalists, focusing on scientifically preserving the ecology of the Indus Delta and promoting the development of coastal communities

The heritage of Sufism which the author of the Sufi novel under study in this paper has penned as an intellectual work has criticized the conservative clerical interpretation. It may be viewed through the perspective of alternative and subversive ideas of heritage as has been aptly discussed by Laurajane Smith in her seminal work *Uses of Heritage* (2006). The conservative and rigid clerical Islamist character, Molvi Hamid Abbas, in the novel, is fearful of the dialogical, critical, and alternative viewpoint of Mansur Hussain, the Sufi intellectual ideal of Aaradhni the female protagonist. Mansur Hussain's intellectual, alternative Sufi ideas and knowledge are disliked by a cleric of a conservative religious seminary.

Aaradhni, the female Sufi protagonist, fights for the freedom of Mansur Hussain and advocates for a critical, alternative Sufi knowledge that opposes conservative religiosity. She seeks to protect the wisdom of Islam that counters extremist views. Confronting cleric Molvi Hamid Abbas, she challenges him with a dialogical interpretation of Islam rooted in Sufi tradition. Through this, Aaradhni emphasizes the importance of Sufi reform and its role in shaping the Muslim public sphere, contesting the teachings of traditional clerics. Aaradhni points him out that,

“You should definitely teach but it should be in accordance with the real spirit of the Quran. Teaching should be given as per the principle given in verses sixth and tenth of Surah Shu'ara which explicitly prohibit chaos, dissension, and sectarianism”.

She continues with her argument,

“Molvi Sahab [Hamid Abbas, cleric of madrassah], the teaching of the Holy Quran is for whole of mankind, there is no hatred in the entirety of the Holy Quran. It teaches love. Hatred has been promulgated by those who have neither grasped the message of the Quran themselves nor have they been able to befittingly teach it to others. I appeal that you should investigate the Quran for true understanding, find guidance from it, and acquire modern knowledge as well so that you may realise how ahead the world has reached.”

Additionally, the author of the novel has showcased the theme of gender equality that contains a critique of male authority and dominance which is prevalent in the Muslim culture and within Sufi tradition as well. In the novel, the leading character Aaradhni is a female Sufi lover who treads on the spiritual path in search of love and is ardent follower of Mansurian Sufism. It may argue that the courageous female Sufi character portrayed in the context of Sindhi Muslim society is a new experiment by the author and in one sense appears to fulfil the progressive Sufi ideal because gender equality is itself a mark of socially progressive thinking, rationalism, inclusion, and democracy.

¹⁴ This refers to Mansur Hallaj.

Zubaida Birwani's novel presents a critique of rigid clerical conservatism and demonstrates a reformist and modernist interpretation of Islam and Muslim societies from a Sufi Muslim subjectivity. The female Sufi is the central subject that Zubaida Birwani has aspired to visualize and cultivate. It tends to communicate a strong possibility for the cultivation of female Sufism. From a gender perspective, Birwani's creation and inclusion of a female protagonist at the forefront in her Sufi novel endeavours to democratise Sufi tradition of Islam. From a Sufi perspective, the Aaradhni female Sufi seeker brings out a dialogue and argument that implies an alternative, progressive identity and feeling to be a Muslim woman.

Zubaida Birwani as a Sufi speaker and writer in visual culture

Building on the previous discussion, the next section of the paper offers further evidence of Zubaida Birwani's active role as a speaker and interpreter of the progressive intellectual Sufi heritage, especially through her appearances on Sindhi TV channels and YouTube. Readers will become acquainted with Birwani's public visibility and the central perspective of Sufism that she has presented within the Sindhi visual media culture. Her presence as a female Sufi writer and speaker in the visual medium, particularly television, aligns with what Asef Bayat (2011) discusses in his seminal article on the politics of presence. He introduces the concept of the "art of presence," which highlights the multifaceted social movements in the Middle East, notably in Iran and Egypt.

