Applying the Integrated Sufi Exegesis Model (ISEM) to Analyze the Meaning of Life in Sufi Quranic Commentaries: Bridging Tradition and Modernity

Abstract

In an era defined by existential uncertainties and a global quest for purpose, the meaning of life remains a pressing concern across cultures. Islamic mysticism, particularly Sufi interpretations of the Quran, offers profound insights into this question through concepts such as fana (annihilation in God), qurb (divine proximity), tajalli (divine manifestation), and wahdat al-wujud (unity of existence). This study introduces the Integrated Sufi Exegesis Model (ISEM), a novel framework combining textual-historical, phenomenological, discursive, and social network analyses, to explore how Sufi Quranic commentaries articulate life's purpose. These components enable a comprehensive analysis of texts within their historical, experiential, and social contexts. Drawing on key commentaries, including al-Qushayri's Lata'if al-Isharat, Ruzbihan Baqli's 'Ara'is al-Bayan, Ibn al-'Arabi's Fusus al-Hikam, and Rumi's Masnavi, alongside historical sources like The History of Nishapur, the study examines how Sufi concepts address existential purpose in diverse regions (Nishapur, Shiraz, Andalusia, Konya). The findings reveal that Sufi exegesis frames life's meaning as a journey toward divine unity, offering responses to modern existential challenges that resonate with meaning-centered psychology and systems-based philosophies. By bridging classical Islamic thought with contemporary issues, this study contributes to interdisciplinary dialogues on purpose and well-being, aligning with Islamic perspectives on human concerns.

Keywords: Meaning of life, Sufi Quranic exegesis, Integrated Sufi Exegesis Model (ISEM), wahdat al-wujud, Islamic mysticism, existential psychology.

Introduction

In an era marked by existential crises, rising mental health challenges, and a pervasive search for purpose, the question of the meaning of life remains a central concern for individuals and societies worldwide. Modern frameworks, such as Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, which emphasizes finding purpose through meaningful goals, or existentialist philosophies like those of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, which grapple with absurdity and freedom, offer valuable perspectives (Frankl, 2006; Sartre, 1943). However, these approaches often lack a spiritual dimension that resonates with religious traditions. Within Islamic thought, non-Sufi exegesis, such as Ash'ari theological interpretations, focuses on divine transcendence and obedience to Sharia as sources of purpose (al-Tabari, 2001). In contrast, Islamic mysticism, particularly Sufi interpretations of the Quran, provides a rich lens for addressing this quest, framing life's purpose as a journey toward unity with the divine. Sufi commentators, such as 'Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri, Ruzbihan Baqli, Ibn al-'Arabi, and Jalaluddin Rumi, articulate concepts like qurb (divine proximity), fana (annihilation in God), tajalli (divine

manifestation), and wahdat al-wujud (unity of existence), offering profound responses to existential questions rooted in the Quranic worldview.

This study introduces the Integrated Sufi Exegesis Model (ISEM), a new interdisciplinary framework designed to analyze Sufi Quranic commentaries with greater contextual and conceptual depth. ISEM integrates four key analytical approaches:

- Textual-historical: Situates texts within their socio-historical contexts, like Nishapur's scholarly networks.

- Phenomenological: Explores mystical experiences through indigenous Sufi concepts such as fana (annihilation in God).

- Discursive: Examines interactions with broader religious discourses, including hadith and theology.

- Social Network Analysis: Maps institutional ties and relationships, such as those found in khanqahs (Sufi lodges).
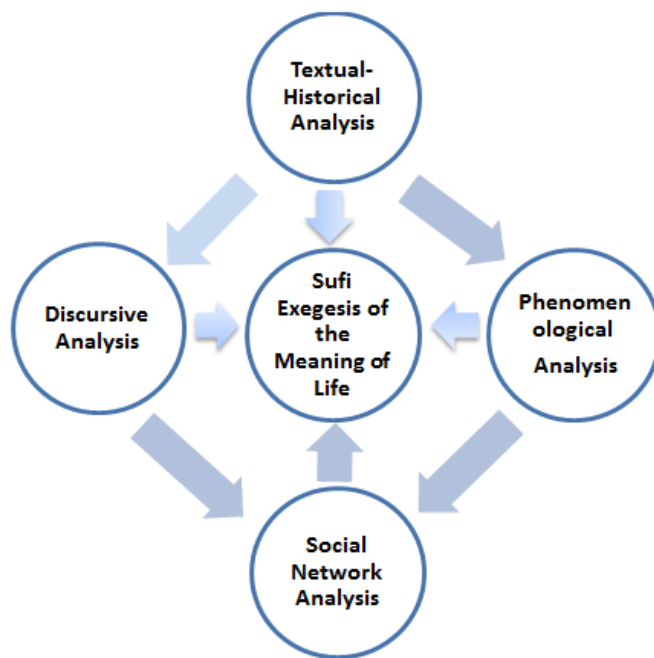
ISEM integrates four approaches to analyze Sufi commentaries comprehensively.

