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From Rasa to Noor: Sufi Epistemology, Spiritual Experience, and the Aesthetic Transformation of South Asian Music and Contemporary Miniature Painting

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between Sufi epistemology and South Asian aesthetic experience by examining South Asian Music and contemporary miniature painting as complementary modes of spiritual inquiry. Drawing upon the concepts of rasa, noor, ishq, fana, and the progressive purification of the nafs, the study explores how artistic experience can move beyond sensory perception toward heightened states of consciousness, contemplation, and spiritual realization. The research brings together the experiential orientation of Sufi thought with the South Asian aesthetic conception of rasa, understood as an intensified form of aesthetic relish associated with transcendence, inner harmony, self-realization, and spiritual bliss. It further examines how musical concentration, tonal and rhythmic immersion, colour, abstraction, spatial dissolution, and material processes may function as vehicles for negotiating the relationship between the tangible and the intangible. The study adopts a comparative, practice-led and interpretive approach, connecting the spiritual dimensions of South Asian Music with the visual language of contemporary miniature painting, particularly through the artwork The Lamp of Passion. Rather than treating music and painting as isolated artistic disciplines, the paper proposes that both can operate as embodied forms of knowledge in which artistic practice facilitates an inward movement from ordinary perception toward contemplative experience. The analysis suggests that the dialogue between rasa and noor provides a productive framework for understanding South Asian spiritual aesthetics and demonstrates how contemporary artistic practice can reactivate traditional metaphysical concepts within evolving cultural contexts.

Keywords: *Contemporary Miniature Painting; South Asian Music; Ishq; Noor; Rasa; Sufi Aesthetics; Sufi Epistemology*

INTRODUCTION

Traditional art forms of South Asia have not only served as a source of aesthetic enjoyment but have also served as mediums for spiritual contemplation, the transmission of knowledge through a material form, and the description of realities that lie beyond one's normal sensory experience. In Islamic culture, especially Sufi teachings, art has often been linked to the pursuit of beauty, love, knowledge, and spiritual elevation. Sufism is about experiential knowledge, in which the person seeking transcends intellectual understanding and reaches a level of awareness where the presence of the Divine comes into their experience. The provided study on Sufism and South Asian Music also portrays Sufism as a mystical journey which is aimed at experiencing the love and wisdom of God through personal spiritual attainment. According to Schimmel (1975), love, longing, remembrance and spiritual transformation are essential aspects of the Sufi concept of the world, while Nasr (1987) defines Islamic art within a metaphysical context where beauty can serve as a reminder of the unity of God. In this way, the phenomenon of art, instead of being only experienced visually or audibly, can be the vehicle for the contemplation of the relationship between the material and the spiritual.

In the South Asian context, the relationship between spirituality and experience of art is especially relevant as Islamic, Persianate, Indic and regional cultural traditions have been mingling together over a long period of time. In the South Asian Music there is one field of study, which is important that brings the intersection of sound, emotion, discipline, concentration and spiritual experience. Rasa is an

integral part of South Asian aesthetic philosophy and represents an aesthetic experience or "relish" achieved through an act of art. The literature provided is about the experience which is accompanied by spiritual delight, elevated awareness, self-realization, liberation, joy, and transcendence. The view is not one in which music is used for entertainment, but rather one where music can change the listener's state of consciousness. Similarly, according to the material provided, Prajnanananda (1980) relates South Asian music to the process of inner realization and knowledge of the divine, implying that music can offer a means of spiritual liberation. But the emotional and experiential aspects of raga and rasa continue to be relevant topics for interdisciplinary study as evidenced in contemporary scholarship on South Asian music.

The spiritual use of music is clearly manifested in the musical culture of the South Asian subcontinent and Sufism. In South Asia, Sufi traditions evolved unique musical practices that allowed for the use of poetry, rhythm, repetition, and melody, as well as collective listening to assist in devotional and contemplative experience. Especially the Chishti Sufi tradition, and also the spiritually oriented listening, samāʾ, is traditionally linked with qawwali. Kugle (2022) refers to the genre as a Sufi practice of listening that surrounds music with spiritual content and uses it as a meditative practice, and Qureshi's seminal ethnomusicology study analyzes the role of music in the context of sounds, social space, ritual use, and spiritual interpretation in South Asian qawwali. This tradition is not just religious but also a representation of ways in which ways of musical structure can help to mediate between emotion, embodiment, memory, devotion and transcendence. More recent studies have also investigated the subjective aspects of qawwali that have been described in religious and aesthetic terms the experiential aspect of singing qawwali can also be studied empirically (Graves et al., 2026).

When one thinks of Sufi concepts of ishq, fana or noor, in conjunction with rasa, the conceptual link between Sufi experience and South Asian aesthetic theory becomes more fruitful. Ishq means a great intensity of love and desire for the Divine, fana (or fana-e-jahan) is the merging or annihilation of the personality in the Divine, and noor is the Divine light or spiritual light. These concepts are explored in the first study provided, which is manifested in the contemporary miniature painting through abstraction, colour gradation, dissolution of space and internal luminosity that can evoke state of spiritual transformation. Another example is the visual language of The Lamp of Passion, which breaks away from a rigid mode of figuration, and uses forms that emerge and dissolve, establishing a metaphorical relationship between the form with fana. Likewise, its internal luminosity is understood from the idea of noor, where light is understood not only as an external physical object, but as a part of the human spirit as well.

The idea of the nafs is another important link between the two traditions. This music study on Sufi music is of seven progressive stages of the self, starting from an-nafs al-ammarah—ego, greed, pride, jealousy, and lower instincts—and then moving on to self-reflection, inspiration, tranquillity, contentment, divine pleasure, and perfection. This is a conceptual model that is helpful for understanding artistic experience as an internal process and not just an external process of representation. The shift from separative or 'ego' consciousness towards contemplation, harmony and spirituality is comparable, tentatively, and comparatively, to the aesthetic shift that goes with rasa. Given material, explains how the experience of rasa can bring about mental harmony at a high level and can temporarily release the individual from the constriction of his social and personal limitations. Even though Sufi epistemology and aesthetic philosophy of South Asia hail from different intellectual and religious roots, both narratives of the experience of art offer a valuable framework for the analysis of the way in which aesthetic engagement can rework consciousness.

