

A Study of the English Translations of *Kashf al-Mahjub*

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Abstract

Sayyed ‘Ali bin ‘Usman al-Hujwiri popularly known as Data Gunj Bakhsh is a much revered Sufi of great repute. He contributed a lot to spread the true message of Islam to the masses of the Punjab through his larger than life character. Besides preaching, he also wrote some books on different disciplines of Islam, of which is his famous treatise named “Kashf al-Mahjub” (The Unveiling of the Veiled).

Since his work on Sufism presented in this book is of encyclopedic nature and a simple but comprehensive one, it soon attracted the attention of both his contemporaries and posterity. This is why the orientalist also turned to translate it into different European languages especially in English. The paper is an articulation of critical study of different translations of the book.

Kashf al-Mahjub (Unveiling of the Veiled) is the oldest treatise on Islamic mysticism (*Sufism*) written by Sayyed ‘Ali bin ‘Uthman al-Hujwiri popularly known as Data Gunj Bakhsh.

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He has written nine books prior to *Kashf al-Mahjub* but none of these writings have been preserved.(1) Shaykh Hujwiri has himself stated that two of his manuscripts were borrowed by others who erased his name from the title and gave out to the public in their own names.(2) So it can be said that plagiarism or fraud in writing books was prevalent even during Shaykh's times.

Kashf al-Mahjub is the first comprehensive book in Persian language on *Tasawwuf*. It was written at a time when Arabic was still the dominant language for expressing Islamic religious thought. Prior to Shaykh, masters such as Abu Nasr al-Sarraj and Abu Talib al-Makki had written famous Arabic treatises discussing Sufi thought and practice in terms of the standard religious sciences.(3) Prince Muhammad Dara Shikoh (d.1069 A.H.) speaks of this book as follows:

“Of the books on *Sufism* in the Persian language there is none so well composed as the *Kashf al-Mahjub*.”(4) This treatise was a model for great Sufi biographer Fariduddin ‘Attar when he wrote his *Tadhkirat al-Auliya*. Carl W. Ernst has expressed his views about this book as follows:

Kashf al-Mahjub is not simply a literary production, however, for it is an exposition of practical *Sufism* summarizing a wide tradition of centuries of reflections; the authorwrote it at the request of a fellow-Sufi from his hometown of *Hujwir*. *Kashf al-Mahjub* is still one of the best description of the Sufi path. It has been said that those who seek a guide in Sufism should do

three things: pray for guidance, visit the tombs of great Shaykhs, and read *Kashfal-Mahjub*. (5)

Edward Granvill Browne has expressed his views about this book as “a work treating of the lives and doctrines of the Sufis, composed by ‘Ali b. ‘Uthman al-Jullabi al-Hujwiri in the later part of the eleventh century”. (6)

Shah Shahidullah Faridi of the learned family of England embraced Islam in 1936 upon reading the *Kashf al-Mahjub*. He was initiated into Sufism by Hadrat Sayyed Muhammad Dhauqi Shah, and in completing the spiritual course in eighteen years, was commissioned as a Khalifah to guide others. (7)

Nicholson’s Translation of *Kashf al-Mahjub*

Reynold A. Nicholson, D. Lit (d.1945) was a famous orientalist who worked as a lecturer in Persian at the University of Cambridge. Being an expert of Persian language and literature, he took the responsibility of rendering the oldest Persian treatise into English upon his shoulders and published it in 1911 for “E. J. W. Gibb Memorial”. Nicholson wrote a Preface comprising eight pages. The translation of *Kashf al-Mahjub* is published in 420 pages that follows 3 indices.

The index-I comprises names of persons, peoples, tribes, sects and places (11 pages) whereas index-II contains subjects, oriental words, and technical terms (10 pages). The Index-III is pertaining to the names of books (2 pages). The second revised edition of this translation was published in 1936 that was reproduced twice in 1959 and 1967 respectively. The Islamic Book

Foundation Lahore and the Sang-e-Meel Publications Lahore published the Nicholson's translation in 1982 and 1996. It has also been reprinted by Pir Press New York in 1999 with a forward by Dr. Carl W. Ernst.

