# Contemporary Sufism Trends in the Thought of Ahmed Al-Jazzar: A Critical Analytical Study

Zainab Abdel-Raouf Ahmed Imam<sup>1</sup>, Magdy Mohamed Ibrahim<sup>2</sup>, Othman Mohamed Othman<sup>3</sup>

- 1-PhD researcher in the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, Arish University.
- 2- Professor of Islamic Philosophy & Vice Dean of the Faculty of Dar Al Uloom, Aswan University
- 3- Professor of Islamic Philosophy & Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Arish University

#### **Abstract**

This study explores the renewals approach of Dr. Ahmed Al-Jazzar in Islamic Sufism, emphasizing his efforts to restore Sufism to its ethical, spiritual, and intellectual foundations while distancing it from excessive mysticism and deviations. Al-Jazzar advocates for a balanced integration of reason and spirituality, offering a refined interpretation of key Sufi concepts such as the relationship between the inner (**Batin**) and the outer (**Zahir**), the concept of trust in God (**Tawakkul**) in harmony with human effort, and Sufi poverty (**Faqr**) as detachment rather than deprivation.

His work presents a critical yet constructive engagement with classical and contemporary Sufi scholarship, drawing on the insights of Mustafa Abdel Raziq, Ahmed Sobhi, Abdel Halim Mahmoud, and Abu Al-Wafa Al-Taftazani. Through his analytical lens, Al-Jazzar advocates for a Sufi revival that remains faithful to Islamic principles while addressing modern societal and intellectual challenges.

Furthermore, this study examines Al-Jazzar's renewed understanding of worship in Sufism, highlighting how he reinterprets prayer, zakat, fasting, and Hajj beyond their ritualistic aspects, emphasizing their deeper ethical and spiritual dimensions. His approach ensures that Sufi practices remain relevant, fostering moral refinement and spiritual enlightenment in contemporary Muslim societies.

By bridging tradition and renewal, Al-Jazzar emerges as one of the leading contemporary figures in Sufi reform, positioning Sufism not only as a spiritual discipline but also as a transformative force for ethical and intellectual revival in the modern world.

## **Keywords:**

Islamic Sufism, Ahmed Al-Jazzar, Sufi Renewal, Tawakkul, Batin and Zahir, Worship in Sufism, Ethical and Spiritual Revival.

#### Preface

The study of contemporary Sufi discourse has a well-established history and a rigorous scientific methodology within academic research. This has made it a focal point for scholars across

various fields of Islamic thought. Among the most prominent modern scholars studying Islamic Sufism is Dr. Ahmed Al-Jazzar, whose academic work is distinguished by a systematic and scholarly approach. His methodology has contributed to reshaping Islamic thought and Sufism, presenting this field in a novel framework that had not been explored before. This, in turn, has enriched academic discourse with unique and diverse contributions based on a precise and purposeful methodological vision.

Dr. Ahmed Al-Jazzar is widely recognized for his extensive knowledge across various disciplines of science and philosophy. He masterfully integrates different branches of philosophy with intellectual depth, logical coherence, and conceptual clarity. His academic supervision was not limited solely to his specialized field of Islamic Sufism; rather, he oversaw numerous comparative studies and research projects in diverse academic areas. A notable example is the dissertation titled "Sufism and Orientalists," which highlights his remarkable ability to draw connections between different intellectual traditions and conduct comparative analyses across various philosophical eras and disciplines with confidence and expertise.

Several research challenges emerge in this study, which can be summarized as follows:

- 1. The lack of consensus on defining Sufi terminology.
- 2. Identifying Dr. Al-Jazzar's perspectives and methodological approach in studying Sufism.

The contributions of Dr. Ahmed Al-Jazzar in the field of Islamic Sufism are particularly noteworthy. His focus on logic has played a crucial role in shaping a rational perspective on Sufism, advocating for an objective and unbiased approach in Sufi studies. His writings maintain a balanced and moderate stance, avoiding sectarian or ideological biases.

Additionally, Al-Jazzar developed a distinctive methodology in Islamic Sufi studies—a challenging feat considering the complexity of this field. His research not only addresses intricate theoretical and philosophical questions but also provides objective and logically sound solutions to key Sufi issues.

