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THE ALCHEMY OF THE DHIKR RITUAL: SOUTH AFRICAN SUFI WOMEN EXPERIENCES

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Kareema Mitha

Through the name of Almighty Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful

I intend for this work to open hearts and am in deep gratitude.

I dedicate this work:

To Allah, my Beloved for Her guidance, strength and endless love and grace.

To the exceptional women, whose stories and perspectives made this journey possible.

To my Professors, for continuously inspiring me to reach higher.

To my mum for never failing to amaze me, and my dad and siblings for believing in me.

To my special husband and wise children, for their unwavering support, love, and encouragement.

There is a life-force within your soul, seek that life.
There is a gem in the mountain of your body, seek that mine.
O traveller, if you are in search of that
Don't look outside, look inside yourself and seek that.

- Rumi

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BACKGROUND

South Africa, colonised first by the Dutch in 1652 and later by the British after the 1901 Anglo-Boer war, has a rich history marked by racist oppression and practices of 'invisibilising' marginalised groups. It was in this colonised landscape that Islam was introduced to South Africa, primarily through the British and Dutch relocation of skilled labourers from their other occupied territories, India and the Malaysian archipelago (Moronell, 2015, 1). The indentured Malay labourers in the Cape Province and the Indians workers in Natal were subject to South African racial laws of the time. (Haron, 2005, 276). Moreover the patriarchal structures embedded in the cultures and religious traditions of these labourers often further marginalised women and children within these already oppressed communities. The systemic injustice and silencing in earlier colonial history was later codified in apartheid-era laws such as the Group Areas Act and the Dom Pas, which restricted movement and segregated communities along racial lines.

As a result of the Group Areas Act, the Islamic practices of the Malay and Indian communities, both within the Cape province and in Natal fostered their own traditions. The ritual practices in both communities have retained a sense of continuity for the most part, fostering a sense of belonging. In Natal most Indians followed the Islamic school of legal thought of Abu Hanifa (Sunni Hanafi) and adhered to the Jilani or Naqshabandi Sufi orders. Conversely, the Malays in the Cape followed Imam Shafi and were predominantly affiliated with the Bal'alawi order (Haron, 2005, 277). Despite the spiritual and cultural richness of these practices, women remained largely invisible, both in practice and in the limited scholarship of the time, which focused almost exclusively on the male experience.

Today, over 30 years into South Africa's democracy, despite significant legal and social progress aimed at addressing racial and patriarchal inequalities, patriarchy still pervades Indian and other communities. Among Muslim groups and even within contemporary Islamic scholarship in South Africa, female narratives and experiences of religion are marginalised (Hoel, 2023, 478-488). Attempts to challenge this androcentric norm are often met with resistance, with feminism being dismissed as a Western ideology perceived to threaten the foundations of Islam.

In this context of silencing female Muslim voices, my research seeks to illuminate the experiences of South African Sufi women, particularly their embodied ritual practices and self-cultivation processes.

The aim of this research is to make visible the embodied ritual practices of South African Sufi women and to explore the significance of these practices in their spiritual and personal development. Through this exploration, I seek to understand how these rituals shape their experiences of self-cultivation and how these women perceive and articulate their spiritual journeys. This study will also strive to reclaim and highlight thoughtful explorations of Sufi Muslima practices and their paths towards spiritual becoming, with emphasis on their lived experiences.

This research engages with multiple disciplines, including religious studies, theology, Islamic studies, sociology, and gender studies. This thesis aims to contribute to these fields by providing a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of South African Sufi women, offering a 'thick' description of their ritual practices and self-cultivation process.

The first chapter provides a comprehensive literature review and establishes the conceptual framework for the study.

I have drawn on key scholarly areas to guide the study conceptually. I cover each of the following topics which constitute an area of inquiry in my literature review to position my research within existing historical and contemporary scholarship:

- **Islam and Sufism - Sufi Theology, Islamic Psychology and Feminist issues**
  This section will explore Islamic Sufi psychology and the God-human relationship, introducing key Sufi concepts related to the spiritual transformation process. A feminist theological perspective will be applied to position women in the broader context of foundational Sufi thought.

- **Rituals as habitus in Islam and the Sufi Transformation Process**
  The role of ritual in the Sufi journey of self-cultivation will be analysed, drawing on both Islamic and Western scholarly understandings of habitus and the significance of ritual.

- **Sufi Practice of Dhikr - Female Embodiment Experiences**
  This section will investigate how women engage in the practice of *dhikr* (remembrance of God) and how this practice facilitates self-making. It will draw from contemporary feminist Sufi scholarship to highlight the practices of Sufi women worldwide.

- **Locating the wider Politics of Agency and Women Embodiment**
  Grounded in feminist theory, this discussion will explore the intersections of biology and the social constructs of the gender, helping to understand the embodiment of femininity within Islamic Sufi practices.

It is anticipated that this literature review will also provide a theoretical framework that will guide the analysis of fieldwork data. The conceptual framework anchors the study in three primary concepts: *embodiment*, *habitus*, and *agency*. Embodiment is explored in terms of how physical practices in ritual shape the experiences and identities of Sufi women. *Habitus* is discussed as the ingrained dispositions and practices that emerge from socio-cultural conditioning, particularly within the Sufi community. The chapter also addresses *agency* as the capacity of these women to act intentionally within the constraints of their social and religious contexts, asserting their power within a traditionally patriarchal society. The integration of these concepts sets the foundation for analysing how these women navigate their spirituality and gendered experiences of self-cultivation.

Chapter 2 dissects the methodology, overview and mapping of this research. It examines how Sufi ritual practices shape the identities of South African Sufi women, using feminist standpoint theory to amplify their voices.

Chapter 3 of this thesis explores the journey of these women toward achieving a "perfectly balanced self," using personal growth and spiritual practices to cultivate a sense of belonging and identity. It examines how they deepen self-awareness through rituals, skills, and ethical relationships within their community, especially through the guidance of their Shaykh and group activities that shape their self-exploration. By integrating self-reflection and shared values, these women expand their consciousness and find purpose. The chapter focuses on three areas: spiritual identity, self-cultivation through joy and ritual, and the role of community in fostering a supportive social identity.

Chapter 4 then follows, dissecting how the identities and embodied experiences of South African Sufi women have been transformed under patriarchal conditioning, aiming to deepen understanding of their self-awareness and spiritual growth. It addresses the challenges they face within patriarchal structures, including the roles they adopt to navigate these systems and the internal conflicts that emerge. Through mentorship from their Shaykh and community support, as well as various embodied healing practices, these women work to reclaim authenticity and bring their feminine into balance. This dual approach - guided learning and ritual practice - enables them to realign while contending with familiar constraints and power dynamics, emphasising themes of identity, community, and self-empowerment.

Chapter 5 looks at how experienced Sufi women, who have a deep understanding of their spiritual path, focus on broader consciousness and spiritual goals. With a strong sense of who they are, a sense of belonging, and purpose, they shift their attention away from external concerns - like personal desires and past emotional baggage - and focus on connecting with their true, inner selves. The chapter unpacks how these women work to overcome internal divisions, aiming to achieve a more unified and balanced state of mind. It also delves into the practices, rituals, and community support that help them let go of ego-based identities and integrate all parts of themselves. Through this process, they begin to see themselves as part of a larger, unified community.

I conclude with Chapter 6 which provides an overall summary on the 3 concepts underpinning this thesis: embodiment, habitus and agency.

INTRODUCTION

Religion, among other things, serves as a project of meaning-making and knowledge creation by human beings. Understanding how religious epistemologies function is key to understanding people, as it is through people that religion is enacted. Gaining insight into why people do what they do is fundamental to the discourse surrounding religion. Since the discourse centres around human experience, and much of the historical scholarship on religion has been androcentric, feminist theory rightfully advocates for a focus on the lived experiences of those who have been marginalised or rendered invisible. Moreover, given that religion interweaves with other forms of social power in varied contexts, feminists have increasingly pointed to an intersectional approach to gendered experiences that illuminate interlocking forms of oppression and complex locations of power and how this affects embodiment when studying groups of women.

As Delores Williams poignantly states in *Sisters in the Wilderness* (2013, 206), "The body provokes theology. The body contests its hypotheses, resists its conclusions, escapes its textual margins." This quote encapsulates the role of the body (including the senses and agential actions) in embodiment within theological anthropology, that examines the nature of humanity in relation to the divine. Theological anthropology explores questions about human existence, identity, and experience, especially in the context of religious beliefs and practices, seeking to understand how the body, mind, and spirit interact within the framework of faith and spirituality. This is especially true in feminist methodology and underpins this research project as the focus is on the practices of South African Sufi women - whose lived realities, in the light of historical social constructs of patriarchy remain particular and distinct from those of men. Informed by feminist commitments, this project will focus on the religious and self-cultivation experiences of a specific group of South African Muslim women, who have a compounded experience of being rendered invisible by virtue of race, religion and gender in the context of South Africa.

In exploring the intersections of feminist thought and religious tradition, this study seeks to investigate how feminist approaches to religion challenge patriarchal structures and offer new ways of understanding spiritual practices. Feminist scholars of religion have long critiqued the ways in which religious institutions, doctrines, and texts have marginalised women's voices

and roles, often relegating them to passive, secondary positions. By engaging with these traditions from a feminist perspective, scholars have opened space for more inclusive and transformative interpretations that honour the lived experiences of women and their spiritual agency.

Within the context of Islam, feminist scholars have worked to reinterpret the Quran and Hadith, focusing on concepts such as justice, equality, and the spiritual dignity of women. These feminist readings push against traditional patriarchal interpretations, advocating for reforms in Islamic social and legal practices that restrict women's rights and opportunities. Islamic feminism calls for a re-imagining of Islamic tradition that embraces women as full agents of their faith, capable of interpreting and living the teachings of Islam in ways that resonate with their personal and social realities.

Feminist inquiry into Sufism offers a compelling focus on the mystical and personal relationship with the Divine, re-examining women's roles in this tradition both historically and today. By highlighting women's spiritual experiences and contributions of female Sufi mystics, feminist interpretations reveal transformative ways for women to engage with Islam. Sufism's emphasis on inwardness and self-realisation provides fertile ground for reinterpreting gender roles and showcasing women's spiritual agency.

Feminist epistemology emphasises that knowledge is personal and rooted in lived experiences. Scholars advocate valuing women's embodied practices as sources of insight, transforming how faith is understood. Concepts like the "*tafsir of praxis*" - recognising women's practices as worship and theological insight - and the "*tafsir of possibility*" - reimagining religion beyond patriarchal constraints - are championed by Sa'diyya Shaikh (2022). These perspectives frame religious traditions as dynamic, shaped by those who practice them, particularly women.

This research project looks at how the Sufi theology and practices form and serve goals of spiritual and self-cultivation in the lives of a group of South African Sufi women.

Chapter 1: LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Islam and Sufism: Sufi Theology, Islamic Psychology and Feminist Issues

Many world religions encompass mystical dimensions, and for Islam, that mystical aspect is known as *Tasawwuf* or Sufism. In his book *The Garden of Truth*, Seyyed Hossein Nasr uses the metaphor of a tree to illustrate Sufism's integral role in in Islam.

"Islam is like a tree whose roots are deeply embedded in the fertile soil of the Divine Reality and the Quranic revelation. The Quran and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet form the trunk of the tree, while *Shariah*, or the Divine Law, and *fiqh*, or jurisprudence, are the branches. These branches are covered by leaves, which represent the outward practices and social laws derived from the principles of the *Shariah* and the *Sunnah*. Sufism is like the sap that gives life to this tree, the water that nourishes it and allows it to flourish. Without the sap, the tree would wither; without Sufism, Islam would lose its inner life and vitality (Nasr, 2007, 9)."

This analogy is useful in highlighting the different dimensions of Islam and, more importantly, emphasises the relationship between Islam and Sufism. Through the metaphor of the tree, we can appreciate how the various elements of the Islamic faith are interconnected and recognise the essential role Sufism plays in preserving the religion's spiritual essence. This broader perspective allows us to position Sufism within the context of this research.

While traditional Islamic theology often centres on legal frameworks and religious doctrines, Sufi theology emphasises a deeply experiential and mystical approach to faith. Grounded in the foundational Islamic concept of *tawhid* (the oneness of God), Sufi thought invites practitioners to seek a closer, inner experience of the Divine and to continuously purify their hearts. Prominent Sufi theologians such as Imam Al-Ghazali, Rumi and Ibn Arabi understood that our spiritual journey is not only about understanding laws or ethics, but about aligning our lives with divine principles. This path requires that we transform ourselves in ways that affect how we live in relation to others. Sufism then offers a way of practicing Islam that harmonises our inner and outer lives. This journey requires ongoing self-purification and enlightenment that not only sustains society with the 'leaves' of law and just social conduct but also allows the 'flowers' of virtue to blossom. This path to God demands an ethics of living that balances self-transformation with a commitment to ethical social engagement. Sufism, therefore, offers

a holistic vision of Islam, where ideally legal frameworks and personal spirituality harmonise to guide practitioners toward lives that reflect divine principles both inwardly and outwardly, fostering communities grounded in virtue and justice.

For Sufis, experiencing the reality of *tawhid* - oneness of *Allah* (God), which is the central theological principle of Islam, entails a dedicated path of self-cultivation aimed at recognition of Allah's absolute unity and developing an awareness that all creation is a manifestation of Allah's attributes (Shaikh, 2022, 480). Within a Sufi framework, Allah, as the Being who harmoniously unites Essence and Attributes within Her Oneness, reveals aspects of Her nature throughout creation, which acts as a mirror to Her divine qualities. This understanding lays the groundwork for the concept of human beings as balancing these divine attributes, embodying them within themselves as part of their spiritual development.

Sufi theology also provides an understanding of human nature where the ideal human subjectivity can embody all Divine attributes. Here Sufis like the influential 12th century Ibn Arabi have posited the concept of *Insan-e-kamil* (the Perfect Human), which refers to the individual who perfectly reflects the Divine attributes in harmonious balance. Through this concept, one can grasp the Sufi understanding of how multiplicity emerges from the One God. In this cosmology the God-human relationship is critical since human beings uniquely have the potential to embody all the divine attributes and hence the realised human being or *Insan-e-kamil* "renders the cosmos conscious (Shaikh, 2022, 481)." This state represents the ultimate goal of seekers on the Sufi spiritual path, marking the station of spiritual enlightenment.

Sufism also forms the foundation of Islamic psychology (Abdulla, 2002, 9), where human subjectivity is understood as dynamic and multidimensional. In Sufi Islamic psychology, the human being is seen as an integration of psychological, spiritual and metaphysical dimensions. Al-Ghazali, in his *Ihya Ulum al-Din,* explains the human as a complex entity composed of several interrelated elements, each crucial for the spiritual development and connection to the Divine. These core components in Sufi psychology include the *nafs* (self or ego), *qalb* (heart), *ruh* (spirit), and *aql* (intellect) and the innermost secret of the self, the *sir* (Haeri, 1989, 31-53). Each element plays a unique role in the process of spiritual growth, contributing to the self-cultivation of the individual and the ultimate goal of Divine union. Sufi scholars like Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, (Al- Jawziyya, 2019) Al-Hujviri (Al-Hujviri, 1911) and Ibn Arabi in his Bezels of Wisdom (Ibn Arabi, 1911), have all enriched this understanding, offering a nuanced

framework for human spiritual development. Harmonious cultivation of these aspects of the self is central to the Sufi path of spiritual and personal growth.

The spiritual journey involves transcending the lower self (*nafs*), purifying the heart (*qalb*), awakening the spirit (*Ruh*), and aligning the intellect (*aql*) with divine wisdom. This psychological framework is deeply embedded in the Sufism's broader metaphysical and ethical teachings. According to Ibn Arabi, the human being is seen as a microcosm of the Divine, possessing the potential to embody God's attributes and thus embedded in an unitive understanding of reality that has been called *Wahdat al Wujud* (Unity of Being) (Shaikh, 2002, 480).

In Sufism, the idea of God being both transcendent and immanent means that God is both beyond us and yet intimately close to us. God exists beyond anything we can fully understand or describe - utterly vast, unknowable, and mysterious. At the same time, God is present within everything around us and within us too. This closeness makes God deeply accessible, present in each heartbeat, in every breath, and in all things we experience.

For us as human beings, this belief reveals a beautiful and complex truth: while each of us is unique, with our own lives, personalities, and experiences, we are also deeply connected to each other and to all of creation through God. Sufism teaches that this diversity - each person's unique way of being - is held together in unity by God. Our individuality doesn't isolate us; rather, it's part of a larger, shared existence.

This concept of multiplicity within unity means that we can embrace both our differences and our interconnectedness. As individuals, we are many, but through God, we are also one. In our journey toward understanding ourselves and our relationship with the divine, we learn to see that all things are interwoven in a single, divine reality that makes room for both the unique and the universal.

Sufi mystic and Master Ibn Arabi's words beautifully encapsulate this interplay:-

> *If you affirm transcendence you bind,*
>
> *If you affirm immanence you define*
>
> *If you affirm both, you hit the mark*
>
> *You are a leader (imam)and a master in the spiritual sciences*
>
> (cited in Shaikh 2022, 490).