It is also a fruitful way to discuss the connection between music and visual arts in the context of South Asian Music rendering affectively and contemplatively structured sound and the miniature painting representing ideas, emotions, spiritual stories and metaphysical concepts in pictures. In both, it is not possible to exhaustively explain the meaning of art in terms of literal representation. The experience of musical improvisation, tonal development, rhythm, repetition, and attentive listening can create an immersive experience, as can colour, line, abstraction, spatial organization, and material layering. The

given study explains that focus on the subtleties of music can create a trance-like state, beyond the tangible reality into an amorphous or cosmic experience. In modern miniature painting, for instance, the loss of legibility of forms can invite the viewer to shift from the representational reading to contemplative perception.

It is also a relationship that poses questions of tradition and modernity and one of the production of knowledge in the context of contemporary art discourse. Dadi (2010) shows how contemporary and contemporary artists, in Muslim South Asian contexts, can use traditions as resources to experiment, instead of as historical objects. The first and other supplied papers also contend that modern miniaturism does not have to reject traditional symbolic languages, but can continue and develop them, with abstraction as a tool to explore spiritual and metaphysical issues. Elkins (1999) also includes a useful theoretical framework that underlies thinking and learning through the process of painting, especially when the visual process tackles experiences that defy simple linguistic expression. Thus, the entanglement of Sufi with the modern miniature does not necessarily signify a departure from the tradition; it can be seen as one of the long-standing associations of art, thinking, and metaphysics.

The implications for methodology are also significant. Practice-led research acknowledges the process of artistic making as a way of knowledge production, in which experimentation, reflection, engagement with material and experience play a role in the production of research. Practice-led research, as defined by Smith and Dean (2009), involves an iterative cycle of creative practice and critical reflection; and later methodological research has placed particular focus on the role of the artwork and the artist's experience in the production of knowledge in art and design research. This method is especially suitable for a study of spiritual aesthetics, as the phenomena to be seen are not sufficiently comprehensible in terms of text analysis. The first paper that is supplied then thus addresses studio production, documentation of the production process, experimentation with materials and visual analysis as interlinked elements of knowledge production.

Though there are significant contributions on Sufism, Islamic aesthetics, South Asian Music, rasa and modern South Asian art, there is a need for a more holistic study of intersections between these fields in the context of aesthetic experiences. Current debates tend to focus on Sufi music, Islamic visual art, or South Asian aesthetics in isolation. This conceptual lacuna is addressed in the present study by presenting the Sufi epistemology in the context of South Asian aesthetic theory, classical South Asian music and contemporary miniature painting. The key theory is that although rasa and noor have different conceptual heritage and, consequently, their definitions must be differentiated, they can be approached as complementary analytical tools for the analysis of transformative aesthetic experiences. The study does not assert that it is the same two concepts, but rather it is an examination of the ways in which the two conceptions of aesthetic absorption, spiritual awareness, transcendence and transformation become productively comparable.

Hence, this research examines the possibility of Sufi epistemology revealing the spiritual aspects of South Asian Music and the modern miniature painting, focusing on the link between rasa, ishq, fana, noor and a transformation of the self. The research attempts to show that artistic practice can be not only a way of representing but also a way of knowing, and that this can be achieved by incorporating both the auditory and visual practices within a common body of embodied aesthetic experiences. It also asserts that the production of art today can be a way of re-activating political-spiritual vocabulary of the past while answering the questions of cultural identity, hybridity and contemporary global art contexts. In this context, the relationship of Sufi metaphysics and South Asian aesthetic thought offers an interdisciplinary prism for considering music and painting as alternative yet powerful means of contemplation, affective change and discovery of realities beyond the visible and audible.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research literature on Sufi aesthetics, South Asian Music and the new South Asian visual arts offers a wide spectrum of ideas in which the experience of art is often linked to mysticism, transfiguration and

the creation of knowledge. Both of the sources provided were useful sources for this study. In the first, contemporary miniature painting is made to serve as a means of exploration and investigation of Sufi metaphysical ideas whereas the second focuses on the connection between Sufism and South Asian Music, such as concepts of nafs, rasa, spiritual concentration, transcendence etc. These materials collectively indicate that music and painting can be studied in ways more than just aesthetic; that music and painting can create a mediation between the visible and the invisible, the sensory and the metaphysical, and even the individual self and transcendent reality.

Sufi Epistemology and the Aesthetic Experience

Sufi epistemology is the study of knowledge which is experiential, transformative, and realized within. Sufi traditions focus on processes of spiritual purification, remembrance, contemplation, love and direct experience, not discursive reasoning as is often done in the study of knowledge. Schimmel (1975) characterizes Islamic mysticism as a broad movement where the inner experience of man is developed by means of love, longing, devotion and spiritual change. The material provided also characterizes Sufism as a mystical journey in which a human being finds the knowledge and love of God by his personal experience. This experiential orientation is especially relevant for an aesthetic investigation as artistic experience can also be a type of knowledge that is hard to communicate in words and propositions.

Nasr (1987) offers a useful background theory to the epistemological approach to Islamic art. One of his interpretations in Islamic art is the connection between visible forms and underlying spiritual realities, and he believes that art can help people remember and contemplate God. This view enables painting, music, architecture, calligraphy, and other creative genres to be examined as part of a larger metaphysical system instead of aesthetic objects of their own. This is especially relevant for the present research, as it allows for the visual qualities of contemporary miniature painting and the sonic qualities of South Asian Music to be explored in relation to their potential to inspire contemplation and transformation.

In the first paper, the position is developed, in which artwork is explicitly regarded as epistemological. It takes a practice-led approach, asserting that the process of making can be a way of knowing, and that material experimentation, visual analysis and theoretical contextualisation can all produce knowledge. This type of knowledge calls into question the dichotomy between art-making and academic research. Rather than that, the artwork becomes an object, process and space of investigation at the same time.

Sufi Concepts of the Self and Spiritual Transformation

The change of nafs, the self, is one of the significant dimensions of Sufi thought that pertain to aesthetic experience. The second source talks about "an-nafs," which is defined as "the lower self," related to the various negative inclinations of the flesh, such as greed, pride, jealousy and self, and then goes on about seven stages of the nafs which progress towards the higher states including reflection, inspiration, tranquillity, contentment, divine pleasure and finally spiritual perfection.

The progressive model offers a helpful interpretive approach to the experience of aesthetics as an inward movement. Sensory attraction can be followed by emotional concentration, contemplation and changed awareness from the process of artistic engagement. Nevertheless, one must not blindly identify pleasure in the sight with spiritual metamorphosis. Instead, it is in the conceptual vocabulary of nafs that the depth and direction of transformative experience can be explored.

