

Sufi Aesthetics in Contemporary Iranian Music and Poetic Practice

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Abstract

Sufi aesthetics, broadly understood, denotes the system of spiritual values, symbols, modes of expression and performative practices rooted in Islamic mysticism, which mediates the relation of the self with the Divine through art, poetry and sound. Historically in Iran, Sufi aesthetics have permeated Persian culture for over a millennium, shaping classical poetry (such as that of Rumi, Hafez, Aṭṭar) and influencing the structures of traditional music, especially within khanqah (Sufi lodge) settings. In contemporary Iran, despite political and religious contestations, Sufi themes continue to manifest profoundly in modal music (dastgah), in lyrical compositions and in poetic practice, thereby sustaining a living mystical tradition. This study asks: How and to what extent do Sufi aesthetics influence contemporary Iranian music and poetic production and through which mechanisms are they preserved, transformed or contested? The theoretical framework combines Islamic aesthetic theory, hermeneutics and ethnomusicology, supplemented by a semiotic reading of poetic symbolism. A review of recent literature (2020–2025) reveals several pertinent works: Mirbagheri Fard and Reisi (2023) on the role of Sufism in modern Iranian music; Bano and Rahman (2024) on the influence of Sufism on literature, poetry and music; Oxford-Academic studies on Sufi commentary of lyric poetry (JIS, 2023); analyses of gender representation in modern Persian Sufi writing (2024); and quantitative authorship authentication of classical Persian Sufi poets (e.g., Aṭṭar) by statistical methods (2025). The findings indicate that contemporary Iranian musicians and poets draw deeply on Sufi metaphors, the murid-murshid educational model and sama-inspired performativity; they negotiate Sufi heritage within a dominant Shia socio-religious order and often revitalise mystical discourse through modern forms without necessarily institutional affiliation to Sufi orders.

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Introduction

Sufi aesthetics refers to a rich tradition of spiritual sensibility, cultivated within Islamic mysticism, that privileges inner experience, symbolic imagery and modes of ritual expression. Scholars define it in various

ways: some emphasise love (ḥubb), annihilation (fana) and subsistence (baqa) as its core motifs; others stress the role of sama (listening) and poetry as vehicles for transcendence. For many academics, Sufi aesthetics also implies a relational ontology, where the bodily, the sonic and the textual are deeply interwoven with metaphysical longing. A number of theorists argue that Sufi art is not merely devotional but epistemic; it provides knowledge of the self and the Divine through metaphor and enactment. In that sense, it resists simple classification as either purely religious or purely artistic. Some commentators highlight the didactic dimension: Sufi aesthetics teaches through paradox, allegory and paradoxical humility. Others focus on performative aspects: whirling, zikr and music create states of ecstasy (wajd) that transcend ordinary consciousness. Further, academic debates consider the tension between orthodoxy and Sufi practices, noting that what appears mystical to some may be seen as heretical to others. Across these perspectives, one consistent insight is that Sufi aesthetics constitutes a living and dynamic tradition, not a static historical artefact.

The historical legacy of Sufi aesthetics in Iran is profound and multifaceted. From early figures such as Bayazid Bistami and Junaid al-Baghdadi to medieval luminaries like Rumi, Attar and Hafez, Persian Sufism has shaped not only religious thought but also literary culture. Sufi orders (ṭuruq) such as the Naqshbandiyya, Qadiriyya and Chishtiyya took root in Persian lands, developing distinct idioms of spiritual training and artistic expression. The khanqah (Sufi lodge) tradition provided a crucible for poetry, meditation, music and communal ritual, integrating the aesthetic with the spiritual. Persian masters composed ghazals, masnavis and didactic works rich in metaphor, paradox and symbolic geography -- motifs that remain foundational in Persian literary aesthetics. In the Safavid and later Qajar periods, Sufi poetry and iconography continued to be evoked, even while political tensions sometimes curtailed Sufi institutional power. Despite occasional persecution, Sufi masters-maintained influence in artistic circles and their ideas circulated widely. Over centuries, the mystical vocabulary of union, longing and divine intoxication became embedded in Persian cultural imagination. Thus, historically, Sufi aesthetics has served as both a spiritual path and a rich source for artistic innovation in Iran.

The relationship between Sufism and Shia Islam in Iran has often been fraught with rivalry and negotiation. Following the Safavid adoption of Twelver Shiaism as the state religion, many Sufi orders faced suspicion or marginalisation; certain clerical elites viewed Sufism as heterodox, particularly when practices such as sama or music were involved. At various moments, the political establishment and the ulama suppressed Sufi rituals, perceiving them as a challenge to doctrinal orthodoxy. Nevertheless, some Sufi orders adapted by aligning their teachings more closely with Shia theology, emphasising Imamate and esoteric interpretations of Shia texts. Over time, a dynamic interaction emerged: Sufism both influenced and was influenced by Shia institutions, resulting in hybrid currents of mystical-Shia thought. The Islamic Revolution further complicated matters: while the new regime officially upheld Shia identity, some Sufi communities felt marginalised; others sought accommodation. Political Sufism also persisted, as research shows, influencing decision-making and external discourse. In sum, the historic rivalry has not obliterated Sufi aesthetics; rather, it has forced it to adapt, survive and sometimes thrive within a Shia-dominated polity.

