



# The five stations of artistry in film narrative: A Sufistic interpretation

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## ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a five-stage screenwriting framework inspired by the Sufi stations of knowledge (*maqamat*), offering an alternative to Western paradigms such as Aristotle's three-act structure and Field's screenplay model. Drawing on Islamic spirituality, the study conceptualises the stations of *Sharia*, *Tariqa*, *Haqiqah*, and *Ma'rifa* as narrative thresholds: Harmony, Beauty, Feel, Truth, and Love. Through comparative textual analysis, the paper examines how these spiritual states manifest cinematically via mise-en-scène, sound design, visual rhythm, and character development. This hybrid methodology not only contributes to the decolonisation of screenwriting theory but also provides a spiritually resonant structure for narrative design in films. The findings through case studies of contemporary films reveal five stations of artistry in film narrative, interpreted through the lens of Qur'anic aesthetics and Islamic epistemology.

Keywords: **Film narrative, screenwriting, Sufism**

## INTRODUCTION

Screenwriting constitutes the narrative craft of film, defined by Batty and Waldeback (2019) as well as Russin and Downs (2012) as creating cinematic narratives through structured scripts that blend dialogue, action, character development, and visual storytelling. Central to this process is theme, which Maras (2009) identifies as the vehicle for the writer's perspective, delivering both emotional and intellectual value to audiences. Screenwriting theorist Snyder (2005) affirms that Aristotle's dramatic structure, first outlined in *Poetics* (Aristotle, c. 335 BCE/1992) as a beginning, middle, and end, remains the dominant framework for mainstream screenplays. Cinema, originating in the West with the Lumière brothers' 1895 film, is an artistic tradition grounded in Western thought. Western dominance in film narrative has been reinforced by scholars like Bordwell (1985), McKee (1997), Field (2005), and others, who developed screenwriting principles based on Aristotle's philosophy.

Sufism, or *Tasawwuf*, focuses on the purification of the heart (*tazkiyah al-nafs*) to gain knowledge of Truth. Early Sufi scholar al-Qushayri (1045-1046/2017) notes that Sufism is the constant connection to and purification for God. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) described it as *al-Ihsaan*, worshipping God as if seeing Him (Muslim) (Mahmood et al., 2020). Prominent Islamic thinker al-Ghazali (1106-1111/1988) explains that the heart, the seat of knowledge, is enlightened through the remembrance of God (*dzikrullah*). As such, the Sufi path shares a common goal with film narratives: the acquisition of knowledge, albeit through different methods. The renowned 6th-century Hijri Sufi, al-Jailani (1160/1997) outlines four stations (maqamat) of knowledge in Sufism: *Sharia* (law), *Tariqa* (path), *Haqiqa* (truth), and *Ma'rifa* (gnosis), all leading closer to the ultimate Truth. This study refers to these as the "Sufi stations of knowledge".

Western screenwriting prioritises linearity, causality, and closure, which are concepts that may contrast with non-Western forms. This paper reimagines screenwriting through Islamic spirituality, drawing on the Sufi stations of knowledge. These trace a journey from outer discipline to inner annihilation, offering narrative depth beyond plot mechanics. The five stations (Harmony, Beauty, Feel, Truth, and Love) reflect transformations in the creative process. Though Islamic aesthetics is well explored in visual art, its relevance to screenwriting is underexamined. This study combines Qur'anic storytelling and Sufi hermeneutics to complement existing models with spiritual and ethical presence. A glossary aids reader accessibility.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the 125 years of cinema, filmmakers from diverse cultures have embedded their worldviews into films. This prompts the question: is there an alternative to Western narrative structures? Among non-Western filmmakers are key voices from the Islamic world, including Moustapha Akkad, Abbas Kiarostami, and Asghar Farhadi. When Muslims make films, what then shapes an Islamic approach to narrative? Discussions of Islam and films often centre on *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), of what is *halal* and *haram* (lawful or unlawful). For instance, al-Qaradawi (1995) permits films if their content avoids sin, does not distract from religious or worldly duties, and prevents gender mixing in cinemas. Yet, beyond moral concerns lies the question of how a story is told. Field

(2005), building on Aristotle, describes the Three-Act Structure: Act I (Set-Up), Act II (Confrontation), and Act III (Resolution). A strong screenplay introduces conflict, deepens struggle, and resolves tension. But is there an Islamic method for shaping story?