Figure 1: Components of ISEM

By applying ISEM, this article investigates how Sufi exegesis addresses the meaning of life. We'll focus on key commentaries, including al-Qushayri's Lata'if al-Isharat (Nishapur, 5th century AH), Ruzbihan Baqli's 'Ara'is al-Bayan (Shiraz, 6th century AH), Ibn al-'Arabi's Fusus al-Hikam (Andalusia, 7th century AH), and Rumi's Masnavi (Konya, 7th century AH).

These texts, alongside historical sources like The History of Nishapur (al-Hakim, 1990), illuminate diverse regional perspectives on existential purpose.

The primary research question guiding this study is: How does ISEM reveal the ways in which Sufi Quranic commentaries articulate the meaning of life, and how do these insights address contemporary existential challenges? Secondary questions include: What Sufi concepts (e.g., fana, qurb, tajalli, wahdat al-wujud) shape the understanding of life's purpose? How do regional and historical contexts influence these interpretations? How can Sufi perspectives contribute to modern psychological and philosophical discourses on meaning? To answer these, the study analyzes Quranic verses frequently interpreted by Sufis, such as "When Moses came to Our appointed time" (Qur'ān 7:143), "By the star when it descends" (Qur'ān 53:1–18), and "And We said, 'O Adam, dwell, you and your wife, in Paradise'" (Qur'ān 2:35–39), which highlight divine encounter, proximity, and the return to divine presence.

This article contributes to the mission of Islam and the Contemporary World by bridging classical Islamic thought with modern human concerns, offering a perspective that is both spiritually grounded and intellectually rigorous. It avoids esoteric jargon to ensure accessibility for a broad audience, including new researchers in Islamic studies, while maintaining scholarly depth. The study begins with a theoretical background on the meaning of life in modern, Islamic, and Sufi contexts, followed by a methodology outlining ISEM's application. It then presents the analysis, discusses findings in relation to contemporary issues, and concludes with implications for interdisciplinary dialogue and future research.

Theoretical Background

The question of the meaning of life has been a perennial concern across philosophical, psychological, and religious traditions, gaining urgency in the modern era amid rapid societal changes and existential uncertainties. In Western philosophy, existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus frame life as inherently absurd, devoid of intrinsic meaning, with purpose arising only through individual choice and action (Sartre, 1943; Camus, 1955). In contrast, Viktor Frankl's logotherapy posits that meaning is found through purpose-driven activities, relationships, or suffering endured with dignity (Frankl, 2006). These perspectives, while insightful, often lack a transcendent framework. Within Islamic thought, non-Sufi exegesis, such as al-Tabari's Jami' al-Bayan, emphasizes divine transcendence and adherence to Sharia as sources of purpose, viewing life as a test for the afterlife (al-Tabari, 2001:1:45). Sufism, however, offers a mystical approach, prioritizing the experiential relationship between the human soul and God.

In Sufism, the meaning of life is inseparable from achieving divine proximity and unity. Sufi Quranic exegesis interprets the Quran as a guide to this pursuit, with concepts such as fana, qurb, tajalli, and wahdat al-wujud central to the discourse.

Fana, or annihilation in God, represents the mystic's radical dissolution of the ego and individual self-consciousness, moving beyond the confines of temporal existence. This

concept is central to the Sufi understanding of life's ultimate purpose, as it posits that true meaning is found not in the affirmation of the finite self, but in its transcendence and absorption into the infinite Reality. Through *fana*, the individual transcends the limitations of worldly attachments and realizes a deeper, unified connection with the divine, thereby imbuing life with inherent purpose rooted in complete surrender and spiritual actualization. For instance, early Sufis like Abu Yazid al-Bistami frequently spoke of achieving a state where the self ceases to exist in the face of Divine Presence, signifying an end to self-centeredness and the beginning of God-centered existence (See al-Sarraj, 1990: 250-251, for classical discussions on *fana*).

Qurb, or divine proximity, emphasizes a dynamic nearness to God achieved through rigorous spiritual practices and sincere devotion. This concept frames life as a continuous journey toward ever-increasing divine intimacy, where meaning is derived from the deepening relationship with the Creator. It is not merely a physical closeness, but a spiritual and experiential reality where the heart finds solace and purpose in its nearness to the divine. Al-Qushayri highlights *qurb* as the core of spiritual attainment, where devotion transforms into direct experience of God's presence, making every moment of life a step closer to ultimate reality (al-Qushayri, 2007:2:112).

Tajalli, or divine manifestation, views life and the entire cosmos as a vibrant theater of God's continuous self-disclosure. Meaning, from this perspective, arises from the ability to witness and discern the divine beauty and attributes in every aspect of creation and experience. It transforms the mundane into the sacred, providing an enduring sense of awe and purpose in perceiving the interconnectedness of all existence with its divine source. Ruzbihan Baqli, for example, beautifully articulates how the universe is replete with signs (*ayat*) and manifestations of God's essence, inviting the discerning heart to find meaning in this perpetual divine unveiling (Ruzbihan Baqli, 1995:2:146).

