

SACRED SCREENS: GENDERED READINGS OF THE JAALI IN HAZRAT NIZAMUDDIN DARGAH

BALPREET SINGH

Research Scholar, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the *jaali*—the intricately carved stone lattice—at Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah as a spatial and symbolic marker of women's devotional experience. While the dargah is celebrated as a site of inclusivity within South Asian Sufi practice, the restriction that prevents women from entering the inner sanctum relegates them to the threshold, where prayer is mediated through the *jaali*. This paper offers a feminist historiographical reading of the *jaali* at Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah, examining how women's devotional practices have been spatially and narratively circumscribed across time. While male-centered chronicles and institutional traditions emphasize saintly authority and custodial lineage, women's roles are rendered marginal, remembered primarily as spectators at the threshold rather than as active participants within the sanctum. The *jaali*, as both architectural device and historical marker, embodies this exclusion by preserving a boundary that is at once physical, symbolic, and historiographical. Drawing on feminist critiques of history-writing, the study interrogates how notions of purity, modesty and spiritual legitimacy have been inscribed onto the female body and reified in sacred architecture. By situating the *jaali* within a feminist historiography of religious space, the paper highlights the need to recover women's devotional subjectivities from the margins of both practice and history, reimagining the archive of Sufi piety as one shaped not only by exclusion but also by negotiation, improvisation, and resistance.

Keywords: dargah, *jaali*, feminism and sacred.

INTRODUCTION

Women's access to public space in South Asia has been constrained by a variety of factors: social attitudes, family pressures, even public infrastructure and facilities. In the 2011 book *Why Loiter*, authors Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade argue that 'loitering'—simply "hanging out" together in public—is a truly radical act for South Asian women. They argue that for a city to be a truly open and equal space, women must have the freedom to loiter wherever and whenever they please, just like men can. Even sacred spaces, such as Sufi shrines, are not immune from these constraints around gender identities, including women.

FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

Within the frame of feminist historiography, which incorporates the study of women's roles and experiences at Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah from a feminist perspective, the paper explores the intricate ways in which women have been engaged with, represented through and contributed to the cultural and spiritual life surrounding the sacred space of Delhi Dargah. Viewing the dargah from a feminist lens emphasizes how gender roles and spatial dynamics intersect in this revered Sufi shrine, especially in relation to the *jaali*, a latticed screen, that traditionally separates men and women in many sacred Islamic spaces. The delicately designed *jaali* screens are both practical and symbolic

elements of the architecture, practically allowing light and air to flow through while maintaining privacy of women. Symbolically, the *jaali* acts as an avenue for women's spiritual involvement, facilitating seclusion, yet fostering a connection with the divine.

Similar to other marginalized identities seeking solace in sacred sites, women also find refuge and spiritual connection in Sufi environments such as Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah, where they can express personal prayers and attain serenity among the hardships of life. The atmosphere of the dargah, imbued with music, recitation, and collective devotion, offers them a comforting sanctuary, allowing them to feel spiritually embraced and seen, even from behind the traditional boundaries of the *jaali*. But still in dargahs, there are limits to women's access and worship. In many Sufi dargahs including Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah, women are allowed to worship and congregate only in the courtyard surrounding the shrine, but they are not allowed into the innermost area containing the tomb of the saint. This tradition is justified by both men and women, who cite menstruation, impurity, safety, historical tradition, and other reasons for not allowing women into the innermost areas of these shrines.

This Indo-Islamic design of *jaali* serves not just as a physical restraint on gender roles but also as a medium for women's spiritual engagement. Religious critic Fatema Mernissi in her works *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society* and *Gender Roles: Women's Rebellion & Islamic Memory* have discussed the ways Islamic practices and architecture enforce gendered spaces, but also how women have historically navigated these spaces to claim spiritual engagement. Her works do not explicitly discuss the *jaali* or its use in sacred spaces like Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah; however, her broader arguments on gender, religious spaces, and cultural practices provide an insightful framework to interpret the *jaali*'s significance. Her perspective encourages a reinterpretation of gendered spaces within Islam and views elements like the *jaali* as symbols of both separation and spiritual participation that women creatively negotiate.

In *Ethnocentrism: Beyond the Veil*, Mernissi explores how Western and Muslim societies often view each other through ethnocentric lenses, particularly concerning gender roles. She critiques the Western tendency to misinterpret or simplify Muslim women's experiences, often perceiving them solely as victims of oppression. She argues that this reduction of interpretation ignores the nuanced ways Muslim women actively resist, navigate, and subvert patriarchal norms within their cultural and religious contexts. She emphasizes that Islamic teachings on gender are complex and have been interpreted in diverse ways across history and cultures. Within paradigm of this notion, Mernissi calls for a deconstruction of both Western and Islamic assumptions, urging a more empathetic, multidimensional understanding of Muslim women's agency beyond stereotypical portrayals of veiling and submission.

Furthermore, Mernissi discusses how Western misinterpretations of veiling or physical barriers simplify the ways Muslim women interact with spaces. Extending her view to the *jaali*, one could argue that Mernissi would see it as a physical symbol that women adapt to suit their own spiritual needs, rather than merely a restriction imposed by patriarchal norms. For her, gendered boundaries in sacred spaces are often socially constructed rather than religiously mandated, and women, through acts of resistance, create their own ways of accessing spiritual communion. In this context, the *jaali*—a carved lattice or screen—functions as a physical and symbolic boundary in Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah, separating men from women and simultaneously creating a layered space where gendered gazes intersect. Traditionally, women are not permitted inside the innermost sanctum of many dargahs, but they participate deeply in the ritual life of the dargah, often viewing the tomb of

Nizamuddin Auliya through the *jaali*. This screen becomes a focal point for gendered spirituality, as it enables women to experience closeness to the saint while remaining within culturally prescribed boundaries.

