

## WESTERN RESEARCH ON ISLAMIC SUFISM THROUGH THE WORK OF ANNEMARIE SCHIMMEL

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**Abstract:** Islamic Sufism is among the branches of Islamic knowledge that have exerted a profound influence on European intellectuals and Orientalist scholars, owing to the elevated spiritual values it embodies. As one of the most significant Islamic traditions, Sufism attracted sustained attention in Orientalist studies because of the intellectual role it has played in the historical development of Islam. Many Western scholars were influenced by prominent Sufi figures within Arab and Islamic mysticism, engaging with their thought through research and translation. Annemarie Schimmel represents an illuminating and distinguished model within this scholarly tradition. Her approach was exceptional, her engagement profound, and her fairness toward Islam and Muslims unparalleled. For these reasons, she has drawn considerable academic interest and may be regarded as a genuine exemplar of an Orientalist scholarship that faithfully reflects Islamic values and Muslim ethics. This research aims to investigate how Western thinkers; particularly the German Orientals; have viewed Islamic mysticism or Sufism; how widely Annemarie Schimmel has interacted with Sufi mysticism and Arabic Sufi poetry; and whether her scholarship has engaged with these traditions as well. To do so, the research utilizes an analytical methodology grounded in classical Sufi texts as well as contemporary orientalist scholarship, combined with an interpretive lens through which to analyze Schimmel's scholarship related to both topics. The findings reveal that Schimmel's scholarship demonstrates both an intellectual objectivity and a balanced and scientific method of addressing the themes within these works by rejecting oversimplified and reductive interpretations, which in turn has resulted in being more accurately represented within Western academic studies of Islamic mysticism.

**Keywords:** Equity ; Germans ; Heritage ; Orientalism ; Schimmel

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## 1. Introduction

Arab scholars, as well as many Western thinkers, tend in their rich and multifaceted definitions of Islamic Sufism to converge on the idea that, in its earliest stages, it constituted primarily an individual spiritual tendency. This tendency required asceticism, giving up worldly pleasures, and a deliberate withdrawal from physical adornments to seek closeness to God. Such an orientation appears to have emerged as a reaction to the moral and social deviations that characterized Islamic society at the beginning of the second century Hijri, particularly with its growing immersion in luxury and civilizational opulence. In this sense, early Sufism may be understood as both a spiritual discipline and a form of ethical resistance to material excess, emphasizing inner purification and moral accountability.

With the advent of the third century Hijri, this spiritual inclination gradually evolved into a codified discipline known as *‘ilm al-taṣawwuf* (the science of Sufism), after having previously existed primarily as a practical mode of worship and personal devotion. Among the prominent figures who distinguished themselves in this field and authored influential works are al-Suhrawardī in his book *‘Awārif al-Ma‘ārif*, al-Qushayrī in his *Risāla*, and Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd, along with many others who contributed significantly to the intellectual and spiritual foundations of Sufism. This shift from experiential practice to formalized knowledge signifies the increasing necessity to systematize mystical experience and convey it across generations within a consistent intellectual framework.

Even though classical Islamic sources as well as modern orientalist studies on Sufism have been rich in meaning, the appropriation and the interpretation of Islamic mysticism by western intellectuals remain significantly ambiguous. Exploring Sufism through an Orientalist lens, especially within a European context (particularly Germany), raises important issues regarding objectivity, cultural mediation, and differences between the analysis of Sufism as a scholarly enterprise versus how it is experienced within the spirituality of individuals engaging with Sufism. It is certainly true that ideological bias or reductionist readings have characterized some Orientalist approaches; however, other Western scholars have attempted to construct more sophisticated and sympathetic visions of Islamic spirituality which aim at reconciling philological rigor with interpretive sensitivity.

We aim, throughout this study, to examine how Sufism has been perceived from an oriental perspective and, consequently, how this perspective has influenced scholars' interpretations of Sufism within both Islamic religious and literary traditions regarding the true nature of the Sufi institution. Additionally, it seeks to assess whether experts from other countries have contributed to an accurate understanding of Sufism. This can also show how some evidence given by the Germans can help prove that there is a real gap in how we view Orientalism and Sufism today as opposed to what they actually represent in their own right. In this sense, this study is also situated within ongoing debates by researchers involved in similar work, with respect to the issues of representation; how different scholars, through different forms of analysis, are able to establish the foundations on which the beliefs of Sufis and the nature of their practice exist, and the ethics of cross-cultural academic research.

