Symbolism and Spiritual Insights in Shah Waliullah's Mukāshafāt: A Hadith-Based Analysis

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Abstract

This study delves into the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of Mukāshafāt (revelatory visions) as experienced and recorded by Shah Waliullah al-Dihlawi, one of the most influential scholars and mystics of the Indian subcontinent. By employing a Hadith-centric analytical framework, the research examines the thematic content, metaphors, and spiritual meanings embedded in these visions. The study investigates how Shah Waliullah interprets his spiritual unveilings in light of Prophetic traditions, and how he bridges rational theology, mysticism (tasawwuf), and Hadith scholarship. Special focus is placed on the epistemological status of mukāshafāt in Islamic thought and their validation through Hadith evidence. Furthermore, the research highlights Shah Waliullah's role in integrating symbolic mystical experiences with textual orthodoxy, offering insights into the balance between personal spirituality and the Prophetic model. The study aims to contribute to contemporary Islamic spirituality by

re-examining classical mystical experiences within a Hadith-based framework.

Key Words: symbolism, spiritual visions, Islamic mysticism, epistemology, tasawwuf, Prophetic traditions, Islamic spirituality.

1. Introduction

Shah Waliullah al-Dihlawi (1703–1762) occupies a pivotal place in the intellectual and spiritual history of the Indian subcontinent, blending rigorous Hadith scholarship with deep mystical insight. His spiritual legacy is rooted in a balanced approach that sought to reconcile rational theology (ʿilm al-kalām), jurisprudence, and Sufi experience. Central to his spiritual thought are his mukāshafāt (spiritual unveilings), which he regarded not merely as personal illuminations but as divinely inspired reflections meant to guide the Muslim ummah. Shah Waliullah emphasized the importance of aligning mystical experiences with the Qur'an and Hadith, insisting on the validation of spiritual truths through authentic sources. His visions often contained complex symbolic language reflecting metaphysical realities, which he carefully interpreted within the framework of orthodox Islam. This integration of tasawwuf and Hadith set a precedent for subsequent reformers and mystics, making his spiritual legacy both enduring and influential across generations (Ahmed 1980, 115).

The primary objective of this study is to examine the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of Shah Waliullah's mukāshafāt (spiritual unveilings) through a Hadith-based analytical framework, highlighting how these mystical experiences align with or derive meaning from Prophetic traditions. The scope encompasses a critical analysis of selected visions recorded in his works, particularly Fuyūḍ al-Ḥaramayn, situating them within the broader context of Islamic mysticism (tasawwuf) and textual orthodoxy. This research aims to bridge the often-perceived gap between personal spiritual experience and formal religious texts, demonstrating how Shah Waliullah maintained a unique synthesis of mysticism, Hadith validation, and rational scholarship. By doing so, the study contributes to the contemporary understanding of Islamic spirituality and its potential applications in addressing moral and intellectual challenges faced by the modern Muslim world (Baljon 1986, 88).

This study employs a qualitative methodology grounded in textual analysis and Hadith-based evaluation to explore the symbolic and spiritual content of Shah Waliullah's mukāshafāt. Primary sources, such as Fuyūḍ al-Ḥaramayn and Al-Tafhīmāt al-Ilāhiyyah, are critically examined to identify recurring themes, symbols, and mystical expressions. These are then analyzed in light of authentic Hadiths drawn from canonical collections such as Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, and others, to assess their conformity with Prophetic teachings. The study further incorporates classical Hadith commentaries and principles of Hadith criticism to ensure a rigorous validation of Shah Waliullah's spiritual insights. This combined approach

enables a balanced evaluation of his mystical experiences within the framework of Sunni orthodoxy, reaffirming his efforts to harmonize inner revelation with textual authority (Siddiqi 1967, 42).