Rasa and Spiritual Experience in South Asian Aesthetics

Ishq is a significant concept in Sufi aesthetics, as is fana. Ishq is the truest form of spiritual love and longing, whereas fana is the annihilation of the individual ego or self in relation to the Divine reality. The first paper supplied (The Lamp of Passion) is read in just these terms. The breaking down of the

recognisable forms is recognized as a visual metaphor of fana, and the emotional intensity of the work is related to ishq. In Sufi mystical experience, as studied by Schimmel (1975), the nature of love as a central theme of mystical experience and the transformation of the self within Sufi mystical thought is also prominent.

This framework is enhanced by the notion of noor (divine illumination). Luminosity isn't seen in The Lamp of Passion as merely an optical effect, but as an inner spiritual attribute. The metaphysical approach to Islamic art, which takes the form to be made perceptible by the senses to the inner or spiritual reality of art, fits this type of interpretation of Nasr's (1987).

Sight and Inward Vision in South Asian Aesthetics

The term rasa constitutes the main theoretical link between South Asian Music and the Sufi aesthetic framework analysed in this study. Aesthetic theory in South Asia speaks of the aesthetic delight or experiential essence created through aesthetic engagement as rasa. The source provided explicitly connects rasa with the feeling of bliss, a transcendent experience, higher consciousness, self-realization, liberation and happiness. This knowledge brings rasa into particular relevance to the present study which is related to the art andSpiritual experience.

The significance of rasa is that it is something that is experienced. Rasa is not simply a list of emotions; it is an altered state of aesthetic experience of the sensitive listener or spectator. The material provided highlights how the experience of rasa can create a focused mental harmony and raise the individual above his personal and social constraints. This is a conceptual parallel to the Sufi focus on transcending the 'personal consciousness' but it should not be confused with the Sufi tradition.

This difference is relevant to the current study. Rasa is rooted in South Asian aesthetics and it's about the nature of aesthetics while noor, fana and ishq come from the Islamic mystical discourse. It is to be understood that their comparison is in fact not a conceptual equivalence, but an analytical dialogue between disciplines. The advantage of having them come together is establishing common questions about the nature of affect, transcendence, selfhood, contemplation, and the power of the artistic experience to transform ordinary perception.

Give an example of how South Asian Music relates to the Raga and Transcendence.

South Asian Music is particularly rich in its context and provides a rich example for the study of aesthetic structure and spiritual experience. The given source talks about music as a way by which the individual can reach his or her self-realization and his or her divine knowledge. Emotion is also central to South Asian musical notions, and the connection between raga and emotional experience. The relationship between the musical structure and affect has also been a current topic of computational research on certain raga and emotion/mood state associations, indicating that this link is still a subject of inquiry.

In the experiential view, South Asian Music is not only about identifying the emotions but also a sensation of its durability and strength. When listening to music, focus can build up into a state of concentration and this can lead to attention increasingly being focused on the fine gradations of tonal and temporal relationships. This process, described by the supplied source, can create a trance-like psychological response when focusing on the more subtle aspects of music, which have the ability to move the listener beyond the normal tangible experience.

This aspect makes classical music in South Asia particularly significant to the idea of listening to music in a spiritually oriented manner, known as samāʾ. Music also evolved through South Asian Sufi traditions, in which listening to music, recitation of poetry, repetition, melody, and devotion had the potential to become a means of experiencing the spiritual. The ethnomusicology of Qureshi's work on qawwali is significant since he places Sufi musical performance in social, ritual, sonic, and cultural

contexts. While qawwali can certainly be considered as a type of South Asian Music, its evolution reveals the intricate interplay of Sufi faith and South Asian musical traditions.

Sufism, Music, and the South Asian Cultural Context

Sufism and South Asian artistic traditions went hand in hand in a complex historical setting of cultural exchange and interaction. Music was one of the crucial vehicles that facilitated the flow of Sufi thoughts, poetry, devotion and expression. The second source highlights the connection of Sufi concepts with South Asian Musical experiences, especially concentration, spiritual emotion and transcendence.

This connection, however, should be taken up in an historical and critical manner and not presumed as a single unified ‘Sufi-South Asian' aesthetic. South Asian Sufism is a multi-faceted phenomenon, with several orders, regions, practices, languages and music traditions. Likewise, South Asian Music has a variety of gharanas, repertoire, performance traditions and theory. But the analytical value of the comparison comes from a comparison of specific points of convergence, such as experiential listening, affective absorption, devotional expression, and transformation, and not through the erasure of the different intellectual histories from which these ideas stem.

Contemporary Miniature Painting and the Reinterpretation of Tradition

The visual aspect of the present study is achieved through the miniature tradition that belongs to the present. Dadi (2010) shows how modern and contemporary Muslim South Asian artists have engaged with the artistic conventions they inherited, in the context of modernism, cosmopolitanism, nationalism and transnational cultural exchange. His research focuses on the reconfiguration of visual traditions by artists from Muslim South Asia in the context of evolving intellectual, social and political contexts.

This is essential because the current miniature painting cannot only be described as a reproduction of Mughal or Persianate styles. Instead, it is a field of study that is constantly in development, and where historical practices, imagery, and cultural experiences can be reworked in the light of current artistic issues. The first paper that I'm giving takes this line and suggests that abstraction need not be an assault on miniature tradition but an extension of it.

In The Lamp of Passion, this new interpretation is manifested in the shifting from conventional figurative forms to fluid abstraction. Colour shifts, dissolution of form, internal illumination, and spatial ambiguity turn into ways of articulating metaphysical concepts. The artwork can thus be used as an adequate vehicle to explore the possibility that inherited spiritual concepts might be recoded in a modern visual idiom.

Abstraction as a Mode of Spiritual and Epistemological Inquiry

Abstraction is especially significant for the current study, due to the fact that spiritual experiences often consist of phenomena which cannot be literally depicted. In the first paper supplied, it is suggested that abstraction can be used to describe states like fana and noor, precisely because these states cannot be described with a simple figuration.

This argument fits neatly into more general discussions of Islamic aesthetics in which the symbolic, the geometric, the calligraphic, and the non-naturalistic have been used as alternatives to direct representation throughout history. Nasr (1987) sees Islamic art from the standpoint of a metaphysics of orientation where forms in the sense of the senses are capable of pointing to things that are greater than themselves. Thus the modern miniature painter's abstraction can be understood not simply as a stylistic option but as a means of manoeuvring between the material form and spiritual content.

Practice-Led Research and Artistic Knowledge

The theoretical framework of this research is also reinforced by the methodological literature related to practice-led research. Smith and Dean (2009) view creative practice and research as an iterative process and creative practice as a way of producing research insights, and at the same time, research could inform creative practice. Their approach treats creative practice as an acceptable way of enquiry, and not just a reproduction of theoretical findings that have already been reached.