Reynold A. Nicholson has translated from the text of the Lahore edition after comparing it with the manuscripts in the Library of the India Office and the British Museum. So the learned translator has been very careful in this translation but has acknowledged the difficulty to grasp Shaykh Hujwiri's meaning at many places. He writes:

“In my translation I have, of course, corrected the Lahore text where necessary. While the doubtful passages are few in number, there are, I confess, many places in which a considerable effort is required in order to grasp the author's meaning and follow his argument.”(8)

It is worth mentioning that no authentic text of the “Kashf al-Mahjub” has been edited when Nicholson completed his translation. Prof. V.A. Zhukovsky (d. 1917) edited the Persian text and wrote a preface in Russian. This was published posthumously in Leningrad in 1926. The same text was published by Intisharat-e-Amir Kabir Tehran in 1957 but the preface written by Zhukovsky was rendered into Persian. The English translation of this preface had already been made by Mr. Sidney Jerrold and published by E. Denison Ross in 1926 in the Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London.(9)

Nicholson has given some account of the life of Shaykh ‘Ali bin Uthman al-Hujwiri. He has told about his Sufi master (murshid) and his teachers. While he discusses the journeys of Sayyed Hujwiri, he tells us how he reached Lahore after the demise of his Shaykh. Nicholson has also prepared a list of his other writings referred to in the *Kashf al-Mahjub* but none of these has been preserved. It is also told that the book was written by Sayyed Ali Hujwiri in reply to certain questions addressed to him by a fellow townsman - Abu Sa‘id al-Hujwiri. About the style of the *Kashf al-Mahjub*, Nicholson observes:

“The author’s attitude throughout is that of a teacher instructing a pupil. Even the biographical section of the work is largely expository. Before stating his own view the author generally examines the current opinions on the same topic and refutes them if necessary. The discussion of mystical problems and controversies is enlivened by many illustrations drawn from his personal experience.”(10)

Nicholson has also pointed out some sources of the “*Kashf al-Mahjub*” like “*Kitab al-Luma‘*” by Abu Nasr Sarraj. The translator also tells his readers: “I have not hesitated to abridge when opportunity offered.”(11)

Foreword by Shahidullah Faridi

In Muharram 1396 A.H. Shahidullah wrote a foreword on Nicholson’s translation of the “*Kashf al-Mahjub*”. Faridi has provided some additional information about Shaykh ‘Ali Hujwiri and pointed out some mistakes in Nicholson’s translation. About

the origin of “Hujwir” he has stated a strange idea. He writes that the editor of the Tehran edition has put forward the novel theory that the word Julabi is really Gulabi, and that Hujwiri’s master in poetry was a person whose soubriquet was Gulab (in Arabic Julab). (12) However, Shahidullah has not accepted this etymology of the word “Jullab”. According to Nicholson Jullab and Hujwir were two suburbs of Ghazna.(13) Prince Dara Shikoh observes that Jullab and Hujwir are two localities of Ghazni. In the beginning, he resided in Jullab and later on his residence was in Hujwir. (14) So the etymological relation of Jullabi and Gulab seems illogical. Rightly did Faridi point out that whatever we know of Hujwiri’s life consists of what he himself has told us in the *Kashf ul-Mahjub*. So his book is the primary source for compiling the biography of Sayyed Ali Hujwiri. In this foreward the readers have been told about Hujwiri’s teachers, his contemporaries and his visits of various Islamic centers. His spiritual pedigree has been traced. About his arrival in Lahore, Shahidullah thinks that it was probably after the death of his Shaykh Abu Fadl Muhammad bin Hasan al-Khuttali in Syria. The tradition is that during his stay at Lahore, he became an institution of spiritual teaching in himself, and converted large numbers of Hindus to Islam. The controversy of Hujwiri’s marriage has been discussed as well. According to Faridi, Nicholson is wrong in thinking that the infatuation with an unseen lady led to marriage, as this is clearly against the sense of what Hujwiri writes. (15) About the style of his writing, Faridi has remarked:

“He usually starts with relevant quotation from the Qur’an and the Traditions of the Prophet, and then proceeds to his own analysis, interspersed with numerous references to the dicta of the saints.” (16)

Shahidullah Faridi has discussed *Tasawwuf* and a number of schools of *Tasawwuf* as elucidated by Hujwiri. The eleven veils which are uncovered by him, have been enumerated. Modernists claim that *Tasawwuf* is not in accordance with the teachings of Islam. Shahidullah Faridi has refuted it vehemently. In this context, he writes:

“Hujwiri was great upholder of the *Shariat*, and used to insist that *Sufis* learn well the outward observances of Islam. At the same time he was swift to defend *Tasawwuf* from ignorant attacks by mere formalists” (17).