2. Understanding Mukāshafāt in Islamic Thought

The term mukāshafāt in Islamic mysticism refers to spiritual unveilings or inner disclosures granted to the heart of the seeker through divine illumination. These unveilings are considered a form of kashf (spiritual unveiling), in which hidden realities—often metaphysical, eschatological, or symbolic—are revealed to the mystic without the intermediary of rational thought or sensory perception. According to Sufi scholars, mukāshafāt are typically categorized into various types, including visionary experiences, symbolic dreams, auditory revelations, and intellectual illuminations. Al-Ghazālī, in Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn, describes mukāshafah as the highest stage of certainty (yaqīn) attained by the heart, where divine truths become manifest beyond doubt. These experiences are not considered sources of Shariah, but when aligned with Qurʾanic and Hadith principles, they are viewed as signs of spiritual elevation and sincerity. Shah Waliullah adopts a cautious yet affirming stance on mukāshafāt, accepting their validity while emphasizing the necessity of corroboration with Prophetic traditions and rational inquiry (Schimmel 1975, 295).

Classical Islamic scholars and mystics have offered nuanced perspectives on spiritual unveilings (mukāshafāt), recognizing them as potential signs of divine favor, but also cautioning against over-reliance on subjective experience without alignment to the Qurʾan and Sunnah. Al-Qushayrī, in his foundational work al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya, categorized such unveilings as either kashf ṣarīḥ (clear disclosures) or kashf majāzī (figurative or symbolic disclosures), asserting that while genuine unveilings may bring clarity of spiritual realities, they are granted only to those purified through rigorous worship, sincerity, and ethical conduct. Likewise, Ibn al-ʿArabī viewed mukāshafāt as stages of spiritual maturity, warning that such visions could be misleading if the seeker lacked grounding in knowledge and Prophetic guidance. These classical voices established a framework in which spiritual experiences were respected but subjected to ethical scrutiny and textual validation, a position later upheld by Shah Waliullah in his own treatment of mystical experiences (Knysh 2000, 181).

In Islamic epistemology, visions (*ruʾyā* or *mukāshafāt*) occupy a unique, though contested, status within the hierarchy of knowledge sources. While the Qurʾan and Sunnah remain the primary and authoritative foundations of knowledge, many classical scholars acknowledged that truthful visions—especially those experienced by pious individuals—can serve as a supplementary, albeit non-legislative, form of insight. Ibn Khaldūn, in his *Muqaddimah*,

describes visions as part of the "intuitive faculty" (*al-quwwa al-hadsiyya*) that operates beyond rational deduction and sensory experience, noting that saints and prophets receive such knowledge through divine illumination. However, he emphasizes that while such visions may convey personal truths or guidance, they cannot form the basis for legal rulings or doctrinal beliefs unless corroborated by textual evidence. This nuanced position reflects a broader Islamic tradition that respects spiritual knowledge but subjects it to critical standards rooted in revelation and reason (Ibn Khaldūn 1967, 90).

3. Shah Waliullah's Approach to Mukāshafāt

Shah Waliullah al-Dihlawi's mystical experiences form a central component of his intellectual and spiritual legacy, deeply rooted in the traditions of tasawwuf while firmly aligned with Qur'anic and Hadith principles. In his autobiographical and visionary work Fuyūḍ al-Ḥaramayn, he documents several profound spiritual encounters, including dreams of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, celestial ascents, and symbolic visions of angels, divine light, and eschatological realities. These experiences occurred during and after his journey to the Ḥaramayn (Mecca and Medina), a period marked by intense spiritual devotion and scholarly engagement. Shah Waliullah regarded such visions not as ends in themselves but as divine affirmations of his reformist mission. He carefully interpreted them within the bounds of Sunni orthodoxy, often drawing parallels with the ruʾyā ṣāliḥa (truthful dreams) mentioned in Hadith, thereby positioning his experiences within the tradition of pious visionary knowledge accepted in Islamic thought (Ansari 1966, 179).

Despite his deep involvement in mystical experiences, Shah Waliullah emphasized rigorous criteria for validating their authenticity. He warned against accepting spiritual insights uncritically, highlighting that any vision or inner disclosure must align with the established teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. In Al-Tafhīmāt al-Ilāhiyyah, he outlines conditions for trustworthy mystical knowledge: it must not contradict divine revelation, must be experienced by individuals of proven piety and scholarship, and should ideally be subjected to rational reflection. His methodology illustrates a deliberate attempt to harmonize kashf (unveiling) with ʿilm (knowledge), ensuring that subjective spirituality does not override objective scriptural truth. This synthesis of inner experience and textual validation allowed Shah Waliullah to maintain credibility among both the traditionalist scholars and the Sufi circles of his time, while laying the groundwork for a spiritually informed but intellectually disciplined Islamic revival (Baljon 1986, 92–93).

