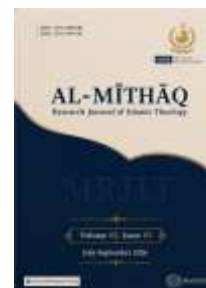




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Sufi Epistemology and Its Role in Resisting Neoliberal Hegemony: A Critical Analysis of Mystical Knowledge as a Counter-Narrative

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How to Cite:

Fazeel Eayaz and Mohammad Ibrahim. 2026: "Sufi Epistemology and Its Role in Resisting Neoliberal Hegemony: A Critical Analysis of Mystical Knowledge as a Counter-Narrative". *Al-Mithāq (Research Journal of Islamic Theology)* 5 (03): 55-76.

Article History:

Received:

02-07-2026

Accepted:

15-08-2026

Published:

25-08-2026

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Conflict of Interest:

Author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

Abstract & Indexing



Publisher



HIRA INSTITUTE
of Social Sciences Research & Development

Sufi Epistemology and Its Role in Resisting Neoliberal Hegemony: A Critical Analysis of Mystical Knowledge as a Counter-Narrative

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of Sufi epistemology as a counter-narrative to neoliberalism, exploring how mystical knowledge challenges the dominant frameworks of rationality, individualism, and market-driven thought in contemporary society. Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on economic rationality, self-interest, and commodification of knowledge, has become a pervasive force in shaping global academic, political, and cultural landscapes. This study argues that Sufi thought, through its emphasis on experiential knowledge, spiritual interconnectedness, and ethical transformation, offers a profound challenge to these neoliberal ideologies. Drawing on the writings of classical Sufi scholars and contemporary thinkers, the paper examines the epistemological foundations of Sufi thought, with a particular focus on concepts such as tazkiyah (soul purification) and ma'rifah (gnosis), which foster knowledge beyond materialism and rational utilitarianism. By foregrounding spiritual experience as a legitimate form of knowledge, this paper illustrates how Sufi epistemology critiques the reductionist nature of neoliberalism and calls for a redefined conception of truth, one that prioritizes collective well-being and social justice over individual profit. Through a critical, interdisciplinary approach that combines Islamic mysticism and critical theory, this paper highlights the resistant potential of Sufi thought to challenge neoliberalism's intellectual hegemony. It also emphasizes the relevance of alternative epistemologies in contemporary global debates, advocating for the integration of mystical, non-materialist paradigms in both academic inquiry and social praxis. This analysis contributes to broader conversations on epistemic justice, alternative knowledge systems, and the political dimensions of spiritual traditions in the neoliberal era.

Keywords: *Sufi Epistemology, Neoliberalism, Islamic Mysticism, Spiritual Experience.*

1. Introduction

Contemporary neoliberalism has evolved beyond an economic doctrine into a comprehensive epistemic and cultural order that shapes how knowledge, identity, ethics, and human value are understood in modern society. Since the late twentieth century, neoliberal rationality has increasingly transformed universities, political institutions, and social life according to market principles centred on competition, efficiency, productivity, and self-optimization.¹ Knowledge is now evaluated according

to its economic utility, institutional profitability, and measurable output rather than its ethical, spiritual, or transformative significance. In this framework, education becomes vocational training, intellectual inquiry becomes commodified expertise, and human beings are reduced to entrepreneurial subjects whose worth is measured through performance and productivity.²

This transformation reflects what Michel Foucault describes as “governmentality,” a form of power that shapes individuals into self-regulating economic actors governed through market logic rather than direct coercion.³ Neoliberalism operates not only as an economic system but also as an epistemological regime that determines what counts as legitimate knowledge, rational behavior, and meaningful existence. Neoliberal reason extends market values into every sphere of life, converting citizens into human capital and redefining social relations according to economic calculation.⁴ It restructures society through privatization, deregulation, and the normalization of competitive individualism, thereby eroding collective ethical responsibility and public consciousness.⁵

The consequences of this epistemic order are not merely institutional but existential. Contemporary neoliberal culture privileges instrumental rationality, measurable success, and individual accumulation while marginalizing forms of knowledge that cannot be measured within market frameworks.⁶ Neoliberal society produces subjects trapped in cycles of self-exploitation, emotional exhaustion, and psychological fragmentation under the illusion of freedom and achievement.⁷ Human beings are encouraged to enhance themselves, while spiritual depth, ethical contemplation, and communal solidarity are displaced by consumerism and performative productivity. As a result, neoliberalism generates not only economic inequality but also a profound crisis of meaning, identity, and moral orientation.

In this context, the question of alternative epistemologies becomes significant. Contemporary critiques of neoliberalism have emerged from Marxist theory, postcolonial studies, critical sociology, and secular humanist traditions.⁸ While these approaches provide valuable critiques of capitalism, coloniality, and power structures, they often remain confined within materialist or secular frameworks that overlook the epistemological and ethical potential of religious traditions. In particular, relatively little scholarly attention has been given to Islamic mystical epistemology as a form of counter-hegemonic resistance against neoliberal rationality.⁹ This absence is especially notable given the rich intellectual history of Sufism, which has historically emphasized ethical transformation, spiritual discipline, metaphysical interconnectedness, and experiential modes of knowing that transcend utilitarian materialism.

Sufi epistemology offers a different understanding of knowledge, subjectivity, and reality. Rather than reducing knowledge to empirical data or rational calculation, Sufi thought holds that true knowledge is inseparable from spiritual purification and ethical transformation.¹⁰ Central Sufi concepts such as *tazkiyah* (purification of the soul), *maʿrifah* (gnosis), *dhawq* (spiritual taste), and *kashf* (unveiling) emphasize that authentic knowledge emerges through inner refinement and experiential realization rather than through detached rational abstraction alone.¹¹ Knowledge in this framework is not merely informational but transformative; it concerns the moral and spiritual condition of the knower as much as the object known.

Classical Sufi scholars argued that unchecked desire, greed, arrogance, and attachment to worldly accumulation distort human perception and prevent access to higher forms of truth.¹² Al-Ghazali states that the purification of the heart is a necessary condition for genuine knowledge because moral corruption clouds intellectual and spiritual perception.¹³ Similarly, Ibn ʿArabi conceptualizes reality through a metaphysics of divine unity that challenges atomistic individualism and material reductionism.¹⁴ Such

perspectives provide important conceptual resources for critiquing neoliberal assumptions regarding selfhood, value, rationality, and social existence.

The relevance of Sufi epistemology lies not merely in its spiritual teachings but in its capacity to function as an alternative epistemic paradigm. Against neoliberalism's commodification of knowledge, Sufi thought foregrounds ethical consciousness and spiritual accountability. Against hyper-individualism, it emphasizes interconnectedness, humility, and collective moral responsibility. Against instrumental rationality, it proposes a mode of knowing rooted in transcendence, self-discipline, and existential transformation. In this sense, Sufi epistemology represents not simply a religious worldview but a counter-hegemonic critique of dominant modern assumptions about knowledge and human flourishing.