Wahdat al-wujud, or unity of existence, articulated most comprehensively by Ibn al-'Arabi, posits that all existence is fundamentally a manifestation of the One Divine Reality, meaning God is immanent in every aspect of creation. This profound metaphysical concept eliminates the illusion of absolute distinctions between the self and the divine, thus imbuing life with an inherent and all-encompassing unity and purpose. For proponents of this view, life's meaning is found in recognizing this fundamental oneness and living in accordance with it, transcending dualities and realizing the divine presence within oneself and the world (Ibn al-'Arabi, 2002:67; also see Chittick, 1989, for extensive analysis of Ibn al-'Arabi's thought).

Rumi further illustrates these concepts in his **Masnavi**, where life is portrayed not merely as a physical existence but as a spiritual journey of returning to the divine source. He uses the powerful metaphor of a reed flute longing for its origin (Rumi, 2004:1:18), emphasizing that the soul's deepest yearning for connection and reunion with the Divine is the ultimate source of meaning and purpose in human existence.

Sufi commentators draw on Quranic verses to articulate these concepts. For instance, "When Moses came to Our appointed time" (Qur'ān 7:143) is interpreted by al-Qushayri as a moment

of divine proximity, reflecting the human longing for meaning through closeness to God (al-Qushayri, 2007:2:112). "By the star when it descends" (Qur'ān 53:1–18), describing the Prophet's ascension, is seen by al-Sulami as a paradigm of divine encounter, where meaning is found in transcending worldly limitations (al-Sulami, 2001:3:78). "And We said, 'O Adam, dwell, you and your wife, in Paradise'" (Qur'ān 2:35–39) is interpreted by al-Tustari as a narrative of estrangement and return, where life's purpose lies in reconnecting with divine presence (al-Tustari, 2002:1:56). These interpretations are shaped by regional contexts, such as Nishapur's Ash'ari scholarly milieu, Shiraz's poetic traditions, Andalusia's philosophical environment, and Konya's Sufi-poetic culture.

Despite the richness of Sufi exegesis, few studies have systematically applied interdisciplinary frameworks to connect these insights with contemporary issues like the meaning of life. Modern Islamic studies have explored Sufi eschatology (Bowering,1980) and interpretive methods (Sands, 2006), but the application of Sufi concepts to existential questions remains underexplored. Psychological research, such as studies on meaning-making (Park, 2010), suggests that spiritual frameworks enhance well-being, yet Islamic perspectives are rarely integrated. This study addresses this gap by using ISEM to analyze Sufi exegesis, fostering a dialogue between Islamic mysticism and modern discourses on purpose.

Methodology

This study employs the Integrated Sufi Exegesis Model (ISEM), a multi-method framework designed to analyze Sufi Quranic commentaries with contextual and conceptual depth, specifically tailored to explore the meaning of life. ISEM integrates four analytical components to provide a comprehensive understanding of mystical texts:

- Textual-Historical Analysis: Situates commentaries within their socio-historical contexts, examining how regional and temporal factors shape interpretations. For example, Nishapur's Ash'ari scholarly environment influenced al-Qushayri's emphasis on qurb, while Andalusia's philosophical traditions shaped Ibn al-'Arabi's wahdat al-wujud.

- Phenomenological Analysis: Focuses on mystical experiences through indigenous Sufi concepts like fana, qurb, and tajalli, capturing the experiential dimensions of meaning-making in Sufi thought.

- Discursive Analysis: Examines interactions between Sufi commentaries and broader religious discourses, such as hadith, theology, or jurisprudence, using Talal Asad's concept of discursive tradition (Asad, 1986:45). For instance, al-Qushayri's use of hadith legitimizes qurb within orthodox frameworks.

- Social Network Analysis: Maps institutional and social relationships, such as khanqahs, dhikr circles, and scholarly networks, to situate commentators within their

socio-religious contexts. For example, Rumi's ties to Konya's Sufi circles shaped his influence.

Data Sources and Sampling

Our analysis draws on both primary Sufi commentaries and a key non-Sufi exegetical work for comparative purposes. We used purposive sampling to select these texts, aiming for a diverse representation across historical periods, geographical regions, and conceptual emphases within Sufi thought, alongside a prominent traditional perspective.

Primary Sufi Commentaries:

- Lata'if al-Isharat by 'Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri (Nishapur, 5th century AH): Chosen for its articulation of qurb and its grounding in an Ash'ari scholarly setting, reflecting a balanced approach to orthodoxy and mysticism.

- 'Ara'is al-Bayan by Ruzbihan Baqli (Shiraz, 6th century AH): Selected for its emphasis on tajalli and its representation of Sufi poetic traditions, highlighting the aesthetic dimension of mystical interpretation.