4. Symbolism in Shah Waliullah's Visions

Shah Waliullah's mystical experiences, as documented in his works such as Fuyūḍ al-Ḥaramayn and Al-Tafhīmāt al-Ilāhiyyah, are rich in symbolic content, with each vision offering a deeper spiritual insight through the use of metaphor and allegory. One notable vision described by Shah Waliullah involves a symbolic journey through a divine garden, representing the soul's path to spiritual purification and closeness to Allah. The garden itself, with its lush greenery and diverse plants, serves as a metaphor for the various stages of purification and the multitude of divine attributes accessible to the seeker. These symbols are not merely artistic representations but are intended to convey profound spiritual truths, each element in the vision symbolizing a specific aspect of the soul's journey. Shah Waliullah interpreted such visions in alignment with classical Islamic thought, drawing from the works of earlier Sufi scholars like al-Ghazālī, who also used vivid metaphors to convey the stages of spiritual ascent and the purification of the heart (Chittick 1989, 134).

The language of metaphors and allegory in Shah Waliullah's visions serves as a key tool for conveying complex spiritual concepts that would otherwise be beyond ordinary comprehension. Like many Sufi thinkers, Shah Waliullah employed allegorical language to communicate divine realities, recognizing that human language, constrained by material and rational limits, could not fully capture the transcendent. In his vision of the light of divine knowledge descending from the heavens, for example, Shah Waliullah used light as a metaphor for the illumination of the soul through knowledge and piety. This use of metaphor aligns with the broader Sufi tradition, where spiritual realities are often expressed through tangible symbols—such as light, gardens, or rivers—that reflect the inner state of the believer. The allegorical approach not only made these profound truths accessible to a wider audience but also allowed them to be interpreted at multiple levels of depth, depending on the seeker's spiritual maturity (Schimmel 1975, 217).

The symbolic language employed by Shah Waliullah finds strong parallels with symbolic narratives found in Hadith literature. In Hadiths such as the famous Hadith of the "miʿrāj" (the Night Journey), the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ describes celestial realms, angelic beings, and divine light, all of which serve as symbols conveying deeper metaphysical truths. Just as in the miʿrāj where the ascent to the heavens represents the soul's journey toward closeness to Allah, Shah Waliullah's vision of the divine light mirrors this celestial journey, where light symbolizes divine guidance and proximity to the Creator. The parallelism between Shah Waliullah's use of symbols and the prophetic Hadith narratives reveals a common method of conveying spiritual truths through symbolic representations. Both mystical experiences and

Hadith share the aim of providing insight into the unseen world in a form that is accessible to the human intellect and heart (Knysh 2000, 192).

5. Hadith-Based Validation of Spiritual Insights

In analyzing Shah Waliullah's mystical visions, it is essential to draw upon the rich corpus of Hadith literature to ensure that his experiences align with authentic Prophetic traditions. Shah Waliullah meticulously selected Hadiths that spoke to the nature of spiritual illumination, divine knowledge, and the transformative power of inner experience. In *Fuyūḍ al-Ḥaramayn* and other works, he cited Hadiths like the one where the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ says, "The strong one is not the one who is able to overpower others, but the one who controls himself when angry" (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī). This Hadith, which emphasizes self-control and inner strength, closely parallels Shah Waliullah's vision of spiritual ascension, where overcoming the ego and worldly desires is seen as a crucial step in gaining divine insight. By incorporating such Hadiths into his interpretations, Shah Waliullah ensured that his mystical experiences were not isolated from the Islamic tradition but were grounded in the fundamental teachings of the Prophet ﷺ (Rahman 1991, 134).

Shah Waliullah's visions consistently harmonized with Prophetic traditions, reflecting an underlying unity between his mystical experiences and the core teachings of Islam. For example, in his vision of light descending from the heavens, Shah Waliullah described a divine illumination that aligns with the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ: "Verily, Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth" (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim). This Hadith underscores the centrality of light as a divine symbol of guidance and purity, a theme that Shah Waliullah echoed in his mystical narratives. His use of such symbols and metaphors not only reinforced the authenticity of his experiences but also highlighted the seamless integration of Sufi mysticism with Hadith-based knowledge. By drawing from these traditions, Shah Waliullah framed his mystical insights within an orthodox framework, demonstrating that visions, when properly interpreted, could enhance, rather than conflict with, traditional Islamic teachings (Siddiqi 1967, 45).