A film is both a technological product and an artistic expression. What, then, is Islam's guidance in shaping cinema as art? Can Islam offer its own approach to narrative design? Sufism, aimed at uncovering divine truth, offers a layered epistemology. Since the theme in screenwriting also conveys knowledge, it is worth asking whether Sufi stations of knowledge can inspire a new model of film narrative. Could this framework complement Aristotle's structure, and serve as a meaningful alternative for Muslim filmmakers? From an Islamic perspective, the Qur'an holds the highest authority. In Surah an-Nahl (16:89), God declares it "a clarification for all things and as guidance," and in Surah al-Haaqqah (69:51), as *haqq ul-yaqin*, "the true certainty" (al-Hilali & Khan, 2018; Pickthall, 1930). As such, the Qur'an is regarded as absolute and incontrovertible Truth.

Divine guidance on the arts appears in Surah ash-Shu'ara, verse 227: "Except for those [the poets] who believe, do righteous deeds, remember God often, and defend themselves after being wronged..." (26:227). Prominent scholar Hamka (1982) interprets "poets" as encompassing artists more broadly, which naturally includes screenwriters. Mehring (1990) describes screenwriters as artists with "something important to say" (p. 2), a view echoed by Macdonald (2013), who interprets them as cultural voices that challenge conventions and expose deeper meanings. This links artistry with Sufi practice, particularly the remembrance of God. Notably, Qur'anic stories such as those of Prophet Yusuf and Isa (pbut) follow narrative arcs that parallel Aristotle's dramatic structure. While *Poetics* predates Islam, Muslims view Qur'anic narratives as divine and timeless. Any Islamic approach to storytelling must begin with the Qur'an, starting with the guidance offered in Surah ash-Shu'ara (26:227).

Recent scholarship has increasingly explored the intersection of religion and screen narrative. Callaway and Batali (2016) demonstrate how theological frameworks shape narrative meaning and audience engagement, highlighting the ways characterisation and storytelling may be interpreted through religious lenses. As editors, Mitchell and Plate (2007) curate scholarship that explores intersections between biblical hermeneutics, religious traditions, and cinematic storytelling. In parallel, Chaudhuri (2005) argues that non-Western cinema frequently resists classical screenplay conventions through affective and politically inflected poetics, while Naficy's concept of "accented cinema" (2001) frames diasporic filmmaking as embedded in cultural displacement and charged with both existential and political significance. This study builds on these contributions by mapping Sufi spirituality, specifically the *maqamat*, onto narrative structure.

### *Theoretical framework*

Mehring (1990) notes that screenwriting requires insight into one's thoughts and feelings, highlighting the importance of spiritual dimensions in creative work. This concern is echoed in diverse cinematic traditions. Abdul Latif and Hassan (2020) interpret Malaysian features *Jogho* (1997) and *Bunohan* (2011) as narratives of cultural education and spiritual continuity, while Fang and Mansor (2024) examine how *Ne Zha* (2019) achieves cultural and spiritual resonance through sophisticated visual symbolism and narrative archetypes.

These studies foreground the spiritual as a legitimate structuring force in cinematic storytelling, supporting the development of an indigenous Islamic screenwriting model. They also complement recent scholarship that positions cinema as a site of spiritual inquiry. Johnston et al. (2019) explore how film can serve as a theologically resonant arena where narrative, symbolism, and spirituality intersect, while Johnston (2006) provides a foundational framework for understanding films as theological dialogue. Together, these perspectives reinforce Mehring's insight into the spiritual artistry of screenwriting.

Narrative arts in film should also be explored through the lens of Islamic spirituality. For Muslim filmmakers, this goes beyond *fiqh*-based discussions of what is *halal* or *haram*. Al-Ghazali (1106/1988) holds that knowledge arises through the remembrance of God, and al-Jailani (1160/1997) outlines four stations of understanding. These Sufi stations of knowledge can inform a spiritually grounded approach to storytelling. Although Western in origin, Field's (2005) Three-Act Structure offers a clear narrative method aligned with Qur'anic storytelling, which itself mirrors Aristotelian form. Thus, it should not be rejected but integrated with the Sufi framework. Combining both models allows for a balanced theory of film narrative, merging Islamic metaphysics with cinematic craft.

The proposed *maqamat*-screenwriting model aligns spiritual stations with narrative thresholds: *Sharia* (Harmony), *Tariqa* (Beauty), *Tariqa* (Feel), *Haqiqa* (Truth), and *Ma'rifa* (Love). These stations reflect a journey from outward structure to inward essence. Rather than a linear progression, this structure invites ethical circularity and narrative depth. Where Aristotle privileges causal momentum, and Field emphasises inciting incidents and plot points, the *maqam* framework privileges affective resonance, spiritual ambiguity, and ethical transformation. Each *maqam*-station represents not only a story beat but a mode of artistic consciousness. This metaphysical underpinning does not negate form, but instead, spiritualises it.