Annemarie Schimmel reflects an academic approach that combines accuracy and fairness and acts as a reliable reference point for all future Sufic studies conducted under an orientalist paradigm. In the twentieth century, she was recognised as one of the principal scholars of Islamic mysticism, as evidenced by her wide-ranging research and scholarly output, which covered every aspect of Sufi spirituality, poetry, and symbolism, but also provided strong examples of both the philological and historical academic integrity of the author. In addition, Schimmel's examination of the Arabic, Persian, and Urdu literary

traditions provided her with the necessary intellectual scaffolding to enable her to fully grasp and accurately depict the cultural norms and practices associated with Sufism.

Schimmel's work is also important because it strikes a balance between being critical and understanding deeply. She did not want to make Sufism into just theories or outside views; instead, she wanted to show its real feelings, deep emotions, and spiritual meanings to Western people. Her work helped clear up Western wrong ideas about Islam and Sufism by showing them as rich, complex, and full of love, beauty, and the search for God. By looking at how she worked with Islamic mysticism and Arabic Sufi poetry, this paper tries to show how her work helps create a more fair and open understanding of Sufism in the West.

The importance of this research study resides in evaluating how Western academic approaches to understanding Islam have formed current perceptions of Islamic mysticism and spirituality and also to highlight the contribution to intercultural knowledge through mutual respect and consideration for each other's cultures and worldviews, as well as the ability to sensitively interpret someone else's worldview based on their own cultural values. Given the pervasive misunderstandings and tensions between cultures today as a result of the differences in ideology, re-evaluating Schimmel's model will serve to illustrate how academic study can connect societies instead of dividing them.

Therefore, we seek to address the following questions: What is the nature of Islamic Sufism as perceived within Western intellectual traditions? How has Sufism influenced Western and more specifically German Orientalist scholarship? And to what extent was the German orientalist Annemarie Schimmel influenced by Muslim mystics and Arabic Sufi poetry?

## **2. The Expansion of Islamic Civilization and Western Interest**

As the Islamic state expanded across distant frontiers and over vast geographical territories, Arab-Islamic civilization succeeded in establishing, within each region it reached, rich intellectual, philosophical, and literary landscapes. In reality, the influence of Islamic civilization extended in a remarkably broad and tangible manner to nearly all spheres of life. This far-reaching impact prompted European orientalists to take a growing interest in Arab-Islamic thought and in this civilization which had emerged from an arid desert environment whose inhabitants were largely nomadic, traditionally engaged in pastoralism and caravan trade. Historically interested in the development of civilisations, some people were naturally curious as to what caused that type of growth within all civilisations.

For intellectual reasons, Sufism quickly became the focal point of subsequent academic inquiry about the various areas of interest. Sufism was particularly present throughout Europe, North America, South America, the Middle East (Middle East and Asia), Australia, and New Zealand; thus, Western scholars began conducting extensive research into Sufism and Eastern Civilisations/Cultures. On the societal level, since Islam was a recent development on the world scene, it was viewed as a continual threat to Christendom in Europe, who believed the followers of Islam were a force in the formation of a collective, cross-border group of believers aiming to overthrow the cultural foundations of Europe at the time. (Al-Haidari, 2010, p. 50)

## **3. The Centrality of Sufism in Orientalist Scholarship**

European orientalists approached the study of Islam and Muslim societies from diverse perspectives and across multiple fields. Some were driven by personal bias and ideological prejudice, which led them astray, whether through ignorance or despite scholarly knowledge. Others, however, chose to adopt a more balanced and objective stance, acknowledging the truth whenever their research findings guided them toward it. These serious and in-depth

academic studies of Islam did not truly begin until the nineteenth century, when awareness of Eastern cultures and Islamic societies became more widespread. This period witnessed the expansion of Western political dominance under the banner of colonialism across Eastern and Islamic lands, bringing Western scholars into closer contact with these societies and inevitably leading to intellectual, cultural, religious, and social interaction and influence.

Orientalist scholars have given Sufism special significance as an intellectual and spiritual force throughout the history of Islam. As a result, they addressed Sufism extensively in their works by analyzing its historical roots, its theoretical foundations, and its most influential practitioners. However, their objectives often diverged from the authentic reality of Sufism, which led to divergent and sometimes contradictory conclusions regarding its origin and development. Many of them relied heavily on the case of al-Ḥallāj, treating it as a pivotal event through which they sought to demonstrate what they perceived as al-Ḥallāj's victimization within Islamic history (Al-Haidari, 2010, p. 50).