Scholarly perspectives on using Hadith to interpret mystical experiences emphasize the importance of contextualizing visions within the broader Islamic epistemic framework. Many scholars argue that Hadiths, as the second most authoritative source in Islam after the Qur'an, provide a robust foundation for interpreting mystical experiences. In this regard, figures like Al-Ghazālī and later Shah Waliullah saw Hadith not only as a source of jurisprudential knowledge but also as a key tool in validating spiritual experiences. Scholars have debated the extent to which Hadiths should be applied to mysticism, with some cautioning against literal interpretations of visionary experiences. However, others assert that Hadiths, particularly those

focusing on the inner life of the believer and the transformative power of divine knowledge, offer valuable insights into the authentic nature of mystical experiences. Shah Waliullah's approach, grounded in a deep respect for Hadith, exemplifies a balanced method where visions are subjected to the same rigorous scrutiny as any other religious experience (Knysh 2000, 212).

6. Integration of Rationality, Spirituality, and Hadith

Shah Waliullah's intellectual legacy is marked by his ability to synthesize textual orthodoxy with inner spiritual experience. In works such as *Al-Tafhīmāt al-Ilāhiyyah* and *Fuyūḍ al-Ḥaramayn*, he sought to harmonize the outward observance of Islamic law (*Shariah*) with the inward journey of the soul. His mystical experiences, often described through symbols and metaphors, were not seen as separate from the core texts of Islam but as complementary to them. For Shah Waliullah, true spiritual knowledge did not contradict the Qur'an and Hadith but was a deeper understanding of their meanings. He argued that the Qur'an itself alludes to the inner dimensions of the faith, urging believers to seek not only the outward commandments but also the deeper, hidden truths. This synthesis allowed him to affirm the validity of mystical experiences while ensuring they were firmly anchored in the foundational texts of Islam, thus maintaining the integrity of orthodoxy (Baljon 1986, 106).

Shah Waliullah's approach to the balance between reason, Shariah, and mysticism was shaped by his belief that human reason and divine revelation were complementary, not contradictory. He argued that the intellect, when properly cultivated, could lead to a deeper understanding of divine law and mystical experience. However, he also emphasized that reason alone could not attain the fullness of spiritual knowledge, as it required the guidance of the Shariah and the illumination of mystical insight. His critique of excessive rationalism or blind adherence to tradition reflected a balanced view that placed the Shariah at the center of his spiritual framework, with mysticism serving as a means of spiritual refinement. Shah Waliullah's perspective aligned with his belief that the Shariah provided the ethical and legal guidelines necessary for mystical experience to be authentic and transformative, preventing it from diverging into heresy or self-deception (Schimmel 1975, 209).

In response to critiques of mystical visions, Shah Waliullah adopted a cautious yet affirming stance, acknowledging that not all visionary experiences were to be trusted unconditionally. He recognized the potential for subjective distortions or even deception in mystical experiences, particularly when the ego of the seeker remained unpurified. As a result, he laid out strict criteria for validating mystical experiences: they must align with the Qur'an and Hadith, be interpreted within the framework of Islamic jurisprudence, and be experienced by individuals

who had demonstrated both piety and intellectual rigor. For Shah Waliullah, visions were not a substitute for the written law but rather a means of enhancing one's understanding of it. This careful balance allowed him to preserve the authenticity of his mystical experiences while responding to potential critiques of their legitimacy, ensuring they did not disrupt the orthodox foundations of Islam (Knysh 2000, 218).

7. Contemporary Relevance and Application

Shah Waliullah's synthesis of mysticism and textual orthodoxy provides significant lessons for modern Islamic spirituality and reform. In an era marked by intellectual and spiritual fragmentation, his work offers a model for reconciling traditional Islamic practices with the evolving needs of contemporary society. His emphasis on the harmony between *Shariah* and *tasawwuf* (Sufism) advocates for an Islam that is both intellectually grounded and spiritually rich. For modern Muslims, Shah Waliullah's framework suggests that spirituality should not be viewed as a retreat from societal responsibilities but as a source of ethical and social transformation. His focus on the practical dimensions of spiritual knowledge—such as self-discipline, ethical behavior, and intellectual engagement with the texts—offers a pathway for reviving a balanced and holistic approach to Islamic practice that addresses both individual and communal well-being (Chittick 1989, 172).