Much of traditional Sufi ritual and practice of *tasawwuf* (Sufism) is based on attaining this balance between immanence and transcendence. Holding both concepts in tension is believed to illuminate the path of becoming "spiritually perfected beings" or what Ibn Arabi refers to as *insan-e-kamil* (the complete human) (Shaikh 2012, 114).

While the mystical path of *tasawwuf* seeks spiritual perfection through the balance of immanence and transcendence, the ways in which Sufi practitioners conceptualise and experience gender have varied widely across time and place. Some Sufi traditions have reinforced conventional gender roles, while others have offered more egalitarian interpretations, encouraging both men and women to pursue spiritual fulfilment. This diversity within Sufi approaches reveals how the journey toward becoming *insan-e-kamil*, the spiritually perfected human, can take multiple forms, shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts.

However, while Ibn Arabi offers a balanced view of immanence and transcendence, some traditional Sufi communities and Shaykhs have adopted patriarchal perspectives that emphasise the transcendent qualities of God while devaluing materiality, including the body. As a result, the body came to be associated with the inferior aspects of human existence. Deighton-Mohammed describes this emphasis as defining a form of Sufism that is "constructed by elite men for elite men" – a patriarchal Sufism. (Deighton-Mohammed, 2021, 5). Similarly, in these Sufi traditions, the *nafs* (lower self or egoic self) was also often linked to the material body and regarded as inferior. Women, in particular, have been symbolically associated with the *nafs* in patriarchal Sufi interpretations, reinforcing perceptions of women and their embodiment as lesser or even obstacles on the path to transcendence for men, where the very notion of the normative seeker is gendered male (Shaikh, 2012, 17).

These binary Sufi approaches that posit spirituality and materiality as oppositional, focus on purification of the *nafs* through "dominating, punishing, overcoming, or ignoring it (Deighton-Mohammed, 2021, 5)." According to contemporary female Sufi teacher, Shaykha Fariha al-Jerrahi of the Nur Akshi Sufi community in New York, a punitive disciplinary approach to the *nafs* or self, is counterproductive. She argues that this approach overemphasises transcendence and reflects "an insufficient appreciation of divine immanence (Deighton-Mohammed 2022, 100)."

In her approach, Shaykha Fariha begins with a less negative understanding of the *nafs;* rather than viewing it as the "self that incites evil" or the "blameworthy self", she refers to it as the "limited self" - "the self that has not yet fully realised it's integration with God (2022, 102)." And instead of rejecting the human aspects of the self, Shaykha Fariha encourages embracing and embodying the limited self as a window through which one can know oneself and grow in awareness of God (Deighton-Mohammed, 2022, 103). Deighton-Mohammed explains how Shaykha Fariha foregrounds divine immanence in Sufi teachings, creating spaces where her students are encouraged to emphasise God in all things, including themselves (Deighton-Mohammed, 2022, 110). Her approach moves away from annihilation and self-abasement, advocating instead for cultivating self-awareness and focuses her followers towards manifesting the beautiful qualities of God. This achieves the same transformative outcome without the punitive discipline traditionally associated with purifying the *nafs.* This embodied practice of self-exploration offers a feminist rethinking to traditional Sufi training, which according to Deighton-Mohammed, has historically focused more on annihilation of the self or transcendence of the body (2022, 100) and highlights Shaykha Fariha's commitment to subverting patriarchal interpretations of Sufism (2022, 96).

Shaykha Fariha's more capacious and anti-patriarchal approach destabilises the denigration of the body within Sufi *nafs* training and challenges the longstanding societal notion that women's bodies are impure. Shaykha Fariha's departure from Sufi gender norms also serves to embrace others marginalised by society – individuals for whom an excess of ego and self-worth is not a primary concern. Deighton-Mohammed suggests that for individuals that are more affected by self-hatred and shame (oftentimes as a result of past traumas), punitive practices directed at transformation of the self, prove counterproductive. Instead, Shaykha Fariha's teachings that offer a path of self-acceptance and transformation prove more helpful (2022, 96). They also emphasise a compassionate approach to inner transformation, particularly for those whose experience of trauma makes punitive methods ineffective. This focus on healing and acceptance resonates with broader Sufi principles that honour both the multiplicity within human experience and the unity of divine presence.

Shaykha Cemalnur Sargut, a prominent Turkish Sufi author and teacher, expands on this idea, using the concept of *edep*[1] to unpack this same concept of multiplicity and oneness, as well as the purification of the *nefis* (lower egoic self). She advocates a balanced approach, encouraging her students to recognize that "God makes Himself manifest through His creation in a state of similarity", and that "His names, attributes and actions are manifested through humans (2018, 33). "At the same time, she urges them to acknowledge that "God is above everything. He is so sublime that his meaning cannot be reached or encompassed (2018, 33)." This middle path is central to her teachings on human refinement, beautiful conduct, and the attainment to elevated spiritual states (2018, 37).

While Shaykha Cemalnur's approach is not overtly anti-patriarchal, it is notably gentler than that of some of her male counterparts. Though she has not explicitly challenged the historical association of the *nefis* with women's inferiority, she advocates a method of training the *nefis* through kindness. She encourages a patient, nurturing approach akin to parenting in order to "take a human being to God" (2018, 55). She emphasises that self-purification should "be gentle with the *nefis*" (2018, 55). Compared to traditional Sufi practices, the teachings of both Shaykha Cemalnur and other female Sufi masters reflect a less domineering and punitive approach to disciplining the *nafs*.

In stark contrast, Rudolph Ware's research in contemporary West African Senegambian Quran schools immersed within a Sufi paradigm, reveals that teachers in these schools often use punitive measures such as physical discipline and deprivation to educate their students. Ware explains that in this approach the goal is to mould the body and ego through domination and correction, making them worthy vessels for embodying the memorised words of the Quran (Ware, 2014, 39-76). This relationship to of embodiment, might be seen as characteristic of approaches that Deighton-Mohammed describes as "Patriarchal Sufism". These practices that treat the body as inferior through action, language and symbolism reinforce a preference for transcendence of the material body (Deighton-Mohammed, 2021, 33). This philosophy coupled with historical Sufi and Islamic views that associate the body with the feminine promotes androcentrism and glorifies the male subject. Feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray argues that

[1] Kabir Heminski in his work *The Mysterion* defines edep/adab as a refined and conscious form of spiritual courtesy that assists in creating "an atmosphere of respect and affection which supports the process of transformation. It is one of the most important practices of the Sufi path. (2023,235)"

subjectivity for women especially, isn't something that can be simply "picked up" or "dropped" within the constructs of language, culture and history without considering the deeply rooted differences that exist (Irigaray, 1985, 206–209). She suggests that where male subjectivity is rigid and singular, feminine subjectivity is more adaptable, fluid, relational, and inclusive - each offering unique embodiments. This is an approach that can be described as a type of fluidity where subjectivity is inseparable from the embodied aspects of identity.

By rejecting patriarchal gender norms, Shaykha Fariha makes room for feminine subjectivity and also embraces the marginalised and outliers in society - those for whom an overabundance of ego and self-worth is not a predominant issue and does not need annihilation as is generally assumed in Sufi training. Deighton-Mohammed posits that instead, this sector of society struggles with self-hatred and shame, thus punitive practices would potentially be counter-productive.

Even though the cornerstone of divine immanence in Shaykha Fariha's training is not to self-aggrandise (2022, 100), given that the community embraces diversity and is open to all - not only the disempowered and marginalised - I wonder whether adopting a methodology of divine immanence for those who come to the order with inflated egos could be counterproductive to the purification process? Perhaps Shaykha Cemalnur Sargut's balanced approach to embodying divine immanence and 'softer' *nefis* training style, is more applicable to the diversity of consciousness in a Sufi community. Irrespective, there is no question that Shaykha Fariha's unique approach to *naf*s training provides an Islamic Feminist alternative to the traditional Sufi concept; an approach that could be the much-needed bridge to Sufi practices that traditionally, were immersed in androcentric male-centredness. In addition, Islamic feminism reimagines Islam as a path to liberation, challenging patriarchal structures by interpreting core texts to show that gender equality is woven into the faith's values. Islamic feminists aim to empower women to embrace their religious identity while advocating for justice, blending their faith with a call for fairness and respect. This approach goes beyond secular Western feminism by focusing on the spiritual and cultural elements that many Muslim women find essential. It defies stereotypes, showcasing Muslim women as active agents, rooted in both spirituality and scholarship, and sparking global conversations on women's roles within Islam. By bringing these values to the forefront, Islamic feminism is reshaping communities and helping women define their place in the future of their faith (Feyza Burak-Adli, Xavier, and Piraino 2024, 6).

Shaykha Fariha's emphasis on promoting the idea of inherent divinity within all individuals, regardless of gender, directly fosters a more inclusive and egalitarian view of Sufi spirituality, and by extension, Islam. This encourages perceiving oneself in others and the concept of *tawhid* (unity). This is echoed in Shaykha Cemalnur's self-conception of "nothingness" and her refusal to be confined by labels reflect her commitment helping humanity to see all as one, transcending gender, religion or ideology. (www.cemalnur.org, Accessed August 29, 2023, http://www.cemalnur.org). This emphasis on oneness and humility, I posit, is essential for effecting social change.

Muslima feminist theologian Jerusha Lamptey in her book *Divine Words, Feminine Voices* appeals to scholarship to challenge dominant assumptions in anthropology and theology by focusing on the various forms of matter and embodiment in relation to the marginalised, since "(W)e do not exist outside of our bodies, and we inhabit diverse social and physical bodies (Lamptey, 2018, 168)." Lamptey directs that this call can be met, by scholars 'visibilising' the stories and lived experiences of those marginalised and rendered invisible and argues that female embodiments offer unique perspectives. Both Shaykha Cemalnur and Shaykha Fariha's approaches resonate with this call made by feminist scholars, in that their pedagogical approaches to Sufi training aligns with making room for the marginalised. They seriously engage women's experience of embodiment in ways that offer unique perspectives and alternatives on how to practice Islam - or, in this case, Sufism.

The role of Shaykhs in Sufi communities and their pedagogical approaches significantly influences followers on the path (*tariqa*). Finding a teacher (*Shaykh)* as a guide for one's transformation process is a key part of the Sufi tradition, based on the idea that "the enlightened person will guide others in a wise and inspired way towards the ultimate goal (Haeri, 1991, 8)." It is through being in the company of a realised individual that a follower is inspired and educated. Given the deeply relational nature of Sufism, where the transmission of knowledge and spiritual practices occurs in close personal settings, it is crucial for contemporary Sufi teachers to be attentive to the different gendered locations of their followers. They must therefore be attuned to the complexities of gender dynamics in their communities to foster a truly transformative learning experience for everyone on the path.

Deighton-Mohammed appreciates this pedagogy but draws our attention to the innate power dynamics in hierarchical Sufi leadership structures. She highlights this model as a site for

potential abuse by spiritual teachers who wield significant authority (Deighton-Mohammed, 2021, 33). In Sufism, spiritual hierarchy is integral to the relationship between a spiritual teacher (often referred to as a *Shaykh* or *Pir*) and a student (*murid*), with the idea that the teacher's advanced spiritual status enables them to guide the student towards self-cultivation and proximity to the Divine (Shaikh, 2023, 9). Deighton identifies where such abuses have been reported and advocates for an era of female leadership. To support this she profiles two Shaykhas - Shaykha Fariha (who we have mentioned above) and Shaykha Fawzia – an expert in the field, whose feminist epistemologies provide more nuanced applications of Sufi teachings in diverse communities, creating spaces for women and marginalised groups. These contemporary Shaykas' teachings and leadership models, which go beyond the mere presence of women in leadership to include a gender-sensitive approach, help to illuminate the unique experiences of female followers on the Sufi path.

In light of this and the feminist underpinning of this research project, the teachings and community model of Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri (the male Sufi teacher to the female research participants in this group) - are of interest. One of Haeri's many books *Journey to the self,* serves as a guide to Sufi personality development and frames his understanding of the Sufi Spiritual Journey, which speaks of transcendence as well as immanence. He describes transcendence as a process of reaching beyond mundane desires and the ego and connecting to the essence that lies past worldly limitations. It involves surrendering one's personal will and perceive a higher, more abstract dimension of existence beyond the material world. Furthermore, Yusuf Eneborgs PhD Thesis *A Sufi for a Secular Age*, sheds light on how Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri's teachings offer a dynamic, inclusive, and transformative form of Sufism that speaks to the spiritual needs of people in the modern, secular age. His leadership style and spiritual practices resonate with individuals seeking personal transformation, community connection, and a deeper engagement with spirituality that is not bound by traditional religious divisions (Eneborg, 2021) - Haeri's approach proved universal and inclusive. This, along with his popularity amongst female followers, makes him both an interesting and provocative figure.

While the role of a teacher (Shaykh) in Sufi transformation is well-established (Wright, 2015, 164-191), the significance of the Sufi community cannot be overlooked. Contemporary Sufi teacher, Kabir Helminski calls Sufism "a relational spirituality", explaining that while Sufis practice solitude in meditation and prayer, "the individual's spiritual practice is nurtured and

balanced within a pattern of relationships (Helminski, 2023, 72)." The Sufi community provides not only a sense of belonging but also a context for character development and the nurturing of higher consciousness. And the role of the community on the path as well as in ritual performance is a key ingredient in the recipe to transformation (Helminski, 2023, 72).

The application of Islamic theology, encompassing concepts such as tawhid*,* multiplicity in oneness, transcendence, and immanence, reveals how Sufi psychology offers a holistic framework to understanding the human condition. It is through the guidance of the Shaykh, community support, and practices of purification, remembrance, meditation, and reflection, Sufis aim to harmonise the *nafs, qalb, aql,* and *Ruh*, transforming themselves into vessels for divine knowledge and presence (Helminski, 2023). This highlights the connection between spiritual practices and psychological transformation in the quest for divine knowledge, with rituals uniquely shaping embodiment.

Rituals as Habitus in Islam and the Sufi Transformation Process

Sufi Islamic theology – what William Chittick describes as "the spirit of Islam" (2000, 3) - deeply informs Sufi ritual practices, which focus on self-transformation. The theology behind these rituals balance the material and spiritual aspects of human existence. Kabir Helminski explains that spiritual practices allow seekers to experience the teachings, stating "The practices are not a rigid set of external forms commanded by God but a means for learning how to surrender and be in harmony with the deep law of life." Each practice - whether it is a prayer (*salaah*), fasting (*saum*), pilgrimage (*haj)*, charity (*zakat*), remembrance (*dhikr*), service (*kidmet*), or spiritual courtesy (*adab*) - teaches the body, mind, and soul to attune to a higher truth (Helminski, 2023, 33). These rituals highlight the deep connection between repetitive action and embodiment of transformation.

Practices such as *muraqaba* (meditation), *khalwa* (retreat), *salaah* and *dhikr* - what Helminski calls "heartfulness practices" - ground and cultivate presence (Helminski, 2023, 84). The physical experience of such rituals - similar to brushing of one's teeth or even reflective walks - can also be sensorial and profoundly affect embodiment, which refers to the sense of being fully present and connected to one's body. These individual and collective "heartfulness" practices awaken in the seeker an awareness to identify incoherence (often due to overattentiveness to the material) and to restore harmony. Collective ritual practices fosters

social cohesion, shared values and encourage mutual support, providing emotional benefits and collective responsibility. This strengthens both individual and social wellbeing.

Helminski provides an overview of how the practices are core to self and spiritual cultivation (Helminski, 2023, 181), and highlights how the power of these rituals to transform on the spiritual path is deepened by the Islamic concept of *niyyah* (intention). Helminski emphasises the significance of the *niyyah*, calling it "the very spirit of the action" and asserts that "the quality of intention behind any spiritual practice, determines the benefit (Helminski, 2023, 137)." This intentionality and awareness in performing each ritual seems to embed change and affect embodiment.

In a study of Sufi communities, Zachary Wright uses the concepts of *habitus* and embodiment as key to understanding Sufi practices, rituals and communal activities (Wright, 2015, 77-104). Wright uses Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* – defined as "ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions acquired through life experiences and social interactions"- to explore how religious practices are deeply rooted in the everyday life and social behaviour of Muslims in West Africa. The internalised *habitus* of their religious and cultural practices shapes embodiment. Moreover Carl Nederman, drawing on Aristotle, notes that a *habitus* may also facilitate the development of virtues through repeated actions (1990, 96). A *habitus* thus is actively formed, and rituals can be seen as a means of habituation, speaking to embodied human agency. These theoretical insights on the concept of a *habitus* helps us to view Sufi ritual as a tool for purification of the lower self and for the cultivation of virtues within the embodied self, as well as the formation of communal spaces that enable such forms of subjectivity to be nurtured. In Wright's study, knowledge transmission and the manner in which Muslim practices are performed are intertwined with the relational and physical aspects of living, forming dispositions and bodies (Wright, 2015, 31).

