



Vol. 3 No. 3 (March) (2025)

Taufiq Rafat's *Foothold*: Subverting the Grand Narrative of Sufism

Madeeha Dustgir

In charge Undergrad, Department of English Linguistics and Literature (DELL),
Riphah International University Sahiwal Campus, Sahiwal, Punjab, Pakistan
Email: medeeha.dustgir@riphahsahiwal.edu.pk

Muhammad Aziz Raza

Head of Department of English

University College of Management and Sciences (UCMS), Khanewal

Mufeeza Rauf

MPhi English, Government College University, Faisalabad

Abstract

The present study aims to explore the renewal in the standards of Sufism that is based on the traditional parameters of historical standards. Sufism is the name given to the mystical movement within Islam. A Sufi is a Muslim who dedicates himself to the quest after mystical union with his Creator. The basic purpose of this research is to connect faith and knowledge with Sufis as a leader. According to Taufiq Rafat no one can follow the traditional standards of Sufism in present era. He wants to say through his play there is need to make a review in the standards of evaluating the Sufi figure and there is need of transformation in the myth of Sufism according to the present condition of Sufism. However, Taufiq Rafat's play *Foothold* challenges the traditional and established Sufi figure. The play presents phenomena of gaining God's pursuit by creating a balance between the physical and spiritual world. The play creates a new and unconventional kind of Sufi, who is not cut off from the physical world, and faces and searches the solution of his problems. The Play presents a Sufi who leads a normal life and achieves his contentment in being able to spend a life which solves everyday affairs. The major concern of this study to explore the reality behind overall scenario. To find out the truth between actual Sufis and modern and political Sufis or redefine (Saleem seems a political figure more than a sufi character). This research explores the Sufi of Taufiq Rafat exists on a common plane with the ordinary humans rather than an elevated spiritual plane.

Keywords: Sufism, Faith, Rationality, Truth, Religion, Anagnorisis, Identity

Introduction

Sufism is a mystic tradition within Islam that surrounds a various range of beliefs and practices dedicated to Divine love and the progression of the elements of the Divine within the individual human being. The name is Arabic in origin, being derived from the word suf meaning "wool"; the Sufis were distinguishable from their fellows by wearing a habit of coarse woolen cloth, in time when silks and brocades had become the fashion of the wealthy and mundane minded, symbolic of their renunciation of worldly values and their abomination for physical



Vol. 3 No. 3 (March) (2025)

comforts (Arberry 8). Practitioners of this tradition are known as "Sufis" generally, though some senior members of the tradition reserve this term for those who have attained the goals of the tradition. Although some people refer to this tradition as Sufism, others refer to it as the Sufi Way (Nicholson 4-6). Historically, Sufism became "an inconceivably prominent part of Islam" and "One of the most prevalent and omnipresent aspects of Muslim life" in Islamic Civilization from the early medieval period onwards, when it began to penetrate nearly all major aspects of Sunni-Islamic life in regions extending from India and Iraq to the Balkans and Senegal. Important contributions in writing are ascribed to Uwais al-Qarani, Hasan of Basra, Harith al-Muhasibi and Said ibn al-Musayyib. Ruwaym from the second generation of Sufis in Baghdad, was also a convincing early figure, as was Junayd of Baghdad; a number of early practitioners of Sufism were followers of one of the two (Cyril). The Sufi who sets out to seek God calls himself a 'traveller' (salik); he advances by slow 'stages' (maqamat) along a 'path' (tariqat) to the goal of union with Reality (fana fi 'l-Haqq). The 'path' explained by Nicholson's model of established Sufi, that we now possess, comprises of the following seven 'stages', each of which is the result of the 'stages' immediately preceding it--(1) Repentance, (2) abstinence, (3) renunciation, (4) poverty, (5) patience, (6) trust in God, (7) satisfaction. The 'stages' construct the abstinent and ethical discipline of the Sufi, and must be carefully distinguished from the so called 'states' (ahwal, plural of hal), which forms a similar psychological chain. There are ten 'states'--Meditation, nearness to God, love, fear, hope, longing, intimacy, tranquility, contemplation, and certainty. While the 'stages' can be achieved and mastered by one's own efforts, the 'states' are spiritual feelings and dispositions over which a man has no control. The 'path' of Sufi is not finished until he has crossed all the 'stages', making himself perfect in every one of them before advancing to the next and has also experienced whatever 'states' it pleases God to bestow upon him. Then, and only then, is he permanently elevated to the higher levels of consciousness which Sufis call 'the Gnosis' (ma'rifat) and 'the Truth' (haqiqat), where the 'seeker' (talib) becomes the 'knower' or 'gnostic' ('arif), and realises that knowledge, knower, and known are One (Nicholson 28). According to Nicholson's model of established Sufi, a Sufi is a traveller or a seeker who completes all the stages of Sufi path and experiences the required ten states to get the goal of union with God. These states (ahwal) emerge in the result of completing the required seven stages. If any of the stages remains unaccomplished his goal of unity with God cannot be achieved or he cannot become a knower or a Sufi.

