

Where we buried our own:
An Ethnographic Study of the Shrine of Wasif Ali Wasif

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1. Introduction

Things do not always go as planned.

I was meant to visit a shrine on my street for my end of semester linguistic anthropology ethnography – one I had no idea even existed until my cook told me about it. It was, rather charmingly, hidden behind some overgrown bushes and old trees, tucked away where it was out of sight. You see, the shrine's neighbors are not the friendliest: those to its left thought it was an eye sore and wanted to pretend it did not exist, and to its right was an army mess with high walls, cameras, and some infantrymen who seemed to perpetually be on watch. I walked over from my house – it is about 500 meters down the street from where I live – and was asked what I wanted at the shrine. I told them I was interested in the history of the place, and that I would like to learn about it, take some pictures, and perhaps, with the caretaker's permission, take an interview. My enthusiasm, however, was met with friendly sarcasm, a slight grin, and a very valid point I had failed to consider: "My son, this is Cantt. You cannot record or photograph anything here", the caretaker said while discreetly gesturing to the security camera pointing into the shrine.

My plan was ruined. I sulked and panicked and spent the rest of the day thinking about what to do next. I had no idea where to look, but there was one person I knew who could help me: my grandmother. She has always been a history enthusiast and would narrate odd tales about the city to me whenever we would meet. After calming me down, she told me to look for a shrine at *Miani Sahib*, a graveyard in the center of Lahore off Ferozpur Road, where my grandfather also happens to be buried.



1. *Miani Sahib Graveyard (Google Maps, 2023)*

Miani Sahib (pictured above) is a one-thousand-year-old graveyard that is spread over one-thousand-two-hundred acres of land (Government of Punjab, n.d.). To me, it is more than just another graveyard – it is where we bury our own. My grandmother told me that there were multiple shrines scattered across the graveyard; however, she pushed me to visit the shrine of Wasif Ali Wasif. Intrigued by this, I inquired why she wanted me to go there specifically. She explained that he had gifted some of his books to my grandfather while he was serving as a lecturer at the economics department at Government College, Lahore. Suddenly, my grandmother was a subject of my study; I asked when they had met and to see the books, however, my grandmother's memory was not serving her well that day, so I took what I could get and made my way to the graveyard on 19th May 2023. Her driver took me to the site and assumed the role of a guide for the day.

Arriving at the Shrine.

Ferozpur Road is one of Lahore's busier streets, home to many hardware stores, government buildings and warehouses. You would not think, in its contemporary state – with overpasses and car galore – that it was lining a one-thousand-year-old graveyard. However, a left turn off the main street revealed a metal fence and graves behind it. Shortly after, you could see the shrine: its arched gateway opened on the sidewalk, with a decorated tunnel-like shade leading to its entrance. It was colorful and felt festive, in stark contrast to its surrounding – graves as far as the eye could see.

Before I entered, as I unbuckled my *Khherri* (Peshawari sandal) – as was required by the shrine – I faced the graveyard. It was odd, but it did not feel sad. I understood those who laid here were loved ones, however, the sheer size of the yard reduced the sadness associated with loss. There were so many loved ones, buried over so many centuries. Where one grave ended, another started. There were no straight lines; no leveled ground; no uniformity whatsoever. Old olive trees, with knots and odd bends cast shade over those whom they witnessed pass. Flowers grew in the strangest places. The chaos made the place seem alive if anything.

I entered the building cautiously, not wanting to attract attention to myself. I wore *shalwar kameez* to distract from my inability to communicate in Urdu fluently. A large room with glass doors at one end welcomed me. Under my feet, was a carpeted floor, which I imagine was much softer at some point in the past. Surrounding me were posters, green and black, with poetry and the sayings of Wasif Ali Wasif. The roof was high and lined with thin wooden beams, which housed the mounting points for fans and a grand looking chandelier. This large glass and metallic ornament was suspended directly over the primary tomb almost as if it was pointing at it. The tomb itself was slightly off center, closer to the wall with the entrance. Raised on a marble platform, with a short marble fence surrounding it, Wasif Ali

Wasif's grave rested under a gold wooden canopy decorated with flowers, real and artificial, and the first *Kalima* of Islam on each side. At the foot of his grave was black sign which once again had the first *Kalima* inscribed on it. Directly under the Islamic verse was poetry.