It is similar in methodology with the first paper supplied where material exploration, pigment application, layering, manipulation of the surface, visual analysis and theoretical contextualisation are considered as continuous research processes. Practice-led inquiry is of special interest in the context of this work because the knowledge embodied in music too is embodied in art forms. Producing or experiencing an artwork can be an attention, repetition, concentration – the experience can be affect, intuition and reflection – these are elements that are hard to convey in words.

Research Gap

Sufi spirituality, Islamic aesthetics, South Asian aesthetic theory, South Asian Music, qawwali, and modern South Asian Muslim art have already been explored in the literature, and these provide great foundations for the understanding and study of Sufi music. These areas are, however, mostly explored individually within specific disciplines. The provided sources dialogue Sufi metaphysics and miniature painting of the present with Sufism and classical music in South Asia. Hence, a more cohesive system as regards Sufi epistemology, rasa, South Asian Music and the contemporary miniature painting is a productive field for further exploration.

This study seeks to fill this gap, treating music and painting as separate, but possibly equivalent experiences of the aesthetic. The study does not suggest that rasa and noor, or fana and transcendental aesthetic experience are the same, but rather that these can shed light on various aspects of transformation, contemplation and spiritual perception. In this way, it brings into a space for artistic practice the possibility of not just representing inherited metaphysical concepts but of experiencing, interpreting, and reconfiguring them.

Through reviewing the literature, it is concluded that within the context of Sufi epistemology, the spiritual-philosophical underpinning of this concept, rasa is an aesthetic theory of experiential transformation, the auditory and affective pathway of engagement to this concept is South Asian Music, and the visual and material pathway of engagement to this concept is in miniature painting of the modern period.

METHODOLOGY

The research design of this study is qualitative, comparative, interpretive and practice-based, which aims to study the relationship between Sufi epistemology, South Asian aesthetic theory, South Asian Music and contemporary miniature painting. The methodological framework is heavily dependent on the two provided sources, which make artistic experience as a form of spiritual and experiential knowledge. The first source adopts a practice-led method, in which all aspects of studio production, material exploration, visual analysis, and theoretical contextualization are interwoven throughout the research process. The latter offers a conceptual framework for analysing Sufi spirituality, the gradual evolution of the nafs, the aesthetic nature of rasa, and the ability of musical concentration to bring about a transposition of the ordinary sensorial realm.

The study does not use quantitative measures or experiments because it aims to interpret and to understand how spiritual concepts are expressed, felt and manifested in artistic practices. Special attention is thus paid to meanings, symbols, formal aspects, experiential aspects, and to the interplay between art processes and metaphysics. The comparative element explores the South Asian Music and

the current miniature paintings as separate art forms and the elements of conceptual convergence, specifically regarding contemplation, affective absorption, transformation of self, transcendence and the transition from sensory experience towards spiritual awareness. It is compared with great caution as ideas from the Sufi tradition and South Asian aesthetic philosophy have different historical and theological background.

The major visual case study is The Lamp of Passion, the modern miniature painting found in a provided first paper. The artwork is approached at once both artistically and as a place of enquiry. Its formal attributes – such as colour, tonality, abstraction, spatial organization, the way light shows and fades and how layers of material construct and deconstruct form – are explored in the context of Sufi notions of ishq (love), fana (an equal exchange of love) and noor (radiance). The original study defines the following features of the painting: warm colors, fluid passages, lack of formal outlines, dissolution of recognizable forms, non-linear spatial organization, and luminosity that is generated within the painting. These features are the most important visual information that will be used in the interpretative analysis.

The conceptual and the textual material presented in Sufism and South Asian Music: A Study of the Relationship is explored in the musical part. Special emphasis is placed on the idea of rasa, spiritual listening, musical concentration, transcendence and transformation of consciousness. The source provided explains that rasa is an aesthetic experience that comes with spiritual delight, elevated consciousness, self-realization, liberation and happiness. It also considers the ability of intense listening of music to create a trance state and to escape the physical world for a more expansive or cosmic state. These descriptions are not psychological measures of listeners' psychological state, but rather evidence of interpretation of psychological reality.

Thematic analysis is used to conceptualise the material into outlining recurring themes. The following are five main analytical themes that are laid out: (1) spiritual illumination and noor; (2) divine love and ishq; (3) dissolution of ego and fana; (4) aesthetic absorption and rasa; and (5) transformation of consciousness through artistic experience. The themes that prevail in the first three themes are largely those of the Sufi framework and the visual analysis of The Lamp of Passion, and the key analytical language for the music of the South Asian classical tradition is that of rasa and aesthetic absorption. The final theme is a comparative theme that allows the two artistic practices to be discussed without assuming that the same philosophical concept is held in both.

A comparative visual-auditory approach is then adopted to explore the similarities and differences between the two artistic approaches. In miniature painting, colour, abstraction, luminosity, spatial dissolution, and material processes are understood as visual means in which spiritual concepts can be suggested. In music, one's focus is focused on aesthetic concentration, emotional experience, musical immersion, and what is referred to in the provided source as the possibility of transcendence. The comparison is thus not literal in the sense of seeking to draw a direct comparison between visual and musical structures but rather on an aesthetic function/experiential possibility level. For instance, noor does not mean rasa and fana is not the same as the transcendent experience of music. Rather, these ideas are explored as various mental models that may provide insights into related questions of transformation, perception and spiritual experience.

The practice-led component can include the story of the production of the artwork and the processes of its material context as evidence of research. Sketches, experimentation in the studio, application of pigment, layering, tonal transitions, manipulation of surface and documentation through photography are recognised as parts of the research process and therefore as part of the research archive. It continues the methodological approach of the provided first study, where successive cycles of making and reflecting produce research material as well as the final artwork creating a place of knowledge production. The focus on embodied practice is especially relevant because the study is with concepts that cannot be verbally explained alone—they are more experiential.

The theoretical framework is based on the aesthetics of Sufism, Islamic and South Asian aesthetics theory and metaphysical thinking. Schimmel's account of Sufi mystical experience offers a context for reflections on the themes of love for God and spiritual transformation, and Nasr's work on Islamic art and spirituality offers a framework for the discussion of the link between the beauty of art and the metaphysical reality. The literature on rasa offers the matching South Asian aesthetic framework, especially in the context of aesthetic relish, focused awareness and transcendence. The process of the inheritance and transformation of art within a contemporary and modern framework is discussed using material from contemporary scholarship of Muslim South Asian art.