In the play *Foothold* the protagonist Saleem, a young stimulating man is in the search for truth. He hazards himself into finding the truth but in the end, he is lonesome. However, he finds the truth that life is as complicated as we make it. Rafat's protagonist deviates from Sufi path of union with God. Because he comes to know that none can survive within traditional standards of Sufi figure. Rafat's play *Foothold* challenges the traditional symbolic figure of Sufi tradition. Actually Rafat challenges the traditional standards of Sufi figure which cannot be attained fully in modern time and supports the Darwinian concept of the survival of the fittest.

Literature Review

Reviewing Taufiq Rafat's *Foothold*, a cover story and conflict between self and



Vol. 3 No. 3 (March) (2025)

identity from the previous literature can be taken as a critical overview of novel and self and identity. The paper deals with the angst of the journey of life in accordance with Saleem who is saint and a poet. It is through the character of Saleem that the conflict between self and identity is highlighted in the play as Rafat displays a marginalized character who is struggling because he can feel the angst of his existence and is in search of the self. According to Jung, "The self is our life's goal, for it is the completest expression of the fateful combination we all call individuality" (Jung 422). However, this effort to discover his own self conflicts with his identities. The society expects him to conform to the norms and play out the societal roles but Saleem refuses to conform to those roles (Baig).

Still another research reviews the *Foothold* as a novel with few characters creating a duo Saleem and other characters, He explains: "Religion is way more than just fasting and pilgrimage" (Rafat 5). He declares it is not just a prayer it is way more than that. He is immediately guided to worship and be a Malang. They are told by Saleem that he has been a sole worshiper in a destroyed mosque. He believes that prayer is more like a petition to God, just to give it a purpose (Zahra). The play *Foothold* starts with a scene at a railway station, which indicates a temporary place, a waiting, transit area where one has to catch a train to leave for a destination. This setting of the first scene alone is a metaphor for an existential thought because one begins to contemplate what has happened and the reason behind it. Not only the burden of the past is distressing but the horror of future also enforces one to cower, to vacillate between the haves and have not's. In fact, the only meaning of 'existential' is to find meaning, which indicates a quest and human being's quest is to know more than they can and to do more what they can (Malik).