After losing myself in the environment around me, a waft of warm air from the windows across me hit my face – I was back. After returning to reality, I was slightly intimidated and felt as if I was being watched. This made sense because I had been standing at the door studying the room, drawing the attention of the people present, and the caretaker, who was visibly confused by my behavior. He approached me with a broom in his hand, and softly asked if he could help me.

Others felt intimidated too.

As the caretaker of the shrine walked over, I glanced at those sitting around the room. Interestingly, I seemed to be one of the only men wearing *shalwar kameez*. The rest wore jeans, and polo shirts, if not t-shirts. Women, accompanied by their children, sat in the same room, dressed 'traditionally'. There was a basket of prayer caps which were free to use – most of the men did not wear them, while women covered their heads with a *dupatta* or scarf.

The caretaker was a mild-mannered man who spoke quietly. He was wearing *shalwar kameez* and a prayer cap, and no shoes. The broom in his hand, had been used shortly before I entered – I saw him cleaning the floor when I investigated the shrine from the sidewalk. He seemed humble but also slightly nervous, mostly looking to the ground while speaking to me. I was slightly confused: why was he nervous? It was I who had entered his space. It then clicked, he referred to me as "*Sahib*" over and over; he thought I was a journalist – I entered with a driver, and had my university ID, with the back of the card facing

him, hanging from my *shalwar kameez*. I clarified I was just a student and was there for a project. This seemed to calm him – he confessed that he thought I may have been writing a report on the shrine and that he felt a bit shy talking to me, confirming my suspicions.

Once that was out of the way, I asked him if he would be willing to give an interview for my project. At first, he was hesitant. He recommended I make points on my notebook and have someone else deliver them in the form of an interview. I explained that an interview with him would allow me to draft a transcript and translate what he had told me. I followed this by describing the project to him and telling him how Wasif Ali Wasif had given books to my grandfather many years ago. At this point, I also assured him I could anonymize the interview, if he wanted. He seemed willing to answer my questions with this guarantee: “Yes! That is good. Just do not mention my name or show my face.” I was relieved. I did not want to go looking for another shrine, especially because this one felt like it was destiny. The caretaker asked me what my interview questions were, to which I responded by telling him I had only one question: “What is the nature of the Kalam used at this shrine?” He was confused: “Only one question? Okay, I will take the lead then. Come on, start recording.” This man, who seemed nervous and shy only minutes ago, was now in his element and I could not have been happier. I turned on the voice recording software on my phone and began learning.

2. Account of Scripts

After my interview, I asked the caretaker if I could take pictures of the shrine and document what was written on the walls. He accepted, requesting that I do not take pictures where any women were visible. The table below represents the various forms of script on display at the shrine.

Inscrip. No.	Location	Language	Verse, Pir's saying, etc.	Translation
1	Gate	Arabic	لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ	There is no God but Allah Muhammad is the messenger of Allah (Manchester Central Mosque, 2021)
2	Sign on the outside of the shrine	Urdu	پاکستان نور ہے — نور کو زوال نہیں	Pakistan is God's light — God's light shines forever
3	At the foot of the grave	Arabic	لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ	There is no God but Allah Muhammad is the messenger of Allah (Manchester Central Mosque, 2021)
4	On the canopy over the grave	Arabic	لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ	There is no God but Allah Muhammad is the messenger of Allah (Manchester Central Mosque, 2021)
5	On the fabric draped over the grave	Arabic	لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ	There is no God but Allah Muhammad is the messenger of Allah (Manchester Central Mosque, 2021)
6	Green poster mounted on a wall inside the shrine	Urdu	زندگی آمدن اور خرچ کے علاوہ بھی بہت کچھ ہے اس میں چہرے بھی ہیں اور نگاہیں بھی	Life is more than earning and spending It has faces and glances too
7	Green poster mounted on a wall inside the shrine	Urdu	دوسروں کی خامی آپ کی خوبی نہیں بن سکتی	Other people's vice Cannot be your virtue
8	At the foot of the shrine,	Urdu	ہم نے جب بھی انہیں پکارا ہے اک صدا آئی تو ہمارا ہے	Whenever I have called out to him