This paper investigates the role of Sufi epistemology as a form of resistance to neoliberal hegemony. It asks: How does Sufi epistemology challenge neoliberal constructions of knowledge and subjectivity? In what ways do concepts such as *ma'rifah* and *tazkiyah* function as counter-hegemonic epistemologies? Can mystical knowledge offer an alternative ethical paradigm to neoliberal rationality? Through a critical interdisciplinary engagement with Islamic mysticism, critical theory, and decolonial epistemology, this study argues that Sufi epistemology provides a counter-hegemonic framework that resists neoliberalism's commodification of knowledge through its emphasis on spiritual purification, experiential knowing, ethical transformation, and metaphysical interconnectedness.

This study employs an interdisciplinary qualitative methodology combining conceptual analysis, critical discourse analysis, and textual engagement with classical Sufi sources and contemporary critical theory. The paper analyzes neoliberal discourse as an epistemic and moral order through the works of thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Wendy Brown, Byung-Chul Han, and David Harvey, while comparatively examining Sufi epistemology as an alternative paradigm of knowledge rooted in ethical and spiritual transformation. Through conceptual analysis, the study explores key Sufi concepts including *tazkiyah* (purification), *ma'rifah* (gnosis), *dhawq* (spiritual intuition), and *kashf* (unveiling) in order to explore their counter-hegemonic implications within contemporary neoliberal society. The research further engages primary classical Sufi texts, including Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Ibn 'Arabi's *Fusus al-Hikam*, al-Qushayri's *Al-Risala al-Qushayriyya*, and Jalal al-Din Rumi's *Masnavi* to examine how mystical knowledge constructs alternative understandings of truth, subjectivity, and human flourishing. Through this interdisciplinary framework, the paper seeks to contribute to broader discussions concerning epistemic justice, decoloniality, and the recovery of non-materialist modes of knowing in contemporary intellectual discourse.

By bringing Sufi thought into conversation with contemporary critiques of neoliberalism, this paper contributes to broader debates concerning epistemic justice, alternative knowledge systems, and the political significance of spiritual traditions in modernity. It further argues that recovering non-materialist epistemologies is not a retreat into premodern romanticism, but a necessary intellectual intervention against the ethical and existential crises produced by neoliberal civilization.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework integrating Critical Theory, Sufi Epistemology, and Decolonial Theory to critically analyze neoliberal modernity and articulate an alternative epistemic paradigm. These three frameworks collectively provide the conceptual foundation for examining the relationship between power, knowledge, subjectivity, and spiritual resistance.

Critical Theory provides the analytical tools for understanding neoliberalism as a

hegemonic structure that extends beyond economics into culture, education, and subject formation. This study examines how neoliberal rationality commodifies knowledge, normalizes instrumental reason, and transforms individuals into self-optimizing entrepreneurial subjects.

Sufi Epistemology functions as the paper's alternative paradigm of knowledge. Through concepts such as *tazkiyah* (purification), *ma'rifah* (gnosis), *dhawq* (spiritual intuition), and *kashf* (unveiling), Sufi thought offers a model of knowledge rooted in ethical transformation, spiritual experience, and metaphysical consciousness rather than utilitarian calculation and market logic. This framework enables the study to articulate a spiritually grounded critique of neoliberal subjectivity and material reductionism.

Decolonial Theory further strengthens the analysis by situating neoliberal epistemology within wider histories of coloniality and epistemic domination. This paper argues that modern Western rationality has historically marginalized non-Western and spiritual ways of knowing. Sufi epistemology therefore functions as a form of epistemic resistance that pluralizes legitimate knowledge systems and challenges the monopoly of secular-materialist rationality.

Together, these three frameworks create a triangular analytical structure that allows this study to critically examine neoliberal hegemony while simultaneously recovering Sufi epistemology as an ethically transformative and decolonial alternative paradigm of knowledge.

3. Conceptualizing Neoliberal Hegemony

Neoliberalism is often understood as an economic doctrine advocating free markets, privatization, deregulation, and reduced state intervention. Such definitions, however, fail to capture the broader intellectual and cultural dimensions of neoliberal power. Contemporary neoliberalism operates not merely as a market system but as a comprehensive mode of governance that shapes human consciousness, social relations, institutional structures, and moral imagination.¹⁵ It functions simultaneously as an epistemology that determines legitimate knowledge, an ontology that redefines the meaning of human existence, a mechanism of subject-formation that produces entrepreneurial identities, and a moral order that normalizes competition and self-interest as universal virtues.¹⁶ The global expansion of neoliberal rationality since the late twentieth century has transformed political institutions, educational systems, media cultures, and even personal subjectivity according to market logic.¹⁷ Under neoliberalism, economic principles are no longer confined to financial activity; instead, they become organizing principles for all dimensions of life. Human beings increasingly understand themselves through categories of efficiency, investment, performance, and productivity. This transformation has profound implications for the production of knowledge and the moral foundations of society because it reduces truth, ethics, and education to instrumental and economic calculations.¹⁸

3.1 Neoliberalism as Epistemic Regime

Neoliberalism functions as an epistemic regime because it establishes the criteria through which knowledge is validated, organized, and institutionalized. Rather than encouraging knowledge for ethical reflection or human flourishing, neoliberal rationality privileges forms of knowledge that are measurable, profitable, technical, and economically productive.¹⁹ In this framework, truth becomes closely linked to utility, quantification, and market applicability. Knowledge that cannot be translated into economic value is increasingly marginalized within academic and political institutions. Michel Foucault's concept of "governmentality" is particularly important for understanding this transformation. Foucault argues that modern power operates not simply through coercion but through the management of conduct and the production of

self-governing subjects.²⁰ Neoliberal governmentality encourages individuals to regulate themselves according to market principles, transforming economic rationality into a universal norm for social behavior. The market therefore becomes more than an economic mechanism; it becomes a model for interpreting reality itself.²¹ Individuals are encouraged to perceive all actions, relationships, and decisions through cost-benefit analysis, efficiency, and competitive advantage.

This epistemic transformation also produces a technocratic culture in which expertise, data management, and administrative efficiency are prioritized over ethical wisdom or philosophical reflection.²² Political and educational institutions increasingly rely on metrics, rankings, algorithms, and performance indicators to determine legitimacy and success. The authority of quantitative measurement creates the illusion of objectivity while simultaneously narrowing the meaning of knowledge to what can be statistically calculated.²³ As a result, technocracy replaces ethical deliberation with managerial control. Wendy Brown argues that neoliberal reason extends market metrics into every sphere of life, including education, citizenship, morality, and democratic participation.²⁴ Within this framework, individuals are understood primarily as units of human capital whose value depends upon their capacity for productivity and competition. Education no longer serves the cultivation of ethical judgment or civic consciousness; instead, it becomes an investment strategy aimed at maximizing economic returns.²⁵ Brown therefore demonstrates that neoliberalism is not simply an economic policy but a political rationality that reshapes the foundations of democratic and intellectual life.