## METHODS

### *Research aim*

This study aims to develop the stations of artistry in film narrative through a Sufistic approach as a spiritual branch of Islam. This will create a new narrative concept that can serve as a guide in crafting screenplays, complementing the Western film narrative structure.

### *Research objectives*

This study has three main objectives:

1. To interpret the Islamic approach to narrative, particularly in film.
2. To find the parallel between the stations of knowledge in Sufism and the levels of artistry in film narratives.
3. To incorporate elements of Islamic spirituality in the creation of a screenplay, in order to develop a new film narrative concept.

### *Research methodology*

This study adopted a qualitative approach, employing a textual analysis of the Qur'an, Sunnah, exegeses, academic sources, and films to thoroughly explore the subject.

Qualitative methods allow for a deep investigation into complex religious and cultural phenomena within their authentic context, ensuring findings are rooted in authoritative sources and scholarly interpretations. Qualitative research prioritises depth over breadth, offering a richer understanding of complex issues. Unlike quantitative methods, it focuses on detailed descriptions and emerging themes. Saldaña and Omasta (2022) emphasise that the strength of qualitative inquiry lies in its dynamic, context-sensitive exploration of multifaceted phenomena, where recursive analysis and systematic theme development yield insights fundamentally distinct from quantitative approaches.

### *Data analysis*

A screenplay represents a written narrative that awaits translation into a motion picture by the director and team, remaining subjective and shaped by each reader's imagination. However, a well-crafted screenplay should integrate filmic elements. Mehring (1990) defines filmic as any device, visual or aural, and unique to the motion picture medium, such as filmic time, space, motion, imagery, and sound. As such, to identify how each element of the stations of knowledge in Sufism (*Sharia*, *Tariqa*, *Haqiqa*, and *Ma'rifa*) is present in a screenplay, the narrative must be interpreted by uniting the filmic elements (filmic time, filmic space, motion, imagery, sound) and film content (theme, structure, character, *mise-en-scène*). This union represents a form of artistic expression in writing that conveys a narrative intended for the medium of motion pictures.

When the narrative is driven by characters through the events that unfold, this translation must also encompass the characters' actions, the dialogue (or monologue) they speak, and the depiction of each event within the story's plot. As Field (2005) notes, a screenplay is "a story told with pictures in dialogue and description, and placed within the context of dramatic structure" (pp. 19-20). Therefore, this study extracts and analyses data by interpreting film narratives through the synthesis of filmic form and content within a theoretical framework that harmoniously integrates the stations of knowledge in Sufism with the Three-Act Structure narrative model.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As stated, the Western Three-Act Structure positions a film's theme as a vehicle for conveying meaning and cultural knowledge (Maras, 2009), while the stations of knowledge in Sufism are a path to ultimate Truth in Islamic spirituality. Here, the common ground between these two seemingly disparate concepts lies in their shared focus on knowledge. However, in developing stations of artistry in film narrative through a Sufi lens, the narrative art must be structured similarly to the *maqamat*, progressing through different levels of understanding. Each station builds on the previous, just as in Sufism, where the stations are sequential and interdependent, forming the foundation for spiritual knowledge in Islam.

### *The first station: Harmony*

The Sufi path begins with the *Maqam* of *Sharia*, rooted in the Five Pillars and Islamic legal principles (*ahkam*). This foundational stage requires mastery of what is *halal* and *haram* as prerequisites for spiritual progress, a point emphasised by al-Ghazali (c. 1100/1989) and echoed in contemporary scholarship (Safi, 2018). Its cornerstone is the obligatory

prayer (*as-Salaah*), described by Kamali (2005) as the central pillar of devotion and the basis for all further spiritual advancement. Al-Jailani (Isa, 2014) deemed bypassing this stage heretical, as strict adherence to Sharia's rules and rituals (*arkan*) is non-negotiable for all worship. Therefore, to align the first station of narrative artistry in film with the *Maqam* of *Sharia* in Sufism, this station must serve as the foundational requisite for writing a screenplay. Thus, the first station in the art of screenwriting should be termed the Station of Harmony.