Sufism has also attracted the sustained attention of researchers, and the beginnings of scholarly engagement with it are well documented. Undoubtedly, Sufism, as an established discipline, sought to occupy a position comparable to that of philosophy, theology (*kalām*), and other intellectual sciences. Moreover, Sufism is distinguished by a particular type of knowledge that is not found in other forms of human or Islamic thought. Sufi knowledge is commonly described as experiential, intuitive, revelatory, and inspirational; it is an inner form of cognition that reaches the heart directly, without reliance on rational processes or sensory perception. It touches human consciousness spontaneously, without deliberate effort or intentional pursuit "For them, the path to truth lies in emotion and feelings rather than reason, since reason is incapable of proving the spiritual aspect within humans" (Hanafi, 2009, p. 28) which represents the most important part for achieving psychological and mental balance. .

#### 4. Early Western Encounters with Islamic Sufism

If we trace the historical trajectory backward, we find that the earliest text through which the West became acquainted with Islamic Sufism, and the first study in this field, concerned the figure of Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya, the eighth-century ascetic. Her story reached Europe toward the end of the thirteenth century through Joinville (GONEVEIL), advisor to King Louis IX. Rābi'a's personality later appeared in another Sufi study on sincere love, published in French in 104 (Schimmel, *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam and the History of Sufism* [al-Ab'ād al-ṣūfiyya fī al-islām wa-tārīkh al-ṭaṣawwuf], 2007, p. 12).

Furthermore, the first Sufi work originally written in Arabic to be published in the West appeared in 1638, in the form of a poetic text by the Egyptian poet Ibn al-Fāriḍ, published by the scholar Farriciuce. Translation itself became a central preoccupation for many Orientalists. The Western translation of the *Rubā'iyāt* of al-Khayyām achieved particular prominence especially the well-known version produced by Edward FitzGerald (E. FitzGerald). Similarly, the translation of *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr* (*The Conference of the Birds*) by al-Aṭṭār had a profound impact on European audiences. These translations left a lasting impression on the intellectual and emotional reception of Sufi literature in the West.

Most historical sources and studies on Orientalism agree that the nineteenth century represented the peak of Orientalist scholarly activity. During this period, a new phase of engagement with the East and its intellectual traditions began to take shape. Scientific expeditions, academic missions, and the translation of books particularly those dealing with the history of Islamic Sufism contributed significantly to clarifying the image of Sufism in the European imagination. As a result, European scholars developed a more coherent understanding of its origins, nature, and historical development and they tried to 'criticize European civilization as not being distinguished by humanistic tendencies and concern for

human beings' (Amal Shanna, 2024, p. 9), which has become materialistic and pragmatic, dealing only with things that bring profit and benefit, while neglecting itself and those around it.

The first book devoted specifically to Sufism was written by the German scholar F. A. Tholuck and published in 1821 under the title *Sufism, or the Philosophy of Persian Pantheism*. This was followed by another work by the same author entitled *A Bouquet of Flowers from the Mysticism of the East*. Similarly, E. H. Palmer published his book *Oriental Mysticism* in 1867, in which he asserted that Sufism was the product of the development of the original religion of the Aryan race (Schimmel, 2007, p. 12).

Among other significant contributions is the work of the French scholar R. Arnaud, who published *al-Kalām 'alā al-Şūfiyya* by al-Abyārī, presenting both the Arabic text and its translation in Algeria in 1889 (Schimmel, 2007, p. 14). Mention must also be made of the efforts of the German orientalist L. Gauthier, who published Ibn Ṭufayl's philosophical narrative *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* in 188 (Al-Aqiqi, 1964, p. 318). One of the most influential figures in the study of Sufism was René Guénon, who devoted particular attention to Islamic Sufi studies.

We must also return to Louis Massignon, who is widely regarded as the pioneer of Sufi studies not only in France but throughout Europe. He specialized in the study of Islamic mysticism and devoted his doctoral dissertation to *The Passion of al-Ḥallāj*. His scholarly work focused extensively on the origins of Sufism, and he remains a central reference point in Western studies on Sufism (Al-Aqiqi, 1964, p. 239).

