



Meaning-Making among Islamic Philosophy Students through Engagement with Sufi Literature

Yera Yulista

Institut Agama Islam Negeri Syaikh Abdurrahman Siddik Bangka Belitung, Indonesia

yerabelajar@gmail.com

Article Info

Article history:

Received 31-05-2025

Revised 09-07-2025

Accepted 17-07-2025

Keyword:

Islamic Philosophy,
Spirituality, Sufi Literature,
Phenomenology, Sacred
Reading

ABSTRACT

Spiritual engagement with sacred literature represents a significant area of inquiry within the humanities, particularly for understanding how individuals construct meaning through reflective reading. While Sufi literature has been widely studied from theological and literary perspectives, little is known about how contemporary readers especially Islamic philosophy students experience spiritual transformation through these texts. This study addresses the gap by asking: how do students interpret and internalize spiritual meaning through their engagement with Sufi literature? Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study explores the lived experiences of Islamic philosophy students from a public university in Indonesia as they read classical Sufi works such as those by Rumi and Ibn Arabi. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight participants, and analyzed to identify emergent and superordinate themes. Findings reveal that participants experienced the texts as mirrors for self-examination, sources of emotional awakening, frameworks for reframing existential struggles, and inspiration for integrating spiritual values into academic life. These insights demonstrate that reading Sufi literature functions as a transformative act that shapes ethical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of student identity. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on spiritual phenomenology by highlighting the role of sacred reading in the formation of reflective selfhood. These findings suggest that phenomenological approaches offer valuable tools for examining how individuals embody spiritual meaning in modern educational contexts, opening pathways for future interdisciplinary research.



©2025 Authors. Published by PT Mukhlisina Revolution Center.. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary academic discourse, there is a growing recognition of the importance of exploring human experiences that extend beyond empirical observation and quantitative measurement. This is particularly true in the fields of humanities and philosophy, where the subjective dimensions of meaning, identity, and spirituality are often central to human understanding. Within this intellectual landscape, Sufi literature has long held a distinctive position as a body of texts that seeks to articulate the ineffable aspects of the human encounter with the divine. Composed of metaphors, parables, and poetic imagery, these works convey deep spiritual insights that resonate across cultures and generations.

However, while Sufi literature remains a vital source of spiritual knowledge, contemporary engagement with these texts in educational contexts—especially among students of Islamic philosophy—has not been sufficiently explored from the perspective of lived experience. In many academic settings, the study of Sufi texts is confined to literary or theological analysis, emphasizing structure, symbolism, or historical development. While such approaches offer valuable insights, they may fall short in capturing the transformative dimensions of spiritual reading as experienced by individuals. This is especially relevant for Islamic philosophy students, who often approach these works not merely as intellectual artifacts but as catalysts for personal and spiritual growth.

Comparatively, interpretative phenomenological research in Christian, Buddhist, and secular educational contexts has illustrated how sacred texts can facilitate meaning-making, identity formation, and emotional resilience (e.g., Smith, 2017; Tanaka, 2019; Walker & Rees, 2021). Yet, these insights have rarely been extended to Islamic pedagogical contexts, where personal engagement with classical texts—particularly Sufi writings—may also serve as a form of inner development. Building on these cross-traditional insights, this study seeks to address that gap by investigating how Islamic philosophy students internalize and interpret Sufi literature as part of their lived spiritual experience.

By employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study foregrounds the students' own voices and subjective interpretations, offering an in-depth account of how sacred literature intersects with academic, existential, and emotional dimensions of their lives. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding that moves beyond conventional textual analysis and toward the experiential realities of reading in spiritually charged educational contexts.

Therefore, there is a compelling need to explore how individuals experience and make sense of reading Sufi literature not only as an academic exercise but as a spiritually significant encounter. Such an exploration requires a methodological approach that honors the richness and depth of human experience, making phenomenology a particularly suitable framework for this investigation. By attending to the lived experiences of readers, phenomenological inquiry enables a deeper understanding of how spiritual meaning is constructed, embodied, and integrated into the lives of individuals navigating complex intellectual and cultural landscapes.