Most mainstream screenplays follow storytelling principles based on Aristotle's concept of dramatic structure (Snyder, 2005), with the Three-Act Structure outlined in Field's *Paradigm* (2005) becoming a universal standard. For example, Villeneuve's *Dune* (2021) adheres rigorously to this framework: Act I (Set-Up) establishes Paul Atreides' lineage and the conflict over Arrakis; Act II (Confrontation) depicts the Harkonnen betrayal and Paul's survival in the desert; and Act III (Resolution) culminates in Paul's alliance with the Fremen and the decisive duel with Jamis. The film's Act I introduces the political tensions between House Atreides and House Harkonnen, the mystical Bene Gesserit prophecies, and Paul's awakening visions. Act II escalates the conflict through betrayal, battles, and Paul's adaptation to Fremen culture, with antagonists like Baron Harkonnen and the Emperor's forces emerging. Act III resolves the immediate crisis with Paul's acceptance by the Fremen, while setting up future confrontations. This narrative arc echoes the enduring continuity of Aristotelian principles present in screenwriting theory. Batty and Waldeback (2019) describe contemporary screenwriting practice as shaped by "creative and critical approaches" that remain rooted in theme and structure, while Economopoulou (2009) underscores how Aristotelian narrative logic remains embedded within screenplay theory despite adaptation over time.

*Dune* (2021) exemplifies the Station of Harmony through its intricate worldbuilding and ethical order. Villeneuve's use of symmetrical composition and diegetic chanting sequences visualises a sacred geometry that resonates with Islamic cosmological principles. The *mise-en-scène* reflects a moral architecture, particularly in the spatial hierarchies of House Atreides and the Fremen, mirroring the Quranic notion of balance (*mīzān*). Paul's narrative arc centres on duty and submission to a higher order, aligning with the *Maqam* of *Sharia* as the ethical foundation of narrative direction. Thus, adhering to the Station of Harmony is particularly pertinent because the stories in the Qur'an, whose truth is believed, are presented in a natural narrative structure of beginning, middle, and end, which aligns with Aristotle's principles of dramatic structure. Therefore, the Three-Act Structure in Field's *Paradigm* (2005) must be observed as an integral part of the Station of Harmony, despite its Western origins, as it clearly defines the method of film storytelling.

### *The second station: Beauty*

The second station of knowledge in Sufism, the *Maqam* of *Tariqa*, follows the successful completion of *Sharia*. This station involves the purification of the heart (*tazkiyah al-nafs*) through structured remembrance of God (*dzikrullah*), with the heart's inner vision (*basira*) as the methodology (al-Jailani, 1160/1997). Once cleansed of darkness, the heart receives divine light (*an-Nuur*) from God (Hosein, n.d.), allowing the Sufi to perceive God's beauty in creation. Hamka's (1982) assertion that "God is seen wherever one looks" (p. 196) finds resonance in contemporary scholarship. Al-Zahrani (2021) similarly argues that in

Islamic aesthetics, beauty (*jamal*) is not merely ornamental, but inherently reflective of divine attributes (*sifat*), positioning creation itself as a medium for spiritual awareness.

Similarly, in a screenplay, once the Station of Harmony is fulfilled, the narrative structure is sound and cohesive. At this point, the screenplay transforms into a true work of art, immersing the audience in the beauty of the filmic world. Thus, when a screenplay becomes art, it also becomes beautiful. Therefore, from a Sufi perspective, the second station in the development of artistry in film narrative that aligns with the *Maqam* of *Tariqa* is the Station of Beauty, following the Station of Harmony.

In Tamhane's *The Disciple* (2020), the pursuit of Beauty is rendered through the aesthetic rigour of Hindustani classical music. The film's slow pacing and contemplative tone parallel the spiritual training of the seeker. Through wide shots and long silences, Tamhane crafts a cinematic rhythm that reflects the inward journey of the protagonist. Although resisting conventional narrative momentum, the film can still be read through the lens of the Three-Act Structure: aspiration, disillusionment, and resignation. In this framing, the beauty of the filmic world comes to life, immersing the audience in a contemplative realm that momentarily disconnects them from the noise of modern reality. Beauty here is not ornamentation but the disciplined unfolding of presence. The teacher-student relationship mirrors the Sufi *murshid-murīd* dynamic, grounding the film in the ethics of aspirational refinement.

However, beauty is inherently subjective, shaped by individual perception and experience. What is beautiful to one may not be to another, as different backgrounds and knowledge influence each person's interpretation. The reader's or viewer's experience of the story is affected by their own understanding and perspective. Nevertheless, when a screenplay adheres to the Three-Act Structure, as outlined in Field's *Paradigm* (2005), which is recognised globally as the standard in screenwriting, the resulting strong and coherent narrative structure is more likely to be perceived as a work of artistic beauty.