## 5. Religious Motivations in Orientalist Interpretations of Sufism

The writings of many Orientalists on Sufism were shaped by a Western perspective rooted in religious motivations underlying their scholarly engagement. Their approach was often theological in nature and historically connected to ecclesiastical concerns. This orientation began with Christian monastic efforts in the Middle Ages and has continued, in various forms, into the modern period. A central aim of these studies was to affirm the supposed influence of Christianity on Islamic thought, leading many works to focus on tracing Christian elements within Islamic doctrines. Only a limited number of scholars specialized deeply in this area, among whom the following figures are particularly notable:

### 5.1. Reynold A. Nicholson

Considered a leading authority on Sufism, Nicholson devoted his scholarship almost exclusively to Islamic mysticism. He edited the *Mathnawī-yi Ma'nawī* of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī and authored significant works such as *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* and contributions to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. He described the spiritual states of the Sufis and the nature of Islamic mysticism, and he strongly asserted that the origins of Sufism derive from Christian roots a position later adopted by many researchers in the field "not all foundations of the Sufi experience are religious or metaphysical, aiming at love of the Divine Self and annihilation in it" (Zadadka, 2008, p. 24), as in some Sufi symbols, the truth was discovered that had eluded many scholars and those interested in this field.

### 5.2. Louis Massignon

Of French origin, Massignon engaged deeply with Persian Sufi literature, including the poetry of Farīd al-Dīn al-'Attār, much of which revolves around the martyrdom of al-Ḥallāj and expresses veneration for him as a symbolic figure of Sufi sacrifice. Among his most famous works is *The Passion of al-Ḥall* (Massignon, 2004, p. 11).

### 5.3. Henry Corbin

Henry Corbin's philosophical and mystical perspective differs significantly from that of many other Orientalists. His approach to Sufism is deeply shaped by Iranian intellectual traditions and is grounded in experiential spirituality and inner vision. While Massignon became closely associated with the figure of al-Ḥallāj, Corbin became renowned for his extensive engagement with al-Suhrawardī. Al-Suhrawardī occupied a central place in Corbin's scholarship, as evidenced by the numerous lectures he delivered and the books he authored on his life and intellectual legacy (Badawi, 1964, p. 95).

### 5.4. Tor Andrae

Tor Andrae is regarded as one of the most prominent Swedish Orientalists and a leading specialist in the history of religions and psychology. His book *Islamic Mysticism* is considered an important reference in the study of Sufism. The work does not merely present Sufism and its objectives; rather, it allows the major Sufi figures themselves to express their inner experiences and spiritual reflections (Al-Haidari, 2010, p. 57). The book is distinguished by its clarity in narrating events and detailing accounts concerning the origins of Sufism. Andrae demonstrates remarkable precision in uncovering historical realities, particularly in his interpretation of asceticism and his exploration of the inner spiritual life of the Sufis. He begins by examining the relationship between Sufism and Christianity, then moves on to discuss the meaning of Sufism (Andrae, 2003, p. 57), followed by themes of unity and community, and concludes with an analysis of trust in God (*tawakkul*) and divine love.

## 6. Annemarie Schimmel as a Model of Contemporary Orientalist Engagement with Sufism

After presenting a number of European Orientalists and thinkers who were among the most prominent in studying Islamic Sufism and writing about major Sufi figures, we arrive at the model selected for this study. This choice is motivated by the significant contributions she made to the field of Islamic Sufism and by the distinctive nature of her scholarly engagement. Her approach was marked by a profound personal and intellectual openness toward Islam in general, and toward Islamic Sufism and Sufi poetry in particular. This figure is the German orientalist Annemarie Schimmel.

She is considered one of the few scholars who devoted their academic careers to the study of Islamic Sufism and its history. The cultural platform *Riwāyatī* described her in the following terms: "Annemarie represents a model of those who sincerely loved Islamic civilization, recognized the great contributions it has made to humanity, and offered, through their studies and research, outstanding services to Islam. Some among them even made personal sacrifices in order to remain faithful to their convictions" (Al-Namlah, 2018, p. 177).

Schimmel succeeded in achieving many noble scholarly objectives that most of her contemporaries failed to attain. This success can be attributed to the intellectual background through which she approached Islamic civilization a background rooted in genuine appreciation, respect, and a sincere desire to discover its most luminous aspects. Her relationship with the civilization she studied was not merely academic, but also deeply human and empathetic, it is "a profound experience oriented toward the absolute and the infinite, and poetry was the means through which the Sufis expressed their experiential insights within a discursive framework full of symbols, ambiguity, and allusion, due to the inability of ordinary and familiar language to fully convey and encompass the entire mystical and emotional experience of the Sufi" (Bouabida, 2023, p. 68).