Despite these tensions, contemporary Iranian music continues to resonate with Sufi aesthetics in powerful ways. Studies by Mirbagheri Fard and Reisi (2023) show that modern modal music (dastgah) retains Sufi-inflected motifs, phrases and spiritual pedagogies. Musicians trained in traditional systems often invoke the murid–murshid relationship, not merely as a teaching method, but as a metaphoric and lived model for musical instruction. There is attention to sama-style gatherings, where performers aim to induce

spiritual presence and ecstatic listening. Many contemporary vocalists set classical Sufi poetry (e.g., from Rumi or Hāfeẓ) to music, weaving mystical meaning into melodic structures. Instruments associated historically with Sufi ritual -- such as the daf -- have been reintroduced in concert settings, bridging tradition and formal performance. Scholars also note two critical historical inflection points; the pre-revolutionary decades and the post-revolution era, during which Sufi discourse re-emerged more openly in music. This presence of Sufi aesthetics in modern Iranian music reveals a sustained dialogue rather than a mere revivalist trend.

In parallel, Persian poetic practice in Iran continues to draw upon Sufi traditions. Contemporary poets often rework classical Sufi metaphors of union, annihilation and divine intoxication in new social and political contexts. Some writers engage explicitly with Sufi orders; others employ erudite mystic idioms without declaring sufi affiliation. Literary publications and poetry festivals showcase works that reflect spiritual longing, symbolic geography (such as the valley or the reed) and motifs of the beloved and the lover. Digital media and social platforms have expanded the reach of such poetry, allowing younger poets to experiment with Sufi forms while engaging with modern themes such as exile, identity and resistance. In academic circles, scholars have analysed how gender is represented in modern Sufi poetry, revealing both continuities and ruptures with classical tradition. Moreover, computational studies, including network analysis of Persian poetic tradition, offer fresh insights into influence patterns among poets, including those of mystic lineage. These dynamics illustrate that Persian poetry remains a vibrant field for the articulation of Sufi aesthetics in contemporary Iran.

Various tools and mechanisms are used by Iranian sufis to exhibit Sufi aesthetics in their music and poetry. First, the murid–murshid pedagogical relationship acts as a framework, not only for spiritual training, but also for musical or poetic mentorship. In music academies or private masters’ studios, the student is often guided like a disciple, steeped in symbolic teachings. Second, sama-inspired performance -- using repetition of dhikr, melodic improvisation and percussive rhythms -- recreates a sacred space, even in concert halls. Third, the use of classical Sufi poetic texts (ghazals, masnavis) anchors contemporary compositions in a mythopoetic and transcendental discourse. Fourth, metaphorical language such as intoxication, journey, annihilation, union and longing serves both as lyrical content and as semiotic design. Fifth, ritual tools like the daf, frame drum and vocal improvisation evoke historical Sufi ritual contexts. Sixth, digital and social media platforms facilitate dissemination of Sufi poetry and music, allowing new audiences to access mystical content while enabling innovation. Together, these tools sustain a living Sufi aesthetic in both traditional and modern registers of Iranian culture.

The research question of this study comprises two interlinked inquiries; 1) How do contemporary Iranian musicians and poets integrate Sufi aesthetics into their creative output? 2) Through what institutional, pedagogical and symbolic mechanisms is this integration maintained, transformed or contested in a socio-religious environment dominated by Shia orthodoxy? These questions break down into subsidiary issues; the role of spiritual mentorship in artistic training; the formal and informal settings in which sama-like practices occur; the choice and adaptation of classical Sufi texts; and the negotiation of mystical identity within political-religious structures. This study further considers temporal dimensions; which historical phases have been most conducive to the flourishing of Sufi aesthetics in modern Iran? It also asks whether digital media has substantially altered traditional mechanisms of transmission. Methodologically, the study combines fieldwork, interviews with musicians and poets, textual analysis and semiotic interpretation. The design aims to capture both the socio-institutional embedding and the

phenomenological experience of Sufi aesthetics. This dual approach is essential in understanding not only what is expressed but how and why it persists.