### *The third station: Feel*

The *Maqam* of *Tariqa* also involves the Sufi experiencing *zauq*, a profound state derived from the Arabic meaning "to taste". While Hamka (1962) describes this as a "subtle, sensed but not grasped" experience (p. 78), Safi (2018) reframes it phenomenologically as a "pre-conceptual encounter" with divine love (p. 116), emphasising its ineffable yet transformative nature. The heart, revitalised by divine light, becomes sensitive to *zauq* (al-Jailani, 1160/1997). As al-Jailani (1160/1997) explains, the heart vibrates with increased spiritual strength through *dzikr*, aligning with the Qur'an's description of the softening of hearts (39:23). In applying this Sufi perspective to film narrative, the next station in the development of artistic expression in screenwriting continues to align with the *Maqam* of *Tariqa* on the Sufi path. In narrative artistry, *zauq* aligns with the next level of film narrative development, referred to as the Station of Feel.

As explained earlier, once a screenplay achieves the Station of Harmony, all its elements come together harmoniously, resulting in a strong and cohesive narrative structure. At this point, the screenplay becomes a living work of art, achieving the Station of Beauty. It becomes a living creation, as Mehring (1990) describes: "A screenplay is a living form, it has an organic structure" (p. 222). Like living organisms, it transmits emotional energy, achieving the Station of Feel. This emotional power is exemplified in Bairéad's *The Quiet Girl* (2022), Ireland's Oscar-nominated drama. It follows Cáit, a

neglected nine-year-old girl sent to live with distant relatives on a rural farm. In a pivotal scene, Cáit, who has barely spoken throughout the film, whispers “Daddy” to her foster father, Seán, as he carries her to bed after she wets herself in shame. This moment, devoid of melodrama, radiates seismic emotional power, evoking sorrow for Cáit’s vulnerability and fractured sense of worth, joy for Seán’s quiet act of love as he breaks his own emotional reserve, and loss for the audience, who intuit that this fragile bond will soon be severed when Cáit must return to her neglectful home.

The scene’s silence and minimal dialogue amplify its impact, through a lens of restrained intimacy. Here, the screenplay’s “living” quality manifests in its ability to breathe through pauses, as Cáit’s whispered word becomes the film’s emotional climax, and to pulse with unspoken history, particularly Seán’s grief over his deceased son. This scene exemplifies how *The Quiet Girl* (2022) achieves the third station in the artistry of film narrative, Feel. *The Quiet Girl* (2022) articulates the Station of Feel through emotional minimalism and sensory texture. The film’s sparse dialogue and visual softness cultivate a cinematic *zauq* (taste) grounded in affective restraint. Natural lighting and diegetic sound, such as rustling leaves and shallow breathing, substitute for dialogue, echoing the inner work of spiritual cultivation. Here, feeling arises not from dramatic action but from the silent witnessing of love and loss. This *Maqam* of *Tariqa* is characterised not by overt transformation, but by the quiet attunement to grace.

In the Station of Feel, readers or viewers will experience a variety of emotions conveyed through the screenplay’s narrative—joy, sorrow, anger, disappointment, fear, and more. These emotions migrate from the heart of the screenwriter to the hearts of the audience. As Mehring (1990) notes: “The screenwriter experiences, understands, and then shapes human emotions to create an expressive art form” (p. 222).

### *The fourth station: Truth*

In Sufism, after progressing through the *maqam* of *Sharia* and *Tariqa*, a Sufi reaches the third *maqam*, *Haqiqa* (Isa, 1250/2014). Derived from the Arabic root *haq*, meaning “truth”, *Haqiqa* refers to the ultimate reality of Truth. The concept is tied to God, who is considered the essence of all truth. God declares in Surah *al-Hajj*, verse 62, that He is al-Haq, the Ultimate Truth: “It is because God is the Ultimate Truth, and what they invoke besides Him is falsehood” (22:62). Truth originates from Him and returns to Him. All that exists is a manifestation of His Truth, as He is the source of ultimate reality. This is the ultimate Truth sought by a Sufi at the beginning of their spiritual journey. By attaining this Truth, the heart, as Hosein (n.d.: 8) explains, will be able to perceive and comprehend what the intellect, reason, and external observation cannot.

In screenwriting, this corresponds to the Station of Truth that aligns with the theme, revealing the core truth of the narrative. Where Mehring (1990) observed theme becoming clear at the story’s climax, contemporary scholars like Batty and Waldeback (2019) describe this as the point at which thematic meaning is consolidated, revealing the narrative’s philosophical backbone. The climax marks the protagonist’s final crisis, forcing a decisive choice that determines their success in achieving the goal set in Act I.