In *Gender Roles: Women's Rebellion & Islamic Memory*, Mernissi emphasizes that many interpretations of Islamic traditions, including gendered spaces, are shaped by historical choices rather than core Islamic values. This lens suggests that the *jaali*, while often seen as a barrier, can become a medium through which women carve out a unique, sanctified space that both respects traditional codes and enables their active participation. Mernissi's work encourages viewing such practices as nuanced and open to reinterpretation, allowing women to engage with spirituality in meaningful ways even within constrained environments. In the Sufi space, this design is representation of women's spiritual practice. In Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah, women are not merely passive observers at the dargah; they actively shape and reinterpret their own relationship with the shrine, often subverting the boundaries imposed upon them by tradition. Through practices like viewing through the *jaali*, making offerings, or reciting prayers, women create a participatory, embodied spirituality that challenges reductive interpretations of their roles within Islamic and Sufi spaces. The *jaali*, though restrictive in form, has been appropriated by women as a means of personal connection with the saint, enabling a "seen but unseen" approach to their participation in the rituals of the shrine.

Mernissi's feminist analysis underscores how women find creative ways to assert their agency within structural confines. She might interpret the *jaali* at Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah not just as a barrier but as a tool that women use to subtly resist marginalization. Viewing through the *jaali* could symbolize women's assertion of presence, a method of "seen yet unseen" worship that reinforces their spiritual agency. For Mernissi, these acts are not passive but active subversions that affirm women's defiance and adaptability within prescribed gender roles.

The cultural portrayal of women in Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah, as captured in photographs, films, and popular media, often highlights them as peripheral figures. The cinematic and photographic representation of women peering through the *jaali* presents a visual trope of women as "outside-looking-in," emphasizing the duality of presence and separation. However, feminist interpretations argue that this image signifies resilience, reflecting women's determination to assert their presence even within confined spaces. Through this symbolic gaze, they connect with a tradition that ostensibly marginalizes them but still continuously reshaped by their participation through architectural design of *jaali*.

Through the lens of feminist perspective and spatial theory, it can be viewed how the women's presence and practices challenge the male-dominated sacred space. In Sufi shrines like Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah, women continuously reinterpret the designs of their constraints like *jaali* to mark their dissent against the established cultural codes and assigned gender roles as a social construct to them in the premises of sacred spaces. Henri Lefebvre's idea of "lived space" and Edward Soja's "third space" both refer to individuals' subjective experiences of space, reveal how women reinterpret their spatial boundaries at the dargah, particularly through rituals, prayers, and the use of the *jaalias* both the notions emphasise the interaction between an individual and a space. While the *jaali* separates, but it also becomes a medium through which women assert their spirituality and agency. This dual function aligns with feminist notion that spaces are relational and gendered, reflecting ongoing negotiations of power and identity. Both of these thinkers, Fatema Mernissi and Henri Lefebvre, implicitly emphasize the feminist reinterpretation of spatial designs like *jaali* within

the premises of Sufi shrines like Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah.

In a nutshell, the use of *jaali* (intricate lattice screens) at the Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah serves more than a decorative element—it functions as a symbolic and physical mediator between visibility and invisibility, public and private, particularly in the context of women's access to sacred spaces. The *jaali* allows women pilgrims to observe the main sanctum without being fully visible, embodying a subtle dissent though reserving a sense of modesty that aligns with the socio-religious norms of seclusion (*purdah*). In this case, the *jaali* becomes a metaphor for women's negotiated presence in religious life: they are neither completely absent nor fully present. This spatial design thus reflects a unique intersection of religious orthodoxy and feminist resistance, where the architecture itself becomes a site for the enactment of fluid, hybrid identities for women. Thus, *jaali* creates a space within a space of fluid identity for women in Sufi shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah.

CONCLUSION

The *jaali* at Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah stands as more than a carved lattice of stone; it is a historical text that encodes the silences, negotiations, and exclusions that have structured women's devotional lives across centuries. Read through the lens of feminist historiography, the *jaali* reveals how gendered boundaries of sacred space are not merely architectural but historiographical, sustained by narratives that privilege male authority and erase female presence from the sanctum. Yet, this boundary is neither absolute nor uncontested. Women's continued acts of devotion at the threshold, their oral testimonies, and their legal and cultural challenges testify to an ongoing struggle to inscribe themselves into the history of the dargah. By foregrounding these counter-narratives, the *jaali* can be reimagined not only as a symbol of exclusion but also as a site where resistance and resilience take shape. The feminist historiographical task, then, is to recover and revalue these lived practices, to question the silences of dominant histories, and to open space for alternative archives of memory and devotion. In doing so, we move toward a more inclusive understanding of Sufi sacred space—one that acknowledges women not as peripheral spectators but as integral agents in the making and remaking of devotional history.

WORKS CITED

- Mernissi, F. (1987). *Beyond The Veil, Revised Edition: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. Indiana University Press.
- Mernissi, F. (1996). *Women's Rebellion & Islamic Memory*. Zed Books Ltd.
- Mohanty, C. (1988). Under Western Eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review*, 30(1), 61–88. <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1988.42>
- Phadke, S., Khan, S., & Ranade, S. (2011). *Why Loiter?: Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets*. Penguin Books India.
- Saniotis, A. (2012). Attaining the mystical body: Indian Sufi ascetic practices. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 23(1), 65–83. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1757-6547.2012.00165.x>
- Sobers-Khan, N. (2018). Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and ecological thought in the medieval ruins of Delhi. *Global Intellectual History*, 6(4), 560–564. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23801883.2018.1520951>