Notable examples of his analytical approach include discussions on "Wahdat al-Wujud (Unity of Being) and Fana' (Mystical Annihilation) in Sufism," "Sufi Unveiling (Kashf)," "The Relationship between Shari'a (Law) and Haqiqa (Truth) in Sufism," and "The Concept of Wilayah (Sainthood) and Karamat (Miracles)." The latter remains one of the most significant and controversial topics in Sufi studies, requiring deep reflection and critical analysis to fully grasp its implications.

#### **Research Hypotheses**

## **Main Hypothesis**

• Sufi thought is the only intellectual framework with the creative potential for revival, renewal, and regeneration. It possesses an intrinsic ability to renew itself from within while

simultaneously revitalizing the external reality, as it aligns with the divine laws governing the universe.

## **Sub-hypotheses**

1. Al-Jazzar perceives Islamic Sufism as an essential component of Islamic philosophy, not only because its leading figures embody an indisputable level of spiritual transcendence but also due to their profound ethical character.

#### Research aims:

- 1. Clarifying misconceptions surrounding contemporary Sufism and assessing the extent to which modern Islamic life can benefit from Sufi studies, particularly the works of Dr. Ahmed Al-Jazzar.
- 2. Highlighting the significance and role of Sufism in the contemporary world and its contributions to Islamic societies.
- 3. Establishing Sufism as an alternative to extremism and radical ideologies that have distorted contemporary religious thought.

## **Research Methodology:**

#### The Prelude

Since this study examines the impact of contemporary Sufi discourse on religious reform, using Dr. Ahmed Al-Jazzar as a case study, the most appropriate approach for this research is the analytical method.

Through this method, the study systematically analyzes collected data, identifying key insights and distinctive features of Al-Jazzar's contributions. The analytical methodology allows for a comprehensive examination of contemporary Sufi discourse and its influence on religious thought, ensuring an objective and well-structured academic inquiry.

Sufism has long been an integral part of Islamic heritage, emphasizing ethical refinement and spiritual purification based on the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah. However, throughout its historical development, Sufism has undergone various transformations, some of which led to intellectual and behavioral deviations. This necessitated reformist efforts to restore Sufism to its original path.

Among the most prominent modern scholars advocating for Sufi renewal is Dr. Ahmed Al-Jazzar, who presents a balanced vision that integrates tradition with contemporary openness. This section explores Al-Jazzar's reformist tendencies, focusing on his efforts to correct misconceptions associated with Islamic Sufism.

## A. The Concept of Sufism in Al-Jazzar's Thought and His Reformist Approach

Al-Jazzar's Sufi discourse is fundamentally rooted in a moral and behavioral commitment to the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah, rather than being a set of esoteric practices or abstract contemplations disconnected from reality. He asserts that a true Sufi is "a child of his time", meaning that they balance spiritual purification with active engagement in various spheres of life, whether academic, professional, or social.

Furthermore, Al-Jazzar establishes clear criteria for an authentic Sufi, emphasizing the harmony between intellect and spirituality. He argues that reason in Islam is both a tool for worldly progress and a means for spiritual elevation. In doing so, he bridges the gap between philosophical thought and Sufi experience, drawing on the works of great Muslim scholars, such as Al-Qushayri, who described Sufis as:

"The elite among God's saints favored over the rest of His servants after His messengers and prophets. He made their hearts repositories of His secrets, choosing them for the radiance of His divine lights. They are the refuge for creation, always aligning their actions with divine truth, purified from human imperfections, and elevated to the stations of divine witnessing. They fulfill the obligations of servitude and embody the divine decrees with unwavering faith."

Al-Jazzar's engagement with Sufism extends beyond spiritual matters to include a broader concern for Islamic thought, encompassing political, social, and intellectual dimensions. His approach not only preserves tradition but also seeks practical methodologies to integrate Sufism into modern Arab and Islamic societies.

#### B. Al-Jazzar's Corrections of Misconceptions in Sufism

# 1. Refuting the Claim That Esoteric Knowledge (Batin) is Sufficient Without External Practice (Zahir)

Al-Jazzar rejects the claim made by some Sufis that inner spiritual knowledge (batin) alone suffices for divine proximity, making external adherence to Islamic law (shari'a) unnecessary. He cites the Prophet Muhammad's hadith, in which an Arab man asked about the Day of Judgment, and the Prophet responded:

"What have you prepared for it?" The man replied: "Nothing, except that I love Allah and His Messenger." The Prophet then said: "You will be with those whom you love."