- Fusus al-Hikam by Ibn al-'Arabi (Andalusia, 7th century AH): Included for its comprehensive discussion of wahdat al-wujud and its philosophical depth, representing a highly conceptualized approach to unity.

- Masnavi by Jalaluddin Rumi (Konya, 7th century AH): Chosen for its profound exploration of fana and the journey of divine reunion, reflecting a major Sufi poetic current and its experiential focus.

- Tafsir al-Tustari by Sahl al-Tustari (Basra, 3rd century AH): Included as an early Sufi commentary highlighting direct divine presence and reunion, offering historical breadth and insight into foundational mystical interpretations.

For comparative analysis:

- Jami' al-Bayan 'an Ta'wil Ay al-Qur'an by Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (3rd century AH): We selected this foundational Sunni tafsir as a representative non-Sufi, traditional theological-legal exegesis. Its literal and juristic interpretations provide a crucial counterpoint to Sufi mystical readings, underscoring the unique contributions of Sufi approaches to the meaning of life from an experiential and relational standpoint.

Supporting Historical and Non-exegetical Sources:

- Non-exegetical texts, such as Kashf al-Mahjub by al-Hujwiri (Lahore, 5th century AH) and al-Luma' by al-Sarraj (Tus, 4th century AH), provided foundational definitions and context for mystical concepts, supporting a broader understanding of Sufi terminology.

- Historical sources, including The History of Nishapur (al-Hakim, 1990) and The History of Baghdad (al-Khatib, 1997), helped reconstruct the socio-religious and intellectual contexts of the commentators and their regions, providing a deeper understanding of the environment shaping their interpretations.

Quranic Verses and Data Coding Procedures

The study focuses on specific Quranic verses frequently interpreted by Sufis to address existential purpose. We selected these verses for their rich potential to reveal insights into divine encounter, proximity, and the return to divine presence:

- "When Moses came to Our appointed time" (Qur'ān 7:143), symbolizing divine encounter and proximity.

- "By the star when it descends" (Qur'ān 53:1–18), representing the Prophet's ascension and divine unity.

- "And We said, 'O Adam, dwell, you and your wife, in Paradise'" (Qur'ān 2:35–39), reflecting estrangement and return to divine presence.

We applied a qualitative data coding procedure aligned with the ISEM framework to analyze these selected texts. This process involved several iterative steps:

- Initial Reading and Immersion: We thoroughly read each selected commentary, along with relevant sections of al-Tabari's Tafsir, to grasp their overall themes and specific interpretations of the chosen Quranic verses.

- Deductive Coding (Framework-Driven): Based on ISEM's components and the core Sufi concepts identified in the theoretical background (fana, qurb, tajalli, wahdat al-wujud, divine presence), we deductively applied initial codes to passages discussing or implying these concepts in relation to the meaning of life. For instance, any discussion of spiritual closeness to God in al-Qushayri's commentary on Q 7:143 was coded as "Qurb-meaning of life."

- Inductive Coding (Emergent Themes): We remained open to new themes or interpretations emerging directly from the texts. Any novel insights into the meaning of life, or unique expressions of Sufi concepts, were inductively coded.

- Contextual Annotation: For each coded segment, we added contextual annotations, linking the interpretation to its historical milieu (e.g., Nishapur's scholarly environment), specific mystical experience (e.g., the experiential aspect of tajalli), discursive engagement (e.g., referencing a Hadith), or social network implication (e.g., mentions of khanqah practices). This ensured all four ISEM components were actively applied during coding.

- Categorization and Thematic Analysis: We then grouped coded segments into broader categories representing how Sufi exegesis articulates the meaning of life through

concepts like divine unity, intimacy, manifestation, annihilation, and reconnection. This allowed us to identify overarching themes and patterns across the commentaries and facilitate clear comparisons between Sufi and non-Sufi perspectives. The lead researcher manually performed all coding to ensure deep engagement with the original texts.

Analytical Process

We applied ISEM through a four-step process for each commentary:

- Textual-Historical Analysis: Identify the historical and social context of each commentary (e.g., Konya's Sufi-poetic culture for Rumi).

- Phenomenological Analysis: Extract key mystical concepts related to the meaning of life (e.g., tajalli in Ruzbihan's interpretation of Qur'ān 7:143).

- Discursive Analysis: Examine references to hadith, theology, or other discourses (e.g., al-Qushayri's use of hadith to legitimize qurb).

- Social Network Analysis: Map the commentator's institutional ties (e.g., Ibn al-'Arabi's philosophical circles in Andalusia).

This methodology ensures a comprehensive analysis that captures the conceptual, historical, and social dimensions of Sufi exegesis, aligning with the interdisciplinary aims of Islam and the Contemporary World.