Pierre Bourdieu further explains that neoliberalism imposes symbolic forms of domination that normalize inequality and competition as natural conditions of existence.²⁶ Through media institutions, educational systems, and cultural discourse, neoliberal ideology reproduces the assumption that market logic represents objective reality rather than a historically constructed worldview. This process obscures the ideological nature of neoliberalism itself by presenting competition, privatization, and individualism as unavoidable social truths.²⁷ Consequently, neoliberal hegemony operates through epistemic normalization: alternative forms of knowing are dismissed as irrational, inefficient, or impractical.

The rise of datafication further intensifies this epistemic order. Contemporary societies increasingly rely on data extraction, algorithmic surveillance, and predictive analytics to organize social behavior and institutional decision-making.²⁸ Human experiences, emotions, and relationships are translated into measurable data points subject to economic analysis and managerial oversight. Such developments reinforce the neoliberal assumption that quantification constitutes the highest form of truth. In this context, spiritual, ethical, and metaphysical forms of knowledge are marginalized because they resist statistical standardization and market calculation.

Neoliberal epistemology therefore privileges instrumental rationality over ethical or contemplative wisdom. Knowledge becomes valuable primarily when it enhances efficiency, technological innovation, or economic productivity.²⁹ This reduction of knowledge to utility represents a significant transformation in the intellectual history of modernity because it displaces older understandings of education such as moral cultivation, philosophical inquiry, or spiritual refinement.

3.2 Commodification of Knowledge

One of the clearest manifestations of neoliberal hegemony is the commodification of knowledge within modern educational institutions. Universities increasingly operate according to corporate models that prioritize profitability, branding, managerial efficiency, and market competitiveness.³⁰ Higher education is no longer primarily understood as a public good oriented toward ethical and intellectual development;

rather, it is treated as an economic enterprise designed to produce employable labor and commercially useful research.³¹

This transformation has significantly altered the purpose of academic inquiry. Research funding, institutional prestige, and scholarly legitimacy are frequently tied to measurable productivity indicators such as publication counts, citation indexes, grant acquisition, and economic impact.³² Academic labor becomes governed by performance metrics that prioritize output over intellectual depth or ethical significance. Consequently, scholars are pressured to produce marketable research rather than pursue reflective or critical forms of inquiry.

The neoliberal university also reflects the growing dominance of scientism and positivism within contemporary epistemology. Scientism assumes that empirical and quantitative methods represent the only legitimate pathways to truth, thereby marginalizing ethical, spiritual, and metaphysical forms of knowledge.³³ Positivist models privilege observable data, technical expertise, and predictive control while dismissing subjective, contemplative, or transcendent dimensions of human experience. Such assumptions reinforce neoliberal preferences for efficiency, calculation, and technological management.

Max Horkheimer's critique of instrumental rationality remains highly relevant in this context. Horkheimer argues that modern societies increasingly reduce reason to technical functionality and practical utility rather than ethical reflection or emancipatory thought.³⁴ Rationality becomes instrumental when it focuses exclusively on methods, efficiency, and control while neglecting questions concerning moral purpose and human meaning. Under neoliberalism, this instrumental logic dominates educational institutions, transforming knowledge into a commodity detached from ethical responsibility or spiritual depth.

The commodification of knowledge also reshapes the relationship between students and education. Students are increasingly treated as consumers purchasing credentials for economic advancement rather than participants in intellectual and moral formation.³⁵ Educational success is measured according to employability, income potential, and professional competitiveness rather than wisdom, character, or civic contribution. This consumerist model weakens the ethical and transformative dimensions of learning while reinforcing neoliberal conceptions of selfhood based on competition and market value.

Furthermore, neoliberal academic culture often discourages critical reflection upon the moral consequences of technological and economic systems themselves.³⁶ Knowledge becomes fragmented into specialized technical disciplines disconnected from broader ethical questions regarding justice, spirituality, or human flourishing. The dominance of market-oriented education therefore contributes to a wider civilizational crisis in which intellectual achievement advances alongside moral disorientation and existential alienation.

3.3 Neoliberal Subjectivity

Neoliberalism not only transforms institutions but also reshapes human subjectivity itself. Under neoliberal rationality, individuals are encouraged to understand themselves as entrepreneurial projects responsible for maximizing their own value, productivity, and competitiveness.³⁷ The self becomes a form of human capital requiring constant investment, optimization, and reinvention. Success and failure are individualized, obscuring the structural inequalities and systemic pressures embedded within neoliberal society.

Byung-Chul Han argues that neoliberalism produces what he calls the "achievement subject," an individual driven by continuous self-optimization and voluntary self-exploitation.³⁸ Unlike disciplinary societies governed through external coercion, neoliberal societies operate through internalized pressure in which individuals compel

themselves toward endless productivity. Freedom itself becomes transformed into a mechanism of control because subjects willingly exploit their own emotional, intellectual, and physical capacities in pursuit of success.³⁹ The result is widespread exhaustion, anxiety, burnout, and psychological fragmentation.

This culture of self-optimization is closely linked to neoliberal individualism. Collective identities, communal ethics, and social solidarity are weakened as individuals are taught to prioritize personal advancement and competitive success.⁴⁰ Human relationships increasingly become transactional, governed by networking, branding, and strategic self-presentation. Neoliberal subjectivity therefore undermines deeper forms of social belonging and ethical responsibility.

Zygmunt Bauman describes contemporary neoliberal society as “liquid modernity,” a condition characterized by instability, insecurity, and the erosion of durable social bonds.⁴¹ Individuals are forced to constantly adapt themselves to rapidly changing economic conditions, resulting in persistent uncertainty and existential insecurity. Identity becomes fluid and performative because individuals must continuously reconstruct themselves according to shifting market expectations.⁴² In such conditions, spiritual rootedness and ethical continuity become increasingly difficult to sustain.

The neoliberal subject is therefore simultaneously empowered and isolated. Individuals are promised unlimited freedom and self-realization, yet they remain trapped within systems of economic pressure, emotional fatigue, and perpetual competition.⁴³ This contradiction reveals the deeper ontological dimensions of neoliberalism: it does not merely regulate economic activity but redefines what it means to be human.

Ultimately, neoliberalism must be understood not only as economic domination but as a form of epistemic colonization. It colonizes knowledge by reducing truth to utility, colonizes institutions by subordinating education to market logic, and colonizes subjectivity by transforming human beings into entrepreneurial commodities.⁴⁴ Its power lies precisely in its ability to naturalize its assumptions regarding rationality, value, and existence while marginalizing alternative ethical and spiritual epistemologies. It is within this context that Sufi epistemology emerges as a significant counter-hegemonic framework capable of challenging neoliberal constructions of knowledge, selfhood, and reality.