Al-Jazzar interprets this hadith to mean that true love for Allah and His Messenger necessitates obedience to Islamic commands, rather than merely relying on internal devotion. He argues that genuine Sufism must be firmly rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah, avoiding both extremism and esoteric interpretations that diverge from Islamic fundamentals.

## 2. The Concept of Tawakkul (Reliance on God) Between Faith and Action

Al-Jazzar critiques the passive understanding of Tawakkul (reliance on God), which assumes that trusting in God negates the need for effort and action. He argues that this misinterpretation contradicts the Prophet's own practices, citing the hadith:

"There is no disease that Allah has created, except that He also has created its remedy."

This indicates that taking practical steps, such as seeking medical treatment, is part of true faith.

He also references Abdul Qadir al-Jilani, who stated:

"Whoever denies the importance of human effort has denied the Sunnah, and whoever denies true reliance on God has denied the essence of faith."

For Al-Jazzar, true Tawakkul is about maintaining a balance between acting and trusting in God's decree, ensuring harmony between belief and practice.

#### 3. Al-Jazzar's Reformist View on Sufi Poverty (Al-Faqr)

Al-Jazzar presents a nuanced understanding of the Sufi concept of poverty (al-faqr), distinguishing it from material deprivation. He asserts that true Sufi poverty does not mean financial hardship but rather detachment from material obsession. He states:

"Poverty does not mean lacking possessions; it means not being enslaved by them."

He reinforces this perspective with the words of Abu Bakr Al-Kattani, who said:

"When one's poverty in Allah is complete, their richness through Him is realized."

Thus, Al-Jazzar criticizes the superficial view that Sufism equates to material destitution, emphasizing instead that spiritual wealth and inner contentment are the true markers of Sufi detachment from the world.

## C. Al-Jazzar: Balancing Sufi Tradition and Modern Renewal

Al-Jazzar insists that authentic Sufism does not advocate withdrawal from reality or rejection of modernity. Instead, he believes that Sufism should adapt to contemporary social and cultural changes, ensuring that it remains a positive force in individual and collective life. He argues that Sufi renewal should integrate both strong doctrinal foundations and ethical cultivation, making it an instrument for building a morally and intellectually balanced society.

Furthermore, Al-Jazzar warns against historical distortions in Sufism, such as the spread of superstitions and unfounded practices, stating:

"Sufism must be cleansed of practices that have harmed its image, preventing it from being used as a tool to attack Islam as a whole."

In this, Al-Jazzar aligns himself with the reformist movement led by scholars such as Muhammad Abduh, who advocated for the purification of Sufism from deviant elements while preserving its spiritual and educational essence.

## 1.Sufi Renewal: Between Theory and Practice

Dr. Ahmed Al-Jazzar emphasizes that Sufism is not merely a theoretical philosophical perspective; rather, it must have a practical application that influences both individual and societal life. This practical dimension of Sufism contributes to enhancing spiritual and moral values, making it a transformative force in contemporary society.

Al-Jazzar argues that modern Islamic thought must engage with Sufism through a critical and analytical process, one that considers intellectual and cultural transformations while utilizing Sufism as a tool to address spiritual and ethical challenges faced by modern communities.

Furthermore, he asserts that Sufism is not a rigid and fixed doctrine, but rather a dynamic and evolving experience. It requires a balance between the foundational teachings of early Sufi masters and the development of modern methodologies to make Sufism relevant in contemporary individual and social life.

## D. Sufism and Contemporary Arab Thought: A Critical Analytical Perspective

Al-Jazzar's renewalist vision is reflected in his critical analysis of the stances taken by several Arab thinkers towards Sufism. Among the most notable figures he examines are:

## 1. Mustafa Abdel Raziq and His Critique of Sufism

Al-Jazzar recognizes Sheikh Mustafa Abdel Raziq as a leading modern Islamic thinker who presented a progressive vision of Sufism. Abdel Raziq challenged the claims of some Orientalist scholars, asserting that Sufism originated within Islam itself rather than being influenced by foreign philosophies. Al-Jazzar agrees with Abdel Raziq that early Sufism was primarily characterized by asceticism and pure devotion, and only later developed philosophical dimensions.