A contemporary theorist, Merleau-Ponty (d. 1961), suggested that the concept of embodiment is a fluid and dynamic engagement with the world and that while our bodies allow us to experience the world individually, they also facilitate relation to others (Crossley, 1995, 60). Through embodied shared experiences and perceptions, we come to empathise with others and build social relationships. Using Merleau-Ponty's theory, dependant on individual choice and reflexivity in relation to traditional religious practices, individual subjectivity can be

particularly formed and shaped. He adds that when performed collectively these shared practices can inculcate sense of belonging and community.

Western psychologists and cognitive scientists (Hobson et al. 2017) who study ritual actions, argue that ritual behaviors that are fixed, repetitive, and meaningful have been fundamental to shaping human experience (2017, 261). Studies have found that rituals involving physical movement, posture, or voice can often, regulate emotions and create a sense of safety through repetition (2017, 262). When performed communally, such rituals may also confer belonging, collective unity (2017, 273) and well-being (Callender et al, 2022).

Rituals also serve to shape character and integrity, concepts Sufis call *adab* or spiritual courtesy (Helminski, 2023, 33). In both religion and spirituality, rituals are repetitive actions or ceremonies that have cultural or religious significance, serving to instill values, shape character and disposition, reinforce social norms, and cultivate a sense of community (Nederman, 1990, 96). In acknowledging this value ethic then, spiritual or religious ritual can facilitate individual self-formation and promote personal and communal wellbeing. Helminski adds that recognising the divine presence within us and others brings a deep, transformative joy. This joy is the natural outcome of cultivating an awareness of the divine through the embodied practices and inner experiences previously discussed. When we begin to see God's qualities in the world around us - such as love, compassion, and humility - we experience a joy that transcends ordinary emotions. Unlike joy tied to external circumstances, this joy flows from an inner awareness of the interconnectedness of all life. As we align our hearts with this divine awareness, we transcend the ego and connect to a larger, more fulfilling sense of unity and peace (Helminski, 1999, 126-127).

Ritual practice remains a significant component of all Abrahamic Religions, as well as in Hinduism, Buddhism, and African religions. In Sufism the practice of *dhikr* – an Arabic word often translated as “remembrance” - is a ritual of notable significance.

As a ritual practice *dhikr* deeply informs the habitus of Sufis. Helminski describes it as an “embodied mindfulness practice” that aligns the body and mind with the Divine (Helminski, 2017, 67). Habitual *dhikr* practice is also attributed with reinforcing social bonds and habituating virtues. Sufis, through *dhikr* – through repetition of Allah’s attributes - imprint these Divine qualities into their souls. This trains them to see the Divine in all of creation,

creating a new lens though which to perceive reality. This shift in perception is a key aspect of Sufi habitus (Schimmel, 1975, 102).

Women's Embodied Practice of Dhikr - Female Embodiment Experiences

Considering feminist theory this section of the review will unpack the literature of women-led ritual practices including the practice of *dhikr* and will bring to the fore the otherwise underreported lived experiences of women in this discourse.

Shaykha Rosina Fawzia Al-Rawi discusses how "reading the story of one's life as it is written into the body" is central to Sufi teaching. She views the body as a 'noetic faculty'- a credible source of self-knowledge and as Deighton-Mohammed extrapolates, Shaykha Fawzia's *dhikr* approach, is built on this premise and therefore centres on the body and recesses the mind (2021, 113).

Instead of relying on the mind's fragmented understanding, Shaykha Fawzia advocates engaging the body's knowledge - through sensation, feeling, and integration, to foster unity and harmony (2021, 113). Reconnecting with the body, she suggests, allows one to integrate with the self, which then leads to Divine connection. This spiritual elevation of the body contradicts those patriarchal approaches within Islam and Sufism - that have historically devalued the body in favour of the mind and implied that transcendence requires subjugating the body. Shaykha Fawzia challenges such assumptions by arguing that approaching the body through the mind is counterproductive due to obfuscating mental judgments and social constructs. Instead, she encourages embracing the body's intrinsic knowledge and power through somatic practice (2021, 120). For her, "embodied practice facilitates spiritual healing better than disciplining action (Deighton-Mohammed 2021, 122)." Through somatic *dhikr* ritual practices, her students learn to "read their body's' sensations and feelings, recognising the Quranic divine names speaking through their embodied experiences (2021, 122)."

Similarly, Jamila Rodriguez's ethnographic research of Sufi women from a Naqshabandi order in Cape Town, explores the somatic experiences generated through the Sufi *hadra/dhikr* ritual. Her study focuses on selfhood expression of embodiment to achieve healing (Rodriguez 2018). *Hadra,* as used by Naqshabandi Sufis, is defined by Rodriguez as rhythmic chanting of praise and supplication to God, often accompanied by spontaneous body movements triggered by voice and music (2018, 102). She applies Thomas Hanna's definition of 'soma' to the Sufi *hadra* ritual, viewing it as a union of mind and body to achieve self-knowing (2018, 102). This

echoes Shaykha Fawzia's explanation (2021, 124). The *dhikr* ritual serves as a "the platform that enables women to make sense of their embodied selfhood" (2018, 102).

Rodriguez's emphasis on the body in *dhikr* ritual parallels the work of dance anthropologists like Adrienne Keppler, who argue that body movement in religious ritual forms a system of embodied theology and contributes to individual and communal learning, ultimately fostering societal change (2018,103). Rodriguez' interviews with the female *hadra* attendees explored their feelings and experiences during the *dhikr* ritual. *Hadra* participant Bianca opined that "the moment of experiencing selfhood in the *hadra* occurs when she is able to forget everything and allow the body movement to flow with the practice (Rodriguez 2018, 111)." This implies that the bodies movement, chanting and sensing are intrinsic to the experience of forgetting everything and letting go of the mind, and allowing flow, which *hadra* participants called *fan'a* (loss of egoic separate self) (2018, 109). After the *hadra* ritual some women reported feeling calm, while others experienced a space for reflection. The vessel of the body, which facilitated the ritual, the transcendence, and the return, undergoes an alteration of embodiment. It serves as a space where women explore and potentially challenge their identities and societal roles. Through the experience of self-loss and transcendence, participants may develop a deeper understanding of their position in society, influencing their relationships and community roles. Rodriguez' interviews suggest that the *hadra* ritual leads to lasting changes in self-perception and social positioning, reshaping women's agency and how they engage with societal norms.

Leyya Hoosen's thesis *Wayfaring: A Muslim journey of Becoming* focuses on a mixed-gendered Sufi youth community in Johannesburg and "is written as a meditation (2019, 11)" as she journeys with the community members through the *dhikr* practices and the reconfiguration of their subjective and objective selves. Hoosens' observations echoed Rodriguez noting that habitual *dhikr* practice produced detachment from, and re-entry to, self. This shows how habitual *dhikr* practice fosters a fluid process of self-detachment and re-entry, where participants reshape their identities by letting go of old selves, habits, and traditions (2019, 88).

In both the South African studies by Rodriguez and Hoosen, this procedure of detaching, re-entering and reforming creates an ungroundedness as participants seek for alignment with their new embodiments. As this process unfolds within individuals, the community ritual fosters the formation of "intimate inter-corporeal friendships with those they are sharing the process with

(2019, 88).” Such friendships engender support, healing and belonging. The attitude of “being able to share one’s journey and be of service to someone else’s (2019, 96),” permeated the community and an imagined broader application could address much of the narcissism and conflict that prevails today. While both above-mentioned studies were inclusive of all genders and based in South Africa, no unusual or female-specific experiences were noted. Sufi rituals and their impact on embodiment, particularly feminine embodiment, is multifaceted and influenced by various factors and individual beliefs.

Sufi rituals are highly diverse, and specific practices and experiences can vary among different Sufi orders and communities. In her paper *Gendering the Divine,* Xavier addresses various Sufi rituals and highlights both the lack of women’s participation and leadership in these Sufi practices globally and the fact that they are vastly underreported (2020, 168). Xavier focuses on *dhikr* (Remembrance) as a central Sufi practice involving the repetition of sacred phrases or names of Allah. She includes Joseph Hill’s studies of women leaders on the Tijani Sufi order in Senegal, emphasising the female-led *dhikr* rituals with mixed-gender disciples (2020, 171). Xavier examines the practice of whirling dervishes, part of the Mevlevi Sufi order, who engage in a ritual practice known as the *Sema* ceremony. Through precise spinning, participants aim to achieve meditation, spiritual ecstasy, and unity with the divine. The physical whirling, Xavier affirms, can deepen the sense of embodiment and spiritual connection, as one Canadian *semazan* (whirling dervish) reflects: “In the deepest moments of this meditation one’s outer form does not matter, but only one’s inner state (2020, 174).” Contemporary Sufi leaders such as Camille Helminski and Shayka Fariha in North America share this traditional *semazan* practice with female community members.

Sara Shroff, in her paper *Fashioning Sufi*, further notes that Sufi rituals such as *qawwali* (a form of Sufi traditional music that originated in the Indian subcontinent) often incorporates combinations of music, poetry, and chanting. Exemplified in the sixty-seven-year-old Queen of *Qawwali*, Abida Parveen, this practice can evoke strong emotions and create a sensory-rich environment (2022, 407), enhancing embodiment. Parveen plays a powerful role in the *qawwali* and broader Sufi music tradition which was historically a genre dominated by male performers only. Her uniquely feminine solo Sufi renditions brings spiritual depth. A common thread within all these Sufi rituals, in accordance with Sufi theology, is the pursuit of spiritual connection and inner transformation, often involving a profound simultaneous exploration of one’s embodied experience and one’s relationship with the divine in various forms. The themes

of corporeality and transcendence are echoed in Parveen's reflection of *qawwali* ritual performance as sacred and how she uses this process to unfix gender, challenging the conventional boundaries and rigid roles traditionally ascribed to gender. By engaging with the embodied experience of the ritual, Parveen transcends gendered expectations, allowing for a more fluid and expansive understanding of both personal identity and spiritual practice. In this way, she facilitates her self-making and spiritual connection beyond traditional gender norms (2022, 411).

Locating the Wider Politics of Agency and Women's Embodiment

Feminist theories on embodiment began with Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 work, where she stated that "one is not born but becomes a woman (1972, 267). "This implies that biologically female bodies are socialised from birth to conform to societal expectations. Beauvoir argues that the essence of being a woman is shaped by these societal expectations. In the late 1980s, Judith Butler's article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,*"* introduced theory of performativity, analysing feminine embodiment and the social construction of gender (1988, 519). Butler illustrated that learned gender performances are essentially - reiterative acts imposed by normative heterosexuality, constructing our female embodiments. Butler suggests that repeated adjustments to normative behaviours can alter these gender norms. She encourages feminists to consider the materiality of the body beyond narrow binaries of biological essentialism or social constructivism. Butler emphasised the need to examine how 'naturalisation' of sex imposes limits on gendered life. She urged us to view bodies differently, highlighting how discourse, through performativity, has marginalised certain bodies "whose lives are not considered to be 'lives' and whose materiality is not understood to 'matter'." She stated that "to live in such a body in this world is to live in the shadowy regions of ontology (Meijer and Prins 1998, 277)." Similarly, Sufi practices invite a departure from conventional notions of selfhood and bodily identity, especially through embodied rituals that emphasise transcendence and union with the divine.

In these practices, Sufi women, for instance, use rituals to create a way of being those challenges traditional gender roles, allowing them to step outside the limits of societal expectations. In this way, Sufi embodiment aligns with Butler's call to "view bodies differently," offering a space where gendered experiences that are typically marginalised can

flourish. These rituals enable a “shadowy” existence - one that holds deep spiritual and social meaning, even though it may be overlooked or invalidated by dominant gender norms.

Islamic and Sufi ritual practices have a profound impact on embodiment and personal transformation for men and women. However, the complex and significant relationship between gender and ritual embodiment plays a crucial role within feminist theory. The historical dominance of patriarchy in Islamic discourse, along with the neglect of women’s lived experiences and those off other marginalised groups, is critical to acknowledge. Within Sufism, while the foundation of Sufi theology and ritual for spiritual enlightenment is theoretically universal and inclusive, Sa’diyya Shaikh illustrates that a significant corpus of Sufi terminology and practice reflect androcentric views towards women (2012, 43). This results in an ambivalent and tensive approach to on gender within Sufism, as highlighted by Merin Xavier (2020, 164). This scholarly project endeavours to embrace Butler’s challenge to identify power relations and manage knowledge surrounding women’s embodiment (Itulua-Abumere, 2015). More specifically my study is responsive to the invitation by Muslim feminist scholar Jerusha Lamptey who urges scholars to question dominant theological assumptions by foregrounding women’s embodiment in varied contexts stating that “we do not exist outside of our bodies, and we inhabit diverse social and physical bodies (2018, 168).” As such I aim to illuminate the stories and embodiments of the Sufi South African women, amplifying their agency in interpreting and applying Sufi concepts and practices

Engaging debates on religious agency, the anthropologist Saba Mahmood’s study of Muslim Egyptian women’s ritual practices, suggests that these practices can be viewed as performances that, and are intrinsic to women's embodiment (2004, 163). Moreover Mahmood argues that her Egyptian female mosque participants, performance of virtuous actions fosters internalisation while reinforcing a pietistic *habitus* that simultaneously shapes their activity (2004, 163). The success of embodying a virtue was measured by the alignment between the exterior actions (which perform the desired virtue) and the internal state of that virtue within the individual. This means that to truly embody a virtue such as patience, kindness or honesty there must be a match between your actions and what you feel or believe on the inside (2004, 164). Mahmood’s examples (2004, 163), suggest that identifying an Islamic ritual practice as a means to cultivate an internal virtue, combined with consistent self-reflection, alters the subject’s internal landscape, allowing them to embody the ritual and its form. I propose that this concept can also extend to Sufi ritual practices.

Mahmood's study of Muslim women also challenges conventional liberal feminist views of agency, by showing that it is not solely a form of resistance or retaliation. Rather, she argues, agency can also emerge through the active cultivation of religious practices, which may involve submission in ways that are complicit with patriarchal norms. This redefinition challenges the binary of resistance versus conformity, suggesting that transformation can occur through submission, not just through defiance (Mahmood, 2015, 29-33). By engaging this nuanced concept of agency, we can better understand the ways in which Sufi women participants in this project enact their practices of self-cultivation - practices that may simultaneously involve submission to religious authority and self-transformation within a patriarchal context

Distilling Conceptual and Theoretical Tools

This paper examines the self-cultivation of South African Sufi women, focusing on how their spiritual practices and journeys shape identity and belonging. It centres on the interplay of Sufi theology, community, and tools - such as the guidance of the Shaykh and ritual practices - and their role in fostering personal and spiritual growth. A key focus is the relationship between spiritual progress, particularly through *dhikr*, and its influence on self-making and embodied transformation.

The analysis integrates Islamic and Sufi theological concepts with feminist critiques of Sufi leadership, exploring gendered dimensions of spiritual authority and community. Ritual practices like *dhikr* and the role of the Shaykh are considered through both Sufi thought and feminist theorisation, emphasising their impact on the moral and spiritual development of female seekers, especially within the unique cultural and socio-political context of South Africa.

Drawing on Aristotelian notions of habitus and Sufi teachings on embodiment, particularly Ibn Arabi's *insan-e-kamil* (Perfect Human), the study highlights the integration of corporeal and spiritual dimensions in women's self-making. This tension between transcendence and immanence reflects their journey toward spiritual and personal balance. Their lived practices embody Sufi ideals, transforming physical actions into tools for spiritual growth.

The concept of habitus, informed by spiritual teachings and socio-cultural influences, underscores how women internalise dispositions shaped by their engagement with Sufi rituals and community life. This also informs their agency, expressed not as resistance but as

negotiation within the constraints of tradition and authority. Through mentorship, ritual, and spiritual commitment, women navigate spaces for self-determination and empowerment.

Incorporating the works of Deighton-Mohammed, Judith Butler, Jerusha Lamptey, and Saba Mahmood, the paper explores how theories of embodiment, agency, and ritual provide critical insights into how *dhikr* facilitates transformation. By bridging Sufi and feminist frameworks, it offers a nuanced understanding of South African Sufi women's spiritual lives.

Chapter 2: METHODOLOGY, OVERVIEW AND MAPPING OF JOURNEY

This project aims to gain a deep, comprehensive understanding of the role of Sufi ritual practice in shaping the identities of South African Sufi women. The research is guided by an ethics of care, transparency, and collaboration with participants, both in the methods used and in the interpretative processes. To approach this task thoroughly, an interdisciplinary framework is essential.

I draw extensively on feminist scholarship which insists on a variety of culturally sensitive research methods be utilised to gather knowledge. This approach has shaped the methodological choices of the study, and to ensure the authenticity of participants' voices, a combination of methods - fieldwork, questionnaires, and interviews - will be employed.

Despite this paper integrating methodologies from various disciplines, it is underpinned by feminist theory. Since my research seeks to reclaim the significance of women's experiences with Sufi ritual practices and to explore power dynamics- especially the influence of patriarchy and misogyny - feminist epistemologies and methodologies are particularly well-suited to make visible, the lived realities of these South African Sufi women.