To preserve the interpretive validity, the study differentiates between direct evidence in the provided materials and the researcher's interpretation of the evidence. The visual components of the work are documented in formal observations, whereas connections between these visual components and the concepts of noor, ishq and fana are offered as analytical readings of the artwork, and not as objective facts. Similarly, the descriptions of rasa, musical concentration, and transcendence were not regarded as effects of South Asian Music that could be demonstrated in empirical studies, but as concepts that were defined in the literature provided. It is important to not overgeneralize comparisons between spiritual and aesthetic traditions.

The study also takes into account cultural and conceptual differentiation. The Sufi metaphysics and South Asian aesthetic philosophy emerged from distinct religious, philosophical and historical lines. For this reason, the methodology does not seek to integrate their vocabulary in a universal spiritual system. Rather, it relies on comparative interpretation to find points of productive dialogue, while maintaining conceptual differences. Both traditions offer nuanced descriptions of aesthetic experience, in which sensory involvement is entangled with thoughts of contemplation, feelings of change, and awareness of greater horizons; and both describe the same experiences in different philosophical terms.

Last, the methodological process is divided into four interwoven steps: (1) conceptual mapping of Sufi and South Asian aesthetic terminology; (2) close reading of the provided literature on Sufism, nafs, rasa, music and spiritual experience; (3) visual and material analysis of The Lamp of Passion; and (4) comparative synthesis of the auditory and visual aesthetic experience. The resulting interpretation is meant to illustrate how the field of miniature painting and that of South Asian Music are both experiential knowledge, yet can be studied as separate, yet connected entities. In this approach, the investigation will explore the possibility of a meaningful way of thinking about the ongoing effect of spiritual aesthetics in contemporary artistic practice of South Asia through the mediums of rasa and noor, and of musical absorption and visual abstraction.

RESULTS

Emergent Relationship between Sufi Epistemology and Aesthetic Experience

The analysis showed that the relationship of the concept between artistic experience and experiential knowledge for the two source materials was very close. The first one sets the stage for contemporary miniature painting as a locus for thinking about Sufi 'metaphysical' concepts in practice, while the second one suggests music as a means of concentrating, spiritualizing and transcending the common sense perception. In both cases, therefore, one might say, artistic practice is more than representation; it is a pathway to the experience of inner states and metaphysical ideas.

The transparent nature of this is especially apparent in the visible aspects of The Lamp of Passion and the experiential aspects outlined in the musical source. Both the painting and the musicals use fluid abstraction, tonal shifts, spatial indeterminacy and internal luminosity, and the process of concentration, immersion and departure from the tangible reality. Both of these mechanisms are sensory in nature, but they may be viewed as ways of promoting non-representational perception to contemplative experience.

***Noor*: Visualizing Spiritual Illumination**

One of the clearest findings concerns the representation of *noor*, or divine illumination, through the visual language of *The Lamp of Passion*. The artwork does not depict illumination through a conventional external light source. Instead, luminosity appears to emerge from within the composition, producing an impression of internally generated radiance.

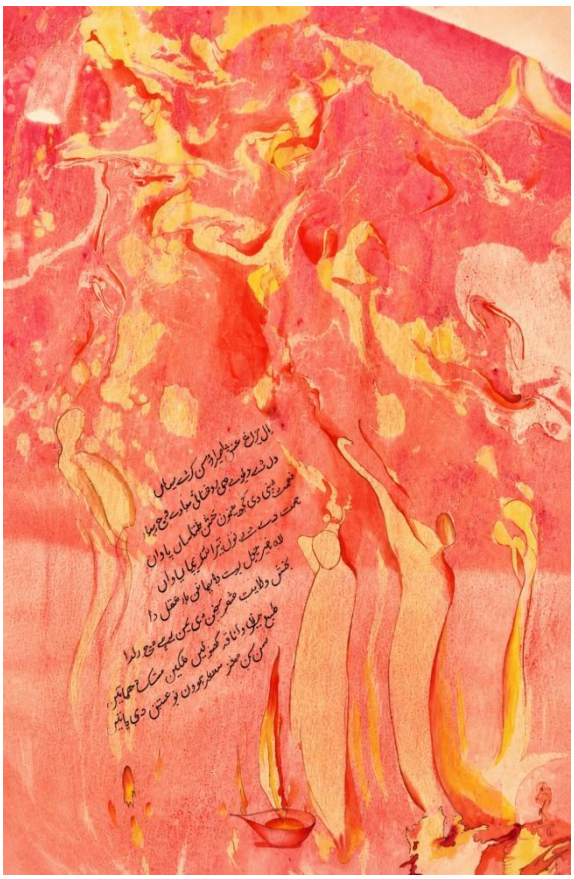

Figure 1 The Lamp of Passion

Source: Artist's own work (Dr. Rabia Kanwal, 2024)

The study then determines that the most significant internal criterion for the identification of noor is visual, namely internal luminosity. The use of warm colors, especially reds, oranges, and yellows, adds a sense of intensity and radiance to the scene. The effect is a visual field that is both formal and metaphysical. The painting therefore turns the concept of light from a physical to a spiritual state.

The discovery made a strong link with the wider Sufi epistemological system where spiritual knowledge is perceived as experiential. The visual strategy enables the intangible concept to be tackled by the use of material colour and tonal relationships. As illustrated in Figure 1, the painting employs fluid transitions of warm colour and internally generated luminosity to create a visual field that can be interpreted through the Sufi concept of *noor*.

***Ishq*: Intensity, Colour, and Emotional Movement**

The second big discovery relates to the depiction of *ishq* - mystical love as intensity of color and movement within the composition. The overall color palette and composition of the painting create a

sense of warmth and movement, suggesting a more emotional and expressive quality than a traditional portrait.

The analysis reveals the affectivity of colour as an element, not a description. Ray's paintings don't use color to represent objects, but use color as the primary vehicle for emotional and spiritual significance. The use of gradations of tone creates a feeling of transformation and movement. Here, too, the visual vocabulary of The Lamp of Passion aligns with the Sufi focus on love and longing as engines to drive the seeker toward spiritual enlightenment.

This is especially significant in light of the concept of rasa. According to the music source given, rasa is an aesthetic phenomenon that can evoke delight, focused awareness and heightened awareness. Therefore, although both concepts are not the same, they both offer a perspective on how intensity and affect are important elements of art.

***Fana*: Dissolution of Form and Ego**

One other significant discovery was the link between abstraction and the Sufi idea of fana. From this visual analysis, it is evident that The Lamp of Passion deliberately avoids the rigidity of outline and clearly defined figure. Forms seem to come and go in the composition, rather than being there indefinitely.