Carl W. Ernst’s Foreword

Dr. Carl W. Ernst has written foreword for a new edition of Nicholson’s translation printed from New York in 1999 which comprises six pages. Being a famous orientalist and having special interest in Islamic spiritualism, he has provided some information about Shaykh Ali bin Uthman and his book *Kashf al-Mahjub*. He has told that Shaykh Mu’in al-Din Chishti stayed at Lahore to pray and meditate at the tomb of Shaykh Hujwiri to seek permission before going further when he came from Afghanistan to India in the closing years of the twelfth century. (18) Ernst tells that the mosque near the tomb was originally built by Shaykh Hujwiri. His tomb was built by the grandson of Sultan Mahmud. Some information in the foreword are not very different from Nicholson’s preface. However, Carl W. Ernst has told that the Persian text of *Kashf ul-Mahjub* has been published several times

in Lahore, Deoband, Samarqand and Tashkent. It has been rendered into Arabic by Dr. Isad ‘Abd al-Hadi Qandil published from Cairo (Egypt) in 1974. (19) Nicholson’s translation of the *Kashf al-Mahjub* has been regarded as one of the best achievements of the European orientalist scholarship of its time. Like other scholars of his generation, Nicholson believed that Sufism was not really a part of Islam, but was somehow grafted on from some Indian or Greek source but Dr. Carl W. Ernst has repudiated it. According to him, contemporary Chishti Sufi leaders in Pakistan have criticized Nicholson for his assumption that Sufi doctrine and practice was some kind of later deviation from pristine Islam; they maintain that it is in fact *Sufism* that provides the surest guide to the true meaning of the Qur’an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him).”(20)

Dr. Carl has told about the best critical edition of the Persian text published in Leningrad by the Russian orientalist Valentin Zhukovski and also English translation by Capt. Wahid Bakhsh Sial Rabbani.

Wahid Bakhsh’s Translation

Captain Wahid Bakhsh Rabbani has rendered the *Kashf al-Mahjub* into English with a commentary on it. He was a *Chishti Sufi* and a disciple of Sayyed Muhammad Dhauqi Shah. He has written the following books on Islamic spiritualism in Urdu:

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| 1. <i>Sharh-e-Kashf al-Mahjub</i> , , | 2. <i>Mirat al Asrar</i> |
| 3. <i>Maqabis al-Majalis</i> , | 4. <i>Iqtibas al-Anwar</i> |
| 5. <i>Maqam-e-Gunj Shakar</i> , | 6. <i>Punj Pir</i> |
| 7. <i>Azmat-e-Ahle Bay’at-e-Rasul</i> , | 8. <i>Mushahidah-e-Haq</i> |

Besides English translation and commentary on the “*Kashf al-Mahjub*”, Wahid Bakhsh has also authored a book entitled “Islamic Sufism” in English. The translator and commentator of the “*Kashf al-Mahjub*” published this huge work in June 2001 for the first time. He has written “Translator’s Preface” comprising 21 pages. The translation and commentary is spread over 419 pages. In the end an index of names of persons mentioned in the book is given in 13 pages. The text of translation has been differentiated from explanatory notes by putting the latter in boxes. Every time, it starts with word “commentary”. So the translation of the *Kashf al-Mahjub* is not amalgamated with commentary in this book.

In the preface, Rabbani has discussed *Sufism* in detail. He has referred to some books of orientalists wherein mysticism has been discussed. He has given extracts from the following books:

1. Thomas Arnold, The Preaching of Islam
2. H.A.R. Gibb, Whither Islam
3. A.J. Arberry, Introduction to the History of Islam
4. Shahidullah Faridi, Foreword to Nicholson’s Translation
5. Ibn Arabi, Futuhat-i-Makkiyah and Fusus al-Hikam
6. Extracts from the writings of Prof. Massignon and Toynbee.(21)

In the end, he has given English translation of an article written by Sayyed Muhammad Dhauqi Shah,(22) in which terms like *Shariat*, *Tariqat* and *Haqiqat* have been elucidated.

The English translation by Rabbani has its merits – some of which are lacking in Nicholson’s translation. The translator has

been very careful throughout the whole work because he was a Muslim and a sufi as well. Therefore, he was able to understand this sufi treatise in a better way. He has interpreted important parts of the book. However, his translation has some lacunae. For instance, an event has been narrated by Hujwiri which described certain Shaykh reciting the following verse: “Beware of a day on which ye shall be returned unto God” (al-Qur’an ii:281). A heavenly voice called him “Do not read so loud. Four angels have died from the terror of this verse.” (23) This translation is totally incorrect because the word “Paryan” (24) has been used in the text that means fairies. Furthermore, angels do not die as other living beings die. Nicholson has translated the last sentence as under:

“Do not read so loud; four peris have died from the terror inspired into them by this verse.” (25)

He is the first Muslim who has translated this textbook of Islamic mysticism in any European language. Though the book has been translated into other western language but it is the work of an orientalist. Henry Corbin edited the *Kashf al-Mahjub* in 1949 and translated it into French that has been published under the title “Le Devoilement des Choses Caches” in 1988 from Paris. (26) Nicholson’s translation also has shortcomings some of which have been discussed by Shahidullah Faridi. (27)

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