4. Foundations of Sufi Epistemology

Sufi epistemology emerges from the wider Islamic intellectual tradition as a spiritual framework of knowledge rooted in revelation, ethical transformation, and experiential realization. Unlike modern secular epistemologies that often separate knowledge from morality and spirituality, Sufi thought understands knowledge as inseparable from the purification of the self and the cultivation of proximity to God.⁴⁵ In this framework, knowledge is not merely informational or analytical; rather, it is transformative, existential, and sacred. The ultimate purpose of knowing is not control over the world but the refinement of the soul and recognition of divine reality.

The Qur’ān emphasizes that genuine understanding is connected to spiritual and moral receptivity rather than intellectual ability alone. The Qur’ān states, “Indeed, it is not the eyes that are blind, but it is the hearts in the chests that grow blind”.⁴⁶ This verse establishes a foundational principle of Sufi epistemology: human perception is deeply conditioned by the spiritual state of the heart. Similarly, The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, “Indeed, in the body there is a piece of flesh; if it is sound, the whole body is sound, and if it is corrupted, the whole body is corrupted. Truly, it is the heart.”⁴⁷ Sufi thinkers interpreted such teachings as evidence that ethical corruption distorts cognition itself, while purification enables access to deeper forms of truth.

Within this context, Sufism developed a sophisticated epistemological tradition centred

upon concepts such as *maʿrifah* (gnosis), *kashf* (unveiling), *dhawq* (spiritual taste), and *tazkiyah* (purification of the soul). These concepts collectively articulate an alternative understanding of knowledge that challenges materialist and positivist assumptions dominant within modern neoliberal culture.⁴⁸

4.1 What Is Sufi Epistemology?

Sufi epistemology may be understood as a theory of sacred knowledge grounded in spiritual experience, ethical refinement, and direct awareness of divine reality.⁴⁹ While modern epistemological systems frequently define knowledge through empirical verification or rational abstraction, Sufi thought argues that ultimate reality transcends purely sensory and intellectual comprehension.⁵⁰ Human reason remains important, yet it is insufficient when isolated from revelation and spiritual purification.

A central distinction in Sufi thought is the difference between acquired knowledge (*ʿilm*) and realized knowledge (*maʿrifah*).⁵¹ *ʿIlm* generally refers to conceptual or discursive understanding obtained through study and rational inquiry, whereas *maʿrifah* refers to intimate experiential knowledge attained through spiritual discipline and nearness to God. This distinction reflects the Sufi belief that truth cannot be fully grasped through intellectual analysis alone because ultimate reality must also be spiritually experienced.

The Qurʾān itself points toward experiential dimensions of certainty. God states, “And worship your Lord until certainty comes to you”.⁵² Classical Sufi scholars interpreted certainty (*yaqīn*) not simply as theoretical conviction but as existential realization grounded in worship, remembrance, and purification.⁵³ Knowledge therefore becomes transformative rather than merely descriptive.

Connected to *maʿrifah* is the concept of *kashf* (unveiling), which refers to the disclosure of spiritual realities to the purified heart.⁵⁴ Al-Qushayri explains that unveiling occurs when the veils of ego, desire, and worldly attachment are removed, enabling the seeker to perceive truths hidden from ordinary perception.⁵⁵ Such unveiling does not replace revelation but deepens the believer’s awareness of realities already affirmed within the Qurʾān and Sunnah.

This epistemological framework differs significantly from empirical positivism, which confines truth to measurable and observable phenomena.⁵⁶ Positivist epistemology generally rejects metaphysical knowledge because it cannot be empirically verified through scientific methods. Sufi thinkers, however, argue that material observation represents only one dimension of human knowing. The Qurʾān repeatedly emphasizes the reality of the unseen (*ghayb*), affirming that true believers are “those who believe in the unseen”.⁵⁷ Consequently, Sufi epistemology insists that authentic knowledge includes metaphysical and spiritual dimensions inaccessible to empirical reason alone. At the same time, Sufi scholars did not reject rationality altogether. The Qurʾān repeatedly encourages reflection, contemplation, and intellectual inquiry.⁵⁸ Classical Sufis therefore regarded reason (*ʿaql*) as a divine gift necessary for moral discernment and theological understanding.⁵⁹ However, they also maintained that reason becomes limited when detached from spiritual purification. Al-Ghazali argues that intellect alone cannot attain certainty concerning divine realities without inner transformation and illumination.⁶⁰ Thus, Sufi epistemology integrates reason within a broader hierarchy of knowledge that includes revelation, spiritual discipline, and experiential realization.

4.2 Sources of Knowledge in Sufism

Sufi epistemology is structured around multiple interconnected sources of knowledge that collectively form a holistic understanding of reality. These sources include revelation (*wahy*), intellect (*ʿaql*), the heart (*qalb*), intuition (*dhawq*), and unveiling

(*kashf*).⁶¹ Unlike secular epistemologies that often privilege only rational or empirical methods, Sufi thought integrates intellectual, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of knowing. Revelation (*wahy*) occupies the highest epistemological authority in Islam. The Qur'ān and the Prophetic Sunnah establish the ultimate foundations of truth and guide all legitimate spiritual experience.⁶² Sufi scholars consistently emphasized that mystical insight must remain within the boundaries of revelation. Junayd al-Baghdadi famously stated that all spiritual paths are closed except for those following the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.⁶³ Consequently, Sufi epistemology is not based upon subjective mysticism detached from scripture, but upon experiential engagement with revealed truth.

The intellect (*'aql*) also plays an important role within Sufi thought. The Qur'ān repeatedly criticizes those who fail to reflect and contemplate divine signs.⁶⁴ Islamic intellectual tradition therefore views reason as an essential faculty for understanding revelation and distinguishing truth from falsehood.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Sufi scholars argued that reason alone cannot penetrate the deepest dimensions of reality because the ego and worldly desires distort intellectual perception.⁶⁶

For this reason, the heart (*qalb*) occupies a central position within Sufi epistemology. In Islamic thought, the heart is not merely emotional but spiritual and cognitive. The Qur'ān associates understanding with the heart, stating, "They have hearts with which they do not understand".⁶⁷ Sufi thinkers interpreted this to mean that spiritual perception depends upon the condition of the heart itself. A corrupted heart loses its capacity for discernment, while a purified heart becomes receptive to divine guidance.