This study will employ both ethnographic and qualitative approaches, including field research and interviews with a small female *dhikr* group in Gauteng, South Africa. This qualitative approach is appropriate, as building relationships with these women through conversation and participation in group *dhikr* ritual practices will provide a deeper, more nuanced, context-rich perspective. This subjective, experiential lens is expected to enrich the understanding of the fieldwork interviews.

Given that the goal of this research is to highlight the practices, experiences and voices of Sufi women in South Africa, feminist standpoint theory is an ideal framework. Feminist standpoint theorists encourage researchers to examine the articulations of women to comprehend the manner in which they construct their realities (Wiggington and LaFrance 2019, 4). This is a central focus of my research. To ensure that the knowledge produced reflects the perspectives of marginalised groups and not just dominant narratives, I will use Feminist standpoint theory alongside the concept of strong objectivity. Strong objectivity calls for greater reflexivity, pushing researchers to critically examine how their own social positions and biases influence

their work. Their personal backgrounds such as gender, race or social status can impact the way they conduct and interpret research. Strong objectivity encourages them to acknowledge their perceptions and biases instead of pretending they don't exist, and this will ensure their work is more transparent and mindful of these influences (Wiggington and LaFrance, 2019, 8).

Both strong objectivity and standpoint theory affirm that researchers are not in separate from the knowledge they create – instead, research is a process of co-creation of knowledge. These frameworks encourage acknowledging the researcher's location and incorporating it into the observation that is being made (Wiggington and LaFrance, 2019, 5). My intent in this research is to remain open to personal growth through this knowledge-making process

In line with Harding's call to critically examine one's positionality and biases as a researcher, I will reflect on my positionality here to avoid blind spots that could unduly impact my analysis. As a South African woman born during apartheid and raised in the Indian Muslim community of Natal, invisibility has been a significant part of my lived reality. Growing up in a society where I could only picnic at designated beaches and attend under-resourced schools compared to my white peers was the norm. This marginalisation was compounded by my gender, which rendered me even more invisible in workplaces and within my community, where being female seemed like a handicap. Struggling to be heard over the noise of patriarchy and misogyny has been a significant part of my lived experience. In response to this trauma and in an effort to understand both its personal, social and religious sources, I embarked on a healing journey that included scientific, alternative, and spiritual explorations across religious boundaries. The journey felt like a quest to heal, discover my significance, and make peace with my embodiment and the world at large. It was also an attempt to reject androcentric knowledge systems, and seeking instead my own knowledge through experience, with the aim of promoting social justice and challenging the dismissal of female bodies. My positionality in the shadows of race, heritage, religion, and gender motivates me to search and uncover the hidden lived experiences of the marginalised and unseen segments in society.

I recognise that my positionality and personal experiences may influence my analysis, potentially shaping it to align with my own journey. This awareness is crucial as it allows me to consistently refocus on these women, their stories, and their voices. To maintain objectivity throughout this research, I engaged deeply with my positionality in consultation with my

supervisors. They reviewed my interview schedule to ensure the questions were neutral and not leading. They also encouraged me to explore uncomfortable findings, particularly regarding my own conflicted feelings around the significant role of the male Sufi leader in this women's *dhikr* group. These explorations revealed the significance of a male leader example whose leadership style was more balanced, encouraging and inviting in this group.

As part of my reflective process, I attended bi-weekly therapy sessions to guard against superimposing my personal experiences onto the research. Additionally, I sought feedback from objective, non-participant reviewers on my questionnaires and interview questions. Where necessary, I revised these to eliminate any potential bias.

That said, I believe that my own experiences provided an opportunity to empathise with participants and create safe spaces when necessary. In line with standpoint theory, my lived experience informs this thesis, and I hope that through my embodied perspective, unique insights have emerged.

It is also important to note that I am an active participant in the community I am researching, and I will continue to be involved with these women. I hope to offer through this positionality knowledge production from the standpoint of one within the community I am researching. To uphold the highest ethical standards, I followed the guidance of feminist insider research. While this approach fosters trust, rapport, and deeper understanding—often leading to interviews that feel more like natural conversations—it also presents methodological and ethical challenges, particularly when interviewing friends (Hodkinson, 2005, 131-145). The confusion in the relationship runs the risk of the interviewee/friend feeling betrayed once the data is publicised. The blurred boundaries and high possibility of stereotyping a 'friend' are ethical challenges that require addressing upfront. Furthermore, maintaining confidentiality within close-knit communities can be difficult (Sather, 2024, video file 9.26min long).

To mitigate bias in selecting interview candidates for interviews, I avoided choosing participants from among my friends. Instead, I asked the group leader to suggest potential participants and invited others randomly through snowball sampling. Despite these efforts, my status as an insider dissolved typical hierarchies and power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee. Anne Davidsson Bremborg suggests that this intimate relationship can facilitate openness, sharing, and co-creation (2010).

Informed consent forms were distributed via mail prior to the interviews, allowing participants time to reflect on the use of the data. Before each interview, I confirmed that participants were comfortable with all conditions outlined in the consent form, and I invited them to ask any questions.

The target group for my research was a Gauteng-based Sufi community, led remotely by Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri (SFH), residing in White River in the North-West Province. After this study was initiated, I paid a visit to White River with SFH, whom I had repeatedly heard, from the women in the group, to be kind, gentle and very approachable. This description was far from my historic experience with religious leaders, so I was curious to assess for myself. To my surprise even though I was accompanied by my husband, SFH paid equal, if not more attention, to my questions and responses. He addressed the concerns I raised, from my perspective as a researcher, and not in my capacity as wife or mother. He encouraged my further tertiary education and drew attention to my health issues. While I imagine that Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri may have developed his benevolent masculinity over time, my personal experiences align with the group's assessment of his manner and attentiveness. Despite this, the issue of male leadership in spiritual spaces, such as those led by SFH, creates a paradox when attempting to challenge patriarchal norms. Although Haeri's teachings promote spiritual equality and inclusivity, the fact that women continue to follow male figures for guidance can unintentionally reinforce existing gender hierarchies. Sa'diyya Shaikh observes in her book *Sufi narratives of Intimacy* that even when spiritual empowerment is emphasised, male-centred authority subtly sustains patriarchal structures within Sufism (Shaikh, 2012).

The Shaykh's daughter, Muna Bilgrami, occupies a hands-on leadership role within the Gauteng community. While the group meet in person approximately 4 times a year, they meet for online *wirdh* (litanies) and *dhikr* (remembrance) practice weekly. From my observations, the group of females have representation across all age groups and genders. They also include all race groups and nationalities. This diversity, I imagine, will provide unique and rich understandings and appreciations of how the rituals are embodied.

Field research spanned three months and involved semi-structured interviews. These interviews, while guided by key themes, allowed for the addition of new, reflexive questions. As Bremborg notes, this method is valuable for understanding and analysing people's ideas and

beliefs within religious and qualitative studies (Bremborg, 2010, 310). Given this, I found the methodological approach well-suited to my research objectives.

A gatekeeper interview with Muna Bilgrami was conducted to ensure adherence to my ethical standards of transparency, to share my project intent, and obtain permission. It also provided an overview of the teachings, practices and values of this community, the Shaykh and of Muna herself; and helped me identify any boundaries so I assured a maintenance of respect and avoided overstepping. In the spirit of co-creation, I sought Muna's suggestions regarding which group members would be open to interviews (selecting my first four participants out of the ten), as well as feedback and input on the themes and questions I hope to cover. Through introducing my research through Muna, I was able to build trust with the interviewees, as they felt assured that sharing information with me would be safe. (Lata, 2020, 81) Since Muna is an academic, her insights added a richness to the process and the project as a whole, and also ensured that my interviews included themes and questions that matter not only to myself but to the group as a whole. To ensure Muna's input did not influence the rest of my data, the questions I posed to her in her personal capacity were the same as those posed to the rest of the interviewees and these questions were reviewed by my supervisors to ensure there was no subjective influence.

The core intention of my work is to share and empower. Therefore, I used this conversation with Muna to ascertain what value I can give back through this project. I will share my intention of hosting a workshop with the group once the thesis is complete, to share and discuss the findings. Additionally, I plan to disseminate my findings in small community publications, and newsletters following thesis submission. By incorporating Muna's feedback, this sharing of knowledge will ensure Sufi South African women are empowered to become part of the discourse. These short pieces will also be blogged online to bring South African Sufi women into the global conversation of Sufi women practices, extending the reach of the research insights.

I conducted interviews with a sample of ten women from this circle. Rather than pursuing a broad analysis, I focused on producing a deep, nuanced understanding of the lived realities of these ten participants. Using a semi-structured approach, I began with interviews of participants recommended by Muna and then applied snowball sampling by asking each participant to suggest others. Because I had established a comfortable relationship with these women, most interviews were conducted face-to-face in a conversational format. This allowed for

relationship building and the use of non-verbal cues to deepen my understanding. In accordance with ethical guidelines, I obtained informed consent and permission to record the sessions. Interviews were held in quiet, uninterrupted spaces at the convenience of the interviewees.

The interview themes and questions were open-ended to encourage reflective responses. Many participants found sharing their experiences to be a relief, according to many participants, the interviews facilitated a process of healing. The themes of the questions enabled positioning these sisters in the Sufi world, to understand what self-cultivation means to them and the place for ritual and *dhikr* in their lives. The aim was to understand any limitations they operated under, and how they envisioned self-formation and embodied ritual practices.

The 75-minute interview was followed with a brief questionnaire to capture factual data. To ensure accuracy, the transcripts were audited against the recordings, and unclear sections were sent to participants for review. This approach aligned with my ethics of transparency and the collaborative nature of the research.

After completing all the interviews, I conducted a thematic analysis of the transcribed data. The findings were then analysed in light of Islamic Sufi and feminist theories discussed in the literature review. All data has been securely stored on password-protected cloud files.

Given the dearth of scholarly literature on female Shaykhas and understandings of the experiences of female seekers on the path, contemporary Shaykha Fawzia al-Rawi was interviewed as a key informant and expert in the field. Her decades of experience as a teacher and her nuanced insights into female Sufi journeys, which remain largely undocumented, were invaluable to the topic of my project. As one of the few prominent female voices in contemporary Sufism, her contributions bridge a critical gap in understanding the intersection of gender and spiritual self-cultivation within the tradition. The 75-minute interview, conducted online, involved questions framed around fieldwork findings that required clarification. Her responses offered rich, context-specific insights into the lived realities of female Sufi seekers, shedding light on dimensions of theology, practice, and embodiment that are rarely addressed in existing literature.

Beyond clarifying ambiguities in my data, Shaykha Fawzia's reflections served as a touchstone for my analysis, providing a unique combination of scholarly rigor, spiritual depth, and practical experience. Her ability to articulate complex theological concepts through a feminist lens offered a critical framework for understanding the models and approaches shared by

participants. Her role as a teacher and guide not only validated my findings but also highlighted the transformative potential of female leadership in Sufi practice. Shaykha Fawzia's perspectives were thus indispensable in shaping the theoretical and practical contributions of this project, elevating its depth and relevance.

In a field dominated by androcentric scholarship on Sufism, and within a context of historical discrimination and marginalisation, this research aims to make visible the experiences of South African Sufi women and their engagement with Sufi ritual practices. By unveiling and amplifying their voices, I seek to highlight how these women use ritual practices to transform and reform in their pursuit of self-making. I hope to uncover the unique embodied experiences of these women, identify the intersectionality and social constructs that shape their lives, and explore how they navigate these challenges. Throughout this process, I remain grounded in feminist standpoint theory, acknowledging that all knowledge is partial and situated.

All ten participants were biologically female, with only one identifying as queer. Half were aged 35-55, and the other half were aged between 55 -75. Most of the participants were born in South Africa, while three were immigrant residents, expressing a strong connection to the land and its people. The women were generally well-educated, with over half having received tertiary education. More than half the participants were or had been actively employed or entrepreneurial, and many of the participants also reported being politically or socially active.

All participants practiced Islam, described themselves as 'seekers' on a Sufi spiritual path and aligned with the principles of Sufism. Understanding these South African Sufi women begins with their self-identification, which was often complex. While some participants embraced specific roles or societal labels, at least half the women rejected fixed identities, viewing themselves as being on a journey that was ever evolving. Given the research focus on these women's embodiment practices, a mapping process was crucial to grasp their shifting identities. In *The Journey of the Self*, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri – the teacher for this group of women – provides a Sufi roadmap to spiritual psychology. Paired with the interviews, this guidebook framed their evolving embodiments as a journey rather than a fixed destination. Their spiritual goal was to become one in constant remembrance of their soul self *(Ruhani*) and Allah (*dhikr*). Though they shared this goal, their self-identities were diverse and continuously evolving. The metaphor of a 'journey' was the most fitting tool to explore their fluid, ever-

changing selves. The shared, elusive destination was to befriend Allah, which also became a journey to themselves.

While the phases of this journey are presented chronologically in the following chapters, it is important to note that stages often overlap and even run in tandem with others, and often involve revisiting to deepen or further embed. Also, each participant's self-cultivation journey had independent points of departure, completely dependent on their unique lived realities and experiences**.** Each participant's journey began from unique lived experiences, making it crucial to avoid reducing their spiritual progress to fixed stages. Since this journey is driven by a spiritual, somewhat mystical goal, I suggest adopting a hermeneutics of fluidity in analysing these women as they currently present. Moreover, some phases seemed to be navigated with greater speed than others, depending on specific experiences and environments, self-discipline with practices, and divine openings.

The following analysis explores the role of SFH, community, and practices that shaped each phase**.** The participants are grouped into three phases based on their self-identification and characteristic commonalities. These three evolutionary embodiment stages on the self-cultivation journey inform the three analysis chapters that follow: **Forming a Sense of Self, a Belonging, and Expanding**, which marks the initial phase of self-discovery and empowerment, where individuals explore their identity and begin to recognise their agency and role within the broader community. This stage is foundational, as participants develop a sense of belonging within themselves and their environment, creating the space for deeper exploration.

The next stage, **Rebalancing the Feminine Self**, represents a pivotal shift where participants begin to reconnect with and reclaim the feminine energies within. This phase involves not only healing and integrating aspects of the self that have been marginalised but also reimagining and rebalancing gendered experiences, strength, vulnerability, intuition, and spirit. It's a process of harmonising the internal forces of the feminine and masculine, as well as embracing the cyclical nature of growth and transformation, leading to a more profound understanding of one's own potential and capacity for self-cultivation.

Finally, **Moving from Individuation to Oneness** signals the culmination of this journey, where participants transcend individual ego and embrace a deep interconnectedness with others

and the world. This stage reflects a shift from personal growth to collective awareness, where the individual realises their place in the greater cosmic order. It is about embodying a sense of unity and wholeness, experiencing oneness not only with oneself but also with the community and the universe at large. Each stage represents a continuous process of evolution, where growth, transformation, and integration lead to collective healing and spiritual awakening.

Chapter 3: ANALYSIS - FORMING A SENSE OF SELF, A BELONGING AND EXPANDING

"You have no need to travel anywhere - journey within yourself. Enter a mine of rubies and bathe in the splendour of your own light."

- Rumi

This chapter looks at the metaphor of the journey as a framework to understand how participants in the process of self-cultivation create a sense of belonging, while expanding their sense of identity. It examines their progression towards becoming the 'perfectly balanced self'- their ultimate spiritual goal. By viewing their experiences through this lens, the chapter offers insights into how participants make sense of their personal journeys and learn more about themselves by developing different parts of their identities. This includes the skills they focus on developing and the rituals they practice to increase self-awareness.

The chapter also dives deeper into the tools and strategies they utilise to shape their self-concept, with a particular focus on the community's influence, the shared ethical values, and how these relationships support their personal growth and a sense of belonging. It pays special attention to the role of their Shaykh, rituals, and group activities that shape their everyday ethics, morality and meaning making

The chapter is organised around three key areas of inquiry:

- Explorations of the Self: Who Am I, What Do I Believe and Why Am I Here?
- Self-Cultivation: Art, Joy and Ritual Practice
- Community, Social Identity and Service

Explorations of the Self: Who Am I, What Do I Believe and Why Am I Here?

The women in this phase of their spiritual journey were preoccupied with ontological questions of who they were in relation to the universe and their purpose within it. Irrespective of the phase they occupied, all participants identified as 'seekers,' emphasising their pursuit both towards material and spiritual self-knowing. This journey was not just about understanding themselves but also about their roles in Islam and within Sufi teachings.