	under the first Kalima			There was a voice that said you are mine
9	Green poster mounted on a wall inside the shrine	Urdu	فقیری شروع ہوتی ہے بے ضرر ہو جانے سے اور مکمل ہوتی ہے منفعت بخش ہو جانے پر	Asceticism starts with becoming harmless And concludes with becoming beneficial
10	Green poster mounted on a wall inside the shrine	Urdu	زندگی سے تقاضا اور گلا نکال دیا جائے تو سکون پیدا ہو جاتا ہے	If we remove demand and complaint out of life Peace is born
11	Green poster mounted on a wall inside the shrine	Urdu	حضور کی بات پر کسی اور بات کو فوقیت دینا ایسے ہے جیسے شرک	To give precedence to anyone's word before the Prophets Is the same as idolatory
12	On a poster mounted inside the shrine above an oil lamp window	Urdu	بلندی پستی احساس ہے اپنے احساس کی اصلاح کریں	To succeed or to fail is a perception Correct this perception
13	On the tunnel-like canopy at the entrance of the shrine	Urdu	ہوں چراغ داغ بنا ہوا، سر شام جلتا ہوں شوق سے میرے پاس آئیں گے وہ کبھی جنہیں اک سحر کی تلاش ہے	I have become an oil lamp that lights up fondly in the early evening Maybe those who desire a morning will come to me sometime
14	Banner like poster hanging inside the shrine	Arabic	محمد (PBUH)	Muhammad (PBUH)

3. Transcription from Interview

Context

During the interview, the caretaker stood by my side. We faced the grave, and he spoke to me to me in a nearly undisturbed flow, however, he did stop in between paragraphs to think. Using a set of five recordings, I transcribed the interview and divided it into paragraphs. The order of the interview remains untouched, and nothing has been omitted. I have highlighted variations in tone and volume, pauses and facial expressions, and body language throughout the transcript.

At some points, the caretaker seemed to pause, expecting me to praise Wasif Ali Wasif. He was describing his contributions, often following them with *MashAllah* (God has willed it) or *SubhanAllah* (glory be to God). I followed along and interjected during pauses with praise.

Transcript

Caretaker: “[looks to the door] Let me start of by telling you where we are. This is Miani Shareef Graveyard. It is the biggest graveyard in Asia. It is atleast a thousand years old. This Respected Person (sarkar) died in 1993. He was buried on 18th of January 1993 [slight pause]. This burial place *was chosen by the respected one himself* [emphasis added]. One day he was passing by this area and he asked how far this place was from his home. The person who was with him said that it must be around 3-3.5 kilometers from your house. The respected one buried here said this is a very nice place. So in a way he pointed out the place but didn't say for what purpose. So approximately a year before his passing he had already selected this place but he came here to be buried in 1993. [looks to me and lowers voice slightly] God makes things easy for the ones who are close to God (Wali Allah). God gives them knowledge of things before they happen. So the selection of this place was his own. By

asking the distance of this place from his house he had already decided that he was to be buried here. When he came here to be buried this place became inhabited and this road was made and shops came up and even homes were constructed [pause].”

“Once the respected one was buried here he had a lot of people who loved and venerated him and they used to come here from time to time. Eventually they all got together and tried to make it into a more beautiful place [looks at points around at the primary tomb room]. As time passed the condition of this shrine improved. And over a period of time now this has become a very grand place [praises the shrine]. All the people who loved and respected him have combined their efforts to make this into a place that suited the respected man’s exalted spiritual position [pause].”

“[looks to the ground and begins to speak] The Respected Person is a Sufi, a poet, an acetic, a man of God. He has written many books. He is a Dervish (someone who takes a vow of poverty and austerity). You must have read some of his poetry in this place. He is a Qalandar (a person among the saints, who enjoys freedom from the ties and bounds of time and space). But when he was alive he never revealed himself to anyone. In his last days he gave some signs. Someone insisted that he tell them who he takes his guidance from and pledges allegiance to. The respected one said to him that this is not a good question. Ask another question. But when people kept insisting that he tell them one day he said that I have only this to say for myself.