This purification enables the emergence of *dhawq* (spiritual taste), an intuitive and experiential form of knowing attained through worship, remembrance, and contemplation.⁶⁸ Sufis frequently describe spiritual truth through the language of taste because certain realities cannot be adequately conveyed through abstract concepts alone. Just as sweetness cannot be fully explained to someone who has never tasted honey, spiritual realities cannot be fully understood without direct experience.⁶⁹

Closely related to *dhawq* is *kashf* (unveiling), which refers to the disclosure of hidden truths to spiritually disciplined seekers.⁷⁰ Ibn 'Arabi describes unveiling as a form of inner perception through which the divine signs embedded within existence become manifest to the purified consciousness.⁷¹ Importantly, classical Sufis did not understand unveiling as irrational inspiration detached from religious discipline. Rather, unveiling emerges through obedience, remembrance, humility, and ethical refinement grounded within revelation.

The integration of revelation, intellect, heart, intuition, and unveiling demonstrates the comprehensive nature of Sufi epistemology. Knowledge is not fragmented into isolated categories but connected to ethics, spirituality, and human existence itself.⁷² Such an epistemological model directly challenges neoliberal frameworks that reduce truth to utility, productivity, and quantifiable information.

4.3 *Tazkiyah* as Epistemic Purification

One of the most profound dimensions of Sufi epistemology is the concept of *tazkiyah* (purification of the soul). Sufi thought maintains that moral corruption distorts perception itself, making spiritual purification necessary for authentic knowledge.⁷³ In this framework, epistemological failure is not simply intellectual error but often the result of ethical and spiritual corruption. The Qur'ān links purification with success and guidance. Allah states, "He has succeeded who purifies it, and he has failed who corrupts it".⁷⁴ Sufi scholars interpreted this verse as evidence that the condition of the soul directly shapes human understanding. Greed, arrogance, envy, narcissism, and attachment to worldly desires cloud perception and prevent access to deeper forms of truth.⁷⁵

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ similarly warned against the spiritual dangers of excessive

attachment to worldly accumulation. He stated, “If the son of Adam had a valley of gold, he would desire another valley.”⁷⁶ Sufi thinkers viewed such insatiable desire as an obstacle to spiritual clarity because endless attachment to consumption strengthens the ego and distracts the heart from divine reality.⁷⁷ Al-Ghazali compares the heart to a mirror capable of reflecting divine truth, yet this mirror becomes covered by the rust of sin, pride, greed, and heedlessness.⁷⁸ Purification therefore becomes an epistemic process through which the veils obstructing perception are gradually removed. Knowledge is not merely learned but unveiled through ethical transformation.

This perspective offers a direct critique of neoliberal subjectivity. Neoliberal culture normalizes self-maximization, consumerism, competition, and narcissistic individualism as desirable social values.⁷⁹ From a Sufi perspective, however, these qualities do not liberate the self but imprison it within ego-centred illusion. A consciousness dominated by greed and material obsession loses the capacity for spiritual perception because it becomes attached to appearances rather than truth.

Sufi epistemology therefore challenges neoliberal assumptions regarding freedom and success. Whereas neoliberalism defines fulfilment through accumulation and productivity, Sufism understands liberation as freedom from domination by the ego (*nafs*).⁸⁰ The struggle against the ego becomes both a spiritual and epistemological struggle because authentic knowledge requires humility, discipline, and detachment from compulsive worldly desire.

4.4 *Ma‘rifah* and Experiential Truth

The highest form of knowledge within Sufi epistemology is *ma‘rifah* (gnosis), a transformative awareness of divine reality attained through spiritual realization.⁸¹ Unlike ordinary conceptual knowledge, *ma‘rifah* is existential rather than merely intellectual. It changes not only what a person knows, but also how they exist, perceive, and relate to the world.

The Qur‘ān connects remembrance of God with spiritual awareness and inner tranquillity.⁸² Sufi thinkers interpreted this connection to mean that true knowledge emerges through experiential proximity to God rather than detached speculation alone. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ defined spiritual excellence (*Ihsān*) as “to worship God as though you see Him.”⁸³ This famous hadith became foundational for Sufi understandings of experiential spirituality because it frames religion as inward realization rather than external formalism alone.

Al-Ghazali argues that certainty concerning divine realities cannot be attained through rational argument alone but requires spiritual discipline and purification.⁸⁴ After his intellectual crisis, al-Ghazali concluded that purely philosophical reasoning was insufficient for attaining existential certainty without experiential realization.⁸⁵ Knowledge therefore required both intellectual understanding and transformation of the heart.

Rumi similarly emphasizes that ultimate truth transcends abstract conceptualization. In his *Masnawi*, he repeatedly criticizes purely formal knowledge detached from spiritual transformation.⁸⁶ For Rumi, love becomes an epistemological force that dissolves ego-centred consciousness and opens the self toward deeper awareness of divine unity.⁸⁷

Ibn ‘Arabi develops this experiential understanding through his metaphysics of divine unity. He argues that existence itself reflects the signs and manifestations of God, yet human beings remain veiled from perceiving this reality because of attachment to fragmented material appearances.⁸⁸ *Ma‘rifah* therefore involves perceiving the interconnectedness of existence through spiritual awakening rather than merely intellectual deduction.

Sufi epistemology thus understands truth as transformative and sacred rather than instrumental and utilitarian. Knowledge is valuable not because it produces economic

profit or technological power, but because it purifies the soul and orients human beings toward ethical and spiritual fulfilment.⁸⁹ In this sense, Sufi epistemology offers a profound alternative to neoliberal rationality by restoring the connection between knowledge, morality, and transcendence.

5. Sufi Epistemology as Counter-Hegemonic Resistance

Sufi epistemology does not merely offer an alternative spiritual worldview; it also functions as a counter-hegemonic critique of neoliberal modernity. While neoliberalism organizes society around market rationality, competition, and commodification, Sufi thought reorients human existence toward ethical transformation, spiritual consciousness, and metaphysical meaning.⁹⁰ In this sense, Sufi epistemology challenges the dominant assumptions underlying neoliberal culture, particularly the reduction of knowledge, value, and identity to economic productivity and individual self-interest. The resistance embedded within Sufi thought is primarily epistemological and ethical rather than directly political. Sufism contests the neoliberal understanding of the human being as an entrepreneurial and self-maximizing subject by emphasizing humility, spiritual purification, interdependence, and transcendence.⁹¹ Through concepts such as *tazkiyah* (purification), *fanā* (annihilation of the ego), and *ma'rifah* (gnosis), Sufi epistemology proposes an alternative understanding of reality in which ethical and spiritual refinement become more significant than material accumulation or market success.

5.1 Resistance to Commodification

One of the central features of neoliberalism is the commodification of existence. Under neoliberal rationality, value is increasingly determined according to productivity, profitability, and exchangeability.⁹² Human labor, education, relationships, and even personal identity become integrated into systems of market calculation. Knowledge itself is treated as economic capital, while human worth is measured through efficiency, competitiveness, and measurable performance.⁹³ Sufi epistemology fundamentally resists this reduction of existence to exchange value. In Sufi thought, the value of human life cannot be measured according to material productivity because the human being possesses a spiritual reality that transcends economic calculation.⁹⁴ The Qur'ān emphasizes this sacred dimension of humanity by declaring that God “breathed into him of His spirit”.⁹⁵ Human beings therefore possess intrinsic dignity grounded not in market usefulness but in their spiritual relationship with the Divine.