Research into individuals lived experiences with spiritual and philosophical texts has become an increasingly significant domain within the humanities, particularly as scholars seek to understand how personal meaning is constructed through interaction with complex literary forms. In the context of Islamic intellectual traditions, Sufi literature offers rich textual landscapes that invite deep introspection, emotional engagement, and spiritual reflection. However, much of the existing academic attention remains centered on textual analysis, theological exposition, or historical interpretation, with limited focus on how contemporary readers internalize and embody the meanings within these texts.

One of the key methodological challenges in studying such experiences lies in the inadequacy of conventional quantitative or positivist approaches to fully capture the richness of subjective engagement. Standardized surveys or content-based textual analyses often fail to account for the fluid, affective, and transformative dimensions of spiritual reading. These methods tend to fragment the phenomenon into discrete variables, thereby stripping away the integrative nature of spiritual understanding as it is experienced by the reader in real time and context.

As a result, many prior studies while valuable have been unable to uncover the essence of the phenomenon as it is lived and felt. The limitations of existing research designs make it difficult to grasp how spiritual meanings are not only interpreted cognitively but also experienced affectively and existentially by individuals navigating both academic frameworks and personal belief systems. This disconnect highlights the urgent need for research methodologies that prioritize depth, context, and phenomenological sensitivity.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), grounded in the philosophical traditions of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, offers a compelling alternative by foregrounding the voices and perspectives of individuals as they make sense of their lived realities. It allows for a nuanced understanding of spiritual engagement, particularly in educational settings where students may straddle the boundaries between formal learning and personal transformation. Such an approach is especially relevant for exploring how Islamic philosophy students interpret and embody the spiritual teachings embedded within Sufi literature an area that remains largely under-investigated.

Existing approaches to the study of Sufi literature in academic settings often rely on established interpretative frameworks rooted in literary criticism, theological analysis, or historical contextualization. These methods, while useful in tracing the structure, symbolism, and theological underpinnings of Sufi texts, tend to prioritize textual meaning over experiential depth. As a result,

they offer limited insight into how individuals personally engage with and are transformed by the literature they read.

Such conventional frameworks typically exclude the lived, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of the reading experience. They fail to consider how the encounter with Sufi texts may evoke existential introspection, emotional catharsis, or a shift in personal and moral orientation elements that are central to understanding the role of spiritual literature in shaping human consciousness. This methodological gap has resulted in an underdeveloped understanding of how spiritual meaning is constructed and embodied by readers, particularly those navigating both intellectual and personal spheres, such as students of Islamic philosophy.

To address this deficiency, phenomenological inquiry offers a necessary and compelling alternative. By centering the subjective experiences of individuals, phenomenology provides a holistic framework for exploring how spiritual texts are internalized, how meaning emerges through the act of reading, and how such meaning reshapes the self in relation to the world. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), in particular, allows researchers to move beyond surface-level interpretation and into the nuanced, multi-layered processes by which readers make sense of their engagement with sacred literature.

Despite the richness of this potential, few studies have applied phenomenological methods to investigate the inner experiences of students reading Sufi texts. Consequently, the field lacks empirical insights into how such readings influence spiritual development, ethical sensibilities, or identity formation. This research seeks to fill that gap by employing IPA to explore how Islamic philosophy students experience and interpret the spiritual meanings embedded in Sufi literature thereby contributing both methodological innovation and deeper conceptual understanding to the field. Previous studies have explored Sufi literature through historical, theological, and literary lenses, emphasizing textual interpretation and doctrinal meanings. While these approaches provide valuable insights into the symbolic and philosophical content of Sufi texts, they often neglect the lived experiences of readers. A small number of studies have addressed personal engagement with sacred literature, but few focus on the inner transformations of students encountering these texts in academic settings. Theoretical contributions from hermeneutic phenomenology suggest that spiritual understanding arises not only from reading but also from personal reflection and existential resonance. However, empirical investigations into how readers actually experience and interpret these spiritual messages remain limited.