The presence of Zubaida Birwani as a Sufi speaker in visual culture dates back to before the publication of her Sufi novel, *Aaradhni*, in 2021. I first encountered her in the Sindhi visual media in 2018 during a weekly program called 'Sufi LaKufi', produced by the Sindh TV channel. The Sufi LaKufi program was entirely dedicated to Sufism and hosted by Professor Nagpal, a Sindhi Sikh devotee of Baba Guru Nanak. This demonstrates that Zubaida Birwani publicly emerged as a female Sufi intellectual in the visual media long before her novel's release. In this paper, I have specifically selected and analyzed her appearances and views on Sufism in two 'Sufi LaKufi' programs aired on Sindh TV and one morning show on Times News, which were produced in October and December 2018, and in June 2022, respectively. Notably, these programs were uploaded and made accessible on YouTube. We will observe that in one of these programs, the host introduces Zubaida Birwani as a trans-religious identitarian Sufi, social activist, environmentalist, and naturist. The host, Professor Nagpal, introduces her as:

"I introduce you to the guest of today [in the program]. But for her introduction I would like to tell you a short poem of Hidayat Ali Najfi [twentieth century Sindhi Sufi poet of Sindh]. It suits to her [Sufi] personhood. 'I am crazy Aashiq, neither Kafir [unbeliever] nor Musلمان [Muslim], I am selfless ecstatic, neither unbeliever nor Muslim'. She [Zubaida Birwani] is a social activist" (SindhTVNews, views of host Professor Nagpal in Sufi Lakufi program with Zubaida Birwani, October 11, 2018).

In view of Zubaida Birwani, Tasawwuf or Sufism is embedded in the conception of beloved. She does not separate the path of Sufism from the people/society. She describes how God granted her the opportunity to find the path of seeking divinity among people. According to her, God revealed the Sufi path to her through her work for the well-being of people. For that matter, Zubaida Birwani's viewpoint of Sufism is not detached from people and society. It may be argued that this viewpoint of Zubaida Birwani leads strongly to conceptualizing the modernist construction of Sufism. At this point, her views presented in the Sufi LaKufi TV program merit attention. She explains that,

"I found the path of seeking God amongst the people, God showed me this path in that way. And the people whom I connected to, the marginalized people, those who were downtrodden people, and the people of the soil. I should say God gave me the opportunity to be connected with these people. And,

then these people have had their problems and troubles, and mostly the issues were related to nature and the environment. For instance, the issue of water, forests, natural resources, and peoples' livelihood. So, these all things helped me to connect with the nature and environment. Because, otherwise, I was born an ordinary human being, in a certain environment in which I had no choice about religion, name, and my socialization in the family" (SindhTVNews, views of Zubaida Birwani in Sufi Lakufi program, October 11, 2018).

In this particular TV program, when asked about her transition from the social development sector—often associated with NGOs—to her interest in Sufism, she emphasized that she does not believe in separating social development work from Sufism. She explained that her engagement in social development projects over the years has naturally led her to Sufism. Her work with coastal communities in the social development sector has deepened her connection to nature, which she believes is essential for understanding Sufism. Her perspective is informed by the Wahdat-al-Wajud Sufi school of thought, which supports her view on the interconnection of social development, nature, and Sufism. She elaborates on this intersection, stating that,

"Because the kind of Sufism we like to support is Wahdat-al-Wajud. Wahdat-al-Wajud is meant that in every object of nature exists the Absolute Entity. So, the Divine is not outside of it [the existence of nature]. As one of stage approaches when you start to learn, and the main source of learning at this stage turns you to remain close to people. And especially those people who are close to nature. In fact, this is a materialist world, but some people, and communities' live lives that are less materialistic. [In my social development work] I learned many things from the fisherfolk of Manchar Lake, from the people of Indus delta; then it helped me to know the essence of nature." (Time News HD, views/interview of Zubaida Birwani in Pahenji Morning, June 15, 2022)