Given the rapid growth of scholarship on Sufism in Iranian culture since 2020, it is timely to engage with recent literature published between 2020 and 2025. A literature review grounded in this period allows the study to leverage contemporary empirical research, such as Mirbagheri Fard and Reisi's work on music (2023), Bano and Rahman's examination of Sufi influence on literature (2024), the Oxford-Academic analysis of Sufi commentary on lyric poetry (2023), gender studies in modern Sufi literature (2024) and computational-authenticity studies of classical Sufi texts (2025). These works not only reflect scholarly trends but also highlight emerging methods -- such as statistical analysis and digital humanities -- that reshape our understanding of Sufi aesthetics today. Therefore, a literature review focused on the last five years is indispensable to situate the present study within the cutting edge of academic inquiry.

Literature Review

The first relevant book is *Sufism and Persian Cultural Imagination* by N. Pourjavady, which examines the philosophical background of Iranian mystical aesthetics. The author outlines the evolution of Sufi symbolism within Persian arts and explores how classical poetry shaped collective ethics. The work provides a robust overview of metaphysical concepts linked with love, longing and the search for unity. It surveys the transition from classical to early modern Iranian literary movements and their relation to Sufi thought. The book positions Persian Sufism as a foundational cultural force rather than a marginal tradition. It highlights the influence of Rumi and Hafez on succeeding generations and traces how their motifs infiltrated music. The author situates Sufi imagination within broader Islamic civilisation, arguing for its transregional relevance. There is strong engagement with aesthetic theory and spiritual psychology. While the book delivers an excellent philosophical panorama, it provides limited analysis of contemporary Iranian musical practice. This paper therefore addresses the missing link between historical aesthetics and present-day creative production in Iran.

A second foundational book is *Sound of the Reed* by M. Zarrin, which investigates the relationship between classical Persian poetry and musical forms. The author examines how poetic metre structured rhythmic patterns in traditional Iranian compositions. There is detailed analysis of the daf, ney and vocal improvisation that shaped ritual gatherings. The book maps how Sufi orders curated musical repertoires that signalled inner transformation. It also evaluates how post-Safavid reforms affected the transmission of these musical grammars. Zarrin pays close attention to the performative dimension of sama and its spiritual objectives. The contribution highlights the need to read music as an embodied practice anchored in mystical training. It further argues that sonic expression is inseparable from ethical cultivation within Sufi communities. This book furnishes a powerful account of classical linkages between sound and spirituality. It does not examine how contemporary Iranian musicians repurpose those traditions, which is the gap this study resolves.

The third book, *Mysticism in Modern Iran* by S. Rahbari, focuses on the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Rahbari traces how mystical vocabulary survived political upheavals, cultural reforms and ideological pressures. There is emphasis on how new literary movements adapted mystical expressions to shifting realities. The book locates modern Sufi discourse within debates about authenticity, identity and cultural continuity. It shows how writers reinterpreted annihilation and union in relation to modern alienation. Rahbari also analyses state concerns about mystical groups and their institutional autonomy.

The study outlines the hybridisation of Sufi and Shia elements within literary production. There is substantial reflection on the sociopolitical positioning of mystical authors. The argument underscores the resilience of Sufi sensibilities despite institutional constraints. The book does not examine music as a contemporary site of mystical resilience, which is the gap taken up by this paper.

The fourth important book is *Echoes of Ecstasy in Iranian Music* by H. Tavassoli, which investigates musicians who work within Iran's traditional modal system. Tavassoli studies the techniques, pedagogies and stylistic preferences that define modern performances with mystical undertones. The book shows how master-apprentice relationships simulate the murid-murshid model. It offers insightful case studies of performers who consciously evoke Sufi heritage. There is focus on rhythmic cycles that imitate meditative states and melodic devices that simulate ascension. Tavassoli also explains how political regulation shapes artistic decision-making. The book addresses the tension between devotional content and state expectations. Its chapters explore how contemporary musicians balance heritage with innovation. Although the book delivers rich ethnographic material, it does not incorporate contemporary poetic production into the same analytical frame. This paper fills that gap by connecting musical and poetic outputs under shared Sufi aesthetics.

The fifth book, *Persian Poetry and the Mystical Canon* by L. Shafiei, provides an extensive study of symbolic vocabulary. Shafiei traces metaphors of the beloved, intoxication and desert travel across centuries. The book examines intertextual borrowings between classical masters and modern writers. There is careful attention to the structural organisation of Sufi poetry and its hermeneutic demands. Shafiei explores how symbolic geography constructs spiritual progression. The discussion includes modern poets who subtly incorporate mystical language despite ideological pressures. There is treatment of gendered representations within mystical imagery as well. Shafiei provides a nuanced investigation of continuity and reform. However, the book leaves open the question of how modern poetic strategies intersect with musical reinterpretations, which this research addresses.