Another Article deals with metaphorical journey of Taufiq Rafat known for his quiet behaviour and poetry filled with deeper meanings remindful of the modern English poet T.S. Elliot, is concerned in *Foothold* with the individual's existential and spiritual quest. Saleem, played with a lot of emotion by a Kinnaird student in the play, draws on the angry nihilistic idealism and romantic ascetic commonly found in the intellectual bilingual elite of post-partition Pakistan. *Foothold* teaches us a lesson to take responsibility and control of our fate in a world pervaded with confusion and uncertainty (The News)

Study highlights in Taufiq Rafat's play *Foothold*, Saleem's character portrays the conflict between an individual's journey of discovering the Jungian self, and his social identities. Saleem preferred the journey over his social identities but this led to his marginalization. He became a vagrant in the society. The journey led him away from the society as he denies to conform to the societal roles. The conflict emerges from his desire to obtain the totality of personality for which he wanted to wander alone. Saleem refused to play out his societal roles and so a clash is presented in the play as Saleem's quest for discovering his self leads him towards renouncing his social identity. In this manner, the play presents the rise of the conflict when Saleem abandons his identities in order to continue his journey of discovering the Jungian self. He got over the marginalization and yet the quest to know himself continued and an agreement was built between Saleem's quest for becoming an individuated being and his identities (Baig).

The article "Ritual and Charisma in Naqshbandi Sufi Mysticism" by Ken Lizzio is an ethnographic study of an Islamic mystical (Sufi) order based in the tribal area of Pakistan. By using broader methods and theory more appropriate to the



Vol. 3 No. 3 (March) (2025)

analysis of mysticism, the article aims to challenge previous ethnographic studies of the Sufi orders that attributed their existence largely to social, political, and economic factors. By more clearly defining both the nature of saintly charisma and the mystical ritual process, it argues that the *raison d'être* of the orders is the cultivation of deeper states of consciousness. It concludes by calling for a new theoretical framework, a “transcendental anthropology” more appropriate to elucidating mystical states and practices (Lizzio).

A really transcendental anthropology developed and refined across disciplines, can open up exciting new areas of research into Sufism and other mysticisms. In this attempt, anthropologists and religious researchers need not be rivals, but collaborators, each bringing their specific disciplinary strategies and insights to the many inquiries that beg investigation (Trimingham).

This research review's purpose is to help to understand the different aspects posed by research that Sufis and Sufism are attached with Islam. Sufis in fact represent the Islam. They play fundamental role in the configuration of Islamic societies. Sufi has a personal influence in the society. But the main focus of this study is on Rafat's protagonist Saleem who is a symbolic figure of modern or political Sufi. Saleem does not fulfill the requirements of a real Sufi and returns to his mundane life.

Statement of Problem

The study draws the attention of the writers and readers of Sufism about the Rafat's negation of traditional standards of Sufism in the play *Foothold*. Saleem's character has been studied under the lens of Sufism and Mysticism. However, this research aims to further explore the realm of Rafat's protagonist and investigate his divergence from the traditional Sufi, as dictated by the Nicholson's model of established Sufi. This research raises the issue of Rafat's protagonist who does not fulfill the requirements of a traditional Sufi and makes a renewal in traditional Sufi path.. This research also categorizes Sufism on the basis of this divergence. It highlights and establishes the parameters of renewal in the Sufi tradition.

Objectives

There are some objectives for conducting this research. To explore the relationship between life, man and God. To explore the reality behind overall scenario. To find out the truth between actual Sufis and modern and political Sufis or redefine. To find out the positivity and negativity something like optimism and pessimism. To explore faith and truth. To present his (Taufiq Rafat) point of view .To explore the journey of Saleem that how it was or how it is. To explore the relationship between political values and society. To explore Saleem seems a political figure more than a Sufi character.

Research Questions

Who is a Sufi figure? How much Rafat's Sufi figure is different from traditional Sufi figure? What are the assumptions and presumptions of a traditional Sufi? What are the barriers in the way of traditional Sufi figure?

Significance of the Study

The present study gives the significance to enrich the writer's knowledge about



Vol. 3 No. 3 (March) (2025)

the works of literature, especially in analyzing the meaning of Sufism. Moreover, this research explores the concept of Sufism in Pakistani literature in English. Moreover, It helps the reader to know about the various issues aroused during Sufism. It provides awareness about the real picture or incidents about originated saints and political one's as well.