This understanding radically contrasts with neoliberal assumptions regarding value and success. Neoliberal culture privileges accumulation, consumption, and external achievement, often equating fulfilment with economic advancement.⁹⁶ Sufi thinkers, however, consistently warned against excessive attachment to worldly accumulation because material obsession blinds the heart and distances the individual from spiritual truth.⁹⁷ The Prophet Muhammad stated, “Richness is not having many possessions. Rather, true richness is the richness of the soul.”⁹⁸ This prophetic teaching directly undermines neoliberal definitions of prosperity rooted in endless acquisition and consumer desire. Al-Ghazali argues that attachment to wealth and status generates spiritual diseases such as greed, arrogance, and heedlessness that ultimately corrupt human perception.⁹⁹ Material accumulation becomes dangerous when it transforms from a practical necessity into an existential purpose. Sufi epistemology therefore does not reject economic activity itself but rejects the reduction of human existence to economic functionality.

Sufi spirituality instead locates value in ethical refinement and nearness to God. Acts such as remembrance (*dhikr*), humility, compassion, and self-discipline are considered more meaningful than social prestige or material success.¹⁰⁰ Rumi repeatedly criticizes

societies that confuse outward wealth with inward fulfilment, arguing that attachment to possessions often conceals spiritual emptiness.¹⁰¹ In this framework, the true measure of success is purification of the soul rather than accumulation of capital. Such a perspective challenges the deeper ontology of neoliberalism by refusing to define reality according to market logic alone. Sufi epistemology insists that existence possesses sacred and metaphysical dimensions that cannot be commodified or quantified.¹⁰² Consequently, it functions as a form of epistemic resistance against neoliberal attempts to reduce all forms of value to economic exchange.

5.2 Critique of Hyper-Individualism

Neoliberalism constructs the individual as an autonomous entrepreneurial subject responsible for maximizing personal success through competition and self-optimization.¹⁰³ Human relationships are increasingly shaped by transactional logic, while collective responsibility and communal ethics become secondary to personal advancement. This hyper-individualism produces isolation, anxiety, and the erosion of meaningful social bonds.

Sufi epistemology offers a direct critique of this model of selfhood through the concept of *fanā*'' (annihilation of the ego). In Sufi thought, the ego (*nafs*) represents the primary barrier separating the individual from divine truth and authentic ethical existence.¹⁰⁴ Spiritual realization therefore requires the disciplining and gradual transcendence of ego-centered desires such as pride, greed, selfishness, and domination. The Qur'ān criticizes arrogance and excessive self-centeredness, warning against those who are consumed by worldly competition and heedlessness.¹⁰⁵ Sufi scholars interpreted these teachings as evidence that unchecked egoism distorts both spiritual perception and social relations. The Prophet Muhammad similarly emphasized humility and compassion, teaching that "None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself."¹⁰⁶ This hadith establishes an ethical principle fundamentally opposed to neoliberal self-maximization because it prioritizes mutual care over competitive individualism. The Sufi process of *fanā*'' does not imply the destruction of human personality but rather liberation from narcissistic attachment to the self.¹⁰⁷ Through remembrance, worship, and ethical discipline, the seeker gradually overcomes ego-centred consciousness and develops awareness of interconnectedness with others and with God. Compassion, humility, and service become signs of spiritual maturity because the purified individual no longer views existence solely through the lens of personal gain.

This emphasis on interdependence sharply contrasts with neoliberal subjectivity, which encourages individuals to continuously market and optimize themselves.¹⁹ Byung-Chul Han argues that neoliberal culture produces isolated achievement-oriented subjects trapped within cycles of self-exploitation and emotional exhaustion.¹⁰⁸ Sufi epistemology challenges this condition by redefining human fulfilment through spiritual balance, communal ethics, and inner tranquillity rather than perpetual competition.

Rumi's writings strongly emphasize love and interconnectedness as foundations of spiritual existence.¹⁰⁹ For Rumi, human beings achieve fulfilment not through domination or accumulation but through transcending selfishness and recognizing the underlying unity. Love therefore becomes both an ethical and epistemological principle because it dissolves the illusion of radical separation between self and others. Sufi epistemology consequently undermines neoliberal hyper-individualism by replacing the entrepreneurial self with the spiritually disciplined self. Human beings are not isolated economic units competing for advantage, but interconnected moral beings whose ultimate purpose lies in ethical and spiritual realization.¹¹⁰

5.3 Ethical Knowledge vs. Instrumental Rationality

One of the most important distinctions between neoliberal and Sufi epistemologies

concerns the purpose of knowledge itself. Neoliberal rationality approaches knowledge instrumentally by asking: What is useful? What increases efficiency, productivity, or economic growth?¹¹¹ Knowledge becomes valuable primarily when it contributes to technological control, professional advancement, or market profitability. Sufi epistemology asks a fundamentally different question: What transforms the soul ethically? In this framework, knowledge cannot be separated from moral responsibility because the ultimate purpose of knowing is spiritual refinement and nearness to God.¹¹² Knowledge that increases arrogance, greed, or domination is viewed as spiritually harmful regardless of its technical sophistication.

The Qur'ān links knowledge with humility and ethical accountability.¹¹³ True knowledge leads the individual toward awareness of God, compassion toward others, and recognition of human limitation. The Prophet Muhammad warned against knowledge pursued for status, pride, or worldly recognition, emphasizing instead the ethical responsibilities attached to learning.¹¹⁴ Sufi thinkers expanded this principle by arguing that knowledge devoid of spiritual discipline becomes a source of corruption rather than liberation. Al-Ghazali strongly criticizes scholars who pursue knowledge for prestige or material benefit while neglecting ethical transformation.¹¹⁵ According to him, intellectual mastery without purification of the soul merely strengthens the ego and distances the individual from truth. Knowledge must therefore be accompanied by sincerity, humility, and moral self-discipline.

This perspective challenges modern forms of instrumental rationality. Modern societies increasingly reduce reason to technical efficiency and administrative control while neglecting ethical reflection and existential meaning.¹¹⁶ Sufi epistemology resists this reduction by insisting that knowledge must serve moral and spiritual purposes rather than mere functionality. Consequently, Sufi thought rejects the neoliberal separation between knowledge and ethics. The value of knowledge is measured not according to economic productivity but according to its capacity to transform the individual ethically and spiritually.¹¹⁷ Wisdom becomes superior to technical expertise because it concerns the right ordering of the soul and society rather than the efficient management of resources alone.