This formlessness is a metaphor for the dissolution of identity that is attributable to fana. Lacking sharply defined outlines, the viewer cannot form a firm separation between individual objects and the visual field. Instead, boundaries are permeable, forming a sense of continuity and transformation.

This result implies that here abstraction is not a denial of meaning, but rather a way to represent a condition that can't be taken literally. The disappearance of identifiable forms is similar to the conceptual shift from individual identity to a less differentiated form. This is one of the strongest connections of the material properties of the artwork and its Sufi conceptual matrix.

Rasa and Aesthetic Absorption in Musical Experience

The analysis of the second source led to the conclusion that the central concept in the understanding of the spiritual potential of South Asian Music is rasa. The source defines rasa as aesthetic enjoyment, spiritual experience, higher consciousness, self-realization, liberation and happiness.

The results also suggest that musical experience is described as an active concentration process instead of a passive listening process. The material provided also engages with the subtler aspects of music and demonstrates how fine qualities of music can have a psychological impact and can see the listener transcending the tangible, the normal. The musical experience is, therefore, the one of absorption, concentration and altered perception.

The source also talks about rasa as creating intense mental equilibrium and an individual's temporary transcendence of the usual personal and social constraints. In terms of the analytical structure of this study, this is a significant experiential parallel with Sufi epistemological obsession with transformation of the self.

The Nafs as a Model of Inner Transformation

The Sufi material was analyzed to find that the progressive stages of the nafs was another framework to be used in interpreting artistic change. The following source details the stages of movement from an-nafs al-ammara (the rough soul), to less and less godly influences, eventually reaching an-nafs al-kamila (the perfected self).

This development is a conceptual model of transformation from the consciousness of fragmentation or of the ego-centred consciousness to that of tranquillity and contentment, to the awareness of divine pleasure and perfection. In conjunction with the 'aesthetic experience of music/painting', this nafs approach implies that artistic involvement is a 'travel to the inside'. The artwork and musical performance cannot automatically cause spiritual transformation; it is possible to provide conditions for contemplation and the deepening of awareness, that in which spiritual transformation can be contemplated.

The convergence of the visual and auditory pathways.

A comparative analysis revealed some conceptual similarities between the visual and the auditory materials. These are summarized in table 1.

Table 1. Comparative Relationship Between Sufi Concepts and Artistic Experience

Analytical dimension	**Contemporary miniature painting**	**South Asian Music**	**Interpretive finding**
Spiritual illumination	Internal luminosity and radiant colour	Intensified attentive listening	Movement toward heightened awareness
Divine love (*ishq*)	Warm colours, emotional intensity, fluid movement	Emotional and devotional musical experience	Affective engagement as a pathway to contemplation
Dissolution (*fana*)	Dissolving forms and absence of rigid boundaries	Movement beyond ordinary perceptual experience	Reduction of fixed sensory or ego-centered perception
Aesthetic experience	Visual immersion and contemplation	*Rasa*, aesthetic relish and absorption	Artistic experience can exceed ordinary sensory pleasure
Transformation of self	Visual movement from defined to fluid forms	Concentration and transcendence	Art can be interpreted as an inward process
Spiritual knowledge	Practice-led visual inquiry	Experiential musical listening	Artistic practice functions as a potential mode of knowing

It is at the experiential function level that the strongest link between the two forms of art can be seen (as is shown in the table). While painting uses mostly colour, spatial organization, abstraction, and materiality, music uses mostly sound, concentration, temporal development, and affective experience. However, both sources speak of a shifting from the normal perceptual state to a more focused and reflective state.

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The comparative analysis also revealed two of the analytical categories to be very fruitful, namely rasa and noor. The results indicate that it is not advisable to equate these concepts. Instead, they have different philosophies and religions. Within South Asian aesthetic theory, rasa is an aesthetic experience, or aesthetic relish; and in Sufism, noor is divine illumination.

Their value to analysis lies in their common focus on experiences beyond mere sense-perception. In the provided source, rasa is connected to greater enjoyment, a sense of the transcendental, and spiritual experience, and noor is visually symbolized by something that radiates luminosity from the inside. The comparison thus indicates another level of transcendent aesthetic experience, in which various traditions speak about the transformation of the spirit in their own conceptual language.

Practice as a Form of Knowledge

The last important result relates to the role of artistic practice. The first source puts the emphasis on the epistemological nature of artistic making and states that cycles of making, reflection, documentation and analysis are a part of knowledge production.

The results then corroborate the hypothesis that modern miniaturism works as an artwork, as a research process, as an epistemological object. Whether through the use of pigment layering, tonal transitions, surface manipulation and organization of composition, material decisions are not simply technical in nature, but help to build conceptual understanding.

Together with the musical experience discussed in the second source, this discovery broadens the definition of artistic knowledge to encompass something beyond the creation of the work itself. Concentrating on music, appreciating its beauty, and listening to music spiritually also imply embodied and experiential ways of knowing. Overall, the results contribute to an interdisciplinary perspective of art in which creation, audition, visualization, empathizing and thinking can all contribute to the production of knowledge.

Summary of Findings

In total, the findings reveal five main findings. First, both source types offer the possibility of the art experience as an experience rather than a representation. Secondly, The Lamp of Passion is realised in the form of noor, ishq and fana; in terms of luminosity, colour intensity, abstraction and dissolution of form. Thirdly, rasa offers an alternative perspective from South Asian Music to understand aesthetic absorption and transcendence. Fourth, the nafs offers a theoretical framework within which the process of transformation from the outside can be comprehended. Last, the comparison shows how music and modern miniature painting offer different approaches to related questions of contemplation, affect, spirituality and transformation.

The findings, thus, validate the main thesis of this study that Sufi epistemology and South Asian aesthetics theory can be meaningfully juxtaposed in the study of experience of art, with keeping in view their conceptual differences. The evidence suggests a comparative approach in which the spiritual aspects of visual practice are illuminated by the terms of noor, ishq, and fana, while the experiential aspects of auditory practice are illuminated by the terms of rasa and musical concentration. In combination these findings help to set the foundation for a more general conversation on the potential of modern South Asian art to reanimate traditional spiritual-aesthetic knowledge in a contemporary art context.