For these women, self-awareness, identity, and embodiment were seen as part of an ongoing, infinite journey. The Sufi idea of journeying to the self and Allah resonated strongly with them, shaping their spiritual exploration. Fareeda encapsulated this sentiment by saying, *"I am more than what I present as; I'm passing through."* In this, she conveyed her belief that the human self is temporary, and that there exists a greater, more spiritual reality beyond our physical lives. Likewise, Ilhaan contemplated the essence of humanity, emphasising the bond between the human soul and God as central to the human journey. She said, *"Being human means to know that we have a primordial contract, wherein we all accepted the task of humanity. This can allude to all Ruh (spirit essence) comes from one source—Allah. Our insaniyaat (human nature) has the more physical human aspect but also connects us through our interior qualities to something beyond the dimensions of space and time."*

The Sufi concept of journeying to the self and Allah struck a deep chord with them, shaping their spiritual pursuits. Fareeda's insights reflect with the Sufi perspective of life as a journey—not merely one of personal development, but also a transition from the physical self to a higher, more elevated spiritual form. Like Fareeda, Ilhaan perceived the human self as transcending the physical; she highlighted the interconnectedness of all beings through their spiritual essence, which is rooted in Allah. This belief in potential for spiritual growth was fundamental to the women's efforts to transform and cultivate themselves.

For participants: transformation is not merely a duty, but a vital, joyful and fulfilling aspect of their spiritual journey. It resonates with the writings of their teacher, Shaykh Fadhlalla who notes, "Our conception of self, shows that life is a journey of unfolding discovery towards self-knowledge, and that knowledge begins with physical and material consciousness at birth and evolves into emotional, mental, and intellectual consciousness, then culminates at maturity with higher spiritual consciousness, or pure awareness (Haeri, 1991, 4)."

This understanding of the journey toward spiritual consciousness was shared by all participants. They recognised that the effort to operate primarily from the *qalb* (spiritual heart) rather than the *nafs* (ego/self) is continuous process. While they acknowledged that fully reaching this goal might not be possible, they remained dedicated to pursuing it, with the intention of aligning their spiritual selves with God as a central focus guiding their actions and decisions.

Embodiment, Spirituality and Societal Roles

The women in this study strongly identified with their societal roles and labels, viewing them as integrous to their identity. Aasiya, a trained chef who has managed her own eatery, studied labour law, and now works as a consultant said, *"I'm a creative! And being a woman is quite a big part of my identity as well. I am a queer Muslima. And I identify with my Indian culture."* Aasiya celebrated her creativity and gender, which were central to her self-concept. Her pride in her cultural background, along with her engagement with the complexities of human society, influenced her perspective on her journey. As she put it, *"The colourful drama of humanness makes the journey worthwhile."*

For others, societal roles were equally significant. Fareeda, for example, took pride in her role as a mother: *"I think that my best effort in anything in my life was with my children. I gave up a career to be a stay-at-home mom."* Her decision to prioritise motherhood over her professional life highlighted how deeply she identified with this role. Hasiba, who works as a homeschool teacher described her multifaceted roles, stating, *"I am a Sufi Muslim. I'm an educator, community activist, and a bit of a researcher on the side. I walk in this form of woman which has absolutely embodied all my experiences and choices."* Hasiba viewed her identity as a "spiritual seeker" as central to her life's work, which she believed was closely linked to her roles and spiritual goals. These roles and activities allowed the women to harmonise their material and spiritual lives, fostering a sense of authenticity and commitment to values they cherished.

All the women in this group strongly connected with their worldly roles and societal labels, such as careers and family duties. These material roles were seen as integral to their process of self-discovery and self-cultivation, and not separate from their spiritual journey. Whether they chose to take political or social stances, or engage in community services, their sense of identity was shaped by their dedication to values and choices that felt genuine and authentic to them. These roles and activities guided them along their spiritual path, creating meaningful connections between their material and spiritual lives.

Johaarah, a seasoned participant with over forty years of Sufi practice, shared a unique perspective on self-concept. She highlighted the necessity of cultivating a strong sense of self before transcending the *nafs*. *"Don't underestimate the value of the label or the self (nafs)—before one gives up the nafs for their Ruhani self, you have to develop a self,"* she said. Drawing

from her journey as a mentor to new members of the Sufi community, she noted that those who have faced trauma, particularly those abandoned in childhood, often struggle to trust themselves, and as a result, never develop a sense of self fully. *"If you don't have a self or have an ego, then you don't have a self to give up. And isn't that the point of it all?"* she reflected.

I believe this illustrates the significance these women place of knowing themselves on a worldly level and integrating this with their spiritual understandings. They do not see the material and spiritual as separate entities but rather complementary and equally important to self-discovery and growth. On reflecting on these insights by my participants, I found some of the work of Shaykha Fariha, a female Sufi leader particularly enlightening. She emphasised the importance of self-development, which involves a deeper understanding of both the physical self (*nafs*) and the spiritual self (*ruh*), resonating with the ideas shared by the participants mentioned earlier. Shaykha Fariha described the *nafs* as a crucial vessel for the higher self, the *ruh*. According to her pedagogy of 'divine immanence' (an embodied practice of self-exploration) - understanding one's body and identity is vital to spiritual growth. This process of becoming familiar with the body and identity paves the way for higher consciousness, enabling individuals to understand both themselves and God (Deighton-Mohammed, 2022, 103).

For the participants, the challenge was not only to explore and understand their *nafs,* but also utilise their knowledge to deepen their connection to the Divine. Ilhaan's statement, *"all Ruh (spirit) is from one source - Allah,"* emphasises this fundamental link between self and God. Under the guidance of their Shaykh and within their Sufi community, they engaged in disciplined practices designed to align the self with spiritual awareness. In this process, a number of participants emphasized the crucial role of intention or *niyyah* , which served as a focused and directed effort of mind, body, and soul toward God-consciousness. The women's dedication to self-knowledge - considered through both material and spiritual lenses - demonstrate their commitment to reconnecting with their spiritual selves.

The significance of self-knowledge is deeply embedded in Sufi theology. Ibn Arabi, like many other Sufis often invoke the hadith, "One who knows oneself, knows one's Lord" (Ibn Arabi Muhyi al Din, 1946, 210). This prophetic tradition highlights the women's awareness of the connection between self-knowledge and Divine knowledge. For these women, the quest for self-knowledge was closely intertwined to their journey toward understanding God.

In conclusion, the women, during this stage of their journey were actively involved in a process of self-discovery, shaped by both their earthly roles and their spiritual aspirations. Through dedicated practices and an intentional focus on the balance between the *nafs* and *ruh*, they navigated their journey toward a deeper understanding of themselves and, ultimately, of God.

Self-cultivation through Art, Joy and Ritual Practice

Participants highlighted the importance of developing abilities and skills through various activities, such as ceramic painting, decoupage, and oil painting. These creative outlets not only allowed them to express themselves but explore new aspects of their identities. By engaging in artistic pursuits, they discovered ways to connect with their inner selves that went beyond traditional norms. They also integrated daily reflective and spiritual practices into their routines, alongside traditional Islamic worship, both individually and in community settings. Although these activities differed from conventional religious practices, the Shaykh encouraged participants to explore all dimensions of themselves, including the material and physical aspects, affirming the value of holistic self-on their spiritual journey.

Fareeda shared her experience, saying, *"I am trying to find different facets and aspects of me that give me joy. This is why I try so many different things."* Motivated by the Shaykh's suggestion to create flower paintings, her exploration into painting revealed a hidden artistic talent, broadening her sense of self and bringing her happiness. Bushra echoed this feeling, participating in song and sacred dance, which later became a source of income: *"The singing breaks down barriers – it's joyful for me."* These creative outlets not only provided emotional fulfilment, but also helped her financially. The Shaykh's encouragement in this regard (which is most unconventional for Muslim religious leaders; as music and other sources of entertainment are often Islamically ruled to be not permissible), played a pivotal role in facilitating self-knowledge across physical, mental, and emotional realms. This aligns with the Shaykh's teachings on the transformative potential of passion-driven pursuits (Haeri, 1991, 14), where joy becomes a spiritual and embodied practice. For these women, joy as an integral part of spiritual life emerged through practices that intertwined bodily engagement with emotional and spiritual depth, highlighting the importance of the body in the cultivation of inner fulfillment.

Fareeda described her daily gratitude practice: *"One of my ritual practices that I learned is a gratitude practice - where I remember what I am grateful for. This creates in me a feeling of wellbeing and joyfulness."* Despite facing challenging family dynamics, identifying three things she was grateful for each day provided her with comfort, promoting a mindset of abundance rather than scarcity. Eeman described her connection to nature, saying, *"I walk in nature and am in awe of God's divine majesty and blessings."* For her, and for others like Bushra, Ghadeeja, and Corina**,** spending time in nature strengthened their connection to the Creator, serving as a sanctuary to reconnect with their inner selves and the Divine.

Fareeda expressed her mixed feelings toward ritual practices, admitting, *"I've had a love-hate relationship with ritual. That was before I was introduced to dhikr."* Her perspective changed after she began incorporating a *dhikr* practice, which allowed her to engage more profoundly with worship rituals. Aasiya elaborated on her love for *dhikr*, saying, *"I find the dhikr soothing and comforting. I think it releases trapped energy from my body … I always feel better afterwards … a beautiful stillness!"* This ritual cultivated a sense of calm and presence, and for Aasiya, it became a means to achieve self-acceptance and inner peace.

Participants who actively engaged in ritual practices often found doing so brought them much ease. Those in this phase of the journey articulated oftentimes feeling very much *"in their heads"* in relation to generally juggling more work and family roles than those in the other phases. This led them inclining toward practices that encouraged stillness and tranquillity, creating moments for reflection in their busy lives. Bushra shared her love for journaling, saying, *"I love my journaling practices - it clarifies my mind."* Journaling became an essential tool for gaining clarity, allowing her to separate her internal thoughts and external distractions. Corina also valued journaling for its role in, promoting self-knowledge and clearing mental clutter, pointing out how could reveal hidden truths about herself.

Participants also engaged in meditation, breathwork, and rituals from Eastern culture, discovering that combining these with *dhikr* often brought calming benefits. Ilhaan recounted, *"I think any practice that you perform regularly trains your brain – it creates neuro-linguistic programming connections."* Meditation, for her, facilitated a state of tranquillity and presence. Ilhaan's multifaceted practice of yoga, breathwork, and meditation underscored the importance

of physical awareness. She noted, *"You can't breathe deeply if you are thinking. You have to concentrate on the breath,"* emphasising how focus on breath helped quiet the mind and anchor her spiritual practices. Ilhaan's practice seems to be deeply shaped by her experiences within a multicultural society. She moves through a space where diverse spiritual traditions are not just visible, but actively engage with one another.

Theoretical perspectives support these experiential insights. Mindfulness practices such as the above, are central to Islamic and Sufi methodologies, and enhances consciousness in prayer and rituals. Modern Sufi teacher, Kabir Helminski uses the Sufi idea of 'presence' as "more than a synonym for mindfulness" He suggests it is even more advantageous as "presence is … more than mental," more than mindfulness. Instead "it is a state of comprehensive self-awareness that encompasses body, mind, and heart (Helminski, 2023, 147)." A concept he calls "heartfulness" - which aligns with participants' experiences, affirming that stillness is key and self-discovery is a comprehensive journey involving multiple aspects of one's existence. The path to finding inner peace within life's complexities shows that that rituals and "presenc-ing" practices serve as powerful tools for aligning the self with both the material and spiritual worlds.

Communal Dhikr as a Path to Self-Cultivation

The insights from this group highlight how communal spiritual presenc-ing rituals serve as effective means to calm the mind and nurture inner connections. While many practices are often done solo, participants also took part in communal *dhikr* practices every week, both in-person and online. These gatherings included recitations of the *wirdh* (compilations of prayers) and the singing of *diwans* (collection of poetry praising God), which enhanced the spiritual experience and fostered a sense of community. The communal aspect of the ritual performance highlights the significance of shared spirituality in enhancing personal experiences.

Ilhaan highlighted the advantages of communal *dhikr*: *"It's like breathing out the stale air and letting in the fresh air, bringing you more towards your inner self; a reoxygenation, reviving, rejuvenating, stimulating, tonic on every level."* This metaphor captures the transformative essence of collective spiritual practice, helping individuals connect to their higher selves and

the Divine. It emphasises how group rituals can elevate individual experiences, creating a fertile ground for personal and spiritual growth**.**

Corina shared Ilhaan's views: *"The impact is amplified; connection to higher self is quicker."* The shared experience fostered deepened spiritual connection and supported individual healing journeys. Ghadeeja stressed the transformative power of group *dhikr* and *diwan*: *"It's the way to the light. Diwan singing is the way to get to love. It brings cleansing, forgiveness, and presence and nourishing."* These reflections reveal the significant impact of collective worship on personal growth.

Hasiba expressed the importance of communal rituals: *"Dhikr in community is as important as dhikr alone. It raises everyone's frequency and consciousness … this brings joy."* She noted the interconnectedness between participants, suggesting that the groups energy nourished each individual soul. This sentiment was echoed throughout the interviews, as participants recognised the synergies created by diverse voices coming together in prayer and reflection. The shared experience not only cultivated a sense of belonging, but also fortified their individual spiritual paths.

These rituals not only function as spiritual practices but also played a crucial role in building social connections, enhancing participants' overall wellbeing. The community formed through these shared experiences acts as a safe haven for women, offering them a place to find solace from life's difficulties and promoting resilience and emotional support.

The beneficial effects of communal rituals on mental health and wellbeing are well-established. Studies indicate that communal prayer cultivates a sense of belonging and psychological wellness, supporting the experiences of those involved in it. Callender et al.'s empirical research emphasised the two-fold connections formed during communal rituals: a sense of belonging to the community and a simultaneous connection with the Divine (Callender et al., 2022, 3648). The interviewees experiences resonate with these findings, demonstrating how communal practices can be significant drivers for personal growth and promoting joyfulness.

The narratives of the participants illustrate a rich tapestry of experiences linked by shared spiritual practices. They recount how these rituals offered them grounding and connection, allowing them to navigate life's complexities with grace. The benefits included a deepened sense of belonging and moments of joy. The transformative impact of these communal gatherings becomes clear, highlighting the potential for collective spiritual practice to elevate individual journeys. Moreover, these shared rituals fostered the creation of a distinct habitus—an embodied framework of dispositions, attitudes, and practices—that shaped how participants engaged with the world, reinforcing their spiritual identities and sense of purpose in everyday life.

Reflections on Factors impacting Self-Cultivation

For all the participants, the Shaykh's guidance was essential in navigating their journeys of self-discovery. By encouraging artistic pursuits and mindfulness, a supportive framework was established for them to grow. This guidance created a sense of safety and freedom, enabling the women to explore their identities without fear of judgment. The Shaykh's affirmations sparked curiosity and empowered them to step towards their authentic selves.

The nurturing environment fostered by the Shaykh, along with the shared experiences among participants, encouraged them to venture into new territories. As they navigated this journey, the women built resilience and enhanced their ability to face challenges within themselves and their surroundings. The collective support system formed through these shared experiences created a safe space where vulnerability and exploration were welcomed, promoting personal growth and understanding.

The rich experiences and insights shared by the participants highlight the significance of creating spaces where women can delve into their identities and spiritual journeys. Through creative practices, communal rituals, and supportive guidance, they discovered new aspects of themselves, nurturing resilience, joy, and connection. As they continue their paths of self-discovery, the influence of these practices resonates in their lives, empowering them to embody who they really are and cultivate meaningful relationships with others.

The combination of artistic expression, mindfulness practices, alongside communal rituals, fostered a deep sense of self-awareness, fostered joy and enhanced connection to the Divine. The experiences shared by the participants highlight the transformative power of these practices in addressing both personal and communal difficulties, leading to a richer understanding of self and spirituality. As they embraced their individual journeys, the women found comfort in the realisation that their paths, while unique, were also interconnected, emphasising the strength of shared experiences for personal growth.

Their narratives illustrate a larger story of empowerment and self-discovery. Through exploration and mutual support, the women reshaped their relationships with themselves, their spirituality, and one another. The Shaykh's guidance and mentorship was instrumental in shaping their journeys, highlighting the importance of supportive figures in nurturing spiritual growth.

Who are the South African Sufi Women: Community, Social identity and Service

The women interviewed for this study came from a variety of backgrounds. Half of them were South Africans of Indian descent, while the others came from different countries and ethnic groups. A couple of participants not born in South Africa had spent most of their lives here and identified strongly with the country. Eemaan, one of the participants, describes her deep connection: *"I've lived in many countries … from the moment I arrived I felt a homecoming with this land, its beauty, its people and its fight."* Her words highlight a deep resonance with the struggles and beauty of South Africa. Similarly, Ilhaan shared, *"I love being identified as South African - because it puts me on the right side of politics,"* reflecting the pride and positivity many women felt toward their adopted homeland and its democratic ideals.

Participants in the study frequently shared their pride in South Africa's resistance to oppression and apartheid, as well as their appreciation for its natural beauty and resources. These women, part of a self-cultivating spiritual group, showed an awareness of socio-political challenges while fostering strong, intelligent communities focused at self-improvement. The group of Sufi women was described as active thinkers, conscious of the global political issues, and deeply committed to using their spiritual practices to promote both personal growth and societal change.