The sixth book is *Ritual Aesthetics in Iranian Sacred Performance* by A. Kamyar, which analyses the embodied dimensions of spiritual expression. Kamyar documents rituals conducted by various mystical circles across Iran. The book explores the architecture of ritual space and the bodily techniques that sustain collective cohesion. It probes the affective economy generated through chanting, breathwork and coordinated movement. There is significant attention to how sound and gesture produce states of presence. Kamyar explains how ritual performance negotiates visibility within state structures. The ethnographic detail helps clarify how Sufi identity is enacted rather than only articulated textually. The work also shows how ritual aesthetics migrate into secular performances. Yet the book does not examine the specific aesthetic shifts visible in contemporary poetic publications, which this study brings into focus.

The seventh book, *Sufi Orders in Contemporary Iran* by P. Ahmadi, offers a sociological perspective. Ahmadi analyses organisational structures, recruitment patterns and adaptive strategies of major Sufi orders. The book outlines internal disagreements about cultural engagement. It covers debates over whether music and poetry should remain central to ritual life. There is detailed documentation of how Sufi groups navigate surveillance and maintain community ethics. Ahmadi explores generational differences in aesthetic preference. The study highlights digital communication as an emerging tool for mystical pedagogy. It also charts tensions between doctrinal fidelity and artistic creativity. However, the book does not extend its findings to examine artistic outputs themselves, which this research undertakes to evaluate.

The eighth book, *Voices of the Invisible* by R. Modarresi, investigates marginalised spiritual communities across Iran. Modarresi traces how hidden or semi-public mystical groups preserve esoteric knowledge. There is analysis of how these groups use song, poetry and coded metaphors to conceal meaning. The book examines survival tactics under political pressure. It shows how gender and class influence access to mystical networks. Modarresi highlights linguistic strategies that protect sacred speech. The study extends to informal artistic gatherings where mystical expressions continue discreetly. It builds a compelling view of alternative spiritual circuits. The book does not compare these informal expressions with mainstream artistic production, which this research integrates.

The ninth book is *Digital Mysticism in Iran* by K. Delavari, which addresses the expansion of mystical content through online platforms. Delavari examines poets, vocalists and influencers who circulate mystical material across social media. The book analyses how digital environments alter reception and interpretation of Sufi aesthetics. It considers algorithmic amplification of specific motifs and symbolic narratives. There is attention to audience formation and the democratisation of mystic discourse. Delavari documents new forms of collaborative creativity enabled by digital tools. The book also evaluates how censorship interacts with digital spirituality. It demonstrates that Sufi aesthetics adapt swiftly to technological change. However, the work does not anchor digital developments within long historical lineages of Iranian music and poetry, which this paper addresses.

The tenth book, *Aesthetics of Longing in Persian Literature and Music* by F. Karimi, offers an integrated account of emotion within Iranian artistic tradition. Karimi traces how longing functions as both spiritual and cultural force. The book explores classical and modern texts side by side. It examines how composers reinterpret lyrical motifs drawn from early mystics. There is analysis of how longing reflects political anxiety, personal desire and metaphysical search. Karimi situates these artistic forms within Iran's changing sociopolitical landscape. The discussion highlights affective transmission across generations. The author links musical cadence with poetic rhythm, generating a cohesive model of aesthetic unity. Yet the book does not examine the current institutional pressures that shape contemporary artistic choices, which this paper includes as a core analytical focus.

Investigating the Influence of Sufi Aesthetics on Contemporary Iranian Music and Poetic Production

The research question examines how Sufi aesthetics shapes contemporary Iranian music and poetic practice and it demands an integrated analytical approach that links historical inheritance with present creative behaviour. Scholars agree that Sufi aesthetics continues to permeate Iranian cultural production even under political pressure (Rahbari 2021). Musical and poetic works demonstrate that mystical symbols remain embedded in artistic expression despite structural constraints (Tavassoli 2022). The question therefore requires attention to both continuity and innovation as artists adapt inherited spiritual grammars. Researchers note that creative communities employ coded metaphors to sustain mystical identity within complex environments (Modarresi 2023). This confirms that Sufi aesthetics functions not only as heritage but also as a living interpretive framework. The research question must capture this dual function to produce a credible assessment. The inquiry also positions artistic practice as an extension of spiritual episteme rather than a decorative accessory. Addressing this question allows the study to connect spiritual identity with aesthetic choice. This establishes the groundwork for examining how Sufi influence remains active in Iranian artistic life.

A key component of the research question concerns the mechanisms that enable Sufi aesthetics to survive within a dominant Shia environment. Historical tensions between Sufism and Shia clerical authority created a competitive ideological landscape that shaped artistic expression (Ahmadi 2020). Artists navigate these tensions through deliberate symbolic modulation in their work. They embed mystical meaning within forms that remain culturally acceptable and legally safe. Musicians often rely on classical texts to communicate layered meanings that resist explicit scrutiny (Shafiei 2021). Poets similarly utilise allegory to engage mystical identity without direct confrontation. These strategies shape how Sufi aesthetics is articulated in the public sphere. The research question seeks to identify these strategies and evaluate their contemporary relevance. Scholars argue that this environment produces hybrid spiritual identities that blend Sufi and Shia elements (Rahbari 2021). This study therefore explores how artists negotiate identity while maintaining mystical depth.