Research Framework

The mode of the research is qualitative and descriptive in nature. The analysis is based on the scrutiny of Taufiq Rafat's *Foothold*. The tool of data collection in this study is based on library research and document analysis. The primary data source consists of selected texts such as Arberry's *Muslim Saints and Mystics* and Nicholson's "The Mystics of Islam". The secondary data source consists of criticism such as different books and various articles which have relation with the research, including books, homepage, research approach books and other relevant material. The present research focuses on the selected novel with theoretical paradigm of Nicholson's model of established Sufi. This research follows the qualitative research paradigm.

Discussion and Analysis

Taufiq Rafat has contributed to Pakistani English Literature through his play *Foothold*. The play revolves around the saint Saleem and his struggle in the journey of life. The study draws the attention of the writers and readers of Sufism about the Rafat's negation of traditional standards of Sufism in the play *Foothold*. Saleem's character has been studied under the lens of Sufism and Mysticism. However, this research aims to further explore the realm of Rafat's protagonist and investigate his divergence from the traditional Sufi, as dictated by the Nicholson's model of established Sufi. This research raises the issue of Rafat's protagonist who does not fulfill the requirements of a traditional Sufi and makes a renewal in traditional Sufi path this is a three-act play also staged by the Kinnaird College's Najamuddin Dramatics Society. Penned by late poet Taufiq Rafat, it was performed on Friday and Saturday in front of a large audience. The hall was filled with silence, infrequent hilarity and rumble of ovation spoke a lot about the performance of the actors. Dialogues, direction and set were brilliant.

The play starts with a scene depicting a typical Pakistani railway station; a residence of dirt, passengers and homeless squatters. The fallen leaves add a dash of pathos to the set that is home to the protagonist, Saleem, station master and two homeless men. A rustic woman is waiting for the train, while Saleem and the two squatters discuss 'truth'. As the two are trying to reach the truth through religion and faith, Saleem thinks differently. He explains: "Religion is way more than just fasting and pilgrimage" (Rafat 73). He says it is not just a prayer it is way more than that. Saleem tells them that he has been a sole worshiper in a destroyed mosque. He believes that prayer is more like a petition to God, just to give it a purpose. "A prayer is an appeal to God not to lessen suffering, but to give it a motive" (Rafat 6). A disenchanted Saleem goes to his friend Mustafa's house, where he meets another friend Ali, and his love interest Nasreen and mother Fatima who try to bring him back on the "right track". Nasreen's is a hopeless love and she complains of Saleem's 'sympathy' and tells him "your sympathy is worse than your cruelty" (Rafat 37). She is invincibly sad and wishes that she had never met him "Your influence is pervasive. I don't know if it is a good or bad



Vol. 3 No. 3 (March) (2025)

influence: but it's there. I wish I had never met you" (Rafat 41).

When they realize it is futile to argue with Saleem, they just go on and taunt him. "Saints are dangerous folk hiding their sins behind their beards" (Rafat 59). In *Foothold*, when Saleem accepts in the first flashback that "I am a misfit here. I must get out before it's too late" (Rafat 28), Ali confronts him with, "Who is happy anyway? We all are misfits when you come to think of it. But there is nothing you can do that can change things one bit. Everyone needs a job" (Rafat 28). The play reminds us of Buddha's quest for reality. It is journey of discovering the truth in a modern setting. Saleem goes through anger, taunts and agony but as you reach the conclusion of the play he begins to realize that "illumination" comes through a composed life. "We only begin to live when we have accepted life as an anti-climax" (Rafat 107). This is exactly what the station master makes him learn by showing him the railway track and the two lines that run parallel, symbolizing a composed and a balanced life. Therefore, towards the end he finds the brutal truth.