Chapter 4: ANALYSIS - REBALANCING THE FEMININE SELF

"Women is a beam of the divine Light. She is Creator. She is not a creature"

- Rumi

The self-cultivation journey of South African Sufi women is intricately shaped by their community, which plays a crucial role in helping them recognise spiritual obstacles. In the context of a patriarchal world, these women must navigate the roles and internal imbalances imposed by societal expectations, all while seeking a deeper understanding of their identities and spiritual growth. The community serves as a supportive mirror, offering honest reflections and fostering accountability, trust, and belonging. This environment of emotional support and shared purpose strengthens their spiritual journey, with practices like group *dhikr* and collective prayer deepening their bonds. Through this communal dynamic, these women are not only encouraged to reflect on their challenges and behaviours , but are also guided toward reclaiming authenticity and balance. The presence of a balanced male mentor and the guidance of their Shaykh further support this process of learning and unlearning, offering a safe space for healing and realignment. This chapter examines how these women's experiences with patriarchal conditioning and their embodied practices of self-empowerment work together to foster both individual and collective spiritual growth. Ultimately, the narrative intertwines themes of identity, community, and the continuous process of self-cultivation in the face of oppressive systems.

The Problem: Patriarchy, Disconnects and Discontents

I noted that the participants frequently cited their cultural and religious upbringing as the main cause of their issues around femininity and self-perception. Many of the women were exposed to religious teachings that propagated sexist and patriarchal views from an early age, often portrayed as divine truth. Over time, these teachings fostered a skewed perception of both themselves and their relationship to femininity.

Eemaan describes growing up at home: *"My society was very sexist, and unfortunately, they use even the religion to create more sexism. The sexism and division I saw…the boys in the family were preferred. And you know it creates this…this anxiety almost. It's almost like if we*

don't heal from the trauma that we faced in this, it becomes a generational problem. The sexism, patriarchy and misogyny were synonymous with religious people."

This is especially clear from Eemaan's story. She talks about being raised in a society where religion was manipulated to justify and reinforce sexism. Boys were favoured over girls, and women were often marginalised. Eemaan's reflection serves as an example of how the religious teachings she encountered aligned with patriarchal family structures instil a powerful sense of inferiority in women. Feminist theology offers a lens to understand this dynamic, particularly the ways in which religious institutions uphold male domination and minimise female power. These women's stories demonstrate how women are shaped from childhood by societal and religious constructs that define and limit acceptable expressions of gender, what feminists have argued are forms of hierarchical gendered socialisation (Butler, 1990, 8-10).

The significant emotional and psychological effects of patriarchal conditioning are further highlighted by Eemaan's experiences. The inequality she witnessed—both between her siblings and in the treatment of her mother and other women—contributed to what feminist sociologists describe as the "intergenerational transmission" of patriarchal norms (Trommsdorf, 2012, 126). By observing their mothers' subjugation, they inherited a complicated history of oppression, which they found challenging to overcome. These observations are consistent with theories from feminist scholars who have long highlighted how patriarchal structures perpetuate themselves through family dynamics, history, women as inherently inferior or subservient to men.

Aasiya echoes this: *"I feel like my womanhood, my feminine energy flow is constantly being suppressed by myself. This is because of what religion, society, culture …hmm … just all the structural conditions of the world. From living in a very male-dominated society, there is a conflict with feminine energy."*

This internalised conflict is further illustrated by Aasiya's story, where she struggled with the dissonance between her *"feminine energy"* and the societal structures. She spoke about how religion, society, and culture all directly contributed to the repression of her femininity. Aasiya's conflict represents the struggle between her innate impulses and the gendered expectations that society places on her, forcing her to subdue her femininity.

In addition to religious and societal pressures, I could see that participants struggled with the conflicting legacy of the women's liberation movement. While feminist politics aimed to liberate women, several participants, like Ghadeeja, felt that it simultaneously perpetuated masculine norms as the benchmark for achievement.

Ghadeeja, a self-identified feminist, says with hindsight: *"Women's lib ruined femininity, we had to prove we can do what men could. This led to imbalanced masculine principles within us."*

Similar to Ghadeeja, majority of the women interviewed were either directly or indirectly impacted by the women's liberation movement. Many concurred that this movement, meant to liberate women, occasionally exacerbated the problem by ingraining the idea that to be relevant, valid and 'enough', women had to do what men could do in an identical manner. This led to denying and eventually resenting their own womanliness, viewing it as a weakness, or an enduring defect that hindered them. Thus, they made an effort to replace what they thought of as the feminine principles of nurture, unification and open-mindedness with analytical, linear cognitive processes and self-centred orientation.

The cultural belief that women could only be significant or valued if they could thrive in a male-dominated environment was influenced by this internalised devaluation of femininity. Participants described how this pressure led them to suppress their femininity and adopt masculine characteristics, a shift that left them feeling alienated and disconnected from their own sense of self.

Feminist discussions regarding the course of the women's liberation movement find echo in the participants' struggles and critiques. Earlier French feminist works by scholars such as Luce Irigaray and Simone de Beauvoir presented similar discussions around female subjectivity. Irigaray emphasises the importance of exploring and reclaiming a distinct female identity that has been suppressed by patriarchal language and culture. In her work, Irigaray critiques in her book *The Sex Which is not One,* how the phallocentric nature of Western philosophy marginalises and misrepresents women's identities (Irigaray, 1985). Radical feminists like Shulamith Firestone were critical of the liberal feminist approaches of the eighties that failed to challenge the internal assumptions ingrained in patriarchal structures (Tong, 2009). My participants feelings of estrangement from their femininity can be understood as a response to

the deep rooted patriarchal values that were ingrained in the society. Feminist theories shed light on how these ideals are internalised, causing women to believe they are essentially defective or unworthy. This internal conflict between women's feminine identities and patriarchal demands is a central theme in the participants' narratives, one that they continue to grapple with as they attempt to regain their feminine identities.

Suppression of Femininity in the Workplace

In their work settings, where patriarchal tendencies persisted, the participants' inner battles with femininity transcended their private and religious lives. They explained how, in order to succeed in corporate and social spaces dominated by masculine ideals, they felt compelled to suppress their feminine traits, often with damaging consequences.

Corina states *"a significant embodiment for my journey – from feminist to here… the roles of male and female are for balance… While women are exceptionally strong creatures, we are also innately softer and more intuitive in nature. The masculine energy that I embodied to enable me to operate in corporate, altered me – it is what made me sick."*

To thrive in a business environment, Corina's explains how she deliberately adopted what she described as a *"foreign masculine energy".* She details how detrimental this way of being was for her in terms of her health and well-being. Similar to this, several other participants discuss the persistence of androcentric work cultures that place a higher value on masculine traits - such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and emotional detachment - while downplaying traditionally feminine traits such as empathy, collaboration, and emotional intelligence.

The pressure that my participants feel to adopt masculine traits reflects what sociologist Raewyn Connell refers to as "hegemonic masculinity," which is reflected by the culturally idealised form of masculinity that denigrates both women and other expressions of masculinity (Connell, 1987, 183). In Corina's case, this culture of hegemonic masculinity had detrimental effects on her health. She believed that the unnatural suppression of her femininity and the ongoing pressure to conform to masculine norms resulted in her physical illness.

The psychosomatic impacts of gender suppression, especially in women, have long been a topic among feminist theorists like Susan Bordo (2004, 45-46), who argues that women's bodies

frequently serve as the sites where societal pressures are enacted, resulting in discorded eating, chronic illness, and other physical symptoms of gendered expectations. This perspective can help us understand Corina's illness: the psychological and physical imbalance that resulted from the conflict between her feminine identity and the masculine standards of her workplace *"made her sick."*

Aasiya describes her work situation: *"My role in my corporate organisation is to effect cultural transformation in the businesses of our clients. So, my job is to look at the culture of the client's place of business, understand their leadership styles, and sense the environment…find out how their employees feel, do they feel heard, how are they treated, check if there's fearmongering etc. And then, suggest and implement changes. Yet, within our own organisation we are not practicing what we preach. So, I challenged our male leader and he shut me down. I think me questioning him was quite threatening to him and he took it personally."*

Aasiya's account of her experiences in organisational settings adds another layer to this analysis. As part of her role in cultural transformation, she was in charge of analysing the workplace dynamics of her clients and suggesting adjustments. However when she used the same lens on her own workplace structures, she encountered resistance from her male superior, who rejected her recommendations.

Aasiya continues: *"The challenge is you have to work around masculine fragility as well. And hand-holding and walking fragile personalities through things is very draining so I just end up holding it in my body. It's what I know made me ill. It's this conflict between masculine and feminine energies."*

A number of my participants' described masculine fragility as part of their work environment. According to Aasiya, that she had to constantly stroke the sensitive egos of her male counterparts, often by downplaying her own accomplishments or keeping her opinions to herself. This dynamic resonates with Arlie Hochschild's concept of "emotional labour," which refers to the work women do to navigate not only their own emotions but also the feelings of those around them - especially men (Hochschild, 2012, 137). In Aasiya's case, this emotional labour involved carefully navigating fragile male egos to avoid conflict.

Participants recounted how their feminine traits, particularly their intuition and collaborative leadership styles, were continuously undervalued in favour of more masculine traits, such as aggression and competitiveness. Close to half of the women interviewed spoke about suffering from physical illnesses that they attributed to the anxiety and trauma of suppressing their femininity in order to navigate patriarchal workspaces.

Feminist literature in organisational psychology has shown that the chronic stress of juggling gendered expectations in the workplace can lead to serious health problems, particularly in women. This dynamic was evident in the participants' stories, describing a deep sense of dissonance brought on by the conflict between their feminine identities and the expectations of their workplaces, which were centred on men. The data showed that this dissonance, over time, manifested as illness, particularly in conditions related to the breast tissue or reproductive system—areas of the body closely linked to femininity.

Healing through Balancing Gendered Principles

As the participants began to explore ways to heal from their experiences, they struggled with the physical and emotional toll of patriarchal conditioning. A major element in their healing journeys was the idea of rebalancing the masculine and feminine principles within themselves. The participants' all desire to restore balance within themselves as part of their Sufi understanding of spiritual cultivation.

Ilhaan states: *"I, myself, despite all my work in Islamic Feminism and social justice, am patriarchal. I noticed that I follow guidance from a man with much greater ease..."*

She then continues by noting that her chronic illness was due to *"an imbalance of the masculine principle that needs to be brought back into balance. Playing on the scale of women and male principle energies is a dynamic flux. The idea is to embody both ... in balance."* In this sense, Ilhaan's story is very instructive. She said that her over-reliance on masculine traits had upset her internal equilibrium and that her chronic illness was due to an imbalance of the masculine principle. In Ilhaan's case, her recognition of the imbalance between masculine and feminine energies allowed her to start her healing process that incorporated reclaiming her femininity and integrating it more fully into her life.

For many participants, healing meant confronting and dismantling patriarchal structures in their lives. Their stories reveal that true healing required balancing masculine and feminine energies rather than rejecting one or embracing the other. This reflects a trend in feminist spiritual practices that emphasise integrating traditionally gendered traits for holistic well-being. Many women healed physical and emotional wounds by rediscovering feminine qualities like intuition and empathy, while recognising the need to balance them with masculine traits such as assertiveness and action. Sufi philosophy, as interpreted by scholars like Sa'diyya Shaikh, provides a framework for this balance, with Ibn Arabi's concept of *al-Insan al-Kamil* embodying the harmony of active (male) and receptive (female) principles (Shaikh, 2022, 480-484). Many women mentioned that their mothers and grandmothers, who had been influenced by patriarchal religious and cultural teachings, were the ones who had carried these challenges and passed them down. Eemaan once referred to this as a trauma that *"becomes a generational problem"*. The intergenerational aspect of trauma is well-documented in feminist trauma studies. Researchers like Sarah Henkeman have studied how structural trauma- such as the trauma caused by systemic misogyny - becomes embedded within individuals and communities over time. This type of trauma is often passed down from one generation to the next, as individuals inherit not only their ancestors' psychological scars but also the societal structures that perpetuate oppression (Henkeman, 2022, 7-14). For the participants, recovering meant ending the trauma cycle that had been transmitted through their families in addition to dealing with their own personal suffering. Henkeman's work on structural trauma offers a useful framework for comprehending their experiences, as they recognised that their traumas were not isolated or purely personal but were deeply intertwined with broader societal structures.

In conclusion, there are significant connections between the participants experiences of patriarchal religious upbringing, the suppression of femininity in the workplace, and the ensuing physical ailments they displayed. These physical ailments can be understood as part of the embodied impact of patriarchal culture, where the suppression of the body, emotional expression, and femininity often manifests as illness or discomfort. Embodiment theory highlights how experiences of gender oppression are not only psychological but also profoundly physical, as the body internalises these external forces. The concepts of feminist theory, trauma studies, and Sufi spirituality permeate these life experiences, suggesting that healing involves not just emotional and psychological, work but also a reconnection to the

body. The participants' path of healing emphasises the importance of deconstructing patriarchal structures both within themselves and in society, while also recognising that balance is an embodied practice. Achieving this balance requires the integration of gendered energies and a reorientation toward the body as a site of resilience, empowerment, and healing. By drawing on both feminist and spiritual frameworks, these women attempted to regain their identities and achieve a holistic sense of well-being, where the body, mind, and spirit work in harmony to reclaim both health and personal agency.

Rebalancing and Healing

Healing through Learning and Unlearning with a Balanced Male Teacher

The group of interviewees described that their journey of healing from patriarchal conditioning involved both unlearning the patriarchal lessons that had influenced their early and teenage years and gaining new knowledge that validated their feminine identity. This process required them to face the reality that their understanding of femininity and religion had been greatly impacted by a systemic patriarchy, which not only suppressed their feminine selves but also conditioned them to perpetuate these repressive ideals.

Key to this healing journey was the non-authoritarian pedagogy provided by Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri (SFH), their male teacher. His balanced approach to gender provided a safe space for the women to explore their femininity. The women described how they had been previously subjected to religious teachings by men who exhibited strict, patriarchal attitudes, reinforcing their sense of inferiority as women. Eemaan, one of the participants, talks about her past experiences of sexism, patriarchy, and misogyny in her family and community, which she had long connected with religious teachings. *"The sexism, patriarchy, and misogyny I saw in my family and community were synonymous with religious people… with the realisation that none of this is Islam, I have had to heal this,"* she reflected, focusing on her eventual recognition that these beliefs did not align with the true teachings of Islam.

This realisation inspired Eemaan, along with other participants, to begin a journey of personal healing and empowerment. They described Shaykh Fadhlalla's inclusive approach toward practices like hijab, which is the acceptance and understanding of diverse ways in which

women engage with the practice of wearing the hijab, and his openness to women participating alongside men during teachings is a significant departure from their previous experiences with male religious leaders. For many, this marked a deep transformation in their spiritual journey. As Eemaan noted, *"he was one man I would listen to... I love him."* This newfound trust in a male religious figure who supported gender equity was essential in helping the women reclaim their spiritual and feminine identities. It appeared that his balanced, compassionate masculinity fostered an environment that allowed these women to learn in a non-patriarchal setting.

In feminist terms, the learning process these women underwent align with the idea of a "hermeneutics of suspicion," as proposed by Sa'diyya Shaikh, where the women critically engaged with religious texts and traditions to uncover and challenge androcentric biases. Through the Shaykh's teachings, they applied this suspicion constructively, enabling a "hermeneutics of reconstruction," - an active reinterpretation of their faith that honoured their femininity rather than stifling it (Shaikh, 2021, 37). Quranic criterion of elevation in the eyes of God based on the concept of *taqwa* (God-consciousness or piety) emphasise universal human dignity and rejects social hierarchies based on gender. These learnings challenge androcentric teachings and facilitates an understanding that God sees all humans as equal. Concepts such as these allow women a reclamation of agency. This process of dismantling patriarchal religious teachings and reconstructing a more gender-equitable understanding of Islam paralleled the participants' simultaneous process of learning and unlearning. Sa'diyya Shaikh's horticultural metaphor of *weeding* and *seeding* further illustrates this transformation: *weeding* involves identifying and removing patriarchal beliefs that hinder growth, while *seeding* represents nurturing empowering, life-affirming knowledge. Through their relationship with SFH, the participants could identify and discard oppressive teachings (weeds), while nurturing new, life-affirming knowledge (seeding) that empowered their feminine identities.

The women's experiences of both of learning and unlearning reflect the broader feminist movement of reclaiming feminine identity within patriarchal religious framework. This was particularly highlighted in the participants' stories of how they reshaped their perceptions of womanhood by nurturing a direct and spiritual connection to Allah, free from inherited patriarchal biases. This reconnection allowed for the rebalancing of their own feminine selves,

as they gradually replaced old, disempowering beliefs with ones that affirm their self-worth, a shift supported by what they experienced as their Shaykh's egalitarian pedagogy.

Embodied Feminine Healing through a Safe and Nurturing Environment

For these women, healing from patriarchal conditioning was not just intellectual but deeply embodied. Their spiritual healing was closely tied to embracing their femininity, long stifled under patriarchy. Shaykh Fadhlalla played a key role, offering a safe, nurturing space through his approachable and generous demeanour—contrasting sharply with the authoritarian figures they had previously encountered. This environment allowed them to heal from past traumas.

