

A Typology of Sufi Writings (3-4 AH) and Reciprocal Relation of Texts and Power Structure

Ehsan Raisi

Associate Professor of Persian Language and Literature, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran; Email: Ehsan.reisi@gmail.com

Samaneh Taheri

PhD Candidate in Persian Language and Literature, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran (Corresponding Author); Email: Samanehtaheri176@gmail.com

Received: 22/09/2025

Accepted: 09/02/2026

Introduction

Sufiism and Sufism emerged around the mid-second century AH. They arose as a response to certain social and religious developments. Gradually, during the third and fourth centuries, they assumed a more coherent form. During this period, the Abbasid Caliphate sought to consolidate its political and religious authority. At the same time, various intellectual currents were actively present in society. The Sufis were among these currents. In such an atmosphere, Sufiism was influential in the public sphere. It functioned as a social institution. It also retained its individual, spiritual dimensions. The Sufis engaged in various social actions. One of these actions was the composition of texts. They wrote both poetry and prose. Through these writings, they conveyed Sufial teachings. They articulated doctrinal principles. They expressed ecstatic experiences, known as *mawājīd*. These writings became an integral part of Islamic culture and society. They transmitted profound spiritual concepts. They also enriched the Arabic and Persian languages and their literary traditions. Sufism expanded quantitatively and qualitatively. Various Sufi orders developed distinct branches, customs, and practices. They also maintained shared foundations. As this occurred, written texts increasingly served as vehicles for pedagogical transmission. They conveyed the educational and didactic teachings of the Sufis. The Sufis maintained relationships with different social groups. They also related to the institution of power. The nature of these relationships was reflected in their writings. This reflection renders these works indispensable for understanding social, intellectual, and spiritual transformations. These transformations shaped Islamic history. This study therefore investigates the relationship between political authority and the Sufi circles. It also examines the Sufial writings of the early tradition. The focus is on the third and fourth centuries AH. Through this analytical lens, the study identifies and delineates the various literary genres that emerged within this corpus. This inquiry possesses twofold significance. First, it enables a multi-perspectival examination of Sufial texts. It clarifies the evolving contestations surrounding Sufism across time. Second, it provides insight into the diverse social, political, and intellectual currents that characterized distinct historical periods.

Research Findings

Examination of historical sources reveals that the Sufis of this period failed to adopt a uniform approach toward the institution of power. Some chose seclusion; others drew close to the court; a third group, while maintaining distance, pursued an ethical critique of power. This categorization pertains to an analysis of the Sufis' social actions rather than constituting a mere historical classification.

This divergence in approach was also reflected in the type of works they produced. The reclusive Sufis primarily wrote didactic texts for the training of disciples. Those more active in the social arena pursued the moral reform of society and, by extension, of rulers, through admonition literature and certain epistles. This dynamic engendered a diversity of literary genres within the field of Sufiism, which are introduced below.

In the third century, as Sufi orders expanded, the need for a coherent explanation of Sufial concepts grew. This trend intensified in the fourth century, leading to the emergence of works that expounded upon the terminology, stations (*maqāmāt*), and foundations of Sufism. Indeed, these texts emphasized citation of the Qur'an and Hadith and harmonization of the Sufi path (*ṭarīqat*) with Islamic law (*sharī'at*). This emphasis can be interpreted as an attempt to mitigate the suspicion of jurists and theologians while consolidating the social standing of Sufism. It appears that the systematization of these works was not merely a sign of Sufism's intellectual maturity but also a response to conditions in which Sufiism was compelled to clarify its boundaries and principles to maintain its social presence.

In the hagiographical genre (*awliyānāmah*), an ethical and religious position for Sufiism is established through the depiction of the conduct and ethics of saints and Sufis. This position remains not necessarily dependent on political power. Hence, these works can be considered an effort to strengthen the internal identity of the Sufial institution.

Another genre of writings from these two centuries is ecstatic literature (*mawājīdī*), which expresses the personal experiences of Sufis, often through allusive and indirect language. This mode of expression conveys the Sufial experience while simultaneously avoiding explicit jurisprudential and theological polemics. In a climate where misinterpretation and accusations of heresy were possible, such an approach could serve as a means of maintaining spiritual independence while avoiding direct conflict. Admonition literature (*andarz-nāmah*) represents another genre that can be viewed as a manifestation of critical engagement with power. In these texts, the Sufi speaks through the language of advice, advocating adherence to religious law and avoidance of oppression. Although this critique is often neither explicit nor political, it appears to contain, in its inner layers, a form of ethical assessment of rulers' actions.

It remains noteworthy that in the third century, many Sufial teachings were still transmitted orally, and the existing texts were comparatively limited. However, in the fourth century, as Sufi orders consolidated and *khānaqāhs* expanded, the production of writings increased, and the various genres became more clearly defined. Therefore, the fourth century can be regarded as the period during which Sufial texts achieved stabilization.

Conclusion

An examination of the genres of Sufial writings in the third and fourth centuries AH demonstrates that these texts are not merely the product of the individual experiences of Sufis. Rather, they were formed in continuous connection with social conditions and power structures. The proliferation of didactic and research-oriented texts in the fourth century indicates an effort to coherently explain the foundations of Sufism and consolidate its position in society. Furthermore, hagiographies, ecstatic writings, and admonition literature represent the Sufis' attempts to maintain their spiritual independence while surviving within the existing structure. On this basis, it can be argued that the Sufial writings of these two centuries constitute an arena for establishing a balance between commitment to inner experience, on the one hand, and the necessity of living within the political and social milieu of their time, on the other. These texts are not only a source for understanding Sufial thought but also play a significant role in comprehending the social and cultural history of that period.

Keywords: Sufi writings, 3-4 AH, Sufial Research, Sufi orders, Power Structure.