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THE IMAGE OF AGA-YI BUZURG AS A FEMALE SUFU MASTER IN HAFIZ BASIR'S MAZHAR AL-AJA'IB: MECHANISMS OF LEGITIMIZING FEMALE SAINTHOOD IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY CENTRAL ASIA

Abstract. *This article examines the image of Aga-yi Buzurg in Hafiz Basir's Sufi treatise Mazhar al-Aja'ib as one of the most significant female religious figures in the hagiographical literature of sixteenth-century Maverannahr. Based on textual and historical-religious analysis, the study explores the mechanisms through which her spiritual authority was constructed, the specific features of the representation of female sainthood, and the ways in which her status as a spiritual mentor was legitimized within the Sufi milieu. The analysis demonstrates that the author consistently endows Aga-yi Buzurg with the functions of a spiritual guide, teacher, and bearer of sacred knowledge by employing motifs characteristic of Sufi hagiography, including miraculous powers (karāmāt), insight into hidden realities, spiritual guidance, and posthumous veneration. Particular attention is devoted to the gender dimension of the narrative, in which models of religious authority traditionally associated with male figures are transferred to a female protagonist. The study concludes that the image of Aga-yi Buzurg represents a distinctive model of female sainthood grounded not in lineage or family status but in recognized spiritual authority and proximity to God.*

Keywords: *Aga-yi Buzurg, Hafiz Basir, Mazhar al-Aja'ib, Sufism, hagiography, female sainthood, religious authority, Maverannahr, Islam, gender studies.*

INTRODUCTION

Sufi literature of Central Asia has traditionally focused primarily on male religious figures, while women generally appear as secondary characters within hagiographical narratives (Shanazarova, 2020:4). In this regard, Hafiz Basir's treatise Mazhar al-Aja'ib is of particular interest, as it places at the center of its narrative the image of a female

spiritual mentor, Aga-yi Buzurg. This source belongs to the small number of known Sufi works from sixteenth-century Maverannahr that enable scholars to investigate the mechanisms through which female religious authority was formed in a Muslim context (Shanazarova, 2024:1).

The aim of this article is to analyze the representation of Aga-yi Buzurg as a spiritual guide and to identify the principal mechanisms through which her sanctity and charismatic authority are legitimized in Hafiz Basir's treatise.

MAIN PART

One of the distinctive features of Hafiz Basir's narrative strategy is the absence of information concerning the heroine's personal name and lineage. The author refers to her exclusively by the honorific title "Aga-yi Buzurg" ("The Great Lady"), thereby contributing to the construction of a universalized image of sainthood whose significance derives not from social origin or status but from spiritual rank (Aminova, 2009:8).

Such an approach corresponds to broader traditions of Islamic hagiography, in which biographical specificity is often subordinated to the creation of an idealized model of sanctity. By omitting details concerning her background, the author presents Aga-yi Buzurg primarily as a bearer of sacred knowledge and spiritual authority.

An important element in the legitimization of her authority is the narrative describing a religious dispute with her father. In this episode, the daughter emerges as the possessor of true knowledge, while her father ultimately acknowledges her correctness. Such an inversion of the conventional patriarchal model underscores the superiority of the heroine's spiritual status over her gender and social position.

The functions of a spiritual mentor are most vividly revealed in the narrative concerning Amir Hanafi. According to the treatise, the disciple undergoes a profound spiritual crisis that cannot be resolved through ordinary religious practices. The crisis is overcome only through the intervention of Aga-yi Buzurg.

During this trial, Amir Hanafi experiences a symbolic death followed by spiritual rebirth. From a hagiographical perspective, this episode demonstrates the mentor's capacity to influence the inner state of her disciple and guide him along the path of spiritual perfection.

To confirm her exceptional status, the author employs a range of traditional Sufi motifs, including knowledge of a person's hidden condition, the performance of karāmāt,

spiritual guidance of disciples, and the transmission of mystical experience (Shanazarova, 2023:213). Significantly, these characteristics were typically associated with male shaykhs but are here fully transferred to a female figure.

Recognition of Aga-yi Buzurg's spiritual superiority is further demonstrated through the actions of her disciple. Following his transformative experience, Amir Hanafi emancipates slaves, donates property as waqf, and openly acknowledges himself as her follower. In this way, the author illustrates not only spiritual but also social recognition of her authority.

Additional information concerning the activities of Aga-yi Buzurg is preserved in the later work *Tarjumayi Hali Aga-yi Buzurg*. Despite its compilatory nature, this text remains valuable for reconstructing perceptions of her religious role within subsequent traditions. According to this source, Aga-yi Buzurg organized gatherings of followers at the Bagh-i Haram complex, supervised communal activities, and participated in religious instruction. Particularly noteworthy is the reference to her teaching of Hadith and Qur'anic exegesis (Aminova, 2009:11).

Unlike most female characters in Sufi literature, whose roles are generally limited to the demonstration of piety, Aga-yi Buzurg is portrayed as a transmitter of religious knowledge and a mentor performing educational functions. Moreover, the author does not consider it necessary to justify her right to teach Islamic sciences, which indicates a high degree of recognition of her religious status (Shanazarova, 2024:1).

A substantial portion of the treatise is devoted to the description of Aga-yi Buzurg's final days and death. Within the hagiographical tradition, such narratives play a crucial role, as the circumstances surrounding death often serve as important evidence of sainthood.

Hafiz Basir emphasizes her conscious acceptance of death, her ability to foresee the approach of the end of her life, and her authority to direct the arrangements of her own burial. A particularly significant figure in this context is Moghul Khanim, the wife of Ubaydullah Khan, who is presented as one of Aga-yi Buzurg's followers (Aminova, 2009:8). The presence of members of the ruling elite among her devotees further strengthens the public legitimization of her spiritual status.

The author also provides a detailed account of the funeral ceremonies, the large number of participants in the burial, and the subsequent veneration of her mausoleum.

Such elements are characteristic features of Sufi hagiography and function as evidence of posthumous sanctity.

The preservation of Aga-yi Buzurg's memory through her shrine, oral traditions, and hagiographical writings ensured the continued reproduction of her authority among subsequent generations of followers.

CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates that the image of Aga-yi Buzurg in Hafiz Basir's treatise is constructed through a complex system of hagiographical and rhetorical devices aimed at legitimizing her religious authority. The author consistently presents her as a spiritual guide, teacher, possessor of sacred knowledge, and intermediary between the earthly and divine realms.

The distinctive feature of this portrayal lies in the transfer to a female figure of characteristics that were typically associated with male shaykhs in Central Asian Sufi literature. Aga-yi Buzurg guides disciples, interprets spiritual experiences, provides religious instruction, and organizes communal activities.

Thus, *Mazhar al-Aja'ib* demonstrates the existence within the Sufi culture of sixteenth-century Maverannahr of conceptions of female sainthood grounded in personal spiritual authority and communal recognition. The study of this image contributes to a broader understanding of the role of women in the history of Islamic religiosity in Central Asia and of the mechanisms through which female spiritual leadership was formed within the Sufi tradition.

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