Schimmel possessed exceptional linguistic abilities, surpassing most scholars in the field of Islamic studies. She played an important role in introducing Eastern audiences to Sufi figures from India, Pakistan, and Turkey who had not been widely known before. She had the capacity to translate the complete works of Rūmī, as Nicholson had done, yet she deliberately refrained from doing so. She believed that no language regardless of its expressive power could fully convey the depth and richness of Rūmī's spiritual universe. Schimmel was also convinced that the message of Islam transcends both geographical boundaries and historical periods. For this reason, she sought to move beyond temporal and spatial limitations and to cross the symbolic barriers erected by some Muslims in the name of serving Islam (Abduh, 2016, p. 53).

She is regarded as one of the most influential Orientalists of the contemporary era and enjoys a high level of credibility and respect in both Eastern and Western intellectual circles. She traveled extensively throughout the Islamic world, met with political leaders and prominent figures, and received numerous honors and distinctions. Yet the most meaningful recognition she received was popular rather than institutional as she sees Islamic Sufism “as a reminder and recollection of the original covenant and pledge that God took from His servants in the world of atoms.” (Muaamar, 2022, p. 27). She did not write exclusively for academic elites; instead, she addressed a broad readership without distinction. The simplicity and accessibility of her style contributed significantly to her widespread popularity, particularly among general audiences in Muslim societies.

### *6.1. Schimmel's Literary Sensibility and Intellectual Legacy*

In addition to her deep attachment to Islamic spirituality, Schimmel demonstrated a profound love for Arabic poetry and even composed verses that reflected her own poetic sensitivity. Among notable examples is her Arabic rendering of a line by the German poet and philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, which she formulated as follows:

*If Islam means submission (to God),  
then in Islam we live and in Islam we die* (Al-Namlah, 2018, p. 179).

Schimmel's intellectual output was exceptionally rich. She authored more than one hundred books and scholarly studies, with Sufism occupying the central place in much of her work. Given that this prominent figure has not received sufficient attention within Arabic scholarship, and that her contributions to the study of Islamic philosophy and Sufism remain underrepresented in Arabic academic discourse, this study has sought to shed light briefly on her efforts and intellectual legacy.

Her book *Mystical Dimensions of Islam and the History of Sufism* is regarded as an essential reference for scholars of Sufism in both Eastern and Western contexts. In this work, she outlines the fundamental contours of a historical perspective on the Sufi movement in the Islamic East and critically examines the major Western theories that attempt to explain its origins and development. The book approaches the subject with a largely objective methodology in its portrayal of the general framework of Sufi history, drawing extensively on the writings of major Sufi authorities. It also includes discussions of the most important Sufi poets, the principal pioneers of Sufism, and the major Sufi orders across both the Mashriq and the Maghrib (Al-Haidari, 2010, p. 57).

The study reveals “distinctive stylistic shaping is tied to the creation of semantic interstices through which the Sufi experience is constructed, insofar as it is, above all, a linguistic experience” (Kaouane, 2010, p. 9) as well as a remarkable scholarly competence in bringing together a vast and complex body of evolving thought that developed over centuries within profoundly diverse cultural contexts. The significance of the work lies in the depth of

the author's intellectual culture and in the breadth of her knowledge of Muslim history, ideas, and belief systems.

Schimmel was widely regarded as an advocate of dialogue between religions and civilizations. She firmly believed that dialogue constitutes the only viable path toward promoting freedom, mutual understanding, and the elimination of hatred, violence, and fanaticism. She viewed Islam as a tolerant religion that enjoins what is right and forbids what is wrong, emphasizing that without reciprocal knowledge, mutual respect, and shared trust, no meaningful or lasting peace can be achieved (Al-Haidari, 2010, p. 57).

Through her work, she played a significant role in introducing German society in particular, and European audiences more broadly, to the principles of Islam and the richness of Islamic civilization. She was acutely aware that Islam was undergoing ideological transformations unprecedented in its earlier history (Al-Haidari, 2010, p.15).

Schimmel also published a book on the life of the Prophet Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh (peace be upon him). When she was criticized by certain German media outlets for her positive stance toward the Prophet, she responded simply: "Yes, I love him." In response to a question about her view of Islam, Schimmel stated: "I love Islam. Had I not loved it, I would not have written more than eighty books about it. I found in it a religion of tolerance and spirituality. I reflected deeply on the Qur'anic verse: *'There is no compulsion in religion'* (al-Baqara 2:256). And to those who criticized me, I said: 'I love the Messenger Muḥammad, peace be upon him' (Al-Namlah, 2018, p. 18).