However, both scholars also acknowledge that later developments in Sufism led to certain deviations, where some Sufi practices were exploited for personal gain rather than serving as a means for self-discipline and spiritual elevation.

As a response, Al-Jazzar calls for a return to authentic Sufi principles, purging it of distortions, and reinstating its role as a path for ethical and spiritual refinement.

## 2. Ahmed Sobhi's Critical Perspective on Sufism

Al-Jazzar examines the work of Ahmed Sobhi, who approached Sufism with a constructive critical lens. Sobhi believed that Islamic Sufism emerged as a reaction to the growing materialism within some Islamic societies, particularly from the second century Hijri onwards. Sobhi argued

that Sufism became a necessary counterbalance to the consumerist tendencies that had begun to shape Muslim communities.

However, Sobhi also criticized certain excesses in later Sufi traditions, particularly the overemphasis on miracles (karamat) and sainthood (wilaya). He believed that these concepts were often exaggerated and misused, leading to the spread of superstitions and a departure from Sufism's core focus on piety and devotion.

Al-Jazzar finds Sobhi's analysis valuable, particularly in his distinction between mainstream Sunni Sufism, which aligns with Islamic teachings, and extreme mystical practices that deviate from its core principles. He argues that such distinctions are essential in contemporary Sufi studies, enabling scholars to preserve Sufism's strengths while discarding harmful distortions.

## 3. Abdel Halim Mahmoud's Balanced Approach to Sufism

Among the scholars who influenced Al-Jazzar was Dr. Abdel Halim Mahmoud, a key figure in modern Sufi thought. Mahmoud advocated for a pragmatic and balanced approach, emphasizing that Sufism should not be an escape from reality but an active force within society. He maintained that true Sufism integrates devotion with social responsibility, ensuring that spiritual practice does not lead to isolation from real-world responsibilities.

Al-Jazzar fully supports this viewpoint, stressing that Sufism must be a force for harmony between spirituality and practical engagement, rather than a means of retreating from the world.

#### 4. Abu Al-Wafa Al-Taftazani's Critique of Sufi Practices

Al-Jazzar also draws on the critiques of Abu Al-Wafa Al-Taftazani, who warned against the ritualistic and superficial aspects that infiltrated later Sufi traditions. Al-Taftazani argued that some Sufi orders became overly focused on outward ceremonies, losing sight of the spiritual and ethical essence of Sufism.

Al-Jazzar agrees with this assessment, cautioning against the excessive veneration of saints and reliance on mystical experiences, which, in some cases, led to practices inconsistent with Islamic teachings. Instead, he advocates for a comprehensive approach to Sufism—one that integrates true devotion with ethical conduct, ensuring that it remains firmly rooted in Islamic beliefs and practices.

# D. Key Features of Contemporary Sufism According to Al-Jazzar

Based on his critical engagement with modern Islamic thinkers, Al-Jazzar outlines several essential characteristics that contemporary Sufism should embrace:

## 1. Balancing Tradition and Modernity

• Sufism must remain grounded in its Islamic roots while also being adaptable to contemporary realities.

• It should offer practical solutions to modern spiritual and ethical dilemmas rather than being confined to historical discussions.

#### 2. Purging Sufism of Superstitions and Deviations

- Excessive veneration of saints, misinterpretations of miracles, and unverified mystical claims must be corrected to restore Sufism's credibility.
- Authentic Sufism should always be aligned with the Qur'an and Sunnah.

## 3. Integrating Spirituality with Social Engagement

- Sufism should not encourage isolation; rather, it must inspire active participation in community life.
- A true Sufi balances worship with work and ethical conduct.

#### 4. Modernizing the Sufi Discourse

- Al-Jazzar stresses the need for a contemporary and accessible language in teaching and promoting Sufism.
- Instead of relying on traditional mystical terminology, Sufism should engage with the language of modern youth and intellectuals, making it more relatable and applicable in today's world.

# E. Ethical and Spiritual Significance of Worship in Sufism

## 1. The Ethical and Spiritual Significance of Prayer

Al-Jazzar contends that prayer is not merely a sequence of physical movements and verbal recitations, but rather a state of perpetual presence before God. He argues that a prayer devoid of spiritual consciousness becomes an empty ritual.