DISCUSSION

The present research focused on the relationship between Sufi epistemology, South Asian aesthetic theory, South Asian Music with contemporary miniature painting by keeping in mind the artistic experience as an experiential knowledge. The results suggest that despite the fact that music and painting are mediated by different sensory and formal processes, they can be related in terms of shared interest in concentration, affect, transformation, contemplation and departure from the perception of the ordinary. It should be noted that this is not to equate Sufi concepts with South Asian aesthetic concepts. Instead, the results show the existence of specific conceptual languages in which various traditions have

described experiences of artistic and spiritual depth in the form of a succession of noor, ishq, fana, rasa, and the progressive transformation of the nafs.

One of the key results was the experiential knowledge of artistry. The first provided study clearly calls into question the contemporary miniature painting as an epistemological field of enquiry, where the production of knowledge is informed by the making, the reflection and material experimentation. This is in line with the theory of practice-led research which acknowledges that creative practice and research inquiry can be mutually influential. Smith and Dean (2009) suggest that creative practice and research can be an iterative process whereby creative activity raises questions and understandings which in turn inform subsequent creative practice. This is especially pertinent to the current study as noor and fana are all spiritual concepts that cannot be fully appreciated by textual description. A way of interpreting them is found in the way that they are presented in terms of colour, materiality, spatial organisation and the gradual movement of visual form in The Lamp of Passion. The artwork therefore is not just a way of illustrating the pre-explanatory ideas of Sufism, but a practice place where the ideas of Sufism are investigated as practice.

This finding on the internal luminosity and noor is significant. The visual analysis highlighted the fact that the light is not being depicted as a physical object outside the composition but rather as a light that arises from within the composition. This helps explain that noor is not just a literal representation of light, but an illumination that is drawn inwards. This reading would fit in with the broader Islamic aesthetic sensibility that suggests that the shape of an artwork can pull viewers away from the surface level of its physical existence. The visual strategy is important in this way, as it does not limit spirituality to known religious symbols. Rather than that, spiritual meaning is created by the literary structure of colour, tonal shifts, and brilliance.

This perspective becomes more apparent when examined in the context of the modern art of the Muslim South Asia, as shown by Dadi (2010) who argue that the modernist movement in Muslim South Asia was a process of negotiation between the old art forms and the new cultural contexts. The contemporary artists were not only reproducing historical forms, but also often changing and morphing them in response to contemporary and transnational artistic discourses. The results of the present study further reinforce this notion by proposing that spiritual ideas can also be translated into action, but be not discarded. But the abstraction in the Lamp of Passion is not necessarily an abandonment of miniatures, rather an extension of their ability to convey experiences not readily apparent in a more traditional figurative mode.

Another significant contribution of the study is the interpretation of abstraction as a visual method for fana. The results revealed that within The Lamp of Passion forms appear and disappear, not boxed in by firm borders. This is a formal instability that can be seen as a visual metaphor for the fading of individual identity that is experienced in fana. The force of this reading is one of materiality and process paralleled with philosophical concept; the image does not simply refer to the process of dissolution, it generates an experience of uncertain boundaries, through the organization of its forms.

This discovery also aligns with the overall Sufi theme of change of the self. The second source quoted states that the nafs goes through seven stages, moving from an egocentric state to more and more elevated states, until it reaches the state of spiritual perfection. The visual dissolution revealed in the present study can thus be understood within a larger process of transgression from the static consciousness of the individual. This, however, ought to be an interpretive match and not a statement that abstraction in and of itself generates fana. The artwork provides a symbolic and experiential opportunity to contemplate dissolution; spiritual realization is the subject matter of the viewer's subjective and cultural experience.

The results on colour and ishq further illustrate the relationship between formal qualities and spiritual significance. The strong presence of red, orange and yellow hues and some of their combinations creates intensity and movement, as well as an emotional warmth. These colours work not so much as a

descriptive colour, but as an affective and symbolic element. This helps to interpret ishq as an energetic force in the visual composition. The Lamp of Passion further suggests this relationship, as does the lighting of the lamp itself.The title of the painting, The Lamp of Passion, and the illumination of the lamp, further reinforces this relationship.

It is particularly fruitful to compare this to South Asian aesthetic theory and rasa at this juncture. Tamošaitytė (2000) elucidates the fact that the notion of rasa has a long pedigree in the South Asian aesthetic and musical tradition, and have been understood as an aesthetic experience which can elevate emotion to a higher level of enjoyment. The findings of the present research also confirm that colour and visual form can be more than a representation, and can be used to evoke an affective experience. Hence both the words 'ishq' and 'rasa' can be used for talking about intensity, but they need to be conceptually distinguished: 'ishq' is a vocabulary of Sufi love and spiritual longing; 'rasa,' on the other hand, is the aesthetic relish or experiential essence created in the process of artistic engagement.

This interdisciplinary relationship is further endorsed by the results for South Asian Music and aesthetic absorption. The provided source links rasa with devotional enjoyment, elevated consciousness, self-realization, deliverance and joy. In a similar fashion, Pudaruth (2016) maintains that South Asian music has been historically conceptualized as an expressive art, but also as a means to achieving aesthetic experiences, and in some versions of South Asian philosophy, to ultimately, or self-realization, or realization of ultimate reality. The results of the present analysis are described with terms of these perspectives, such as musical concentration. The meaning of music is not just in the music itself, but in the listening and involvement of the listener.

Spokane poet and Sufi musician Meeta Devi notes that in the South Asian tradition of Sufi music, particularly qawwali, the connection between music and spiritual transformation is of special significance. Qureshi's ethnomusicological research focuses on the inseparability of qawwali from its performance setting, the role of the audience, the ritual setting and religious significance. This is a significant qualification for this present study, that musical structure does not produce spiritual musical experience. It is formed by performers, listeners, texts, ritual expectations, cultural knowledge and the social context in which music is heard. Thus, it is not the intention of the findings to imply a universally or automatically transformative impact of South Asian Music. Instead, through specific aesthetic and cultural settings, musical immersion can be a meaningful spiritual experience.

Yet another key discovery made by the study is the concentration that occurs in both music and painting. According to the material provided, focused music can create a trance state that can lead the listener beyond reality. The Lamp of Passion is also not confined to a single viewpoint or to a specific shape in the visual realm; it opens up a field of contemplation, which one would be wise to follow. Thus, the comparison seems to imply that concentration could prove to be a promising cross modal class to study spiritual aesthetics. Music focuses attention through the passage of time, tonal relationships, repetition and listening, while painting can focus attention through colour, spatial ambiguity, material texture and visual rhythm.