Analysis: Applying ISEM

This section applies the Integrated Sufi Exegesis Model (ISEM) to analyze how Sufi Quranic commentaries articulate the meaning of life, focusing on the selected texts and verses. Unlike a component-by-component analysis, this section examines each commentator individually, leveraging ISEM's four lenses—textual-historical, phenomenological, discursive, and social network analysis—to provide a comprehensive understanding of their contribution to the discourse on life's purpose.

۱. Al-Qushayri and the Meaning of Life through *Qurb*

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Al-Qushayri's *Lata'if al-Isharat* emerged from Nishapur (5th century AH), a prominent center for Ash'ari and Shafi'i scholarship. His commentary reflects a milieu that harmonized theological orthodoxy with profound mysticism. This context shaped his emphasis on *qurb* (divine proximity), which aligned with Nishapur's disciplined spiritual practices and scholarly environment where integration of Sufism with Sharia was crucial. Historical sources confirm the intellectual vibrancy of Nishapur during this period, influencing al-Qushayri's integrative approach (al-Hakim, 1990:156).

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Al-Qushayri interprets Qur'ān 7:143 as a profound experience of divine proximity, central to understanding life's purpose. He states: "The vision of God lies in the proximity of the heart, where life finds its purpose" (al-Qushayri, 2007:2:112). For al-Qushayri, life gains ultimate purpose and direction through a felt spiritual intimacy with the Divine. This is not a mere intellectual understanding, but an experiential closeness cultivated through rigorous spiritual practices like prayer (*salat*), remembrance (*dhikr*), and self-purification. The closer one feels to God, the more profound and clear the meaning of their existence becomes, as their actions and intentions are continuously oriented towards the Divine presence. This pursuit of *qurb* transforms daily life into a meaningful spiritual journey, providing a stable foundation for purpose irrespective of external circumstances.

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Al-Qushayri actively engaged with broader religious discourses to legitimize *qurb* within orthodox frameworks. In Nishapur's Ash'ari-dominated context, he frequently cited Hadith to align *qurb* with established Islamic teachings. For instance, he refers to the Hadith: "The vision of the Real is with the heart of the believer, as the Prophet said, 'Worship God as if you see Him'" (al-Qushayri, 2007:2:113). This strategic use of Hadith bridged mystical and legalistic discourses, framing *qurb* as a legitimate, indeed recommended, path to finding meaning rooted in prophetic tradition, thereby securing its acceptance among mainstream scholars.

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Al-Qushayri's dual role as an influential Ash'ari scholar and a prominent Sufi leader positioned him uniquely within Nishapur's intellectual and spiritual landscape. His presence in both *madrasas* (religious schools) and *khanqahs* (Sufi lodges) greatly amplified the dissemination of his teachings on *qurb*. Biographical accounts note his significant influence in guiding Nishapur's religious discourse (al-Dhahabi, 1996:12:89). This interconnected network ensured that his interpretations, emphasizing divine proximity as life's purpose, resonated far beyond academic circles, reaching a wider community through formal and informal spiritual gatherings.

٢. **Ruzbihan Baqli and the Meaning of Life through** *Tajalli*

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Ruzbihan Baqli's *'Ara'is al-Bayan* emerged from Shiraz (6th century AH), a city known for its vibrant Sufi poetic and *khanqah*-based spirituality. This rich cultural backdrop deeply influenced his focus on *tajalli* (divine manifestation). His work reflects a mystical tradition where aesthetic appreciation and symbolic interpretation played a crucial role in spiritual

understanding, making Shiraz an ideal environment for the development of such an interpretive framework.

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Ruzbihan Baqli, commenting on Qur'ān 7:143, emphasizes *tajalli* as the source of life's meaning. He asserts: "The vision of the Real lies in the mystic's heart, where God manifests, making life a mirror of divine beauty" (Ruzbihan, 1995:2:146). Here, meaning arises not just from seeking proximity, but from perceiving the divine *within* existence and through the universe's manifestations. Life becomes inherently meaningful as every phenomenon, from nature to human interactions, is viewed as a reflection of God's attributes and beauty. This perpetual act of witnessing *tajalli* imbues the world with sacredness and transforms ordinary experiences into profound moments of spiritual realization, giving life an aesthetic and transcendental purpose. This constant revelation provides an inexhaustible wellspring of meaning, making every moment an opportunity for divine encounter.

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Ruzbihan Baqli integrated poetic and theological discourses, drawing significantly on Persian literary traditions to articulate *tajalli*. His exegesis blends philosophical insights with mystical intuitions, aligning his vision of divine manifestation with the Quranic call to witness His signs (*ayat*). By presenting *tajalli* not just as a mystical experience but as an interpretive lens for the Quran, Ruzbihan legitimized a highly symbolic approach to scripture within the broader Islamic intellectual landscape.