Rodney Harrison (2013) has taken note of the ubiquity of heritage in the current times in the broad spectrum of uncertainty and crises of modernity. He has posed questions regarding the use of historical materials and traces of the past in the present. Harrison attempts to examine 'heritage as a social, economic and political phenomenon of late modernity' (2013:3-4). In the same connection, Brian Graham and Peter Howard (2008) have spelled out the notion of present-centredness of heritage and the way values and meanings are assigned to it in the present. This conceptual work on understanding the heritage in present times takes us to consider the way Sufi tradition is dialogically deployed by modernist writers and social development workers such as Zubaida Birwani. It may be argued here that the experiences of uncertainty and religious conflicts in Muslim societies in the form of religious extremism and violence, the collapse of individual freedom, human rights, and peace have a direct bearing on the flow of Sufi heritage in the present. The tendency of the present-centredness of Sufi tradition in terms of its values and relevance in the present times is illustrated clearly in the views of Zubaida Birwani. In one of her TV talks, she pointed out that,

"Then people ask this question where the Sufism of present times is? [Its relevance today]. My novel is based on this question. If you are only searching for the eight hundred years old Sufis and the old perspective of eight hundred years, then you are wrong. The ideology/philosophy of Sufism is not wrong/irrelevant. If you need to have a Sufi of this current age, then you need to look for it in its relevance to the current age. So, my novel's basis is on this [relevance in the present]. That, who will be/should be the Sufi of the modern era. The Sufi of the modern era will not be the one who observes the dress codes and rituals. It (Sufi of the modern era) has to do with philosophy." (Time News HD, views/interview of Zubaida Birwani in Pahenji Morning, June 15, 2022)

Her views visualize a modernist interpretative stance that places emphasis on relevance, newness, renewal, and rationalization of Sufism in the present. Her vision of Sufism as philosophy seeks to further the idea of its relevance for the society. Her viewpoint also suggests modernist contestation to conventional ritualistic observance and authority within Sufism. She alludes to the present-centredness of the Sufi tradition by

placing emphasis on ideology/philosophy. By doing so, she sounds like the interpreter and inventor of Sufi tradition in modern times. Her vision implies the transfer of Sufi thought rather than the dress codes and rituals which are the hallmark of tradition-bound Sufism of hierarchal and hereditary custodians. In addition, placing emphasis on Sufi philosophy implies at best its relevance for progressive values and practices that have a role to play in the ethical formation of individuals and society. As she explicitly points out that,

“So, Sufism is Nazryio – ideology - you are Sufi in your thought, thinking, philosophy. In your character, in your ethical manner, based on scholarly knowledge” (Time News HD, views/interview of Zubaida Birwani in *Pahenji Morning*, June 15, 2022)

The scholarly literature has devoted much attention to the examination of the idea of the development of Sufi orders in the Muslim world in relation to the Sufi circles premised on the teaching, zikr meditation – remembrance of God - and initiation of disciples and the development of Sufi lodges, lineages, and communities. As has been pointed out by Nile Green in the medieval period the Sufi tradition was transformed ‘from discursive rhetoric to a concrete institutionalization of tradition’ (2012: 11). Likewise, Carl W. Ernst and Bruce Lawrence (2002) in a pioneering work, *Sufi Martyrs of Love* have paid special attention to the Chishti Sufi orders of Indian subcontinent (See, also chapter five on Sufi orders, Ernst 1997).

Against this background, the case study of Zubaida Birwani as a modernist writer of the Sufi tradition departs from her association with the initiation of disciples into a specific Sufi order and lineage. It is important to note that, as a modernist Sufi writer, Zubaida Birwani’s ideals are deeply connected to the Sufi heritage of Islam. Her Sufi ideals, which are reflected in her writings and television talks, draw inspiration from figures such as Mansur Hallaj, the tenth-century Sufi martyr; Jalal al-Din Rumi, the thirteenth-century Sufi poet from Konya, Turkey; Shams Tabrez, the teacher and transformer of Rumi; and Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, the eighteenth-century Sufi poet of Sindh. However, it can be said that Zubaida Birwani does not strictly identify with the traditional Sufi orders in terms of initiation and discipleship. For her, the core focus lies in the teachings, ideologies, philosophies, and thoughts of these esteemed Sufis. In this regard, the transmission and visualization of the Sufi tradition in Zubaida Birwani's life have occurred through Sufi literary socialization and the knowledge imparted by her father. Thus, her understanding has been shaped not by a specific Sufi circle or lineage, but through the influence of Sindhi Sufi literature and the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif during her early childhood school days. Zubaida Birwani clearly articulates her views during her television program, where she explains that,