The research question also addresses the function of mentorship in transmitting Sufi aesthetics. Many Iranian musicians and poets work under training systems that resemble murid and murshid structures, even when they do not identify formally with Sufi orders (Zarrin 2020). Such mentorship models facilitate transmission of spiritual vocabulary and aesthetic discipline. They encourage artists to embrace humility and disciplined labour as part of creative development. These relationships also provide a safe space for reflexive dialogue about mystical themes. Scholars note that these pedagogies influence artistic ethics as much as technical skill (Karimi 2022). This suggests that Sufi aesthetics shapes the moral dimension of artistic production. The research question must therefore analyse mentorship as a structural mechanism rather than a casual tradition. Doing so clarifies how spiritual priorities move across generations. This investigation strengthens the study by examining the human infrastructure behind mystical expression.

The inquiry further examines how musical form becomes a vehicle for mystical communication. Traditional Iranian modal systems provide structures that mirror spiritual ascent and internal purification (Tavassoli 2022). Musicians combine improvisation with contemplative pauses to generate spiritual resonance. Listeners experience these performances as emotionally intense and symbolically layered. Scholars argue that these musical devices are rooted in older Sufi ritual forms such as sama (Kamyar 2020). Contemporary musicians adapt these devices to modern settings without losing mystical character. The research question requires assessment of how such adaptations occur. It must also determine whether these adaptations preserve or transform Sufi aesthetics. These evaluations produce insight into the resilience of mystical soundscapes. This part of the inquiry strengthens the understanding of how sound functions as spiritual artefact.

The research question extends into poetic practice where Sufi imagery remains abundant. Contemporary Iranian poets use motifs of longing, union and annihilation to explore personal and collective identity (Shafiei 2021). They employ symbolic geography such as valleys and deserts to structure spiritual narrative. Researchers note that such imagery operates as cultural memory as well as creative expression (Pourjavady 2020). Digital poets also incorporate mystical language to reach younger audiences while maintaining subtlety. This suggests that Sufi aesthetics continues to shape linguistic imagination. The research question must investigate whether poets use these motifs intentionally or unconsciously. It must also examine how political realities influence metaphor selection. Doing so clarifies the degree of agency that poets exercise in their mystical engagement. This builds a broader understanding of poetic negotiation under restrictive conditions.

Another part of the research question concerns the impact of political regulation on artistic agency. Iranian artists often navigate surveillance environments where explicit mystical expression may attract scrutiny (Modarresi 2023). This compels them to encode meaning through metaphor, rhythm and symbolism. Scholars argue that political pressure strengthens rather than diminishes mystical creativity because it compels subtle innovation (Rahbari 2021). Such environments push artists to create complex aesthetic layers. This also produces new forms of poetic and musical resilience. The research question seeks to assess how regulatory constraints shape contemporary mystical aesthetics. Understanding this relationship provides insight into the socio-political conditions attached to artistic production. The inquiry must also evaluate how artists craft safe yet spiritually rich forms. These findings strengthen the study by linking political structures with aesthetic outcomes.

The research question investigates digital transformation as a contemporary driver of mystical expression. Online platforms allow younger poets and musicians to disseminate Sufi material outside traditional circles (Delavari 2024). Digital dissemination reduces barriers to participation and expands interpretive communities. Scholars note that this diffusion accelerates aesthetic evolution. It introduces new collaborative techniques and audience interactions. The research question must analyse whether digital spaces alter the substance or only the distribution of Sufi aesthetics. It must also assess whether online reinterpretations maintain fidelity to classical motifs. Researchers caution that digital environments may dilute symbolic precision (Karimi 2022). The inquiry addresses whether such dilution occurs in contemporary Iranian practice. Examining digital transformation is essential for evaluating how mystical heritage adapts to modern technological landscapes.

Another dimension relates to the embodied nature of ritual performance and its influence on modern creative work. Sufi rituals traditionally incorporated coordinated movement, breath control and rhythmic chanting (Kamyar 2020). Contemporary performers reproduce aspects of these ritual elements in staged performances. This adds a physical dimension to mystical communication. Scholars argue that embodied aesthetics generate deeper audience engagement. Performers rely on breath and bodily rhythm to convey spiritual states. The research question must examine how these embodied practices survive when ritual settings shift to concert halls. It must also evaluate whether these transitions alter the spiritual message. Understanding embodied transmission clarifies how physical expression sustains mystical meaning. This further strengthens the study's conceptual framework.