To respond to this gap, this study adopts Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine how Islamic philosophy students experience spiritual meaning through reading Sufi literature. IPA allows for a deep exploration of how individuals make sense of profound and often transformative experiences. This method was chosen for its emphasis on subjectivity, personal meaning, and the interpretive process of understanding lived phenomena. The study addresses the question of how reading Sufi texts contributes to the construction of spiritual insight and personal growth among students. By highlighting readers' voices, the research reveals the depth and complexity of spiritual engagement that traditional approaches often overlook.

This article is structured into several key sections. The introduction presents the context and rationale of the study, including the theoretical foundations and research gap. The methodology section describes the phenomenological approach, data collection through in-depth interviews, and thematic analysis using IPA. The results section presents four central themes drawn from participants' narratives, supported by direct quotes. Finally, the discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing literature and broader philosophical implications, followed by a conclusion outlining contributions and future directions

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of Islamic philosophy students engaging with Sufi literature. The phenomenological design was selected for its emphasis on capturing the depth and complexity of individual experiences, particularly in contexts involving existential, spiritual, and emotional dimensions. IPA, rooted in the hermeneutic tradition of Heideggerian phenomenology, was deemed appropriate for this research, as it focuses on how individuals interpret and make meaning of their experiences within specific cultural and educational contexts. The design enabled a deep examination of how participants experienced spiritual transformation and meaning through the act of reading sacred poetic texts.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals who had directly experienced the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria comprised undergraduate or postgraduate students majoring in Islamic philosophy who had engaged in sustained reading of classical Sufi texts such as works by Rumi, Ibn Arabi, or Attar. Participants were required to have engaged with these texts for at least one academic semester and to express an interest in their spiritual and philosophical content. Individuals without this reading experience or lacking reflective engagement with the texts were excluded. A total of eight participants (five males and three females) aged between 21 and 28 years participated in the study. All participants had completed at least one course related to Islamic mysticism or philosophy, and most had voluntarily read additional Sufi literature beyond curricular requirements.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in a quiet, private space familiar to the participants, either on campus or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on individual preferences and availability. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was guided by a flexible protocol designed to elicit reflections on spiritual engagement, personal transformation, and meaning-making during the reading of Sufi texts. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interview protocol was informed by existing literature on spiritual phenomenology but was adapted iteratively based on pilot interviews to ensure contextual relevance and emotional accessibility. To ensure participant comfort and depth of response, open-ended questions and reflective pauses were integrated into the interview process.

Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which emphasizes both descriptive and interpretative layers of meaning. Data were first read multiple times to gain a holistic sense of each participant's narrative. Meaningful statements were then identified and coded into emergent themes. These themes were further clustered into superordinate themes that reflected shared patterns across participants while preserving the uniqueness of individual accounts. NVivo software was employed to support the organization of codes and themes, though thematic interpretation remained grounded in manual engagement with the textual data. The analysis followed a step-by-step process: initial coding, development of emergent themes, cross-case analysis, and final articulation of essential experiential meanings. This approach allowed the identification of nuanced and context-rich insights into how students interpreted and internalized the spiritual messages of Sufi literature.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants received a detailed information sheet and signed an informed consent form before participation. The anonymity and confidentiality of participant data were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessed only by authorized researchers. The study adhered to international ethical standards for qualitative research involving human participants, including the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

RESULTS

This study explored the lived experiences of Islamic philosophy students in interpreting spiritual meanings through the reading of Sufi literature. Through in-depth interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis, four central themes emerged, each illuminating a unique dimension of spiritual engagement: (1) Encountering the Self through the Sacred Text, (2) Transformative Resonance and Emotional Awakening, (3) Reframing Existential Struggles, and (4) Integrating Sufi Values into Contemporary Academic Life.