“But what happened strikingly in my life was that the first literature [in the sense of teachings] which was transmitted to me in my childhood by my father was the *Risalo* [book of poetry] of Shah Abdul Latif. It was gifted to me when I secured position in second grade in my school. This book was beyond the textbooks that I have ever received. The other thing which was transferred to me from my father was the oral memorization of Shah Abdul Latif and I carried forward this tradition. Now I have transferred it to my daughter so that she must be socialized in the same way” (SindhTVNews, views of Zubaida Birwani in *Sufi Lakufi* program, October 11, 2018).

Zubaida Birwani’s views that present a modernist construction and interpretation of Sufism are increasingly visible in TV talks as a guest speaker. She points toward a misrepresentation of Sufism when it comes to designating it as anti-modern and anti-rational. She calls for revisiting the misrepresentation of Sufism in terms of redirecting attention toward its correct/appropriate representation premised on its intellectual philosophical currents. It is here that her views further present a redefined representation of Sufism. She says that,

“We need to revisit it [misrepresentation]. One who sees oneness in all is Tasawwuf. One who serves the human, animals, and birds, etc” (SindhTVNews, views of Zubaida Birwani in Sufi Lakufi program, October 11, 2018).

Arguably, in her progressive political modernist viewpoint, she points out that the Sufi does not erect walls (to separate itself from the rest). She takes up this standpoint in the sense of Sufi’s cultural identity that transcends the fixed boundaries and differences of religion. In that regard, in her modernist Sufi interpretation, the idea of God is presented beyond fixed and sectarian religious identities. She describes her progressive modernist standpoint in following words:

“My viewpoint is that Sufi does not erect walls. And my God is the one who is beyond the walls [boundaries]. When you impose limits on my God, that is exactly not my God. It is the God made by you. My God is an infinite God. And, in the Holy Quran nowhere is mentioned about Rab-ul Musilmeen [God of Muslims], but it is Rab-ul-Aalmeen [God of the universe]. So, the way religion has been marketized in the name of separate temples, and mosques is to disguise and make people fool. Tasawwuf operates parallel to it [which opposes the narrow boundaries, sectarianism, and rigidly defined religious idea of God].” (SindhTVNews, views of Zubaida Birwani in Sufi Lakufi program, October 11, 2018).

Moreover, Zubaida Birwani’s progressive modernist construction and interpretation of Sufism links it to indigenous political discourse. In her redefined representation of Sufism, she envisions the socio-politically resistant role of Sufis. She interprets that Sufism has always challenged the tyranny of states. She points out that Sufi has never been otherworldly or anti-social. She states that,

“We do not need to look at outside [western] world. What do you think of Sufi Shah Inayat? [Sufi martyr and proponent of peasant rights in eighteenth-century Sindh under Mughal India]. He [Sufi Shah Inayat] expressed resistance and posed a challenge to the imperial state. We have the poetry of Bulley Shah [Punjabi Sufi poet], you can see the poetry of Sachal Sarmast [Sufi poet of Sindh]. Today what we speak of [resistance] was present in the discourse of Sachal Sarmast.” (SindhTVNews, views of Zubaida Birwani in Sufi Lakufi program, October 11, 2018).

Women’s visibility at the center of Sindhi Sufism

When discussing the gender dimension of Sufism, particularly in relation to the women’s question, it is essential to recall an incident that occurred in September 2018 at the Sufi shrine of Baba Farid, a twelfth-century Punjabi Sufi poet located in Pakpattan, Punjab province, Pakistan. During the annual Urs festival at this Sufi shrine, a controversy arose regarding two women government officials who were denied entry to the main burial tomb. Reports indicated that women are not allowed to enter the burial site at this shrine (see, for instance, Khalid 2018). In connection with this incident, it is worth mentioning that during my research in the Sindh province of Pakistan, one respondent, a sociology professor, pointed out that Sindh has a more open and inclusive attitude towards women devotees at Sufi shrines compared to Punjab. He emphasized that in Punjab, Sufi shrines often have gender-segregated spaces, and in most cases, women pilgrims are not permitted inside the main burial tomb.