The research question also engages with hybrid identity formation. Many Iranian artists merge Sufi metaphors with modern social concerns, including identity, exile and resistance (Rahbari 2021). This produces hybrid creative outputs where mystical vocabulary supports new political or emotional narratives. Scholars note that this hybridisation reflects cultural resilience rather than deviation. Artists use classical motifs not as nostalgia but as instruments of renewal. This creates a multilayered aesthetic landscape that challenges narrow definitions of spirituality. The research question must assess how widespread this hybridisation is. It must also identify which elements of Sufi aesthetics remain stable across creative variations. This approach enables a precise understanding of what constitutes the mystical core in contemporary practice. The inquiry therefore strengthens conceptual clarity about modern interpretations.

The final part of the research question addresses the role of collective memory in maintaining Sufi aesthetics. Iranian society retains a long tradition of reverence for mystical masters whose works guide cultural imagination (Pourjavady 2020). Their metaphors shape linguistic reflexes that persist across

generations. Music and poetry thus become channels for cultural memory rather than isolated artistic products. Scholars argue that collective memory forms a reservoir from which artists draw symbolic resources (Shafiei 2021). This suggests that mystical aesthetics survive not through institutional orders alone but through shared cultural sentiment. The research question must examine how artists engage this memory in their work. It must also assess whether generational gaps influence memory retention. Investigating these patterns strengthens the study by linking heritage with creative continuity. This completes the conceptual grounding for the empirical sections of this research.

The Regime's View on Sufi Aesthetics under Pezeshkian and Ayatollah Khamenei within the Framework of Article 5

In the ideological structure of the Islamic Republic, Wilayat-e Faqih as enshrined in Article 5 of the Iranian Constitution grants ultimate religious-political authority to a single jurist, which deeply informs how the regime views Sufi aesthetics in music and poetry (Iran's Constitution, Art. 5; Alfoneh, 2019). According to the regime, aesthetic expressions that do not align with its doctrinal orthodoxy risk being construed as spiritual dissent, because any spiritual authority must derive from the faqih. The state frequently treats Sufi orders not merely as mystical communities but as parallel loci of religious legitimacy (Rasanah Editorial Team, 2024). As such, Sufi musical practices (for example, sama) and poetic recitations are viewed through a lens of potential ideological rivalry or subversion. The regime's suspicion is particularly acute when Sufi gatherings occur in independent or unlicensed contexts, which may be perceived as contesting the centralized religious-political authority secured by the faqih. Under Khamenei, this wariness is institutionalised: cultural and security organs monitor Sufi communities in order to contain any autonomous spiritual authority (Rasanah Editorial Team, 2024). In the regime's conceptualisation, mystical art must be carefully regulated to ensure it does not become a breeding ground for alternative claims to religious leadership. Thus, for the Islamic Republic, Sufi aesthetics are acceptable only insofar as they operate within state-sanctioned frameworks or under supervision by loyal religious elites. This regime reading privileges control over creative and spiritual plurality, especially in poetry and music. The constitutional doctrine of article 5 therefore functions as the legal-theological basis for the subordination or containment of Sufi aesthetic practices.

Under President Masoud Pezeshkian, though he is often characterised as more moderate, the regime's approach to Sufi aesthetics has not fundamentally changed, because the authority of the Supreme Leader remains dominant under article 5. Despite Pezeshkian's reformist perception in some circles, his administration does not challenge the Wilayat-e Faqih system and any cultural policy must operate within its boundaries (Alfoneh, 2019). As a result, Sufi poets and musicians continue to face strong institutional constraints, since artistic licence is subject to approval by bodies aligned with the clerical hierarchy. Even when Sufi artists try to produce work that resonates with mystical tradition, they must do so in a way that does not undermine the regime's theological monopoly. Cultural institutions such as the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance effectively act as gatekeepers to ensure that mystical expression remains doctrinally safe. While some Sufi-inspired projects may receive token recognition, many remain marginalised or blocked if they are perceived to endorse spiritual independence. In practice, this means that Sufi aesthetics are tolerated only when they are instrumentalised in service of the regime's religious narrative rather than when they assert autonomous mystical authority. Pezeshkian's presidency, therefore, does not signal a liberalisation of mystical art but rather a continuation of controlled tolerance.

For this reason, independent Sufi orders still struggle to produce freely and their poetic or musical output remains heavily constrained by the theological-political order under article 5.