5.4 Spiritual Ontology Against Material Reductionism

At its deepest level, Sufi epistemology challenges the materialist ontology underlying neoliberal modernity. Neoliberal culture generally operates within a reductionist worldview that interprets reality primarily through economic, material, and empirical categories.¹¹⁸ Human beings are treated as biological and economic entities whose desires, behaviors, and aspirations can be explained through market logic and material interests. Sufi thought rejects this reductionism by affirming the sacred and transcendent dimensions of existence. Reality is not limited to material processes because existence itself reflects divine signs and metaphysical meaning.¹¹⁹ The Qur'ān describes the natural world as *ayat* (signs) pointing beyond themselves toward God.¹²⁰ Consequently, creation possesses spiritual significance rather than merely instrumental utility.

This sacred cosmology is especially visible in the metaphysics of Ibn 'Arabi, who conceptualizes existence through the doctrine of divine unity.¹²¹ According to Ibn 'Arabi, all multiplicity ultimately derives from and reflects the unity of divine being. Human beings therefore exist within an interconnected metaphysical order that transcends material fragmentation and isolated individuality. Such an ontology opposes neoliberal assumptions regarding competition and atomization. If existence is fundamentally interconnected and sacred, then reducing reality to consumption, productivity, and economic exchange becomes spiritually impoverished.¹²² Sufi epistemology therefore restores transcendence to human understanding by situating

economic life within a broader metaphysical and ethical framework. Nasr argues that modern materialism desacralizes both nature and humanity by severing the connection between knowledge and transcendence.¹²³ The result is not only environmental destruction but also existential alienation and spiritual emptiness. Sufi metaphysics counters this condition by affirming that the cosmos possesses sacred meaning and that human fulfilment cannot be attained through material accumulation alone.

Ultimately, Sufi epistemology functions as a counter-hegemonic framework because it challenges the foundational assumptions of neoliberal modernity at epistemological, ethical, and ontological levels. Against commodification, it affirms spiritual dignity. Against hyper-individualism, it emphasizes humility and interconnectedness. Against instrumental rationality, it prioritizes ethical transformation. Against material reductionism, it restores transcendence and sacred meaning to existence. In doing so, Sufi thought offers not merely a critique of neoliberalism, but an alternative vision of knowledge, self-hood, and human flourishing grounded in spiritual consciousness and moral responsibility.

6. Intersections with Critical Theory and Decolonial Thought

The contemporary relevance of Sufi epistemology becomes more visible when placed in conversation with critical theory, decolonial thought, and debates surrounding epistemic justice. Modern neoliberalism does not merely dominate economically or politically; it also establishes an epistemic hierarchy in which Western secular rationality is treated as the universal standard of legitimate knowledge.¹²⁴ Within this hierarchy, spiritual, metaphysical, and non-Western intellectual traditions are frequently marginalized as irrational, premodern, or culturally secondary. Sufi epistemology challenges this epistemic monopoly by proposing an alternative understanding of knowledge grounded in ethical transformation, spiritual experience, and metaphysical consciousness.

Decolonial scholars have increasingly argued that modernity and coloniality are deeply interconnected processes. Walter D. Mignolo contends that Western modernity established global systems of knowledge that privileged European rationality while subordinating alternative epistemologies and indigenous intellectual traditions.¹²⁵ Colonial domination therefore involved not only political conquest but also epistemic control over what counted as truth, reason, and civilization. Similarly, Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues that modern Western epistemology produced what he calls “epistemicide,” the systematic marginalization and erasure of non-Western ways of knowing.¹²⁶

Within this context, Sufi epistemology can be understood as a form of epistemic resistance because it refuses the exclusivity of secular materialist rationality. Sufi thought does not reject reason itself, but it rejects the assumption that empirical and instrumental rationality constitute the only valid pathways to truth.¹²⁷ By affirming revelation, spiritual intuition, ethical purification, and experiential knowledge as legitimate epistemic sources, Sufism broadens the boundaries of what may be recognized as knowledge. This intervention is particularly important in discussions of epistemic justice. Modern neoliberal knowledge systems often privilege technocratic expertise, quantification, and economic utility while dismissing contemplative, ethical, and spiritual forms of understanding.¹²⁸ Sufi epistemology destabilizes this hierarchy by asserting that moral and spiritual transformation are themselves forms of intellectual refinement. Knowledge is therefore not reduced to data accumulation or technical functionality but connected to the ethical state of the knower.

Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism is also relevant here because Western representations of Islam have historically framed Islamic intellectual traditions as irrational, static, or anti-modern.¹²⁹ Sufism has often been selectively romanticized as

either exotic spirituality detached from Islam or dismissed as irrelevant to serious philosophical discourse. Such representations obscure the intellectual sophistication of Sufi epistemology and reinforce Eurocentric assumptions regarding the superiority of secular rationalism.

Talal Asad further critiques the universalization of secular modernity by demonstrating that concepts such as religion, rationality, and secularism are historically constructed rather than universally neutral categories.¹³⁰ His work reveals how modern secular discourse often marginalizes religious epistemologies by defining legitimate knowledge through specifically Western historical experiences. Sufi epistemology therefore challenges not only neoliberal rationality but also the broader secular assumptions underlying modern epistemic structures.

The significance of Sufi epistemology within contemporary global debates lies precisely in its ability to provincialize Western rationalism without rejecting intellectual inquiry itself.¹³¹ Sufi thought does not advocate anti-intellectualism; rather, it questions the reduction of reason to material utility and instrumental control. By integrating ethics, spirituality, metaphysics, and experiential realization into its theory of knowledge, Sufism presents an alternative epistemic framework capable of expanding contemporary discussions surrounding human flourishing, morality, and meaning. In this sense, Sufi epistemology contributes to a wider decolonial project aimed at recovering marginalized intellectual traditions and pluralizing global knowledge systems. It broadens legitimate modes of knowing by affirming that spiritual and metaphysical experiences possess epistemological significance alongside rational and empirical inquiry. Such an approach is particularly relevant in an age marked by existential anxiety, ecological crisis, and moral fragmentation generated by neoliberal modernity.

7. Challenges and Critiques

Despite its critical potential, Sufi epistemology is not free from important challenges and criticisms. A rigorous analysis must therefore avoid romanticizing Sufism as a flawless alternative to neoliberal modernity. Impactful scholarship requires critical engagement with both the strengths and limitations of mystical traditions.

One common criticism concerns the romanticization of Sufism within contemporary academic and spiritual discourse. Modern representations often portray Sufism as a universal spirituality detached from Islamic theology, law, and historical context.¹³² Such portrayals reduce Sufism to abstract mysticism or therapeutic individualism while ignoring its grounding within Qur'ānic ethics and Islamic intellectual traditions. This selective appropriation risks transforming Sufism into a commodified spiritual product compatible with neoliberal consumer culture rather than a genuine critique of it.