In the climactic scene of Wells’ *Aftersun* (2022), adult Sophie finally pieces together her fragmented childhood memories of a vacation with her father Calum. As the film cuts between young Sophie dancing with Calum to “Under Pressure” and present-day Sophie watching the same camcorder footage, the devastating truth emerges: this was their last

happy moment before Calum's implied suicide. The film's thematic core emerges in the insight that love persists even amid incomplete understanding, as children may never fully grasp their parents' struggles yet still cherish fleeting connections. Wells' subtle narrative design, marked by Calum's depression and financial difficulties, foregrounds memory as both intimate and elusive. By embracing painful emotional realities rather than offering easy resolution, the film achieves the Station of Truth.

Similarly, in the devastating climax of Zeller's *The Father* (2020), Anthony, an elderly man with dementia, fully realizes his mental deterioration as he confuses his daughter Anne with a caretaker. The scene's emotional power emerges when Anthony, now childlike and vulnerable, whimpers "I feel as if I'm losing all my leaves... the branches and the wind and the rain..." as Anne comforts him. This moment crystallises the film's central theme: "Love endures even when memory fails, that true compassion means witnessing another's suffering without flinching." This theme aligns with the film's poignant conclusion: "You have to go now; I need my mother." It encapsulates the essence of the story, the truth within the context of *The Father* (2020), that love persists even as identity fractures. The film attains the Station of Truth in its unflinching portrayal of dementia's devastation, yet its depiction of despair (Anthony's final whimper, "I don't know where I am") does not represent absolute Truth in Islam, which affirms that divine mercy and patience anchor human dignity even in suffering.

Truth emerges through fractured temporality and emotional ambiguity in both these films. In *Aftersun* (2022), memory operates as both veil and disclosure. The film's dreamlike editing, flickering light, and off-centre framing suggest a reality grasped through emotional trace. The camera lingers on silences and gazes, evoking the Sufi notion that *Haqiqah* cannot be captured, only intimated. *The Father* (2020) similarly disorients the viewer through spatial repetition and identity shifts, immersing us in the protagonist's truth as lived confusion. Production design and mise-en-scène are unstable yet coherent, building a metaphysical space where truth is simultaneously immanent and slipping away. These films demonstrate that *Haqiqah* in cinema is not about certainty, but a deeper recognition born of the interior unravelling.

In film narrative, the theme serves as the truth underlying the story, just as *Haqiqah* in Sufism refers to the ultimate reality of existence, rooted in God as the Ultimate Truth. Just as a Sufi's heart must be moved by *zauq* to open the inner vision (*basira*) and perceive Truth in the *Maqam* of *Haqiqah*, so too must a screenplay, as Mehring (1990) mentioned, evoke emotions in the reader or viewer before it can reveal its underlying truth, or theme.

### *The fifth station: Love*

The final station on the Sufi path, *Ma'rifa*, follows *Sharia*, *Tariqa*, and *Haqiqah*, culminating in spiritual knowledge. As Hamka (1983) established, *Ma'rifa* signifies the ultimate divine wisdom. Safi (2019) continues this lineage by describing *ma'rifa* as an intimate, heart-centred awareness of the Divine, accessed through presence and love rather than abstract reasoning, thereby framing it as an experiential mode of knowing rooted in the spiritual heart. More precisely, *Ma'rifa* refers to the knowledge of God (*ma'rifatullah*), transcending intellect and relying on divine illumination. This knowledge brings an overwhelming love for God, leading to a yearning for closeness, resulting in *fanaa*, or annihilation in God (al-Jailani, 1160/1997).

This love for God is central to the work of the great Sufi poets like Ibn Arabi (1165-1240 CE / 560-638 H) and Rumi (1207-1273 CE / 604-672 H). In *The Meccan Revelations*, Ibn Arabi places love at the heart of devotion, stating that “God is Love, the Lover, and the Beloved” (Ibrahim, 2020, p. 178). Rumi similarly emphasises that God is the ultimate object of love, sustaining all creation (Istiqomah, 2019). In his *Masnawi*, Rumi explores love’s nature, positioning it as the foundation of spiritual expression. Thus, the Sufi tradition of expressing love for God as the Creator (*al-Khaaliq*) finds its parallel in film narrative artistry through the Station of Love, the highest station. Iranian auteur Majid Majidi’s films manifest this tradition, using visual storytelling to convey this love rather than explicit religious messages. Contemporary Iranian cinema continues this legacy through spiritually resonant works like *Sun Children* (Majidi, 2020) and *The Night Guardian* (Abyar, 2023), which embody Sufi principles through cinematic poetry.