The implications of Shah Waliullah's thought for spiritual leadership and ethical development are profound, especially in the contemporary context where ethical challenges are increasingly complex. His approach stresses the role of spiritual leadership in guiding both individual and community-based moral conduct, rooted in the principles of *ilm* (knowledge) and *taqwa* (God-consciousness). Spiritual leaders, according to Shah Waliullah, must embody the ethical virtues extolled in the Qur'an and Hadith, while also engaging with the mystical dimensions of Islam to foster genuine piety. In a world grappling with materialism and moral relativism, the revival of such a leadership model could help reinvigorate Islamic communities by encouraging a return to the foundational values of sincerity, humility, and service to others. By balancing scholarly expertise with spiritual insight, contemporary leaders can guide their communities in addressing both worldly and spiritual concerns (Baljon 1986, 118).

The revival of Hadith-informed mystical thought in today's context offers an opportunity to reconnect modern Muslims with a rich intellectual and spiritual heritage. Shah Waliullah's emphasis on the role of *kashf* (spiritual unveiling) in understanding divine realities, when interpreted in accordance with the Hadith, serves as a reminder that mystical experiences should not be divorced from the broader Islamic tradition. In the present age, where spiritual practices are often fragmented or distorted, his model of integrating authentic spiritual experiences with

Hadith provides a means of cultivating a deeper, more balanced engagement with Islam. The revival of Hadith-informed mysticism could offer Muslims today a path to spiritual awakening that is both grounded in prophetic teachings and responsive to contemporary challenges, ensuring that mysticism serves as a means of personal growth rather than escapism (Knysh 2000, 223).

8. Conclusion

Summary of key findings

Shah Waliullah's synthesis of mysticism and textual orthodoxy offers profound insights into the integration of Islamic spirituality with everyday life. One of the key findings from this study is that Shah Waliullah's mystical experiences, as recorded in his works like *Fuyūḍ al-Ḥaramayn*, provide a balanced framework that affirms the importance of both inner spiritual development and external legal practice. His careful selection of Hadiths to interpret his visions and the harmonization of Sufism with *Shariah* demonstrate a unique approach to mystical thought that is firmly rooted in Islamic tradition. Furthermore, his focus on the importance of *kashf* (spiritual unveiling) and its grounding in authentic Hadith underscores the critical relationship between visionary experiences and prophetic teachings, offering a model for understanding the mystical within the framework of orthodox Islamic practice.

Contributions to Islamic studies and spirituality

Shah Waliullah's contributions to Islamic studies and spirituality are profound, particularly in the context of revitalizing both spiritual and intellectual aspects of Islamic life. His ability to integrate the mystical dimensions of Islam with its textual and legal foundations has paved the way for a holistic understanding of Islamic spirituality that does not isolate mysticism from practical life. By emphasizing the role of *kashf* and its alignment with the Qur'an and Hadith, Shah Waliullah also contributed to the development of a more inclusive approach to spiritual knowledge. His work has influenced not only Sufi thought but also broader Islamic philosophy and theology, providing a foundation for later scholars to engage with the inner dimensions of Islam while maintaining fidelity to its textual sources (Schimmel 1975, 220). In addition, his critiques of blind adherence to rituals and over-reliance on reason offer critical reflections for contemporary Islamic reform movements.

Suggestions for further research

Future research on Shah Waliullah's mystical thought could delve deeper into the impact of his teachings on later Islamic thinkers, particularly within the context of modern Islamic reform movements. One promising avenue for further exploration is the comparative study of Shah Waliullah's mysticism with that of other major Islamic figures such as Ibn Arabi or Al-Ghazali, examining how their approaches to *kashf* and spiritual unveiling influenced both historical and contemporary Islamic thought. Additionally, there is a need for further investigation into the practical applications of Shah Waliullah's

teachings in contemporary Islamic communities, particularly in relation to ethical development, leadership, and the intersection of mysticism with modern challenges such as secularism and materialism. This research could provide valuable insights into how his synthesis of spirituality and orthodoxy can be applied to current social and theological issues within the Muslim world.

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