



The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India

Shemeem Burney Abbas

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The female voice plays a more central role in Sufi ritual, especially in the singing of devotional poetry, than in almost any other area of Muslim culture. Female singers perform sufiana-kalam, or mystical poetry, at Sufi shrines and in concerts, folk festivals, and domestic life, while male singers assume the female voice when singing the myths of heroines in qawwali and sufiana-kalam. Yet, despite the centrality of the female voice in Sufi practice throughout South Asia and the Middle East, it has received little scholarly attention and is largely unknown in the West. This book presents the first in-depth study of the female voice in Sufi practice in the subcontinent of Pakistan and India. Shemeem Burney Abbas investigates the rituals at the Sufi shrines and looks at women's participation in them, as well as male performers' use of the female voice. The strengths of the book are her use of interviews with both prominent and grassroots female and male musicians and her transliteration of audio- and videotaped performances. Through them, she draws vital connections between oral culture and the written Sufi poetry that the musicians sing for their audiences. This research clarifies why the female voice is so important in Sufi practice and underscores the many contributions of women to Sufism and its rituals.

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