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Safar, Ishq, and the Traveling Sufi: Making of a “Sacred Geography”

The narratives from pre-modern South Asia reflect, enhance, and engage with the contemporary Sufi spiritual and socio-political currents, positing the Subcontinent within the field of literary-cultural-material transactions across the Silk Road. The idea of *Safar* (or, travel) emerges as crucial to the propagation of Sufi thought and expression in South Asia, marking the Perso-Arabic paradigm of exchanges as a cognitive and affective space of *contact*. The trajectory of traveling Sufis can be visited to understand the gradual formation of a certain “sacred geography” along the Silk Road, connecting present day “central” and “southern” parts of Asia with fluid exchanges of ideas, material, and spiritual practices. The paper intends to locate the 9th Century traveling Sufi Mansoor al Hallaj’s journey within the said temporal and spatial framework via the reception of Hallaj as a thematic in performance/ lyric and visual practices in South Asia. The gradual transformation of Hallaj’s journey towards the ultimate *fanaa*, following years of seeking and *hijr* (longing in separation) – both physically and metaphorically – into the emergent thematic element in Sufi expression, can be traced across media and at inter-medial junctures. The paper would explore the lyric by Sufis in performance in pre-modern South Asia, tracing the traveling thematic expression of “the Hallaj matter,” centering around the idea of an all-encompassing divine *Ishq* (love), capable of delivering *fanaa* through self-annihilation. The paper would trace the ways in which Hallaj’s persecution for claiming *ana-haq* (meaning “I am God”), has travelled across spaces in pre-modern Central and South Asia, exploring the later Sufi performative lyric in Farsi, Punjabi and Urdu; and extend the reading of the same to the pre-modern visual presentations in the form of miniature painting procured from Dilli and Kashmir, with a focus on the processes of narrative-making across media and via intermedial transactions. In the process, the paper aims to re-visit the *invisibilized* narratives of a “sacred geography” in performance and material cultures across the Silk Road.