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Ruzbihan Baqli's strong ties to Sufi poets and *khanqahs* in Shiraz were instrumental in popularizing his interpretations of *tajalli*. These social and institutional networks provided platforms for the dissemination of his ideas, as Sufis in *dhikr* gatherings and poetic circles held significant spiritual authority (Abu Nu'aym, 1997:2:123). Through these vibrant communities, the concept of finding meaning through divine manifestation became deeply embedded in the local spiritual culture, reaching a wide audience beyond formal scholastic circles.

۳. **Ibn al-'Arabi and the Meaning of Life through** *Wahdat al-Wujud*

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Ibn al-'Arabi's *Fusus al-Hikam* emerged from Andalusia (7th century AH), a region characterized by rich philosophical traditions and a confluence of Islamic, Jewish, and Christian intellectual currents. This unique cultural and intellectual backdrop profoundly shaped his articulation of *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of existence), as Neoplatonic influences and sophisticated philosophical debates were integral to the intellectual milieu. His thought represents a culmination of centuries of mystical and philosophical development in the Islamic West.

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Ibn al-'Arabi's *wahdat al-wujud* deeply redefines life's meaning, particularly in his interpretation of Qur'ān 53:1–18, which describes the Prophet's ascension. He states: "The world is a manifestation of the Real, and life's purpose is to recognize this unity" (Ibn al-'Arabi, 2002:67). This perspective fundamentally dissolves the perceived distinctions between the self, the world, and God. Life, then, is not a quest for an external meaning, but an unfolding realization of an already existing, inherent unity. The purpose of human existence is to consciously awaken to this *wahdat al-wujud*, to understand that every being and every moment is an expression of the Divine. This recognition provides a holistic, unified worldview that counters alienation and imbues life with an all-encompassing, self-evident significance, transforming every aspect of existence into a sacred revelation.

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Ibn al-'Arabi famously engaged with philosophical discourses, particularly drawing upon Neoplatonic concepts and terminology to articulate *wahdat al-wujud*. He meticulously demonstrated how the Quran itself reveals that all existence is God's manifestation, thereby uniting the knower and the known. His extensive use of philosophical reasoning and sophisticated theological arguments allowed him to present *wahdat al-wujud* not merely as a mystical intuition but as a coherent metaphysical system, engaging scholars and mystics across diverse intellectual schools.

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Ibn al-'Arabi's influence stemmed from his engagement with philosophical circles and his extensive travels, establishing a vast transregional intellectual network. He attracted numerous students and disciples across North Africa, Andalusia, and the Middle East, teaching his profound concepts of unity across cities (al-Dhahabi, 1996:17:45). His writings and teachings became foundational for later generations of Sufis and philosophers, solidifying *wahdat al-wujud* as a central concept within Islamic mystical thought and ensuring its widespread, though sometimes controversial, dissemination.

٤. **Rumi and the Meaning of Life through *Fana***

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Jalaluddin Rumi's *Masnavi* (Konya, 7th century AH) was profoundly influenced by the Sufi-poetic culture prevalent in Anatolia during his time. Konya served as a melting pot of diverse spiritual and intellectual traditions, fostering a fertile ground for Rumi's unique blend of mystical philosophy and poetic expression. His emphasis on *fana* (annihilation in God) and the return to the divine resonated deeply with a populace seeking spiritual solace and meaning amidst political upheaval.

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Rumi's *Masnavi* views Qur'ān 2:35–39 (Adam's fall) as a profound metaphor for *fana* and its connection to life's meaning. He poetically explains: "Like Adam, the soul is exiled from the divine, and life's meaning lies in dissolving the self to return" (Rumi, 2004:1:123). For Rumi, the human experience is characterized by a deep longing for its divine origin, a sense of separation that can only be overcome through the annihilation (*fana*) of the ego. Life gains meaning precisely through this process of shedding the illusory individual self, its desires, and attachments, thereby allowing the soul to reunite with its divine source. This dissolution is not an end, but a transformative journey that reveals the true, boundless nature of existence and restores the soul to its eternal home. This experiential understanding offers a path to profound and lasting meaning beyond worldly attachments.

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Rumi's *Masnavi* famously blended poetry, storytelling, and exegesis, creating a unique discursive approach that made profound mystical truths accessible to a wide audience. He often interpreted Quranic verses, such as Qur'ān 7:143, through the lens of divine love, asserting: "The heart's vision of God is love's fire, burning away the self" (Rumi, 2004:2:45). This integration of poetic expression with scriptural interpretation allowed Rumi to convey complex ideas like *fana* and the longing for reunion in a highly engaging and emotionally resonant manner, shaping a new form of mystical discourse.

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Rumi's *Masnavi* and his teachings spread widely through the vibrant Sufi circles in Konya, primarily through the Mevlevi Order he founded. Key disciples, such as Husamuddin Chalabi, played a crucial role in facilitating the compilation and dissemination of the *Masnavi*, ensuring its reach beyond Konya through *dhikr* gatherings and spiritual centers (al-Dhahabi, ۱۹۹۶:۱۷:۱۲۳). □□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□ □□□ □□□ □□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□ □□ Rumi and his successors were instrumental in solidifying the Mevlevi tradition and embedding the concept of *fana* as a central path to meaning for countless followers.