In *Sun Children* (2020), Majidi explores divine love through the journey of Ali, a street child whose selfless labour to dig a tunnel becomes an act of spiritual devotion. The film’s climactic moment, when sunlight floods the underground passage Ali has painstakingly excavated, visually manifests the Sufi concept of inner illumination (*basira*). Ali perceives divine truth through tactile experience rather than physical sight, his hands becoming instruments of spiritual perception. The golden light that finally bathes his face serves as a cinematic representation of God’s merciful presence, achieved without any explicit religious dialogue. Similarly, *The Night Guardian* (2023) employs profound visual metaphors to express *tawakkul* (trust in God’s wisdom). The elderly protagonist’s quiet care for war orphans culminates in a moonlit scene where her whispered Qur’anic verses blend with a dying child’s gesture of “catching” moonlight. This poignant moment, devoid of didacticism, captures Rumi’s teaching that “the wound is where the Light enters you.” The film’s restrained storytelling uses cinematic language rather than sermons to convey spiritual truth.

In both films, the Station of Love is not romantic but spiritual, a yearning for truth enacted through action. In *Sun Children* (2020), the boys’ quest to uncover buried treasure becomes a metaphor for *Ma’rifa* (divine knowledge); a search not for gold, but for meaning. The use of handheld camera and urban decay in the mise-en-scène evokes a raw intimacy with the divine hidden in hardship. *The Night Guardian* (2023) reframes *Ma’rifa* as protective love, manifest in the silent presence of a watchful figure. The film’s visual language, of lingering shadows, open thresholds, and closed doors, captures a form of divine surveillance rooted in mercy. In both films, Love transcends sentiment; it becomes a state of knowing shaped by selflessness and risk.

Both films exemplify the “show, don’t tell” technique that characterizes Islamic spiritual cinema at its finest. Through masterful use of natural imagery, with sunlight in *Sun Children* (2020) and moonlight in *The Night Guardian* (2023), the directors evoke Qur’anic references to divine light (24:35) while maintaining universal artistic appeal. The child protagonists serve as contemporary vessels for timeless Sufi wisdom, their innocent perseverance mirroring the seeker’s journey toward *Ma’rifa* (divine knowledge). When these narratives express love for God, they achieve the highest station in the artistry of film narrative: the Station of Love. With the attainment of this station, the narrative is complete, embodying perfect artistic expression through the lens of Sufi interpretation.

## CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study draws primarily on the Holy Qur'an, the ultimate Islamic reference, to develop stations of artistry in film narrative through Islamic spirituality. The key Qur'anic chapter used is Surah ash-Shu'ara (The Poets), particularly verse 227. Hamka (1982) explained that, in modern terms, "poet" (*sha'ir*) refers to an artist across various disciplines, an idea echoed in the writings of Rumi, who viewed the poet as a vessel translating divine beauty (*jamal*) into language that stirs the heart. Contemporary Muslim scholars continue this trajectory. Siddiqui (2021) emphasises that beauty in Islamic tradition is an expression of moral and spiritual refinement, extending the "poet's" role into ethical creativity. Zargar (2017) deepens this insight by analysing how storytellers and artists function as spiritual mirrors, embodying Rumi's vision by translating *jamal* into forms that awaken virtue and love. Kazmi (2009) adds a visual dimension: the modern creative imagination is heir to this poetic vision, where narrative and aesthetics converge to awaken the *qalb* (heart) without doctrinal exposition.

Together, these scholars reimagine Hamka's "poet" as any creative whose work embodies Islamic spirituality beyond formal boundaries. When God declares that the third essential quality of a poet (or artist) after faith and righteous deeds is to remember God abundantly, this becomes the key to identifying an Islamic approach to artistic creation. This leads to *tasawwuf*, the spiritual branch of Islam known as Sufism. Remembering God is inherently a spiritual practice, and Sufism offers a comprehensive method for doing so. Therefore, to explore Islamic narrative artistry in film, this research began with Sufism. Mehring's (1990) emphasis on screenwriting's spiritual dimensions finds resonance in Western film theory. Johnston (2006) interprets cinema as a dialogue with theology, while Schrader (2018) shows how the "transcendental style" evokes the sacred through silence and austerity. This trajectory affirms storytelling as a medium for spiritual introspection.

The result of this study is the development of the *Five Stations of Artistry in Film Narrative*, interpreted through a Sufi lens. This new narrative concept for screenplay creation complements Western narrative structure by addressing the spiritual gap often present in such works. Therefore, this is the Islamic answer: Sufi principles, through the five stations of artistry, should guide screenwriting, with the script adhering to these stations as follows:

1. **Station of Harmony** – Aligning with the Sufi *Maqam* of *Sharia*, this station ensures that all elements of screenwriting harmoniously come together.
2. **Station of Beauty** – Corresponding to the Sufi *Maqam* of *Tariqa*, this station allows the audience to immerse themselves in the beauty of the filmic world.
3. **Station of Feel** – Also linked to *Tariqa*, this station ensures the screenplay conveys emotions to the audience.
4. **Station of Truth** – Aligning with the Sufi *Maqam* of *Haqiqa*, this station delivers the core truth of the story.
5. **Station of Love** – Corresponding to the Sufi *Maqam* of *Ma'rifa*, this station manifests love for God within the narrative.