میں خبر کے دام کا دام ہوں

میں خردکدے کا امام ہوں

میں علی ولی کا غلام ہوں

اسی تاجدار کی بات ہوں

میرا نام واسف واسفا

میرا پیر سید مرتضیٰ

میرا ورد احمد مجتبیٰ

میں سدا بہار کی بات ہوں

Translation:

I am the value of the price of knowledge

I am the keeper of the house of wisdom

I am the slave of Ali Wali (Hazrat Ali)

I am the expression of the King of Ka'aba (The Prophet)

My name is Wasif Wasava

My Guide is Syed Murtaza (The Prophet)

My repeated prayer is Ahmed Mujtaba (The chosen one) (The Prophet)

I am someone who remains evergreen”

Caretaker: “He revealed everything in this piece of poetry. He was also a professor. He did his

Masters in English. He also took the examination for the Civil Services. He also ran a college

in Lahore on Naba Road called the Lahore English College. However he couldn't run it for

very long as he started to spend time in prayer and his health deteriorated. The College was

closed as the Respected Persons path was different. Noone knew about it. He was a true Sufi

saint and people wanted to serve him and be in his company for spiritual benefits. There

were important people like Mr. Hanif Ramay (Chief Minister) who used to sit by his feet. Ashfaq Ahmed and Bano Qudsia (famous writers). A lot of other famous people sat by his feet too and he brought a lot of blessings to these people and even future generations.”

Me: “Wonderful. *Mashallah*”

Caretaker: “[smiles looking at the tomb] All of his writings are like pearls beaded into a necklace. Every word, every phrase and every quotation. He said that a Faqir (ascetic) has a library in the sky (heavens) and each of his words comes from that library and not from this world.”

Me: “Great!”

Caretaker: “There are people who were his students who read his books and now they have their own students who have also benefited from these books. Coming to his shrine is like saying a prayer. One person asked the Respected Person once that you do so much for us, what can we do for you? The Respected Person said to only pray for him. So coming to this shrine is like saying a prayer for him. This shrine is like a university. Even if an uneducated man comes here he will leave educated [said with conviction and a hand gesture pointing up then down]. There is a lot of knowledge and ease in this shrine. And the Respected Person has explained everything about life in a very simple and clear terms [stops speaking, looks to me, and nods implying that the interview is over].”

Me: “Absolutely. Thank you very much!”

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Colors of faith.

“There were some of those who believed that the green colour was the colour of the Prophet Muhammad’s tribe, the Quraysh. Others believed that green was the Prophet’s favourite colour. In fact, it is said that the Prophet always wore a greenturban...” (Bakar, n.d.).

The importance of color cannot be disregarded when discussing a shrine. From the arched entrance to the signs, banners, and posters on the walls around the tomb, a significant and specific set of colors caught one’s eye: green, black, and white. Each one of these is closely tied to the Islamic faith, as discussed by Bakar (n.d.) in his work titled “Colours of Islam”.

An abundance of green filled Wasif Ali Wasif’s shrine. The entrance, shade, main door, carpet, and a majority of the posters were various shades of green, some brighter and bolder than others. Bakar (n.d.) suggests that many consider this color to be the Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) favorite. Similarly, black, which was relatively scarce in the shrine, “is also known as the symbol of holiness in Islamic point of view” (Bakar, n.d.). It is also closely linked the Shiism and Dervishes, who link it to suffering and death respectively (Bakar, n.d.). White, which coated the walls as paint and tiles, has “generally been accepted as the colour that is loved by the God and the Prophet Muhammad. It symbolizes purity and cleanness. It is a colour that represents the universal peace, brotherhood and harmony and bears a special place in Islamic ways of life...” (Bakar, n.d.).

Language at a poet and writer’s shrine.

Through my interaction with the caretaker, as well as my examination of the texts on display, I began to consider language’s ability to immortalize or memorialize personalities, in

this case that of Wasif Ali Wasif. The essence of his being, thoughts, and self were poured into his books, as can be deduced from the interview. So, a part of him, in the form of his writings and sayings posted in shrine, and the books in people's shelves at home, would continue to live on without his physical self. My interview also revealed two critical points where language and memory intersected with one another in this case: Wasif Ali Wasif was celebrated in the memory of those who love and value him for his work, and in his own words which become timeless lessons or stories for a literary community.