The links between aesthetic absorption and changed experience should be read with caution, however. The material provided defines rasa as one that can bring focus to the mental harmony and take the experiencer beyond the ordinary limitations. These descriptions refer to particular aesthetic and philosophical approaches and should not necessarily be equated with a clinically assessed change in consciousness. They still play a role as important phenomenological descriptions of the way artistic experience has been conceptualized historically. The present study thus adds to these descriptions by not trying to reduce spiritual experience to a psychological or neurological effect, but by juxtaposing the descriptions with contemporary visual practice.

Another important discovery is the correlation between the sensory form and the intangible meaning. The painting's approach to spiritual ideas is via visible properties, colour, light, form, and spatial organization. In music, spiritual and emotional experiences are explored through sound, focus,

developing melody and aesthetic appreciation. Thus, the two artistic modes show alternative approaches to making tangible sensory experiences of intangible concepts. This is in keeping with the idea that knowledge of the beautiful is not always expressible as a proposition. Instead, artistic practice can produce other understandings that are tacit, embodied and affective.

This is the same observation that is expressed as a methodological implication of practice-led research. Smith and Dean call the process of creating an iterative one between practice and reflection, and the process of creating can also be a way of questioning. In the present study, this is seen in the process of making decisions about materials in the conceptual argument of The Lamp of Passion. Pigment layering, tonal transitions, breakdown of boundaries, internal luminosity, all technical choices and explorations of metaphysical concepts.

Another theoretical overlap and contrast is seen when South Asian aesthetic theory is compared to Sufi epistemology.South Asian aesthetic theory and Sufi epistemology also shows an important theoretical convergence and difference. Both traditions acknowledge a sort of experience beyond the instruments of ordinary knowledge, or the "pure" intellectual, but each one structures these experiences in a different way. The difference arises in the focus of Rasa - aesthetic relish, and Sufi epistemology - Artistic and Sensual experience in a spiritual pathway, towards Divine reality. The study thus has a call for dialogue instead of equivalence. It is best viewed as a comparative analytical relationship between rasa and noor, in that both can enhance increased experience while preserving their respective theological, philosophical and historical significance.

The results also have implications for today's cultural identity. South Asian artists today are creating in more interconnected cultural settings that involve the collision of traditions, global modernism, abstraction and digital culture, as well as transnational art discourse. The first provided study proposes that the fusion of Sufi philosophy and modern aesthetics may be a representation of cultural hybridity and yet remain culturally traditional. In the present research, the proposition is extended by suggesting that the dialogue of Sufi metaphysics with South Asian aesthetic experience is an alternative to the dichotomy of “traditional” and “modern” art, which can be a historical style to be preserved, or it can be a conceptual resource for contemporary experimentation.

One of the other contributions is related to the multimodal aspect of spiritual aesthetics. A wealth of studies has focused on Sufi spirituality in the context of poetry, devotional music, architecture, calligraphy or religious practice, and contemporary miniature painting has been frequently studied mostly in terms of its technique, identity, modernism and art history. This research connects the auditory and visual experience in one analytical approach. This does not imply that music and painting are the same thing. Rather it shows that both can be investigated by way of common experiences of attention, affect, repetition, immersion, transformation, and contemplation.

One of the major limitations of the study is also pointed out. The evidence is largely interpretative and case-based, and The Lamp of Passion is the main visual case study, while the literature supplied is the main conceptual framework for the musical element. This means that the results do not make any definitive causal connections between artistic involvement and spiritual change. More specifically, the study does not provide an empirical proof that viewing the painting or listening to South Asian Music or Sufi music results in fana, noor or an altered state of consciousness in general. Instead, it is a case of how such experiences can be conceptually and aesthetically understood within existing theoretical frameworks. Further evidence could be obtained by conducting interviews with artists and listeners, ethnographic observation, phenomenological accounts or empirical studies of musical and visual engagement in the future.

Notwithstanding this constraint the study is conceptually rich, as it illustrates the capacity of artistic practice as a space of intersection between two different types of spiritual and aesthetic thinking. The bond between rasa and noor is very significant since it moves away from the classification of art-objects and towards the experiences they can bring forth. Likewise, the connection between fana and formal

dissolution illustrates the use of visual abstraction as a material language to think about transformation of the self.

Overall, the results support the main thesis that contemporary miniature painting and classical music of South Asia can be seen as two worlds of experiential knowledge, though not necessarily connected. The visual language of The Lamp of Passion gives ishq, fana and noor a new lease on life, where the idea of colour, luminosity, abstraction and spatial movement is applied, and the South Asian aesthetic frame of rasa offers a language for the understanding of aesthetic absorption and heightened experience within music. The relation between these traditions does not obliterate their distinctions; rather, it uncovers the sophistication with which the understanding of art as an experience, a contemplation, and a communication of realities beyond ordinary representation has evolved in all the intellectual traditions of South Asia.

CONCLUSION

This study shows how the epistemology of Sufis and South Asian aesthetic theory complement each other, yet are conceptually different, in the context of understanding spiritual experiences in art. The analysis of The Lamp of Passion demonstrates how the concepts of noor, ishq, fana can be materially expressed through the internal illuminosity, intense colour, fluid abstraction and dissolving of visual boundaries, and how the concept of rasa can be understood as the aesthetic absorption, increased awareness and transcendence within South Asian Music. The comparison also shows how painting and music can be experiential modes of knowledge that transform and reflect inward through sensory engagement. Importantly, the study does not define rasa as noor or aesthetic absorption as fana, but points out productive areas for dialogue, while maintaining the original philosophical and cultural contexts. The research indicates that the modern painting tradition of miniature in South Asia can be explored as an extension of the traditional spiritual vocabulary, while the musical and visual traditions in South Asia can be looked at as different and alternate means of negotiating between various artistic experiences, spiritual and identity-based experiences, and various knowledges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Future studies should build on the current interpretation and practice-based methodology by making comparative studies of other contemporary miniature painters, South Asian Musicians, Sufi artists and audiences, to explore how spiritual and aesthetic experiences are perceived in different cultural and artistic settings. Research into this relationship of rasa, noor, ishq and fana could be enriched by interdisciplinary studies that brings together art history, musicology, Sufi studies, aesthetics, phenomenology and cultural studies. Artist interviews, ethnographic observation, documentation of the process in the studio, and phenomenological observation of viewers and listeners should also be used as a secondary tool in further research, in addition to textual and visual interpretation. Studies of particular musical genres as Sufi qawwali and South Asian classical performance, together with current practices of miniatures, would help to elucidate convergences and differences in experiences of concentration, transcendence and spiritual transformation. Finally, contemporary artists and researchers are invited to be critically and contextually engaged with traditional ideas of spirituality as a source of creative inquiry and as living structures rather than as mutually interchangeable.

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