۵. **Al-Tustari and the Meaning of Life through Divine Presence**

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Sahl al-Tustari's *Tafsir al-Tustari* (Basra, 3rd century AH) represents an early foundational Sufi commentary. His work emerged from Basra's ascetic and mystical community, where emphasis on direct spiritual experience and strict self-discipline shaped early Sufi thought. This historical context contributed to his focus on immediate divine presence and the concept of return to a primordial spiritual state, making his commentary crucial for understanding the genesis of Sufi exegetical traditions.

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Al-Tustari's interpretation of Qur'ān 2:35–39 (Adam's fall and expulsion from Paradise) profoundly emphasizes divine presence and the journey of return as the core of life's meaning. He states: "Life is a journey to restore the heart's connection to God" (al-Tustari, ۲۰۰۲:۱:۵۶). ⬜⬜⬜ ⬜⬜–⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜, ⬜⬜⬜ ⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜ ⬜⬜ ⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜ ⬜⬜⬜⬜ ⬜⬜ ⬜⬜ ⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜ ⬜⬜⬜⬜ ⬜⬜⬜ ⬜⬜–⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜ ⬜⬜⬜ primal, unveiled connection with God that was implicitly lost or veiled by the descent into worldly existence. This restoration of the heart's divine connection provides ultimate meaning and direction, orienting all of life's activities towards this spiritual reunion. He sees the human condition as one of yearning to return to that original state of intimate divine presence, making the pursuit of this presence the fundamental meaning-giving endeavor. Non-exegetical texts like al-Hujwiri's *Kashf al-Mahjub* reinforce these ideas, emphasizing that "The Sufi path is bound to the heart's purification, where life's meaning is found in divine presence" (al-Hujwiri, 1999:56).

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As an early commentator, al-Tustari's discursive engagement often involved direct, intuitive interpretations of the Quran that were deeply rooted in his personal mystical experiences and those of his Basran community. His commentary, while less overtly engaging with developed theological or philosophical discourses of later periods, laid the groundwork for future Sufi exegetical methods. His direct approach to scripture, focusing on inner meaning and spiritual realities, represented a distinct voice within the nascent Islamic scholarly landscape.

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Al-Tustari's influence stemmed from his strong ties within the early Basran Sufi networks, which included prominent students like al-Hallaj, who further disseminated his teachings (al-Tustari, 2002:1:10). These early Sufi communities were crucial in establishing and propagating foundational mystical concepts, ensuring that al-Tustari's focus on divine presence and the return to God became an integral part of the emerging Sufi tradition, even before the formalization of *khanqahs*. His direct influence on key figures helped spread his unique interpretive approach.

۶. **Comparative Insights and Discussion**

The application of ISEM across these diverse Sufi commentaries reveals both distinct conceptual framings of life's meaning and overarching commonalities. While al-Qushayri emphasizes *qurb* through intimacy, Ruzbihan *tajalli* through perception, Ibn al-'Arabi *wahdat al-wujud* through unity, Rumi *fana* through reunion, and al-Tustari divine presence through reconnection, they collectively frame life's purpose as a journey towards or a realization of divine unity and presence. ISEM's multi-faceted approach, by analyzing textual, experiential,

discursive, and social dimensions for each commentator, allows for a nuanced understanding of these individual contributions while also identifying their shared spiritual trajectory.

To highlight the distinctiveness of Sufi exegesis in articulating life's meaning, a comparison with non-Sufi interpretations is instructive. Al-Tabari's *Jami' al-Bayan*, a foundational traditional tafsir, interprets Qur'ān 7:143 literally, focusing on divine transcendence and inaccessibility: "Moses sought to see God but was overwhelmed by divine majesty, emphasizing God's inaccessibility" (al-Tabari, 2001:9:45). Similarly, for Qur'ān 2:35–39 (Adam's fall), al-Tabari stresses divine command, obedience, and repentance: "Adam's disobedience led to expulsion, and life's purpose is obedience to divine law" (al-Tabari, ٢٠٠١:١:۴۵). □□ □□□□□ □□□□□□□□, □□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□ proximity, inner perception, and an ultimate reunion with the divine, viewing these verses not primarily as legalistic injunctions but as narratives of divine intimacy, existential unity, or a journey back to the sacred origin. This distinction underscores the unique contribution of mystical exegesis to meaning-making, showing how Sufis navigated diverse discourses to articulate life's purpose from a profoundly experiential and relational standpoint, which often contrasts with the more literal or legalistic interpretations.

This comparative analysis, facilitated by ISEM, reveals that Sufi interpretations offer a dynamic, lived experience of meaning, rooted in an active spiritual relationship with the Divine, rather than solely relying on external obedience or intellectual assent. This rich conceptual landscape provides profound answers to contemporary existential challenges, as further elaborated in the Discussion and Findings section.