Encountering the Self through the Sacred Text

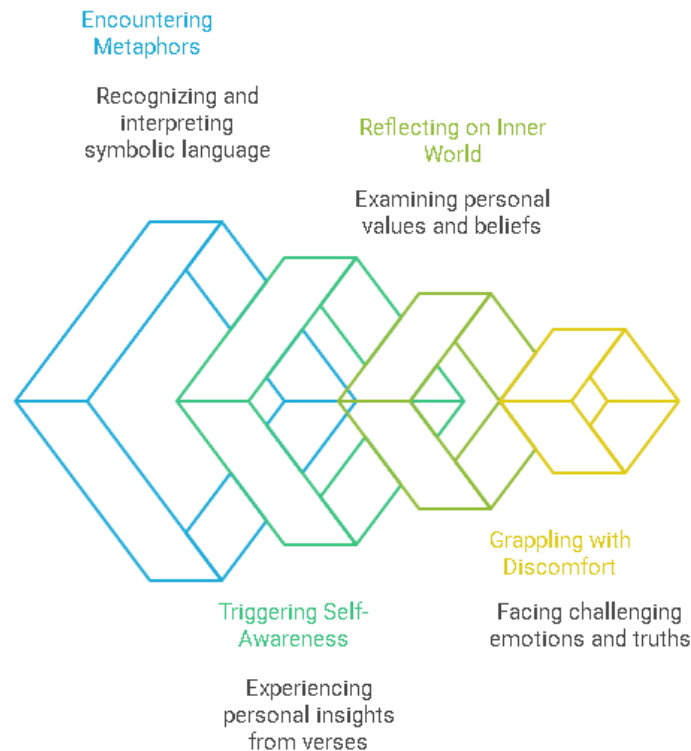
Participants frequently described their reading of Sufi literature as a deeply personal encounter that transcended intellectual comprehension. Rather than simply analyzing metaphors or doctrinal messages, students reported moments of profound self-awareness triggered by specific verses or symbols.

“When I read the line ‘die before you die,’ I paused for a long time. It felt like I was being asked to let go of my ego not just as a concept, but as an experience. It was terrifying, yet liberating.” (Participant 3)

For many, the text served as a mirror, reflecting hidden aspects of their inner world. This reflective process, as narrated by the students, was not always pleasant it often involved grappling with discomfort, guilt, or spiritual restlessness.

“Reading Rumi sometimes makes me uncomfortable. I realize how far I am from the ideals he speaks of. But that discomfort pushes me to examine myself more honestly.” (Participant 6)

Journey to Self-Awareness through Sufi Texts



Transformative Resonance and Emotional Awakening

Several participants described sudden emotional shifts while engaging with Sufi texts what they called “spiritual moments” or “resonances.” These experiences were often characterized by tears, silence, or even physical sensations, suggesting an embodied form of spiritual insight.

“One night, while reading Ibn Arabi’s lines about divine love, I cried. Not because I was sad but because I felt loved, in a cosmic, inexplicable way.” (Participant 2)

These moments were not merely interpretative but transformative, marking a shift in how participants related to themselves and to others. The literature thus functioned not only as a source of knowledge but also as a medium for emotional and spiritual awakening.

Reframing Existential Struggles

The third theme emerged from students’ narratives about how Sufi literature provided new lenses to reinterpret personal hardships. Several participants mentioned periods of doubt, anxiety, or existential crisis, during which the texts became a source of inner guidance.

“During my depression, reading Attar’s ‘Conference of the Birds’ helped me realize that the journey itself the confusion, the failures is part of the path. It gave me peace.” (Participant 4)

Rather than offering solutions or clear answers, the literature helped students embrace ambiguity and uncertainty as part of a larger spiritual journey. This capacity to reframe suffering through metaphor and narrative appeared to play a central role in their meaning-making process.