## 6.2. *Personal Testimonies and Ethical Engagement*

Professor Ahmad Zaki Yamani relates that whenever Annemarie Schimmel mentioned the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), she would say: "My beloved and the comfort of my eyes, the Messenger of God, peace be upon him," and would then recount the Prophetic tradition with careful attention to its chain of transmission and its text. For this reason, she asked Professor Ahmad Zaki Yamani to recite Sūrat al-Fātiḥa in Arabic at her grave on the day of her burial, a request that he fulfilled (Abduh, 2016, p. 69).

Within the framework of scholarly engagement with Schimmel's work, Arabic writings frequently classify her among the Orientalists who were fair and just in their treatment of Islam. When Schimmel engaged in dialogue, her responses often went beyond answering questions and evolved into a profound critique of Western misconceptions. She spent a significant part of her life teaching students in Turkey and delivered dozens of lectures on Sufism and Islamic studies. Her autobiography was translated by 'Abd al-Salām Ḥaydar, while the book *The Woman of the Spirit* was translated by 'Īsā 'Alī al-'Ākūb. These two translators are among the most prominent figures who introduced Schimmel to Arabic readers in a manner befitting her academic stature (Abduh, 2016, p. 93).

Schimmel expressed her views on Islam with both elegance and intellectual integrity, defending it out of conviction and affection. She stated: "If I am repeatedly accused of viewing Islam in a romanticized manner, I can respond with a saying attributed to Saint Augustine: one can only understand something to the extent that one loves it. Since childhood I have loved the world of the East; I communicate with Muslims in their own languages; and I lived with a devout Muslim family. For these reasons, i believe that i have been able to understand them, at least to some extent." (Abduh, 2016, p. 125).

These words were her response to persistent questions from Western audiences regarding her consistently positive portrayal of Islam. She emphasized the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of Islam that she had discovered through a long journey across the Muslim world—teaching in its universities, publishing its heritage, lecturing in its scholarly circles, and engaging closely with men, women, and children.

All of these statements reflect the values of tolerance, affection, and sincere coexistence that characterized her relationship with Muslims through direct interaction. Through this lived experience, she came to recognize the noble ethical qualities present within Muslim communities—qualities rooted in the Islamic principle that religion is fundamentally grounded in ethical conduct. She was treated with kindness, compassion, and respect, and her response was one of appreciation, admiration, and acknowledgment of these elevated spiritual values, whether in society or in the media.

### 6.3. *Sufism, Spiritual Aesthetics, and Schimmel's Intellectual Affinity*

Sufism has been described as “the power of knowing God, the expansion of love and its domination over the heart, achieved after purifying the heart from all worldly preoccupations and attachments” (Wali, 2025, p. 765) . This spiritual dimension one that Schimmel encountered both through lived experience and through extensive reading along with the noble values embodied in Sufi thought, deeply attracted European scholars. Through her literary works on Islam, Islamic Sufism, and on the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), Schimmel came to represent a luminous model of Orientalism. As Thābit ʿĪd described her, he referred to her as the dean of German Orientalism in his book *A Luminous Model of Orientalism*.

She authored several important works, including *East and West* (translated into Arabic by Salām Ḥaydar), *The Triumphant Sun*, *The Beautiful and the Sacred*, *The Symbolism of Letters in Sufi Sources*, and *Mystical Dimensions of Islam and the History of Sufism*. These constitute some of the most significant and valuable contributions she offered to the study of Islam and Islamic Sufism.

Schimmel's dedication to translating Eastern poetry into German and English, along with the richness and quality of her translations, places her among the spiritual successors of the great German orientalist Friedrich Rückert, who was himself both a poet and a translator. Indeed, the excellence of her translations situates her on equal footing with him (Schimmel, *A Radiant Model of Orientalism* [Namūdhaj Mushriq lil-Istishraq], 1998, p. 45).

She was deeply influenced by numerous Sufi poets who wrote within the tradition of Islamic mystical poetry, particularly the eminent master Ibn ʿArabī. The latter developed a comprehensive intellectual system of Sufism rather than being merely “a figure of mystical withdrawal,” a contribution that greatly benefited subsequent generations, who found in his thought an integrated framework that they were able to adopt and develop (Schimmel, 2007, p. 297).

Among Ibn ʿArabī's verses expressing the authentic knowledge of love are the following lines:

*When my beloved appears to me,  
with which eye do I behold Him?  
With His eye, not with mine  
for none sees Him but Himself* (Schimmel, 2007, p. 297).