Eemaan shared: *"I saw so much discrimination, so much misogyny; I had so much anger in me. Thanks to my Shaykh and by Allah's grace, the more openings I received, the more I learned. This changed my perspective. I am now grateful to be a woman. We have incredible strengths and blessings… My anger has turned into empathy and love."* Under the Shaykh's guidance, her growing relationship with the Quran rekindled pride in her womanhood and deepened her appreciation for Arabic, linking intellectual and spiritual growth with ease in her femininity. For her and others, healing involved revisiting Islamic texts through a feminist lens and embracing feminine qualities they had been taught to suppress.

Sa'diyya Shaikh's horticultural metaphor aptly describes this dual process. "Weeding" removes patriarchal beliefs that drain energy, while "seeding" nurtures new knowledge that strengthens the feminine principle. Eemaan exemplifies this: her anger reflected patriarchal "weeds," while her newfound pride and connection to the Quran symbolised "seeding" life-affirming knowledge.

Daahlia echoed these sentiments, noting that embracing her womanhood was both intentional and transformative. *"It influences how I run my business and raise my kids. It's part of my character to nurture, unify, and gather. There are so many capacities as a woman I can tap into—an internal capacity of wisdom."* Accepting her femininity allowed her to access inner wisdom, enriching her roles as a mother and leader of a business focused on empowering marginalised women. Her leadership style, rooted in feminine values of support and upliftment, reflected the balanced, nurturing environment fostered by her Shaykh.

This embodied healing process aligns with feminist efforts to reclaim female subjectivity. By integrating intellectual, spiritual, and embodied transformations, these women rebalanced their feminine and masculine energies, fostering a sense of worthiness and reshaping their understanding of gender. This holistic approach enabled them to reclaim their feminine selves in a patriarchal world.

Reflections on Feminist Hermeneutics and Sufi Pedagogy

The healing journeys of these women can be analysed through a combination of feminist hermeneutics and Sufi pedagogy, which highlight the need for balance between feminine and masculine principles. The teachings of SFH and other Sufi scholars, such as Shaykha Fawzia, offer a framework for understanding the significance of restoring balance between these energies in the process of spiritual healing. The female Sufi teacher, Shaykha Fawzia, urges women to engage in a process of learning and unlearning to heal from the trauma caused by patriarchy. In her teachings, she stresses the importance of understanding and embodying feminine qualities, rather than navigating patriarchal systems through masculine traits. As she observes, "The first step is for women to understand that they themselves are children of the patriarchy... this is why we, as women, do not honour or even know the feminine qualities within ourselves." This observation resonates with the experiences of the participants, who, under the guidance of SFH, began to reclaim and integrate their feminine qualities into their spiritual practice.

Shaykha Fawzia's approach to rebalancing femininity aligns with wider Sufi feminist discourses on integrating both male and female elements in the process of self-cultivation. This reflects the intuitive practices described by the participants, who spoke of how their healing involved not only a rejection of patriarchal teachings and overemphasised masculine traits but also a conscious effort to cultivate a balanced, feminine identity. For these women, restoring femininity was crucial to their spiritual healing and self-cultivation, as it enabled them to reconnect with the divine feminine within Islam and reclaim their agency as women.

Their teacher, Shaykh Fadhlalla, whose non-authoritarian approach provided an egalitarian model of spiritual guidance and leadership, emphasised teachings of moral agency and self-responsibility. This model of leadership, however, is not without complexity. While the feminist question might be posed about how these women remain under the instruction of a

powerful man, it appears that it is precisely the presence of this type of male teacher - who models a form of masculinity that is non-dominating and supportive of their agency - that allows for an unlearning of patriarchal masculinity. His leadership approach and unity value teachings align with feminist principles of gender equity and shared authority (Eneborg, 2021, 299). As scholar, Deighton-Mohammed notes in her analysis of Sufi pedagogies, a "community-engaged self-cultivation" model - one that resists patriarchal structures, affirms individual moral agency, and promotes shared authority - provides a framework for healthy development (Deighton- Mohammed, 2024, 13). This model is reflected in the experiences of women like Eemaan and Daahlia, for whom Shaykh Fadhlalla's leadership style, which eliminates authoritarian power and emphasises personal agency, proved transformative (Deighton-Mohammed, 2022, 107).

Ultimately, the participants' healing journeys reveal the transformative impact of merging feminist hermeneutics with Sufi pedagogy. By reclaiming their feminine identities and rejecting patriarchal doctrines, these women were able to restore balance between masculine and feminine energies, promoting both spiritual growth and personal empowerment. This process, which involved learning, unlearning, and embodied healing, was supported by the guidance of a balanced male teacher and feminist scholars like Shaykha Fawzia. It underscores the potential of Sufi pedagogy to advance gender equity and empower for women within a religious framework.

Rebalancing and Healing – Embodied Modalities

For the women in this study, healing was deeply tied to their daily embodied ritual practices, which helped release trauma and support physical recovery. These practices, including meditation, *dhikr* (chanting Allah's names), breathwork, and intentional *wudhu* (ablution) and *salaah* (prayer), were more than religious duties - they were tools for calming the mind, rebalancing the self, and distancing from patriarchal influences.

Song and dance held particular significance. Women sang *diwans* and danced to connect with the Divine Feminine. Eemaan shared, "*Dance and music connect you with your feminine energy. It is an expression of the Divine feminine*." For them, these movements were spiritual expressions that nurtured a deeper connection to their higher feminine aspects. Singing was especially therapeutic, as Ilhaan explained: "*Singing aligns your thought processes...it moves*

you to no thought - no you - you just see La-illaha-illallah." Regular group singing, often online, fostered mental peace, sisterhood, and collective healing, leaving many participants feeling lighter and more present over time.

A central theme in their healing was achieving balance - between spirit and form, masculine and feminine, and intellect and heart. *Dhikr* played a key role here, blending spirituality with inner harmony. Daahlia noted, "*We are the middle people - the Dhikr ritual shows us life at every level and to stay in the middle... to be of spirit but to be present*." This practice helped her remain belanced - connected to the divine while grounded in the material world.

The practice of *dhikr* in community creates a powerful atmosphere of shared devotion, amplifying individual experiences and deepening connections with the divine. As Corina notes, "*Being in the presence of others on this path is magical... it gives you a faster connection to oneness with others and Allah*." This communal ritual emphasises the interconnectedness of their spiritual journeys. For the women, rituals are key to self-connection and transformation. Through these practices, they gain deeper insights, enhancing self-awareness and resilience in life's challenges. These rituals also inspire others to explore their own spiritual paths. As Fareeda shares, "*They see changes in me, and it inspires them to seek their own paths*." This ripple effect extends the benefits of personal transformation to the wider community.

Rituals shape perceptions, behaviours, and relationships, reinforcing Kabir Helminski's idea that "the ripened fruit of spiritual practice is beautiful character (Helminski, 2023)." Through ritual, these Sufi women strengthen their connection to themselves, their communities, and the divine, fostering both personal and collective growth.

This "*middle path*" aligns with broader Sufi teachings that emphasise balancing earthly life with spiritual transcendence. Ilhaan's *dhikr* practice also illustrates this pursuit of balance. She used specific divine names to address internal misalignments. For her, the chanting of Allah's names acted as pathways toward equilibrium. She explained, *"When out of balance I'm living in Jalaal, in angst so I introduce reciting the Jamal. Those beautiful names and aspects brings back feeling the sweetness of love and being held."* By invoking the more softer Divine names, she shifted from inner turmoil to a more harmonious and peaceful state.

The participants' reflections suggest that the women viewed their practices as more than just spiritual routines - they were methods for cultivating a balance between the dual forces within themselves, leading to greater clarity, inner peace and a healing.

Reflections on a Sufi feminist Approach to Healing

The work of Deighton-Muhammad (2022) can be used to analyse the healing process that these women mentioned. We can draw on the approach of the American Sufi teacher, Shaykha Fariha to present a Sufi feminist model of divine immanence. This model, as explored in Deighton-Mohammed's (2022) work advocates for a midway between total transcendence of the ego and absolute materialism. By merging the physical, emotional, and spiritual bodies, Shaykha Fariha's integrated model offers a framework for women, especially those marginalised by patriarchal structures, to accept their full humanity. According to this approach, healing patriarchal wounds involves cultivating a profound understanding of the self, acknowledging one's strengths and weaknesses without self-criticism, and balancing dual aspects of one's being.

Even though they were not specifically aware of Shaykha Fariha's paradigm, the study participants were inadvertently living out her teachings in practice. Their practices - be it *dhikr*, song, dance, or breathwork - reflected their attempts to heal from the wounds of marginalisation. They were actively getting back in touch with themselves - bodies and spirits - and overcoming feelings of inferiority, shame, and self-hatred by reconnecting to their divine feminine energy. They were able to expand in consciousness and feel more rooted and present as a result of the regular ritualisation of these acts.

This ritualistic healing process was two-fold, it involved both individual as well as communal practice. The group *diwan* practices strengthened their sense of belonging to a sisterhood, where their opinions were valued and heard. The women restored their agency and healed themselves via these embodied rituals, defying patriarchal narratives that had previously silenced them.

Participants in this subgroup acknowledged their intersectional patriarchal trauma and sought to dispel misogynistic myths about God. They promoted attributes like nurture, love, and unity

within Islam to affirm the feminine as Divine. Guided by their Shaykh's balanced masculinity, they found a safe space to explore the feminine principle. Through mindfulness, song, dance, and *dhikr* - especially chanting God's feminine attributes - they embraced holistic self-healing and rebalanced femininity.

Aasiya highlights the transformative power of her ritual practices, explaining, "*Practices shape me to be more present. Allow me to see things as they are, not as I am*." This underscores how rituals ground participants in the present, enhancing clarity and decision-making. Many women report that deeper engagement with these practices heightens their awareness of surroundings, thoughts, and emotions, fostering insight into their lives.

Daahlia describes her *dhikr* practice as "*transformational on the body at a cellular level – it alchemises*." Drawing parallels to Masaru Emoto's findings on the impact of positive words on water, she believes *dhikr* alters the body's molecular structure. For her, it cultivates awareness, courage, and resilience, becoming a powerful tool for self-mastery. This resonates with Jamila Rodriguez's view that rituals, especially group *dhikr*, integrate body and mind, enabling profound divine connection (Rodriguez, 2018, 104).

These women's intuitive healing processes, which employ Sufi methodology, offer important insights. By sharing their voices and experiences of patriarchal trauma, we highlight the relevance of their lived realities. These Sufi women demonstrate how these ritual practices are essential to their healing and self-making journey by combining body-based modalities with their Shaykh's teachings, which leads to significant transformation and rebalancing.

Chapter 5: ANALYSIS - FROM INDIVIDUATION TO ONENESS

"When you know yourself, your 'I'ness vanishes and you know that you and Allah are one and the same"

- Ibn Arabi

Participants in this subgroup are well established on the Sufi path, having cultivated a profound sense of self, belonging and purpose. More mature, self-aware, and balanced they focus intently on their spiritual goals. Equipped with a sound understanding of Sufi theology and a strong sense of discipline, these women actively engage in numerous ritual practices and prioritise the cultivation of their higher selves. In this phase, there is a noticeable shift in focus from the more visible, outward aspects of oneself - like personal desires, belonging and past emotional wounds - toward a deeper journey within. This exploration involves connecting with one's authenticity and a part of oneself that feels more spiritually centred, often described as the inner essence or higher self.

This chapter examines how these women try to undo forms of separateness within themselves and aspire to enter a more unified state of consciousness. We analyse the processes and tools they employ to integrate their individual aspects of their identities into a holistic self. By exploring the methods, they use to detach from the labels and roles that anchor them in an ego-based sense of self, I focus on how both practices and community are utilised in nuanced ways to facilitate their transformation. Furthermore, I assess how they navigate their inner landscapes through the process of detachment and the role the body and rituals play in this process. To enhance their awareness and unified consciousness I explore how community involvement serves to mould these women into agential members of a society they come to perceive as unified.

Detaching from Labels and Roles

The women interviewed described a transformative journey toward uniting their will with God, marked by significant detachment from labels and roles. While earlier stages of their journey

involved strong identification with societal roles, participants in this subgroup saw little value in such labels, describing identities as "*ever evolving*." They challenged the notion that labels could define them, fostering a deeper understanding of their true selves by distancing from societal constraints.

About half of the participants felt that overidentifying with roles reinforced an ego-driven self rather than a spiritual one. Ilhaan, for example, explained, "*I identify as a Sufi only as much as we need labels to identify ourselves for the sake of the discourse…. My fear is people get stuck on these names and labels.*" She acknowledged the utility of labels in discourse but cautioned against becoming trapped by them. This sentiment was shared among participants, who believed that exploring oneself beyond labels opens up infinite possibilities.

Johaarah highlighted the dangers of attachment to roles, particularly motherhood, stating, "*Your family are Allah's gift to you. They come into your life with their own duty. For as long as you still think you're the mother of your children, you will always be caught*." She argued that overidentification with familial roles fosters guilt and self-centeredness, distracting from the greater purpose of serving God. This perspective illustrates the need to transcend egoic attachments and use family relationships as opportunities for character cultivation.

Expert Shaykha Fawzia further elaborated on the duality of familial roles. While nurturing can connect women to the divine, excessive attachment risks idolatry by diverting worship from God to loved ones. This delicate balance emphasises the importance of conscious detachment in spiritual growth.

Through reflection, participants realised that societal roles tethered them to their egoic selves, inhibiting spiritual growth. Their journey involved actively overcoming these attachments and aligning their hearts (*qalb*) with their higher spiritual selves. This process revealed the importance of self-awareness and breaking free from societal expectations to embrace a multifaceted spiritual identity.

The Role of the Body in Spirituality

Participants described the body as both a vessel for the ego and a pathway to spiritual liberation. Ilhaan noted, "*We all have a spark of divinity within… and in as much as I can divest myself from identifying with this person, with this biography… just the weight of setting that aside is tremendously liberating*." She emphasised that recognising one's "nothingness" allows for a playful engagement with life, balancing corporeal and spiritual aspects.

Aasiya shared her embodied experience of *dhikr*, explaining, "*Through the repetition, the reverberating sounds, the sight, the smells, and even the movements… each of my physical senses are fully engaged. There's a synergy that generates amplified release of trapped energy.*" This sensory ritual fosters a connection with others, building trust, empathy, and joy, while emphasising the body's role in accessing the divine.

These insights align with Deighton-Mohammed's assertion that the body is "a *noetic faculty… and not merely an instrument of the spirit* (2021, 31)." This challenges conventional mind-body dualism, echoing Sufi perspectives like Ibn Arabi's positive view of embodiment. In contrast, Rudolph Ware's study on Senegalese Quran schools reflects a patriarchal epistemology, where the body is disciplined through harsh measures to house divine words. This contrasts sharply with the nurturing, embodied epistemology described by Shaykha Fawzia, who teaches students to "read their bodies' sensations and feelings" as spiritual insights.

The interviewees embraced the body as integral to their spiritual journey, not merely a vessel to be subdued but an active participant in their connection to the divine. This holistic approach challenges traditional views of the body as an obstacle, promoting an integrated perspective where body and spirit are interconnected in the quest for enlightenment.

To facilitate this journey of detachment, participants engaged in awareness practices like meditation to still the mind, along with a variety of embodied rituals such as *dhikr, salaah* and *wudhu.* These practices allowed them to *"seal off from the world"* and achieve a state of *"dis-appearing."* For instance, Ghadeeja expressed her desire to minimise her worldly presence: *"I*

am not…I am nothing…. There's no-body. I'm trying to be a dot in the world. To dis-appear." This conscious shedding of identities, roles and labels illustrates how these practices have a transformative power and assist in aligning their physical existence with their spiritual essence.

Ghadeeja shares how her ritual practice of *wudhu* (ablution) serves as a means of disconnecting from worldly concerns. She states, *"I let the water wash off the world and thought from each limb,"* illustrating the intentionality she brings to her practice. By engaging in *dhikr* before *salaah* (prayer), Ghadeeja strengthens her relationship and connection with her Creator. She shares that she is able to fully immerse herself in the act of devotion during *sujood* (prostration) *"and empty my heart out on the mat"*. This demonstrates how the participants bring awareness and agency to their daily spiritual practices, turning routine ritual actions into profound and deeply spiritual practices. Saba Mahmood's idea of ethical self-formation has a resonance with the practices of these women (Mahmood, 2005, 32). While Ghadeeja's *sujood* can be narrowly viewed as a submissive act of surrender, through the deepened intentionality and deliberation of emptying out her heart, she achieves surrender, complete trust and ultimately a sense of freedom. What appears as passive submission invites in a more capacious sense of self that transcends entrapment within the social roles and thus those constricted notions of self and power.

Over the course of their self-cultivation journey, the women's ritual practices undergo significant change, becoming more regular, intentional, and disciplined. These practices are not just routine activities; they represent a profound engagement with the spiritual self. The rituals through changing intentionality serve to facilitate evolutions. The women focus intently on experiencing their higher spiritual self, seeking to gain a higher perspective that transcends mundane concerns. Participant Ilhaan articulates this evolution by stating, *"All practices move you away from and towards."* She describes how her rituals assist her in shifting focus from her ego to her heart, illustrating the transition from materiality to spirituality that many interviewees experience.