Integrating Sufi Values into Contemporary Academic Life

Finally, students described attempts to bring the values they encountered in Sufi texts such as humility, surrender, and non-attachment into their daily academic or social routines. While many acknowledged the tension between these ideals and the competitive nature of academic life, they also described subtle shifts in mindset and behavior.

“Before, I was obsessed with being the best. But after immersing myself in these teachings, I try to approach learning with more sincerity and less pride.” (Participant 1)

Some participants mentioned incorporating contemplative practices, such as silent reading or reflection, before classes or assignments. Others began reevaluating their ethical commitments, including how they interacted with peers and responded to academic stress.

The findings reveal that reading Sufi literature among philosophy students is not a purely intellectual or aesthetic exercise it is a transformative spiritual practice that reshapes how they understand themselves, navigate suffering, and integrate ethical values into their lived realities. The experience of engaging with sacred poetic texts unfolds as an inner dialogue marked by reflection, struggle, and gradual reorientation of the self.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that reading Sufi literature among Islamic philosophy students is experienced not merely as an intellectual pursuit but as a deeply transformative spiritual engagement. Participants described encounters with the text as moments of introspection, emotional awakening, and existential reorientation offering nuanced answers to the central research question concerning how spiritual meaning is constructed through the act of reading.

These insights directly address the study’s guiding inquiry: how do Islamic philosophy students experience and interpret spiritual meanings through Sufi texts? The results demonstrate that such readings evoke not only reflective cognition but also embodied emotional and ethical transformation. The phenomenon was experienced as an unfolding journey an internal dialogue where readers engaged with sacred language in ways that shaped their self-understanding, sense of belonging, and spiritual aspirations. The interpretative depth made possible through IPA highlights that the act of reading Sufi literature operates as a lived spiritual practice, not merely an academic or aesthetic one.

In relation to existing literature, these findings support and expand prior work that emphasizes the reflective and affective dimensions of reading sacred texts. For instance, Ahmad and Nasr (2020) identified emotional resonance in Sufi poetry as a trigger for personal transformation among students, though their analysis remained thematic rather than phenomenological. Similarly, Zahavi (2019) highlighted the interplay between self-awareness and literary reflection, which aligns with participants' experiences of encountering their own vulnerabilities through the text. However, this study adds to the field by illuminating the experiential nuances that arise when students engage with such texts within a structured academic environment where reflection is both personal and philosophically informed. Unlike content-driven studies that treat spiritual texts as static artifacts, this research underscores the dynamic process through which meaning is lived, felt, and integrated, affirming the value of phenomenology in capturing the fullness of spiritual engagement.

The implications of these findings extend beyond individual spiritual experiences and invite broader reflection on the role of sacred literature in modern academic and cultural settings. Within Islamic higher education, where intellectual and spiritual development are often treated as separate domains, the results suggest a need to re-evaluate how curricula can integrate reflective and affective dimensions of learning. By recognizing the transformative potential of engaging with Sufi literature, educators may foster more holistic forms of ethical and spiritual development. At a cultural level, the findings highlight how classical texts continue to serve as meaningful resources for contemporary identity formation, particularly for young adults navigating complex moral and existential landscapes. These insights are also relevant for professionals in fields such as counseling, religious education, and intercultural studies, where understanding the lived meanings of spiritual practices is essential.

This study, while rich in depth, is subject to several limitations. The small sample size and specific demographic Islamic philosophy students at a single academic institution limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the interpretative nature of the analysis, while appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, is inherently shaped by the researcher's own lens, even when steps such as member checking and audit trails are employed. The research also focused exclusively on one genre of literature (Sufi texts), which may not reflect the diversity of spiritual experiences elicited by other forms of religious or philosophical writings. These limitations should not be seen as flaws but as necessary boundaries that define the scope and depth of phenomenological research.

