

Article

Sustainable Communication in Sūfī Way of Contemplative Life (*Vita Contemplativa*): Aspects of Silence (*al-Ṣamt*) and Speech (*al-Nuṭq*) in Theoretical and Practical Ṣūfism

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Abstract

The desire to discover the nature of existence and one's proper role in the universe has been a matter of concern throughout the ages, and individuals have endeavoured to examine the events that occur around them accordingly. In their pursuit, some have embarked on a deeper search for meaning, independent of common perceptions, and have posited that forms of expression beyond the limits of language could potentially provide important clues about the course of their lives. Transcending the limits of language can essentially be achieved by choosing a form of expression that goes beyond sounds, letters, words, or speech. Explained by certain scholars as beyond words, silence (Ar. *al-ṣamt*) is a discourse or mode of expression that involves the ability to speak inwardly (Ar. *al-nuṭq*). Thus, silence encompasses the ability to speak through remaining silent—a mode that, at first glance, appears to be paradoxical. This study focuses on one of the ways of attaining truth in theoretical and practical Ṣūfism: by remaining silent and finding the key to inner silence simultaneously. To reach such a level of understanding, it is crucial to examine how Ṣūfīs attempt to assimilate the inherent meaning beyond the boundaries of ordinary speech and approach the concept of silence from various aspects. By way of examining the possibility of communicating through silence according to some Ṣūfīs, the ways to a life in contemplation may be analysed to the extent that one could find a language that goes beyond letters or words.

Keywords: silence; contemplation; speechless expression; apophatic discourse; inward meaning

1. Introduction

As a creature moving between the spiritual and the material realms, the human being may be described as both possessing knowledge and—in a more profound sense—being knowledge in itself. This orientation presupposes faculties intrinsic to human nature through which noumenal reality may be perceived behind phenomena. By cultivating innate capacities such as insight and intuition, one may discern realities through perceived subtleties. Rūmī articulates this anthropology with particular emphasis: “insight (is the only thing) in you (that) avails: the rest of you is a piece of fat and flesh ...” (Nicholson 1934, VI/1461, p. 339), which amounts to saying that one is meaningful and is composed of various levels of meaning at the same time. Human existence, in this regard, is layered with meaning; however, discerning reality beneath appearances requires both insight and an active attentiveness to meaning itself. Similarly, the Qur’ānic conception of knowledge assumes a world permeated by outward and inward signs (*āyāt*): “We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and within themselves till it becomes clear to them that it is



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the truth” (Qur’ān 41:54). Thus, the Qur’ān guides human beings through these signs “just as the cosmos -which is also the Speech of God, articulated within ‘the Breath of the All-merciful’- gives news of God through its signs, which are the phenomena of nature” (Chittick 1989, p. xv). The realisation of this semiotic field enables the attainment of knowledge and transforms what might otherwise remain discrete information into meaning. From an outward perspective, human beings—as knowing subjects—perceive objects external to themselves and incorporate attained meanings into their own being (Türker 2020, pp. 101–2). Conceptual activity thereby generates new mental formations and reorganises prior understanding.

Reflections on the means of achieving essential knowledge appear in almost all intellectual and religious traditions, and contemplation is not merely a matter discussed in our time. To briefly give just a few examples of these traditions, early Christian texts connected sound, silence, and the sacred by grounding the sacred in what reaches beyond articulated forms (Dinkler 2013, p. 14). Hermetic circles similarly treat truth as inherently hidden and inexpressible, transmissible only through restricted means; in this regard, public discourse cannot serve as the measure of perfect speech (Eco 1995, p. 190). In Western mysticism, the tension between saying (cataphasis) and unsaying (apophasis) frames the problem of the ineffable from Plotinus to Dionysius the Areopagite (Sells 1994, pp. 3–5). This tension persists in later thought as a search for a language that preserves silence (Derrida 2005, p. 332) and as an imperative to refrain from speech where speech fails: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (Wittgenstein 1960, p. 189). Within certain contemplative traditions, silent practices (e.g., prayer) are often understood to mediate truths that cannot be adequately articulated or can only be expressed partially. Silence is then construed not simply as absence but as an appropriate “language” for communicating with and about God, and as a condition for conceiving meanings not previously articulated. The etymology of mysticism suggests closure (*myein*), especially of the eyes and mouth, and rites commonly begin with an injunction to silence in that silence enables listening. Only those who are prepared to hear—or who have the requisite receptivity—can contemplate. Present conditions, however, often erode the attentiveness of the speakers, with contemporary means of information and communication potentially preventing the “liberation” of words from their inactive state and diminishing the capacity for silence. In such a context, integrating active aspects of life (*vita activa*) with the life in contemplation (*vita contemplativa*) becomes crucial for resisting the isolation and superficiality associated with modern life (Han 2020, pp. 37–38). Classical reflections on *logos* also expound the issue: the status of language is frequently tethered to its relation to speech and disclosure (Montiglio 2000, p. 9), and philosophical accounts about audible expression often construe speech as making manifest what is spoken of (Heidegger 2007, p. 56). It seems that when it comes to certain subjects such as aesthetic experiences and perceptions, there is a distinction between being incapable of expressing something and being unable to describe it (Jonas 2016, p. 38), paving the way for the traditions that cultivate principled non-articulation. Such silence is not mere absence of thought, but instead an indication that expression originates from a deeper unsaying. As Chrétien suggested, silence can itself stimulate an interior discourse that occurs precisely through non-verbality (Chrétien 2004, pp. 39–40).