For Ibn ‘Arabī, divine revelation manifests within pure existence, within the primordial realm of being (*al-amā*) in the world of creation.

He is also frequently praised as an advocate of religious tolerance. Those who sought to express the ideal of Sufi universalism and non-discrimination often cited his well-known verses from *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*:

*My heart has become capable of every form:  
a pasture for gazelles, a monastery for monks,  
A temple for idols, the pilgrim’s Ka’ba,  
the tablets of the Torah, and the pages of the Qur’an.  
I follow the religion of Love: wherever its caravans turn,  
that is my religion and my faith* (Schimmel, 2007, p. 297).

This spirit of tolerance is precisely what Schimmel admired in Islamic societies, as discussed earlier. She was deeply influenced by the values of fraternity and openness she observed through her direct interaction with Muslims and through living among them. She viewed Sufism as “a mode of conduct and a devotional path that aims at the spiritual formation of the human being” (Hassan, 2020, p. 151). In this respect, her thought converges with that of many contemporary Orientalists who regard Sufi thought as a spiritual path carrying a universal human message. Indeed, “contemporary authentic Sufis seek to expand the scope of Sufism among nations, in anticipation of a future in which Islam may serve as a unifying source of spiritual and human peace” (Abbaz, 2025, p. 68).

In addition to her engagement with Ibn ‘Arabī, Schimmel also demonstrated a strong interest in the Sufi poet Ibn al-Fāriḍ. Among the poems that particularly fascinated her was the celebrated *Khamriyya* from his *dīwān*, which symbolizes the wine of divine love and its miraculous transformative power. He writes:

*We drank upon the beloved’s cup a wine,  
and from it we were intoxicated before the vine was ever created.  
Its vessel is a full moon, its cup a sun,  
a crescent that turns it—how often, when mixed, a star appears.  
Had it not been for its fragrance, I would not have found my tavern,  
and had it not been for its radiance, imagination could not conceive it.* (Schimmel, 2007, p. 309)

#### 6.4. Schimmel’s Aesthetic Reading of Sufi Poetry

In her reflective and interpretive reading of these verses, Schimmel writes: “These lines, which express the lover’s feelings while remembering the beloved, are among the dearest passages of classical Arabic poetry to me. They represent the pinnacle of romantic expression, even though they abound in rhetorical ornamentation” (Schimmel, 2007, p. 310). Her use of the term “ornamentation” (*tatrīz*) clearly signals the poetic artistry and aesthetic refinement of the text. Through this metaphor, she sought to highlight the beauty of composition and the elegance of poetic structure.

In the same context, she writes: “The eye intoxicated with love perceives traces of eternal beauty everywhere and listens to the silent expression within all created beings” (Schimmel, 2007, p. 348). To support this idea, she cites verses by Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, whose poetry was deeply influenced by Qur’anic narratives particularly the story of Zulaykhā, whose love and longing for the beauty of the Prophet Yūsuf (peace be upon him) are evoked in the following lines:

*Even if she were to mention a hundred thousand names,  
her mind and her heart would always return to Yūsuf alone.* (Schimmel, 2007,  
p. 355)

Schimmel was also deeply moved by other verses of Rūmī in which he says:

*I fear nothing, for death does not annul me;  
if I return, I shall die as a human being.  
Then I shall be guided by the wing of the angelic realm,  
and it shall become necessary that I die as a king.  
Then I shall become—though I know not how—the Spirit of God.  
Alas, do not seek me! For non-being calls me.  
To the sound of the organ it proclaims: “Unto Him shall we return”* (Schimmel,  
2007, pp.363–364),

Here, “non-being” is understood as referring to the Divine Essence, which transcends all description. Schimmel was profoundly affected by the final two lines, especially since the German poet Friedrich Rückert who had translated parts of Rūmī’s *Mathnawī* more than 150 years earlier had not translated these particular verses.

Schimmel later devoted an entire book to the study of Rūmī’s works, entitled *The Triumphant Sun*, which was translated into Arabic by ‘Īsā al-‘Ākūb. In this book, she focused on the system of imagery in Rūmī’s poetry, examining metaphors related to the sun, water, the symbolism of gardens, images inspired by animals and children, metaphors drawn from everyday life and food, as well as imagery associated with illness, weaving, and sewing. She also explored Qur’anic imagery, along with references to history, geography, music, and dance.