Creating a community through and around language.

Wasif Ali Wasif's shrine was made by a community that felt his contributions to society deserved to be remembered, and that his way of life and he himself demanded respect. That is evident by the fact that the shrine was made, decorated, and maintained by those who look up to him and enjoy his literary work. Language, from my understanding of this particular shrine, served a larger purpose of community building and maintenance. The presence of Wasif Ali Wasif's work in nearly every direction served as a reminder to those who entered the shrine about why they were there – in the memory of a writer whose work had some impact on them.

Learning to study my own culture – feeling foreign.

I had preconceived notions about what a shrine would be like, how it is operated, and what was expected of me. In engaging with this activity, I discovered multiple points where I was wrong. First, not all shrines are entirely religious or places of worship. In fact, the shrine of Wasif Ali Wasif was not built for worship at all. It was a space to pray for him

and offer gratitude for his contributions to society. That is not to say people did not perform *Namaz* or Islamic ritual prayers there – they did; however, that was not the primary objective of the shrine, as is with others. This shrine was a cultural institution, with importance given to poetry, prose, and the teachings of a wise and “respected person”. Related to this is my observation about clothing, which I presumed would be restricted to indigenous attire. Once again, I was incorrect. Many of those who came to offer their respects were wearing western clothing, such as jeans and polo shirts, and did not wear prayer caps either.

Second, religious institutions, for instance mosques, are normally strictly segregated or are dominated by men. In examining the structures of other shrines, I, once again, found the shrine of Wasif Ali Wasif to be an anomaly. There was no gender segregation: men and women sat in the same room around the tomb. In many other shrines, such as that of Shah Jamal, women were not allowed in the tomb room – they could look into it through viewing windows but were prohibited from entering.

Third, there was limited Islamic scripture posted around the shrine. Apart from the name of the prophet and the first *Kalima*, all text posted around the structure was written by Wasif Ali Wasif himself. Once again, if we compare this shrine to that of Shah Jamal, where Allah’s names were inscribed onto the roof and around archways, there was nearly no Islamic elements apart from those mentioned. Therefore, the literary and cultural elements of the shrine, in a way, outweighed the religious ones.

Fourth, I expected that I would be required to know about the shrine and the person buried there. Given that the shrine was dedicated to a writer, I was somewhat nervous entering not having read any of his work. This did not pose any problems, however. The caretaker was more than willing to teach me about the writer after the interview, and even

wished to gift me his books, however, this was not possible since the shelf housing them was locked and the second caretaker had the keys. This was in line with the general ethos of the institution: “This shrine is like a university. Even if an uneducated man comes here he will leave educated.”

Learning to gather information.

Engaging with a physical space to study the linguistic elements present within it was a daunting task to say the least. It involved multiple different approaches, such as participant observation, in the form of offering a prayer for Wasif Ali Wasif and listening to others around me, interviewing the caretaker, making observations about the different forms of language around the shrine, and even looking at the structure of the shrine itself. Absorbing so much information in such a short period of time taught me several lessons.

When interviewing the caretaker, I understood the importance of affirmation and encouragement. To keep the caretaker speaking, I constantly reassured him of what he was saying. This proved to be extremely useful – after I started doing this, I noticed that the caretaker’s language got increasingly more poetic. He was in his element. This small shift in tone and vocabulary indirectly provided a substantial amount of information which allowed me to deduce much about the shrine and the people that visit and care for it – they too were poetic, inspired, artistic, and spiritual.

By sitting in on of the corners of the shrine, I was able to gain view of the entirety of the shrine, and those present within it. This allowed me to make observations about the kind of people who came to this particular shrine. Placing myself intelligently was key to this process of gathering information. When offering a prayer, I made sure to listen to those around me. Most people were not praying for themselves, rather for Wasif Ali Wasif. This

was peculiar, since traditionally a *dua* or prayer in an institution like this is meant to be for oneself.