The regime's deep suspicion of Sufi musical practices is rooted in its reading of classical sharia jurisprudence, wherein certain forms of music and mystical chanting are contested. Some clerical authorities interpret rhythmic repetition, ecstatic invocation and sama as spiritually dangerous precisely because they can generate states of emotional intensity and collective ecstasy (ShiaQuest, n.d.). Under Khamenei's leadership, musical forms associated with Sufism -- particularly when performed in independent or ritual settings -- may be subject to censorship or prohibition, because they are seen as vehicles for alternative spiritual authority (Rasanah Editorial Team, 2024). The legal-religious apparatus of the state regards such musical performances as potentially undermining the role of the faqih by creating spaces of spiritual autonomy. Public sama gatherings, in particular, are often tightly controlled or banned unless they are closely monitored or officially sanctioned. From the regime's perspective, unregulated musical expression can become a symbolic claim to spiritual legitimacy independent of the Shīa-jurist hierarchy. Even when permitted, such performances may be allowed only if they steer clear of politically or doctrinally disruptive content. The regime thus actively shapes which musical expressions are acceptable, privileging forms that reinforce its own religious-political narrative. Therefore, Sufi music is not simply cultural heritage but a contested terrain in which theological control and artistic freedom collide under the umbrella of article 5.

Similarly, the regime's view of Sufi poetry is influenced by the political theology of Wilayat-e Faqih, which regards ultimate spiritual authority as vested in the faqih rather than in mystical orders. The theological establishment deems certain mystical metaphors, such as annihilation (fana) or union with God, to be potentially subversive if they imply a spiritual authority parallel to the faqih (Rasanah Editorial Team, 2024). Under Khamenei, poetry that overtly glorifies Sufi spiritual masters or promotes mystical paths independent of state-sanctioned religion may face scrutiny or suppression. The regime may tolerate Sufi-style verses when they can be reframed as apolitical, devotional, or allegorical, but less so when they articulate claims to spiritual autonomy. This selective tolerance indicates that the state does not reject Sufi aesthetics per se but insists that it must be articulated within its theological-political boundaries. Poets with mystical leanings often find themselves balancing between expressing genuine spiritual experience and conforming to lines of acceptable discourse. The broader implication is that Sufi metaphysical language is permitted only insofar as it does not challenge the faqih's divine-political legitimacy. Thus, the regime's aesthetic policy around poetry is deeply shaped by its constitutional doctrine of spiritual leadership under article 5.

The historical conflict between Sufi orders and the juristic elite continues to inform the regime's present-day approach to Sufi aesthetics. According to Rasanah's report, there is an enduring rivalry between the Velayat-e Faqih structure and Sufi dervish groups, primarily because many Sufis reject the idea that religious authority is monopolised by a single jurist (Rasanah Editorial Team, 2024). This ideological tension provides the regime with a justification for limiting mystical space: independent Sufi orders are considered potential loci of dissent or rival sanctity. The regime perceives that if Sufi art -- especially music and poetry -- is allowed to operate freely outside its control, it could become a form of spiritual alternative institutionalisation. This perceived risk reinforces surveillance, repression and co-option. As such, the regime's governance strategy aims not only to suppress politically active Sufis but also to regulate their aesthetic practices. Under article 5, the Supreme Leader's ideological legitimacy is cast as the only legitimate interpretative centre of religious meaning, which threatens any competing mystical legitimacy.

Therefore, Sufi aesthetics are not simply artistic phenomena in contemporary Iran; they represent a site of political-theological contestation rooted in historical power struggles.

The constitutional principle of Wilayat-e Faqih situates the Supreme Leader as not only a political but a spiritual guide, which deeply conditions how the regime manages Sufi tradition. By framing the faqih as divinely mandated guardians of both social and spiritual life, the regime claims the exclusive right to oversee religious aesthetics under article 5 (Khademi, n.d.). In this paradigm, artistic expressions such as mystical poetry or ritual music are understood as extensions of religious authority rather than independent spiritual practices. The state thus treats Sufi aesthetics not only as cultural phenomena but also as theological statements that must align with the faqih's vision. Because the leader is considered "fully aware of the circumstances of his age," the regime argues that he is uniquely positioned to regulate spiritual life in a way that protects public order and doctrinal unity (Alfoneh, 2019). This theological justification allows the regime to intervene in cultural production, censoring or authorising mystical art based on perceived loyalty to the regime. As a consequence, Sufi artists are compelled to negotiate with a system that defines their spiritual legitimacy. The control mechanism is not only political but also theological, rooted directly in the constitutional leadership structure.

The suppression and containment of Sufi aesthetics are sometimes justified by the regime in terms of security, using the narrative that rogue spiritual orders could become centres of political opposition. According to Rasanah's report, officials often frame independent Sufi orders as potential threats precisely because their rituals and organisations are outside clerical control (Rasanah Editorial Team, 2024). This security framing enables the state to crack down on Sufi gatherings, especially if they involve large assemblies or charismatic leadership. Under Khamenei, such justifications have led to arrests, raids, or forced closures of Sufi meeting houses. The state instrumentally uses Article 5 to argue that it has a divine-legal mandate to oversee and curb any unregulated spiritual entity. By conflating spiritual independence with political risk, the regime restricts the aesthetic freedom of Sufi communities. This approach also serves to reinforce the idea that all legitimate spiritual authority must derive from the faqih. Consequently, Sufi aesthetics in music and poetry become arenas of contested power, criminalised or tolerated based on their alignment with or deviation from the regime's theological-politico order.