The participants' descriptions of their practices forefront the importance of creating intentional times and spaces for spiritual reflection. By performing these rituals, they made a conscious effort to rise above the distractions of everyday life, allowing for a deeper connection with their inner selves. This process of detachment is an opportunity to discover the enormous potential that lies outside of social conceptions rather than a simple rejection of identity.

The results show a shared commitment among the participants to drop societal roles, labels, and identities, embracing the concept of fusing the material with the spiritual. This perspective is consistent with Sufi ideas of "dying before death," where the shedding of egoic identities facilitates intimacy with the Divine. According to Ibn Arabi, this stripping away of fixed definitions allows individuals to realise their interconnectedness with the spirit, leading to a more profound understanding of existence. The practice of 'dying before death' involves an active engagement in the spiritual journey, allowing participants to experience the liberation that comes with relinquishing fixed identities.

Moreover, the process of *"dis-appearing"* as described by Ghadeeja encapsulates this critical aspect of the women's spiritual journeys. By minimising their worldly presence, they create space for their higher selves to be revealed, fostering a sense of freedom from societal expectations. This deliberate act of shedding roles and identities serves as a powerful reminder of the fluid nature of existence and the potential for continuous transformation.

Sa'diyya Shaikh's concept of "spaces of in-betweenness" echoes the characteristically ambiguous and fluid spaces of identity, navigated by the interviewees (Shaikh, 2012, 123). Drawing on Ibn Arabi's work, she suggests that these "spaces between the 'yes' and the 'no'" enable a Sufi epistemology, where knowledge of God, reality, and humanity transcends binary, rational categories. This murky terrain aligns well with the participants' elusive notions of identity and labels, providing an enriched understanding of the evolving identities along their spiritual journey.

To summarise, these women's journey toward spiritual union is a conscious disengagement from societal labels and roles. By embracing their identities as fluid and multidimensional, they work to overcome the complexities of their spiritual journeys with a focus on merging the corporeal and spiritual. Through embodied practices and a balanced relationship with their physical selves, they strive to move beyond the limitations imposed by ego and societal expectations, ultimately seeking to align their hearts with the divine. Their experiences demonstrate not only the struggles inherent in this journey but also the profound insights gained through the process of detaching from labels and roles.

Embodied Consciousness and Social Impact

As these Sufi women cultivate higher consciousness through their embodied practices, they develop a mindset that transcends individual identity and creates a sense of interconnectedness. Johaarah reflects, *"I am a citizen of the world…I accept everything in it. I accept the world just as it is…the beauty and the majesty…the good and the evil."* This broader outlook embodies the Sufi principle of unity, where participants recognise the divine presence in all aspects of life, aligning with the belief that everything is interconnected.

The ladies attain a higher level of consciousness through the breakdown of attachment and binary thinking, which empowers them to deal with life's challenges with more empathy and comprehension. From this heightened perspective they accept that, despite outward diversities, all beings originate from one source. This mindset cultivates spontaneous empathy and fosters a sense of social justice, prompting these Sufi women to engage with issues affecting their communities and the world.

The women's commitment to embodying their spiritual ideals translates into tangible actions that reflect their values. Aasiya describes how she filters her actions through her soul self, stating, *"Every second I see the whole universe as sacred – to not cause harm to people or things."* This enhanced awareness of interconnectedness nurtures collective social ethics of care and compassion, suggesting that their spiritual journeys can lead to broader societal change.

As these Sufi women deepen their self-cultivation practices, they increasingly recognise their roles as agents within their communities. Their commitment to social justice and compassion is evident through their diverse acts of service, advocacy, and support. Fareeda dedicates her time to voluntary teaching, imparting knowledge and wisdom to others without expectation of compensation. Ghadeeja's service is deeply rooted to the Sheikh's mission and social justice causes. She explains how in her role as an interior designer, she *"brings beauty and harmony to spaces that inspire devotion and reflection."* Daahlia is involved in empowering women in business, fostering entrepreneurship and social impact. Through these varied and impactful roles, these women embody the values of service, compassion, and justice in their communities, using their skills and talents to uplift and transform those around them. It is their spiritual practices that inculcates unity consciousness, and inspires a sense of responsibility towards others and prompts active engagement.

Spiritual detachment is not just a personal journey; it also addresses broader themes of societal expectations and the pressures of conformity. The women's remarks illustrate the importance of embodied practices and conscious awareness by shedding light on how outside influences can affect personal identities and spiritual development. They create space for authenticity and connection to their spiritual essence by letting go of the burden of societal labels.

A central theme that emphasises the significance of combining understanding with bodily actions is the embodiment of spirituality. The women's dedication to rituals and embodied experiences serve as an example of how these practices can transform and foster spiritual awareness. Through meditation, *dhikr*, and other rituals, they cultivate a deeper understanding of themselves and their relationship with the divine.

Ultimately, the insights shared by the participants reflect a collective aspiration to transcend the limitations of societal constructs, embracing a more expansive understanding of identity and spirituality. Their stories offer valuable lessons for others navigating similar journeys and serve as a testament to the power of detachment of the illusory in the pursuit of divine connection. The process of dropping labels and embracing fluidity in identity opens pathways for spiritual growth, allowing individuals to realise their authentic selves beyond societal definitions.

The Community and Embodiment of Practices

The journey of self-cultivation among Sufi women is intricately connected to their community and the embodied practices that shape their spiritual experiences. According to the participants insights, the Sufi community plays a pivotal role in the process of self-cultivation, enabling not only as discussed earlier – a sense of belonging – but now the community serves to assist these women to detach from worldly distractions and identify blind spots that may hinder their spiritual progress. As participant Fareeda shares the community members become, *"...your mirrors…if they tell you something …even about yourself...you believe it. They have your back… in good times and bad."* This encapsulates the essence of communal support, emphasising how deepened intimacy with one or two trusted members of the community fosters an environment of accountability and enhances their spiritual journey.

Many participants agreed with Fareeda's, pointing out that community members offer honest reflections and serve as living examples of the qualities they aspire to cultivate within themselves. Members of the community build a culture of openness and reciprocity, which promotes trust and nurtures a strong sense of belonging. To further illustrate this point, Deighton-Mohammed echoes this by explaining how Shaykha Fariha's community encourage Sufi wayfarers to "see God mirrored in other beings through shared communal experience (Deighton-Mohammed, 2021, 106)." This communal dynamic supports individual growth but also enhances the collective journey toward self-cultivation, which highlights the importance of relationships in shaping spiritual practices.

These women's relationships and personal development undergo substantial changes as they become more involved in their community. The support and encouragement they receive from one another aid in reflecting on their own challenges, behaviours and aspirations, ultimately guiding them toward their higher selves. Fareeda shares how the community members give her *"support to navigate difficult times and serve as key connections that show up"* when she's falling apart. This illustrates how important community is in forming personal spiritual practices and fostering a shared sense of purpose. The influence of community is also emphasised in how these women navigate challenges and setbacks on their spiritual paths. In addition to providing emotional and spiritual support, community engagement also offers a sense of accountability among the participants. This accountability keeps them focused on their commitments to their spiritual practices and helps them remain aligned with their goals.

Communal practices like group *dhikr* and collective prayer foster unity and deepen spiritual experiences, helping participants feel connected and supported. These shared rituals reduce isolation by highlighting their place in a larger faith community. For Sufi women, the role of community in self-cultivation is multifaceted, offering support, accountability, and shared growth. Together, they celebrate successes, confront challenges, and gain deeper self-awareness, enriching their spiritual journeys.

Ultimately, these women exemplify how Sufi practices can transform not just individual lives but also entire communities. Their spiritual journeys reveal that mystical unification, often seen as an esoteric and individualistic pursuit, can be collectively embodied and shared, suggesting that the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment is deeply relational. The principles of oneness and collective consciousness, which form the foundation of Sufi thought, are not abstract ideals but

actionable frameworks that can shape more equitable societies. As they navigate their spiritual paths, these Sufi women embody a powerful synthesis of knowledge, practice, and agency, reflecting the profound potential of self-cultivation within a supportive community.

In conclusion, the insights gleaned from their experiences reveal the transformative power of community, ritual, and embodied consciousness in shaping their spiritual journeys. It highlights the importance of detaching and the role of communal support in fostering spiritual growth, the transformative nature of rituals in connecting with the divine, and the impact of elevated consciousness on their interactions with the world. As these women continue to engage in their spiritual practices, they embody the principles of unity and compassion, paving the way for a more equitable and harmonious society, that recognises the deep, shared interconnectedness of all beings.

Chapter 6: CONCLUSION

"The universe is a complete unique entity. Everything and everyone is bound together with some invisible strings. Do not break anyone's heart; do not look down on those weaker than you. One's sorrow at the other side of the world can make the entire world suffer; one's happiness can make the entire world smile."

- Shams Tabrizi

This thesis contributes to and amplifies current theoretical understandings of spirituality, gender, and social change by bringing a unique lens to the study of South African Sufi women's spiritual practices. It enriches the existing body of work in several ways, particularly through the integration of embodiment, habitus, agency, and the *tafsir of possibility* in the context of Sufi spirituality. By focusing on the lived experiences of these women, it moves beyond the traditional academic focus on male-centred religious practices or generalisations of women's spirituality in religious traditions. This research highlights the intersectionality of gender, culture, and spirituality, and it deepens our understanding of how women navigate and subvert traditional gender roles through their spiritual engagement.

The *tafsir of possibility* - a hermeneutic approach that interprets divine teachings as open to multiple meanings and potentials—becomes a powerful framework through which these women reimagine their roles within their religious and social contexts. This interpretive lens allows them to see their spiritual journey not as a set of rigid prescriptions but as an evolving relationship with the Divine, rich with opportunities for growth, transformation, and empowerment. In this way, the *tafsir of possibility* opens pathways for these women to reinterpret traditional teachings in ways that affirm their spiritual agency and autonomy.

The spiritual journey of self-cultivation followed by South African Sufi women represents a process of profound embodiment, where their spiritual practices transcend mere rituals and become integral aspects of their daily lives. These women embody joy, resilience, and spiritual transformation in a way that shapes not only their inner selves, but also the world around them. The embodiment of joy, in particular, is central to their experiences of self-cultivation. For these women, joy is not a fleeting emotion, but a spiritual expression deeply woven into the fabric of their self-exploration, communal interactions, and engagement with the Divine. The belief that both joy and pain are expressions of God's presence is fundamental to their

embodiment of spirituality. In Sufi thought, everything that happens—whether painful or joyful—is part of the Divine plan, and thus both are seen as equally valid expressions of the Divine's will.

Through the regular practices of *dhikr* (remembrance of God), prayer, meditation, and other rituals, these women learn to embody joy and peace even in the most challenging of circumstances. This embodiment is not merely an abstract concept but a lived experience where their spiritual practices become avenues for experiencing a deeper connection with the Divine. Through these embodied practices, they learn to accept both the beauty and the difficulties of life, understanding that every moment, every experience, whether uplifting or sorrowful, is an opportunity to deepen their communion with God. This embodiment of joy, particularly in the face of adversity, reveals a transformative approach to life. The struggle with hardship does not detract from their connection to the Divine, but instead becomes a vehicle for spiritual growth, as they learn to see every situation as an expression of divine love and wisdom. The capacity to transcend suffering and find joy in the midst of it reflects an integration of spirituality into their very beings, grounding their identity in a sacred relationship with the Divine.

Furthermore, this embodiment is not limited to individual experience. These women often engage in communal rituals and shared practices, further grounding their spirituality in a collective sense of unity. Central to their journey is the reconnection with the divine feminine, an aspect of spirituality that emphasises nurturing, intuition, and the cyclical nature of existence. By embodying the Divine feminine within themselves, these women find a deeper capacity to embrace their faith and navigate the complexities of their lives with resilience and grace. Shared rituals, such as communal *dhikr* sessions, help these women experience the energy of the Divine as a collective force, amplifying their individual spiritual connections. This collective embodiment of spirituality strengthens their connection to one another and to the Divine, creating a communal expression of joy that transcends personal limitations and contributes to the empowerment of the group as a whole.

The concept of habitus, as developed by Pierre Bourdieu, refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals acquire through their social and cultural environments. In the case of South African Sufi women, their spiritual journeys involve the development of a distinct habitus shaped by the intersection of spiritual teachings, community support, and individual experiences. The practices they engage in, guided by the teachings of their Shaykhs

and reinforced by their participation in communal rituals, help to cultivate a spiritual habitus that supports both personal growth and collective empowerment.

This habitus is not merely a reflection of individual identity but also a response to the social, cultural, and religious contexts in which these women live. The guidance they receive from their Shaykhs, particularly the non-authoritarian approach of Shaykh Fadhlalla, challenges traditional gender roles and societal expectations. Through this guidance, these women develop a habitus that allows them to transcend the limiting beliefs and societal constraints imposed upon them. This spiritual habitus is not just about understanding a set of spiritual beliefs, but about internalising an embodied understanding of their potential for spiritual autonomy and leadership. The teachings of Shaykh Fadhlalla emphasise shared leadership, respect for personal autonomy, and the importance of spiritual community. These principles resonate deeply with the feminist ideals of equity, inclusivity, and shared authority, creating a spiritual habitus that is not only transformative for individual women, but also liberating within the larger societal context.

The habitus of these women is further shaped by their participation in female-centric *dhikr* groups, which offer a space for spiritual growth and connection. These groups foster a sense of belonging and shared purpose, where the women's spiritual journeys are supported by a community that values their contributions. Through their engagement with these groups, the women develop a collective habitus that reinforces the values of compassion, justice, and spiritual unity. The communal aspect of their spiritual practices strengthens their sense of interconnectedness with others, fostering a habitus that views spirituality as a collective, rather than individual, experience. This shared habitus of empowerment and transformation extends beyond the personal, influencing the larger community and contributing to the social fabric of their societies.

Additionally, the habitus cultivated through these practices leads to a deep sense of empathy and compassion for others. As these women progress spiritually, they begin to see themselves not as separate from others, but as part of a larger interconnected whole. This realisation is integral to their spiritual development and shapes their approach to life and the world around them. It is through this habitus that they learn to approach the challenges of life with grace and resilience, understanding that personal growth is always intertwined with collective well-being.

The spiritual habitus of these women thus reflects an ongoing process of transformation that involves both personal development and a deep commitment to the welfare of the community.

The development of agency among South African Sufi women is perhaps the most profound aspect of their spiritual journeys. Agency, in this context, refers to the ability of these women to act autonomously, make decisions, and assert their spiritual and social identities in ways that transcend the constraints imposed by traditional gender roles and societal expectations. The guidance of their Shaykhs, particularly Shaykh Fadhlalla, plays a pivotal role in nurturing this agency, offering a framework for spiritual autonomy that empowers these women to take control of their spiritual paths and break free from the limiting beliefs and practices that often define their societal roles.

Shaykh Fadhlalla's teachings emphasise the importance of non-authoritarian leadership, which creates a space where women can explore their spiritual potential without fear of marginalisation or discrimination. This approach encourages the women to engage with their spirituality on their own terms, fostering a sense of agency that allows them to redefine their identities and roles within the religious community. In Sufi practice, the ego (*nafs*) is seen as a barrier to spiritual enlightenment, and part of the spiritual journey involves transcending this ego to align with the higher, spiritual self (*ruh*). As these women work to overcome the ego through practices such as self-reflection, meditation, and guidance from their Shaykhs, they experience a profound sense of spiritual agency. This allows them to view their lives from a broader, more interconnected perspective, one that is not confined by the limitations of personal desires and societal expectations.

The agency these women develop is also deeply connected to their growing sense of social responsibility. As they progress spiritually, they begin to recognise their role not only as individuals on a path of self-cultivation but also as active agents of change within their communities. Whether through teaching, advocacy, or public service, these women embody the core Sufi values of justice, equity, and compassion. Their growing sense of spiritual agency empowers them to take action on behalf of social justice, helping to address issues such as inequality, injustice, and suffering within their communities.

This sense of agency extends beyond the personal to the collective. As these women assert their spiritual autonomy, they also become agents of collective transformation, working to uplift their communities and bring about social change. Through their actions, they demonstrate the

power of spirituality to create positive transformation, not only in their own lives but in the world around them. Their growing sense of agency enables them to navigate the complexities of life with clarity, purpose, and compassion, fostering a sense of empowerment that ripples out to others.

Ultimately, the journeys of these women demonstrate the profound transformative power of spirituality. Through the integration of embodiment, habitus, and agency, these women not only cultivate a deeper connection with the Divine, but also contribute to the transformation of their communities and society as a whole. Their experiences offer valuable insights into the intersectionality of gender, culture, and spirituality, highlighting how women can navigate and subvert traditional gender roles through their spiritual practices. This thesis contributes to and amplifies current theoretical understandings of spirituality, gender, and social change by providing a nuanced perspective on the lived experiences of South African Sufi women. By focusing on their spiritual journeys, this research enriches the existing body of work on spirituality and gender and demonstrates the transformative potential of spirituality in shaping both personal lives and broader social structures.

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