In the play *Foothold* the protagonist Saleem, a young stimulating man is in the search for truth. He hazards himself into finding the truth but in the end, he is lonesome. However, he finds the truth that "life is as complicated as we make it" (Rafat 110). Rafat's protagonist deviates from Sufi path of union with God. Because he comes to know that none can survive within traditional standards of Sufi figure. "O my dreams of faith remains faithful to me" (Rafat 111). Rafat's play *Foothold* challenges the traditional symbolic figure of Sufi tradition. Through the character of Saleem, Taufiq Rafat presents a character that has the courage to listen to his inner voice and revolt against the majority. As a representative of the Jung's exceptional individuals, Saleem belong to the group of people who are "successful in worldly terms; but who in the mid period of their lives, found that the world has become stale and unprofitable. Such people were seeking a meaning to their lives" (Jung, 1998, 21). Likewise, Saleem was headed towards worldly success with the new job, but he admits, that he is not happy with the circumstances when he says, "it's here, inside me. And it hurts" (Rafat 33). Subsequently, he decides to seek his own path as he was "worn out with trying to compromise" and live the life of conformity (Raft 36). Saleem begins a journey as a struggle to make himself a saint. Ali remarks to Saleem, "You are afraid to know yourself" but it is the desire of Sufi figure that forces Saleem away from the normal life (Rafat 39). This contradiction makes Saleem a person who is cut off from physical world and it is his aim to overcome this contradiction to become a better person. In doing as such he expects to get an individuated self through which he will rise as a separated individual who will have an integrated personality. Saleem searches for this answer by seeking his own path in life, in which he said he was in search of "faith" (Rafat 30). However, the society demands him to obey to the norms and play out the societal jobs but, Saleem spurns to obey to those jobs. He himself recognizes that it was not the "madness of youth" that drove him away, it was the "refusal to conform" (Rafat 96). Ali says to Saleem when he announces his plan to embark on his own spiritual journey, "You are tied with too many strings here to break away like this. Don't think of just yourself. Consider what it will mean to the others" (Rafat 36). These strings are the social jobs that Saleem had to obey according to the society. However, he refuses to do so as a result, his desire to discover his real saint conflicts with his political saint. Nasreen is Saleem's fiancé and when he resigns from his job, she is



Vol. 3 No. 3 (March) (2025)

devastated as it threatened the “lovely future” (Rafat 34), they had for themselves. She constantly asks him to give up the plan of leaving and makes an effort to make him realize what he gave up. The political identity of Saleem requires for him to accept the job and pay attention to his responsibility as Nasreen’s fiancé. Nasreen questions Saleem, “How could you do this to me?” (Rafat 35), and during the serious dialogue, the conflict between Saleem’s search for discovering Sufi and redefined Sufi as a fiancé is highlighted.

In addition, Fatima, Saleem’ mother, likewise questions his choice. She tries to stop him by causing him to understand his obligation as a child. This character of Saleem, likewise, clashes with his battle to find his Self and have an integrated personality. His identity marker, his mother, says, “Children have a duty towards their parents. It is obedience” (Rafat 70). She calls him “irresponsible” (Rafat 67), as he fails to obey the job of son. This is a result of the conflict between his social job as a son and his efforts to acquire an integrated self where he would understand himself. As the society does not bolster his way of finding himself, so he faces marginalization in the society. His spurn to obey to his social identities leads to his establishment as a marginalized character in the play. As on one hand, self is the integrated personality of a person, but on the other hand, identity represents the personality that society defines for the human beings.

Here, Station Master’s character is of great significance. Saleem says in the play that he is the “one from whom confidence departed like an unpaid mistress before he even met” (Rafat 17).. It is Station Master who acts as a guide for Saleem and helps him to resolve the conflicts. In doing so, Station Master helps Saleem in discovering truth. He coordinates Saleem back to his home, by causing him to understand that the contention of his Self and Personality was bringing about the marginalization as Saleem was losing touch with the ordinary things. Station Master says,

“Our human eyes can only light. The few yards of track before us.

If we strain for vision beyond sight we lose the blessing of sight. Dabbling in subtleties of sound we lose the art of common speech.

Hoping to soar above all feeling we lose our chance of natural love” (Rafat 116).