These five stations of artistry correspond to the stations of knowledge in Sufism, creating a parallel between Islamic spirituality and film narrative. Just as each Sufi station is interconnected, so too are these stations of artistry in film narrative.

A screenplay must first fulfil all foundational screenwriting elements at the Station of Harmony. Without this, the story will not align perfectly within the natural structure of divine order (*sunnatullah*), which is reflected in all creation's narratives—beginning, middle, and end. Once this is achieved, the screenplay becomes beautiful in its creation of the filmic world, thus reaching the Station of Beauty. When beauty is achieved, the screenplay transforms into a piece of art. Like all living forms, this art will then have the capacity to evoke emotions, moving the audience's hearts and allowing it to attain the Station of Feel. As this emotional connection deepens, the story will engage the minds of the audience, encouraging them to reflect and uncover the core truth of the narrative, thereby reaching the Station of Truth. This truth is the essence of the story and the reason it was crafted and made into a film.

Most films, when they fulfil the Station of Harmony, also successfully achieve the subsequent stations of Beauty, Feel, and Truth. However, films whose screenplays are based on Western principles of storytelling, rooted in Aristotle's dramatic structure, which has become the global standard for screenwriting, often omit the spiritual dimension from their narratives. Therefore, attaining the final Station of Love is crucial, reflecting the Sufi goal of becoming one with God, as explained by al-Jailani (1160/1997). Essentially, in Sufi-inspired art, God is central. Art created using a Sufi approach must not neglect God but rather focus on Him. This is evident in the works of great Sufi artists who manifested love for God in their masterpieces, fulfilling the Qur'anic injunction that true artists are those who remember God abundantly (26:227). This also aligns with God's command that the sole purpose of human creation is to worship Him: "And I did not create jinn and mankind except to worship Me" (51:56).

By fully achieving all five stations of artistry in a screenplay, the work becomes a complete and perfect piece of art, simultaneously serving as worship to God. This framework provides a method for incorporating Islamic spirituality into screenwriting and should be adopted by Muslim screenwriters and filmmakers globally. Ultimately, the benefits of such work extend to audiences worldwide, regardless of religion, race, or culture. With the establishment of the Five Stations of Artistry in Film Narrative—the Station of Harmony, the Station of Beauty, the Station of Feel, the Station of Truth, and the Station of Love, this study can be returned to Surah ash-Shu'ara, affirming that the true artist is one who remembers God abundantly (26:227).

## CONCLUSION

This paper has proposed a spiritually inflected model of screenwriting drawn from the Sufi path of the *maqamat*. By aligning five narrative stations—Harmony, Beauty, Feel, Truth, and Love, with the metaphysical principles of *Sharia*, *Tariqa*, *Haqiqa*, and *Ma'rifa*, it demonstrates how Islamic aesthetics can serve as a structuring force for cinematic narrative. The framework is offered as one possible epistemological intervention, particularly suited to films that privilege ethical ambiguity, interiority, and affective rhythm.

The examples discussed show how mise-en-scène, editing, sound, and character development can embody spiritual states, inviting both practitioners and theorists to reconsider narrative construction through a metaphysical lens. Ultimately, the Five Stations framework invites a mode of storytelling that is not only intellectually rigorous

but also spiritually resonant, expanding the scope of screenwriting pedagogy through decolonial and contemplative aesthetics.

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## Appendix A: Glossary of Islamic Terms

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*Dhikrullah*: Remembrance of God, often through repetition or rhythm, resonant with filmic motifs.

*Fanaa*: Spiritual annihilation of the self in God.

*Haqiqa*: The station of inner truth or metaphysical reality, beyond appearances or doctrine.

*Maqam*: A spiritual station or stage in the Sufi path to divine realisation.

*Ma'rifa*: Gnosis or direct experiential knowledge of the Divine.

*Sharia*: The external path of ethical and lawful conduct in Islam; the foundation of discipline and harmony.

*Tariqa*: The inner path of spiritual refinement, often associated with beauty, feeling, and aspirational devotion.

*Zauq*: Spiritual taste or subtle intuition, often arising through beauty or silence.