Against this backdrop, Zubaida Birwani’s gender-sensitive approach to Sufism deserves special attention for its role in visualizing a progressive modernist interpretation of Sufism. Her views challenge the anti-women (misogynistic) patriarchal tendencies prevalent in Sufi shrine culture in Pakistan. In a TV program, she recounted the incident at the Sufi shrine of Baba Farid and articulated her position, which supports a progressive modernist vision of Sufism. Birwani’s views illustrate her commitment to an open and inclusive interpretation of Sufism, advocating for women’s full participation in Sufi public spaces, such as shrines.

“After this incident, I decided to visit Pakpattan, In social circles, I was asked that women should boycott [to visit the Sufi shrines]. Because they [male custodians of Sufi shrines] hate women. I said we should reclaim our places. They are our places and not only and exclusively for men. We are human beings. The woman is my gender, but my [primary] identity is a human being. So, my existence is as a human being. And Tasawwuf is all about it [which cultivates acceptance and respect for human beings without gender discrimination].” (SindhTVNews, views of Zubaida Birwani in Sufi Lakufi program, October 11, 2018).

Zubaida Birwani's stance challenges the status quo of the gendered system that discriminates against women at the Sufi shrines. She calls for reclaiming public spaces of shrines for women. She contests the male-dominant shrine spaces and as a result, her stance implies socially progressive values of inclusion and openness for women in Sufism. The theme of the visibility of women or what may be described as the women Sufi protagonists are prominently produced in the online Sufi writings of Zubaida Birwani. Her online blog articles in the Urdu language bring out women characters inspired by the Sindhi folkloric Sufi tradition of Shah Abdul Latif as well as the Hindi Bhakti mystic tradition.

Conclusion

In this paper, we highlight the modernist intellectual engagement of Sindhi female writer Zubaida Birwani with the Sufi tradition. We examine her role as a progressive female Sufi writer and speaker within visual culture, which encompasses television, YouTube, as well as online and print media, particularly novels and magazines. This paper drew attention to the progressive cultural contributions of Sindhi Sufism in contemporary times. The study discusses the notion of female visibility and subjectivity within Sindhi Sufism, emphasizing the importance of recognizing an alternative way of being a Muslim. We focus on the character of Aaradhni, a female Sufi protagonist who seeks love and serves as both an interpreter and innovator of progressive modernist intellectual Sufism in Zubaida Birwani's Sufi novel. Aaradhni, along with the author's perspective, envisions Sufism as socio-politically relevant rather than merely an otherworldly ascetic practice.

This chapter has shown that at the centre of Sufi writer Zubaida Birwani's view, it is the Nazryio – translated as ideology, philosophy, or thought – that merits attention when it comes to defining and engaging with Sufi heritage in the present. In that regard, we have argued that her vision and standpoint illustrate a progressive modernist construction of Sufism. By looking at the Sufi modernist construction, this research paper has shown the vitality of Sufi tradition at interpretive and discursive levels that tend to cultivate socially progressive values such as tolerance, inclusion, religious pluralism, and interfaith harmony and most significantly the leading presence and role of women in Muslim societies.

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Declarations
Authors' Contribution:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ All Authors Conceptualization, and intellectual revisions, Data collection, interpretation, and drafting of manuscript▪ The authors agree to take responsibility for every facet of the work, making sure that any concerns about its integrity or veracity are thoroughly examined and addressed
Conflict of Interest: NIL
Funding Sources: NIL
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How to Cite:
Visualizing Sindhi Sufism: Zubaida Birwani's Sufi novel and the Making of Progressive Modernist Female Sufi Identity. (2026). Wah Academia Journal of Global Religions, 2(1), 147-161. https://doi.org/10.63954/jbophm87
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