Discussion and Findings

The application of ISEM reveals that Sufi Quranic commentaries articulate the meaning of life as a journey toward divine unity, offering insights that resonate with contemporary existential challenges. The findings highlight three key dimensions: conceptual diversity, contextual influence, and modern relevance.

Conceptual Diversity: Sufi exegesis presents a rich tapestry of concepts—qurb, tajalli, wahdat al-wujud, fana, and divine presence—each framing life's purpose uniquely. Al-Qushayri's qurb emphasizes spiritual intimacy, accessible through daily practices like prayer, making it practical for broad audiences (al-Qushayri, 2007:2:112). Ruzbihan's tajalli imbues life with aesthetic depth, aligning with psychological theories of awe and transcendence (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Ibn al-'Arabi's wahdat al-wujud counters modern alienation with metaphysical unity, resonating with holistic worldviews in existential psychology (Park, ٢٠١٠). □□□□'□ □□□□ □□□□□□□□□□ □□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□□, □□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□ (□□□□, ٢٠٠۴:١:١٢٣). □□–□□□□□□'□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□, □□□□□□□□□□ □□□□–□□□□□ (□□– Tustari, 2002:1:56). This diversity, captured by ISEM's phenomenological analysis, underscores Sufi thought's flexibility in addressing existential questions.

Contextual Influence: ISEM's textual-historical and social network analyses demonstrate that regional and institutional contexts shaped interpretations. Nishapur's scholarly networks reinforced al-Qushayri's orthodoxy, Shiraz's poetic traditions enriched Ruzbihan's tajalli, Andalusia's philosophical milieu enabled Ibn al-'Arabi's synthesis, Konya's Sufi circles amplified Rumi's fana, and Basra's early Sufi networks shaped al-Tustari's focus on presence. Khanqahs and dhikr circles were critical in dissemination, making these ideas relevant to diverse communities (Safi, 2006:145). This contextual sensitivity distinguishes ISEM from less nuanced frameworks, highlighting the interplay between text and environment.

Modern Relevance: Sufi concepts offer practical responses to contemporary challenges, aligning with psychological and philosophical discourses. Qurb parallels logotherapy's relational meaning (Frankl, 2006), reducing existential anxiety through spiritual connection. For example, mindfulness-based dhikr workshops, rooted in qurb, can lower stress, as supported by spirituality and health studies (Koenig, 2012; Pargament, 2007). Tajalli resonates with positive psychology's focus on awe as a source of purpose (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), applicable in nature-based contemplation programs. Wahdat al-wujud addresses fragmentation with a unified worldview, comparable to ecological philosophies (Capra, 1996), and can inspire community-building initiatives. Fana promotes self-transcendence, useful in therapeutic self-reflection, while al-Tustari's divine presence supports community-based spiritual practices for well-being. These parallels demonstrate Sufi exegesis as a living tradition relevant to mental health, social cohesion, and existential inquiry.

ISEM's interdisciplinary approach enhances this analysis by integrating textual, experiential, discursive, and social dimensions, avoiding Western-centric limitations. Unlike existentialism's focus on individual agency in an absurd world (Sartre, 1943), Sufi exegesis grounds meaning in a transcendent relationship with God, offering hope. Compared to logotherapy's personal goals (Frankl, 2006), Sufi concepts emphasize spiritual surrender, providing a complementary perspective. This dialogue enriches discussions on purpose, particularly for audiences seeking spiritual frameworks.

The findings have implications for interdisciplinary research and practice. In psychology, integrating qurb into therapeutic models, such as dhikr-based interventions, could enhance meaning-making in Muslim-majority contexts (Pargament, 2007). In philosophy, wahdat al-wujud could inform debates on ontology and interconnectedness. In Islamic studies, ISEM offers a robust tool for analyzing mystical texts, fostering a deeper understanding of Islam's contributions to human concerns.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Sufi Quranic commentaries offer profound insights into the meaning of life, framing it as a journey toward divine unity through concepts such as qurb (divine proximity), tajalli (divine manifestation), fana (annihilation in God), wahdat al-wujud (unity of existence), and divine presence. By introducing the Integrated Sufi Exegesis Model

(ISEM), this analysis has revealed the conceptual diversity, contextual influences, and modern relevance of these interpretations, as seen in the works of al-Qushayri, Ruzbihan Baqli, Ibn al-'Arabi, Rumi, and al-Tustari. Drawing on Quranic verses like 7:143, 53:1–18, and 2:35–39, the study has shown how Sufi exegesis responds to existential questions with spiritual depth, offering a counterpoint to modern secular frameworks like existentialism and logotherapy.

ISEM's four-pronged approach—textual-historical, phenomenological, discursive, and social network analyses—has illuminated the richness of Sufi thought. The textual-historical analysis highlighted how regional contexts, from Nishapur's scholarly networks to Konya's Sufi-poetic culture, shaped diverse interpretations.

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