Documenting what was on the walls gave me insight into who exactly Wasif Ali Wasif was, but also taught me that the image I had developed was curated by someone – someone who decided which quotes go where, and which teachings to include, and which poems deserved to be on display. In this case, language was my only way of envisaging who this person was, and so the person was the language I documented and read.

Conclusion

Having learnt about multiple shrines from class fellows during the duration of this course, I have come to realize that the shrine of Wasif Ali Wasif is quite different from conventional shrines. It is dedicated to language, and the person who produced it. The only way of remembering Wasif Ali Wasif is through his words – there are no pictures of him at the shrine. In a way, this takes attention away from him, and spotlights his poetry and prose. Unlike other shrines, Wasif Ali Wasif's was also less religion oriented: there was little about Islam at the shrine. At some points, it felt like the Islamic elements were after thoughts, or perhaps added in order to adhere to socio-cultural norms. Those who visited the shrine were passionate about art and seemed to come for inspiration. Each part of the shrine, as simple as it was, seemed curated and intentional, from the colors of the posters to the placement of the chandelier, to its location. Wasif Ali Wasif's shrine seemed like a gallery displaying art, to honor its artist.

5. Photography



Figure 1 Entrance to the shrine



Figure 2 Pathing heading into the shrine



Figure 3 Main door leading into the shrine



Figure 4 Graves surrounding the shrine



Figure 5 Main door of the shrine (inside view)



Figure 6 Tomb of Wasif Ali Wasif



Figure 7 Black Banner with Kalima and Poetry



Figure 8 The inside of the shrine

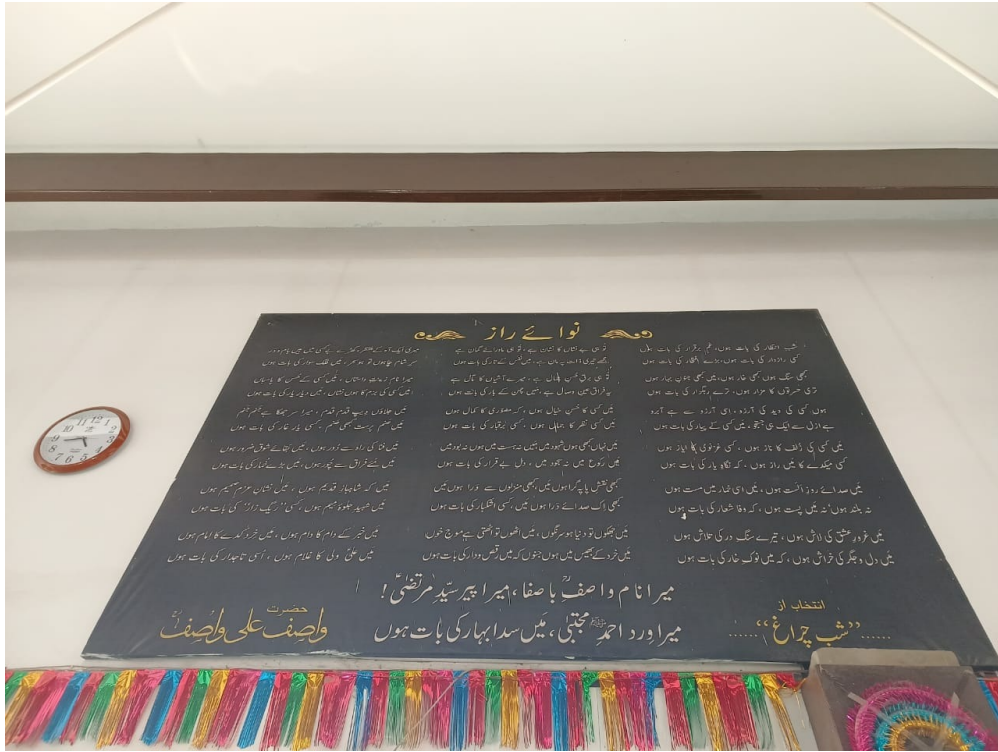


Figure 9 Poetry posted on the wall



Figure 10 Oil lamp shelf



Figure 11 A saying/teaching of Wasif Ali Wasif on a poster



Figure 12 A saying/teaching of Wasif Ali Wasif on a poster

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