Drawing from Al-Razi's interpretations, he highlights that:

"Ritual worship, as prescribed in Islamic teachings, serves as the true gateway to divine connection and spiritual realization."

Sufis view prayer as a meeting between the servant and their Lord, requiring both psychological and spiritual preparation. In this regard, purification (wudu') is not only an external cleansing but also a symbolic purification of the heart from arrogance, doubt, and insincerity. Al-Jazzar affirms:

"Through purification, the heart ascends into the realm of divine presence."

He also notes that the spiritual dimension of prayer begins from the first takbir (Allahu Akbar). Sufis believe that:

"The first takbir should be accompanied by awe and reverence, as though the worshiper is standing before God on the Day of Judgment."

Thus, prayer in Sufism is not just a mechanical act but a transformative spiritual experience, aiming at inner purification and spiritual elevation.

#### 2. The Ethical and Spiritual Significance of Zakat

Al-Jazzar asserts that zakat (charitable giving) is not merely about donating money, but rather a means of purifying the soul from material attachments and promoting social solidarity.

For Sufis, zakat goes beyond financial transactions; it is a process of cleansing the heart from selfishness and vanity. Al-Jazzar warns against performing zakat for self-glorification, referencing the insight of Al-Harith Al-Muhasibi, who cautioned against charity that becomes a source of pride rather than sincere worship.

# Sufis emphasize "zakat of the heart," which entails:

"Purging the soul of malice, envy, and material greed. True zakat is the purification of the heart by upholding the rights of divine knowledge and establishing the boundaries of love for God."

Thus, zakat is not only about monetary generosity but also about spiritual purification and detachment from materialism.

#### 3. The Ethical and Spiritual Significance of Fasting

Al-Jazzar emphasizes that fasting in Islamic Sufism is not simply about abstaining from food and drink, but rather a spiritual exercise in self-discipline and purification.

Sufis view fasting as a multi-layered act of devotion that extends beyond the physical realm to include:

- Fasting of the senses (restraining the eyes, ears, and tongue from sin).
- Fasting of the heart (avoiding negative thoughts and distractions).

Al-Jazzar references the Prophet's statement:

"Every act of the son of Adam is for himself, except fasting, for it is for Me, and I shall reward it."

He interprets this hadith as evidence that fasting is a unique act of worship, since it is free from ostentation, making it a purely sincere devotion to God.

For Sufis, fasting serves as:

- A means of spiritual liberation, helping believers overcome desires and distractions.
- A form of inner struggle (mujahada), refining the soul and drawing it closer to God.

Thus, fasting is a powerful tool for achieving spiritual enlightenment and breaking free from worldly attachments.

## 4. The Ethical and Spiritual Significance of Hajj

Al-Jazzar views Hajj (pilgrimage) in Islamic Sufism as more than just a physical journey to Mecca; it is:

"A journey to God, with the heart preceding the body."

Sufis interpret the rites of Hajj as symbolic spiritual milestones, including:

- Ihram (ritual consecration)  $\rightarrow$  representing detachment from worldly concerns.
- Tawaf (circumambulation around the Kaaba) → signifying annihilation in divine love.
- Standing at Arafat  $\rightarrow$  a moment of deep repentance and spiritual renewal.

From this perspective, Hajj is not merely a ritualistic obligation but a transformative spiritual journey, fostering purification and absolute devotion to God.

## E. Sufism and the Renewal of Worship Practices

Al-Jazzar stresses the need for renewal in understanding Islamic worship by:

- 1. Maintaining the balance between tradition and modernity
  - Worship should preserve its foundational religious principles while being reinterpreted in ways that resonate with contemporary challenges.
- 2. Reviving the spiritual essence of worship
  - Worship should not be reduced to empty formalities; instead, it must cultivate ethical values and spiritual growth.
- 3. Moving beyond external rituals to inner transformation
  - Superficial observance of religious duties must be complemented by deep inner reflection and sincerity.

Al-Jazzar warns against reducing worship to mere ritualistic acts, as this strips them of their transformative power. Instead, he advocates for a balanced Sufi approach, where outward obedience is aligned with inner devotion and self-discipline.