Future research could build on these findings by exploring similar spiritual engagements across more diverse educational, cultural, or religious contexts. Comparative studies could examine how students from different traditions experience sacred texts, or how various pedagogical methods influence spiritual reflection. Longitudinal studies might also reveal how such experiences evolve over time and impact students' ethical reasoning or life trajectories. Moreover, further application of phenomenological methods in religious and literary education may open new pathways for understanding the intersection of reading, reflection, and identity. The current study thus lays foundational insights that may inform both theoretical discourse and practical innovations in spiritual and philosophical education.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how Islamic philosophy students experience and interpret spiritual meaning through the reading of Sufi literature. The research addressed a gap in previous studies that often overlooked the lived, affective, and transformative aspects of engaging with sacred texts. Findings revealed that reading Sufi literature fostered moments of self-encounter, emotional awakening, and ethical reflection, allowing students to integrate spiritual insights into their academic and personal lives. These experiences highlight the value of phenomenological inquiry in capturing the depth and nuance of spiritual engagement that traditional methods often miss. The study contributes to a broader understanding of how spiritual literature can serve as a medium for personal growth, especially in educational settings.

To translate these insights into practical impact, educators and curriculum developers might consider integrating reflective reading modules based on Sufi texts into philosophy or religious

studies programs. Such modules could include guided discussion groups, journaling assignments focused on personal meaning-making, or interdisciplinary courses that bridge literature, ethics, and spirituality. These pedagogical strategies can foster environments that support inner exploration alongside intellectual inquiry. Future research could extend this work by involving students from comparative religion programs to explore interfaith responses to mystical texts, or by employing longitudinal IPA to assess how sustained exposure to Sufi literature shapes spiritual identity over time. Additionally, investigating the role of faculty mentorship in facilitating transformative reading practices could offer further insight into effective educational designs.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- Cetinkaya, M., & Billings, J. (2023). Systematic review of the relationship between Islamic-Sufi spirituality and practice and mental well-being. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 26(10), 1065–1080. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2023.2256265>
- Cottingham, J. (2024). Spiritual experience: Its scope, its phenomenology, and its source. *New Blackfriars*, 104(1112), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12708>
- Gray, B. (2021). From the secular to the sacred: The influence of Sufism on the work of Leila Aboulela. In H. Jonsson, L. Berg, C. Edfeldt, & B. G. Jansson (Eds.), *Narratives crossing borders: The dynamics of cultural interaction* (pp. 145–168). Stockholm University Press. <https://doi.org/10.16993/bbj.g>
- Makhlouf, A. (2025). Interpreting meaning across worlds: A comparative study of Al-Qushayri and Peirce. *Semiotics and Islamic Epistemology*, 8(1), 43–60. <https://doi.org/10.56334/sei/8.1.43>
- Manzoor, A. (2016). Deconstructive phenomenological analysis of Sufi discourse. *Linguistics and Literature Review*, 2(1), 12–24. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3820494>
- Milani, M. (2019). *The nature of Sufism: An ontological reading of the mystical in Islam*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429448737>
- Squires, V. (2023). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. M. Okoko, S. Tunison, & K. D. Walker (Eds.), *Varieties of qualitative research methods* (pp. 269–274). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-04394-9_43
- Yaman, H. (2024). The Light Verse between philosophy and Sufism: A comparative analysis of the interpretations by Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī. *International Journal of Theological and Islamic Studies*, 67(1), 217–249. <https://doi.org/10.15370/maruifd.1553355>
- Yuhanida, Y., Amalia, Z. N., Kerwanto, K., Rahman, R., Muna, M. Y., & Sabour, R. (2024). Epistemology of Sufism in Sufi interpretation: Analysis of the patterns of theoretical (nazhari) and practical ('amali) Sufi exegesis. *Qist: Journal of Quran and Tafseer Studies*, 3(2), 45–60. <https://doi.org/10.23917/qist.v3i2.4199>
- Zargar, C. A. (2023). Poetry and Sufi commentary: A case of/for religious reading in Islam. *Journal of Islamic Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etad057>