She further addressed the concept of *fanā’* (annihilation), a theme that has generated considerable debate in contemporary scholarship. Orientalists have often interpreted it as an extension of Christian theological thought, while modernist thinkers have viewed it as a call toward transcending the human condition in pursuit of the divine an aspiration they consider ultimately unattainable (Muammar, 2022, p. 60).

All of these dimensions reflect the breadth of Schimmel’s engagement with Sufi poetry and demonstrate the depth of her influence by diverse models within Arabic and Islamic mystical literature.

## 7. Conclusion

Through our study, it has been demonstrated that Islamic Sufism, far from being confined to a single domain, transcends disciplinary and historical boundaries and resonates with the conditions of modernity and globalization. It has taken on dimensions that reflect its dynamic and evolving nature across contexts. “Ideas rooted in transpersonal spirituality echo with international initiatives such as the Earth Charter and the United Nations Earth Summit... seeking to inspire all people with a renewed sense of global interaction and shared responsibility” (Mouqari, 2025, p. 791). This confirms that Sufism is not only a spiritual tradition but also a framework that contributes to contemporary global ethical reflections.

Sufism has been one of the most significant Islamic fields to attract sustained academic attention, which underscores its intellectual and cultural importance. European scholars devoted considerable effort to examining its historical development and key figures, even when some questioned the origins of its emergence. In these studies, the author discusses the role of mystical poetry, especially Persian Sufi poetry, as a significant feature of the richness of Sufi expression both symbolically and aesthetically. Annemarie Schimmel, the German orientalist scholar, is identified as one of the scholars who has significantly contributed to

studies of Sufi poetry and is the centrepiece of this study for her contributions to understanding Sufism and Sufi poetry with fairness towards Islam and the opportunity for an in-depth engagement. She approached her research using a scientific and objective approach while also showing the same sensitivity towards the spiritual aspects of the Sufi tradition that many researchers in the West have not shown, even though the majority of them live near places of worship. Because of the materialistic orientation of most of these societies, many Westerners have found that Sufism has provided them with the possibility of a refuge from the spiritual void in their life experiences.

In this regard, the observation of Mark Sedgwick is particularly relevant: “During the twentieth century in the West, it was widely believed that Sufism is something separate from Islam. Yet it is important to recognize that this view is purely Western... and when we detach Sufism from this meaning, it becomes something very different indeed” (Idrissi, 2010, p. 114). This reinforces the necessity of situating Sufism within its authentic Islamic framework, as emphasized throughout this study, in order to avoid reductive or distorted interpretations.

The two main elements of Schimmel's work are theory and practice. She has helped bring to public awareness the spiritual aspects of Sufi Muslim philosophy and poetic expressions of Sufi poetry to Europeans. As she has done throughout her life, through personal experience, Schimmel has immersed herself in the culture associated with people of that faith and has understood how that culture treats people who are not associated with those beliefs or who do not share similar faiths. She has witnessed an Islamic community that lives based on the principles of love and kindness to all; these are ideals that have been established through Schimmel's relationships with Muslims and her examination of the qualities of Islamic faith communities as well as her personal experiences working with Muslims.

Accordingly, Islamic Sufism, as understood through Schimmel's perspective, reflects a modern intellectual vision that embodies peaceful coexistence and civilizational dialogue between religions, Islamic spiritual culture, and other cultures and faith traditions. It also demonstrates objectivity and scholarly rigor in the study of this field through her numerous works, by means of which she sought to acquaint the Western reader with the true essence and authentic meaning of Islamic Sufism and its relationship with the other. In this sense, her scholarship fully supports the central argument advanced in this study.

Finally, this study has mainly shown that the German school of Orientalism, exemplified by Schimmel's work, approached the field of Sufism through a scientific and objective methodology, independent of ideological or political agendas. The influence of German scholarship on Arabic literature was evident and enduring, whether in cataloguing texts, verifying manuscripts, or reinterpreting classical works across genres, including Sufi literature. These contributions to current scholarship represent a new perspective in support of the scientific participation as well as re-establishing the conversation between nations and civilizations today through what is now known as "the dialogue that unifies all civilisations." In exemplifying Sufi Islam as an active and evolving school of thought rather than simply a historical or literary phenomenon, Schimmel demonstrates that Sufism is capable of promoting appreciation of different cultures through building an understanding by living peacefully in equilibrium with one another in our globalized world today. The study makes clear that from an academic standpoint and also continuing our global intellectual discourse, Sufism, as a scholarly discipline, is extremely important.

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