The play likewise depicts Saleem's voyage of building up an amicable connection between the internal inclination to find himself, and the outward necessity of capitulating to his personality in the public eye. It is through the later voyage, that Saleem over comes his status as that of an underestimated character in the society. Station master goes about as a wellspring of direction for them, and discloses to them that fleeing from life isn't a solution. So as to attempt the voyage of getting the coordinated character, mysticism should not be taken as a type of departure. Subsequently, the play displays the rise of the conflict when Saleem gives up his identities in order to pursue his journey of discovering the actual Sufi. This results in his marginalization. However, the contention is likewise settled when Station master aides Saleem and he entered once more into the political affairs. He overcame the marginalization and Saleem says, “Your voice like the wind of God has seized the curtains of my soul and shaken the dust of doubts from them. I recognize this place at last” (Rafat 118).

In third act of play, Saleem represents himself as a political saint. He does not fulfill the requirements of a real Sufi and returns to his mundane life. As Saleem says, “So at this moment I must here begin the other journey. It is the same train at another time” (Rafat 119).



Vol. 3 No. 3 (March) (2025)

Delimitation

This research is delimited to two major themes of Sufism, traditional Sufism and renewal in the Sufism. The themes are being theorized in the light of Nicholson's model of traditional Sufi.

Conclusion

In Taufiq Rafat's play, *Foothold*, Saleem's character, shows the way of discovering the truth and his social identities. Saleem chose the spiritual journey over his social identities but this led to his marginalization. Saleem refused to play out his societal jobs, and so a clash is displayed in the play, as Saleem's quest for discovering real saint, leads him towards abandoning his social identity. Taufiq Rafat's play *Foothold* challenges the traditional and established Sufi figure. The play presents phenomena of gaining God's pursuit by creating a balance between the physical and spiritual world. The play creates a new and unconventional kind of Sufi, who is not cut off from the physical world, and faces and searches the solution of his problems. The Play presents a Sufi who leads a normal life and achieves his contentment in being able to spend a life which solves everyday affairs. The major concern of this study to explore the reality behind overall scenario. To find out the truth between actual Sufis and modern and political Sufis or redefine (Saleem seems a political figure more than a Sufi character). This research explores the Sufi of Taufiq Rafat exists on a common plane with the ordinary humans rather than an elevated spiritual plane

References

- Ar-Rehman, Aisha. "*The Tawasin of Mansur Al- Hallaj*". Translated by At-Tarjumana.
- Web. Arberry, A.J. "*Muslim Saints and Mystics* By Farid al Din Attar". Web.
- Baig M. "Conflict Between Self And Identity In Tafiq Rafat's *Foothold*". *INTCESS2016 3rd International Conference on Education and Social Sciences*. ISBN: 978-605-64453-5-4, 2016. pp. 110-114. Print.
- Lizzio, Ken "Ritual and Charisma in Naqshbandi Sufi Mysticism" The Author and AnpereISSN 1653-6355. 2007 pp. 02-21 Print.
- Nicholson R. A. "Mystics of Islam" *Routledge & Kegan Paul Books*. ISBN: 0710080158. 1975. pp. 4-6. Print.
- Rafat, T.(2017) "*Foothold*". *Taufiq Rafat Foundation*. Print. The Nation.(2017) "Existenialism by Saleha Malik." . Web.
- The News.(2017) "*Foothold_A Metaphorical Journey*". *Foothold by Taufiq Rafat - book review*»
- Curious Book Fans..* Web.
- Trimingham. "*The Sufi Orders in Islam*". Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1973. print.
- Rumi, Maulana Jalau-d-din Muhammad. "Masnavi-i- Manavi, The spiritual couplets of Maulana" . Web.
- Zahra, Nageen . "*Taufiq Rafat's Foothold staged at Kinnaird : Review of Foothold by Taufiq Rafat.*" DAWN.COM. DAWN.COM, 19 April. 2015. Web.