## Results

# 1. Dr. Ahmed Al-Jazzar's Thought as a Model for Sufi Renewal

Dr. Ahmed Al-Jazzar's intellectual contributions represent a prominent model of renewal in Islamic Sufism. His approach aims to restore Sufism to its ethical and scholarly foundations, steering away from excesses and intellectual deviations. He emphasizes the balance between reason and spirituality, offering a well-rounded interpretation of key Sufi concepts such as:

- The relationship between the inner (batin) and the outer (zahir)
- Tawakkul (trust in God) in harmony with human effort
- Sufi poverty (fagr) as detachment rather than deprivation

Al-Jazzar's vision aligns with the principles of Islamic Sharia, reinforcing the necessity of purging Sufism from superstitions and distortions while repositioning it as a tool for social reform and ethical development.

Through this balanced approach, he bridges traditional Islamic Sufism with modern intellectual discourse, positioning himself as one of the leading contemporary reformers in the field.

## 2. A Critical and Modern Interpretation of Sufism

Al-Jazzar's thought exemplifies a renewed approach to Islamic Sufism, striving to move beyond traditional perspectives while preserving its spiritual and ethical essence.

He builds upon the critical insights of several prominent Arab thinkers, including:

- Mustafa Abdel Raziq → who defended Sufism's Islamic origins.
- Ahmed Sobhi → who examined Sufism's response to materialism.
- Abdel Halim Mahmoud → who emphasized the integration of Sufism with daily life.
- Abu Al-Wafa Al-Taftazani → who critiqued the ritualistic distortions in later Sufi practices.

By incorporating and critically analyzing these perspectives, Al-Jazzar presents a balanced vision that merges authenticity with renewal, making him one of the most influential figures in modern Sufi thought.

#### 3. Renewing the Understanding of Worship in Islamic Sufism

Al-Jazzar's vision extends to the renewal of how worship is perceived in Sufism, emphasizing that:

- Acts of worship are not just formal rituals but tools for self-purification and divine proximity.
- The spiritual dimensions of prayer, zakat, fasting, and Hajj transcend their external forms, carrying profound moral and spiritual significance.

He highlights how Sufi scholars deepened the understanding of worship by:

- Interpreting prayer as an intimate moment of divine presence.
- Viewing zakat as not only a financial charity but also a purification of the soul from material attachments.

- Considering fasting as a spiritual exercise that disciplines desire and purifies intentions.
- Understanding Hajj as a journey of the heart toward divine truth rather than merely a physical pilgrimage.

Al-Jazzar stresses the importance of integrating tradition with renewal, ensuring that the spiritual core of worship remains intact while being understood in ways that resonate with contemporary needs. His approach provides a harmonious blend of Sharia-compliant practices with deep spiritual reflection, reinforcing Sufism's role in fostering ethical and moral excellence.

#### Conclusion

Dr. Ahmed Al-Jazzar's approach to Sufi renewal is characterized by a commitment to tradition combined with a forward-thinking vision. **His contributions include**:

- 1. Reaffirming the role of Shari'a in Sufism, countering claims that esoteric knowledge is sufficient without external religious practice.
- 2. Clarifying misconceptions about tawakkul (trust in God), arguing that it must be accompanied by practical effort and responsibility.
- 3. Redefining Sufi poverty, emphasizing that it is about detachment from materialism rather than material deprivation.
- 4. Advocating for a reformed Sufism, free from superstitions and distortions, ensuring that it remains relevant and constructive in modern society.

Dr. Ahmed Al-Jazzar presents a progressive and reformist vision of Sufism, advocating for a dynamic and adaptable approach. His analysis of key modern thinkers—including Mustafa Abdel Raziq, Ahmed Sobhi, Abdel Halim Mahmoud, and Abu Al-Wafa Al-Taftazani—demonstrates his commitment to critically evaluating both the strengths and weaknesses of Sufi traditions.

# His renewals approach seeks to:

- 1. Bridge the gap between traditional Sufism and contemporary challenges.
- 2. Eliminate distortions, ensuring that Sufism remains a force for moral and spiritual refinement.
- 3. Promote a balanced integration of faith, ethics, and societal engagement.
- 4. Modernize the Sufi discourse, making it accessible and relevant to new generations.

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