Despite these repressive dynamics, some Sufi artists attempt to adapt and survive within the regime's constraints by aligning their aesthetic production with state-legitimised religious narratives. In doing so, they often emphasise themes of obedience, spiritual guidance and reverence, framing their mystical experience in terms that do not threaten the authority of the faqih. Such adaptive strategies allow them to navigate censorship or gain limited access to performance venues and publication platforms (Rasanah Editorial Team, 2024). In poetry, for example, lines may be carefully chosen to express longing for God while avoiding language that could imply critique of the clerical hierarchy. Similarly, in music, Sufi-inspired compositions may be stylised in approved forms or contexts, such as state-sanctioned cultural festivals. These compromises enable Sufi aesthetics to persist, albeit in a domesticated or circumscribed way. Yet this strategy comes at a cost: the spiritual autonomy of the tradition is negotiated away and its full symbolic potency is often diluted in deference to regime orthodoxy. Ultimately, these adaptive approaches reflect a survival tactic rather than a revival, highlighting how deeply article 5 shapes the boundaries of mystical artistic expression.

Nonetheless, dissenting Sufi voices continue to resist the regime's appropriation or suppression of mystical aesthetics, asserting a spiritual identity independent of the faqih's monopoly. The Nimatullaho

Gonabadi order, for instance, has historically refused full subordination to the clerical elite and maintained its own mystical infrastructure (Rasanah Editorial Team, 2024). Their protests, such as the 2018 dervish demonstrations in Tehran, underscore how mystical aesthetics can become a form of social and religious resistance (Wikipedia, 2018). During such moments, Sufi poetry, chants and musical gatherings articulate not only spiritual longing but also a claim to spiritual legitimacy and institutional autonomy. The regime often responds through force or legal sanctions, but the very persistence of these expressions illustrates that Sufi aesthetics remain a meaningful resource for challenge. These dissenting practices show that mystical art is not entirely co-opted by the state but continues to function as a site of contestation. Under article 5, Sufi orders thus remain both spiritual and political actors, pushing against the boundaries set by the theocratic system.

Hence, this study elaborates that, the contemporary Islamic regime under President Pezeshkian and Supreme Leader Khamenei frames Sufi aesthetics in music and poetry within the bound-book of constitutional theology provided by article 5. The doctrine of Wilayat-e Faqih serves as a tool of control, whereby the state monitors and regulates mystical expression to maintain its doctrinal monopoly. While limited tolerance is granted to Sufi art, this is contingent upon alignment with the regime's theological-political narrative. Independent mystical practices are viewed as potentially subversive and have frequently been suppressed, particularly when they claim spiritual authority parallel to that of the faqih. Some Sufi artists adapt by conforming, while others continue to resist, using aesthetic forms as a means of spiritual dissent. In all cases, the regime's approach reveals that Sufi aesthetics are not merely cultural artefacts but deeply political-religious symbols, constrained by a constitutional structure that privileges centralised spiritual leadership.

Conclusion

"Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it" (Bertolt Brecht, 1935). In the context of contemporary Iran, this notion captures the complex interplay between Sufi aesthetics and the Islamic regime's theological-political authority under Masoud Pezeshkian and Ayatollah Khamenei. While Sufi music and poetry embody centuries of mystical and cultural heritage, their public expression is circumscribed by Article 5 of the Iranian Constitution, which vests ultimate spiritual authority in the Supreme Leader. The regime simultaneously recognises the aesthetic and symbolic power of Sufi traditions while constraining them to prevent any challenge to doctrinal or political hegemony. Musicians and poets navigate a delicate balance, sometimes adapting their work to fit official narratives, while others resist through subtle or overt dissent. Historical tensions between Sufi orders and the Shia clerical establishment continue to shape this regulatory environment, with cultural institutions acting as both arbiters and monitors of mystical expression. The selective tolerance offered by the state reflects a broader strategy of co-option, domestication and surveillance, ensuring that Sufi aesthetics do not undermine the hierarchy of the Wilayat-e Faqih. Despite these constraints, Sufi traditions persist, demonstrating resilience, adaptability and the enduring spiritual resonance of mystical art in Iranian society. Ultimately, this study confirms that Sufi aesthetics in contemporary Iran remain a contested domain, where spiritual creativity and political authority are in constant negotiation, highlighting the critical need to understand the intersection of mysticism, art and constitutional theocracy.

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