A second criticism involves political quietism. Critics argue that certain forms of Sufism historically emphasized inward spirituality to such an extent that they neglected structural injustice and political resistance.¹³³ Excessive focus on personal purification may sometimes discourage direct engagement with systems of oppression, inequality, and colonial domination. This criticism becomes particularly significant in discussions of neoliberalism because spiritual inwardness alone cannot adequately address institutional and economic power structures.

However, reducing Sufism to political passivity oversimplifies its historical role. Numerous Sufi movements actively resisted colonialism, social injustice, and authoritarian power across different Muslim societies.¹³⁴ Moreover, Sufi critiques of greed, domination, and ego-centred accumulation possess clear ethical and political implications even when articulated primarily through spiritual language. The emphasis on ethical transformation should therefore not be interpreted as political irrelevance.

Another criticism concerns alleged anti-rational tendencies within mystical thought.

Some critics argue that emphasizing intuition, unveiling, and experiential knowledge risks undermining rational inquiry and encouraging anti-intellectualism.¹³⁵ Such concerns become particularly relevant when mystical claims are detached from scholarly discipline or theological accountability. Classical Sufi scholars, however, generally did not reject reason itself. Thinkers such as al-Ghazali and Ibn ‘Arabi integrated rational inquiry within broader metaphysical and spiritual frameworks.¹³⁶ Sufi epistemology critiques the absolutization of instrumental reason rather than rationality as such. The problem, from a Sufi perspective, is not intellect itself but intellect disconnected from ethics, revelation, and spiritual discipline.

A further challenge involves the commercialization of spirituality under neoliberal capitalism. Contemporary global culture increasingly markets spirituality through wellness industries, self-help discourse, and consumer branding.¹³⁷ Sufi symbols, poetry, and practices are frequently commodified for aesthetic consumption while stripped of their ethical and metaphysical foundations. This commercialization neutralizes the counter-hegemonic potential of Sufi epistemology by transforming spirituality into another market product centered upon individual satisfaction and emotional comfort. Related to this is the co-option of Sufi discourse by political and state institutions. In some contexts, governments and global actors selectively promote “apolitical” or “moderate” forms of Sufism as instruments for social management or depoliticized religiosity.¹³⁸ Such appropriation risks reducing Sufism to a tool of governance rather than a critical ethical tradition capable of challenging domination and injustice.

These critiques are important because they prevent simplistic idealization of Sufism. Nevertheless, they do not invalidate the broader epistemological significance of Sufi thought. Rather, they highlight the necessity of approaching Sufi epistemology critically, historically, and contextually. The value of Sufism as a counter-hegemonic framework lies not in romantic nostalgia or spiritual escapism, but in its capacity to recover ethical, metaphysical, and contemplative dimensions of knowledge marginalized within neoliberal modernity. Ultimately, Sufi epistemology should not be understood as a complete political program or a total alternative to modernity. Its importance lies instead in its ability to challenge dominant assumptions regarding knowledge, selfhood, rationality, and value. By reconnecting knowledge with ethics, spirituality, and transcendence, Sufi thought contributes meaningfully to contemporary struggles for epistemic plurality, moral renewal, and intellectual decolonization.

8. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Sufi epistemology offers a significant counter-hegemonic response to neoliberal modernity by challenging its reduction of knowledge, human value, and social existence to market rationality and instrumental utility. Contemporary neoliberalism functions not merely as an economic system but as an epistemic and moral order that reshapes subjectivity, education, ethics, and collective imagination according to the logic of competition, productivity, and commodification. In such a framework, knowledge is increasingly detached from moral responsibility and spiritual meaning, while human beings are transformed into entrepreneurial subjects governed by self-optimization and economic performance.

Against this epistemic regime, Sufi thought presents an alternative vision of knowledge grounded in ethical transformation, spiritual purification, and metaphysical consciousness. Through concepts such as *tazkiyah*, *ma‘rifah*, *dhawq*, and *kashf*, Sufi epistemology redefines knowledge not as the accumulation of information or technical mastery, but as a transformative process that refines the soul and reorients the individual toward truth, humility, and divine awareness. Knowledge in this framework is inseparable from ethics because the moral condition of the knower directly shapes

perception and understanding. Greed, narcissism, arrogance, and excessive attachment to material accumulation are therefore not merely ethical failures but epistemological distortions that veil human beings from deeper realities.

The study further demonstrated that Sufi epistemology critiques the foundational assumptions of neoliberal subjectivity. Whereas neoliberalism promotes hyper-individualism, self-maximization, and performative productivity, Sufi thought emphasizes humility, interconnectedness, compassion, and the disciplining of the ego. The Sufi ideal of spiritual refinement directly opposes neoliberal models of endless accumulation and self-exploitation by redefining human fulfilment through ethical and spiritual realization rather than competitive success. In this sense, Sufi epistemology functions not only as a mystical tradition but also as a profound critique of contemporary structures of meaning and power.

By engaging in critical theory and decolonial scholarship, this paper also highlighted the relevance of Sufi thought within broader debates concerning epistemic justice and alternative knowledge systems. Modern Western epistemology has often universalized secular rationality while marginalizing spiritual and metaphysical modes of knowing. Sufi epistemology destabilizes this monopoly by affirming the legitimacy of contemplative, ethical, and experiential knowledge traditions. It therefore contributes to contemporary efforts aimed at pluralizing global epistemologies and recovering intellectual traditions historically excluded by colonial and neoliberal structures of power.

At the same time, the paper critically acknowledged important challenges surrounding Sufism, including romanticization, commercialization, political quietism, and the risk of anti-rational interpretations. Addressing these critiques is essential in order to avoid reducing Sufi thought to either escapist spirituality or depoliticized mysticism. The significance of Sufi epistemology lies not in rejecting reason or modernity altogether, but in exposing the moral and existential limitations of a civilization governed exclusively by instrumental rationality and market logic.

The implications of this study extend beyond Islamic studies into wider academic and ethical debates concerning the future of knowledge itself. In an era characterized by ecological crisis, spiritual exhaustion, social fragmentation, and the commodification of education, Sufi epistemology offers an important intellectual resource for rethinking the relationship between knowledge, ethics, and human flourishing. It invites contemporary scholarship to reconsider whether education should merely produce economically useful subjects or cultivate morally and spiritually grounded human beings capable of wisdom, responsibility, and compassion.

Ultimately, the recovery of Sufi epistemology contributes to a broader decolonial effort to re-humanize knowledge by restoring ethical depth, transcendence, and contemplative awareness to intellectual life. It reminds modern societies that knowledge cannot be reduced to data, utility, or market value alone because the deepest human questions concern meaning, purpose, and the moral condition of existence itself. Recovering mystical epistemologies is not a retreat from modernity, but a necessary intervention against the moral and epistemic exhaustion of neoliberal civilization.

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