Within Sūfī tradition, the preference between speaking and remaining silent is similarly balanced. Speaking is often preferable when necessary and truthful (Al-Hujwīrī 1911, p. 153), while silence is favoured where speech risks excess or breaches decorum. Yet some Sūfīs regard the acquisition of silence—precisely because it contains the potentiality of speech—as a spiritual rank. The way it appears in figures such as al-Niffārī, Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī, and Ibn al-‘Arabī clarifies how silence (*al-samt*) occupies a distinct position from speech (*al-nuṭq*), not merely as rhetoric but as contemplation and transmission

of knowledge. Classical Ṣūfī works (e.g., al-Hujwīrī, al-Qushayrī, al-Kalābādhī) frequently praise silence, while al-Niffārī, Rūmī, and Ibn al-‘Arabī give particularly suggestive treatments of silence—referring to the possibility of spiritual attainment and gnosis through silence, as well as speaking in silence (Mevlānā Celāleddīn 1992e, vol. VII, p. 267). In this study, while discussing the priority of silence over speech, it should be emphasised that remaining silent outwardly contains within itself the possibility of acquiring knowledge through inner silence. Outward silence can thus be seen as a preference that paves the way for inward contemplation through inner speech. In this sense, the outward silence can be regarded as a means of knowing and attaining gnosis, enabling those who adopt this inner silence access to a higher silence where “the path from the tongue to the heart” remains open, and the secrets of the universe are bound to contemplative possibilities. However, the mentioned possibilities are considered as independent from ordinary articulation (Mevlānā Celāleddīn 2009, [verse 463], p. 92); in this sense, words may become more explicit in silence. With respect to the sacred *ḥadīth*—“I was a hidden treasure; I wanted to be known, so I created the universe” (el-Aclūnī 2019, 3/312)—speech may even frustrate disclosure, because “the very act of expression is the concealment” (Nicholson 1934, VI/699, p. 296). Ibn al-‘Arabī examined silence and speech by proposing that there is no absolute silence in the cosmos: even if tongues fall silent, states of being remain expressive and the “tongue of state” (*lisān al-ḥāl*) becomes the clearest language (Ibn-al-‘Arabī 1992, vol. VI, p. 361).

This article employs a methodology rooted in the reading and thematic analysis of classical Ṣūfī sources and selected comparative materials. Primary sources include treatises and manuals on Ṣūfī doctrine and practice (including the works written by al-Hujwīrī, al-Qushayrī, al-Kalābādhī, al-Makkī, al-Suhrawardī, al-Niffārī, Rūmī, and Ibn al-‘Arabī), which treat silence in connection with (a) decorum (*ādāb*), (b) unveiling the concealed meaning by silence, and (c) readiness or receptivity to gnosis. Comparative references (e.g., on *apophasis* and *logos*) are used only to clarify the broader intellectual problem of ineffability and to situate the views and the discussions of the Ṣūfīs in a wider history of ideas. To identify the place of silence and speech precisely in Ṣūfism, the following points are outlined in this article. In Section 2, the priority of speech or silence is evaluated within the framework of Ṣūfī decorum, which includes speaking when necessary and preferring silence as a good habit. In this regard, priority of silence is generally considered in relation to both what is being said and what is meant. Therefore, outward silence might lead someone to inner speech and may assist those who are truly silent, allowing those who consider silence as their homeland to contemplate a reality without any sign or words. The main themes to be discussed in this section include topics such as the preference of speech due to the ineffability of mysteries. Silence is treated as a starting point, as it is not limited to the tongue and the entire being should participate in silence through certain methods, such as fasting of the heart. Section 3 focuses on silence as a means of attaining gnosis (*ma‘rifa*). In this way, one can attain knowledge and perceive certain realities through a state of listening or remaining silent. If words are insufficient to convey meaning, then speech cannot lead to the desired aim. As a result, the pursuit to grasp the intended meaning necessitates transcending the limits of words. In this sense, the Ṣūfī dictum “*One who knows oneself knows one’s Lord*” can be expounded in such a way that knowing one’s own self requires understanding the material world, enabling one to understand the inherent meanings in Divine Words accordingly. If the path from the tongue to the heart is realised, then the truth confined in words would be revealed.

2. “Speech” (*al-Nuṭq*) and Silence (*al-Ṣamt*) in Classical Sūfī Parlance: The Priority of Speech or Silence

When language enters the field of spiritual refinement and training, it can be perceived as hindering the contemplative function of the “silent heart.” Just as it is difficult to give up something one is addicted to, it is difficult to give up speech and verbal expression. According to al-Hujwīrī, “speech is like wine: it intoxicates the mind, and those who begin to have a taste for it cannot abstain from it” (Al-Hujwīrī 1911, p. 355). It is generally believed that the priority of silence among the Sūfīs is a result of their quest to gain inner tranquillity through silence and thus comprehend the truths they seek to achieve through the new insights their silence provides. At this point, addressing the subject in greater detail, it is crucial to acknowledge that some Sūfīs consider it essential to avoid speech and to resort to it only when necessary, while others adhere to a kind of silence focused on contemplation, conveying that the true speaker is God who inspires and lets one speak inwardly. The latter group believe that God’s knowledge of the Unseen and all secrets oblige the servant to remain silent, such that the servant abides in silence rather than speaking. In this sense, al-Hujwīrī states what should be prioritised when it comes to speaking or remaining silent as follows: “...the Sufis, knowing that speech is harmful, never spoke except when it was considered the beginning and end of their discourse; if the whole was for God’s sake, they spoke; otherwise they kept silence, because they firmly believed that God knows our secret thought” (Al-Hujwīrī 1911, p. 355). The question of priority of speech or silence thus depends on the consistency between what is said and what is meant. In this context, Al-Hujwīrī points out key distinction: *speech is either real or unreal, and silence is either fruition or forgetfulness. If one speaks truth, his speech is better than his silence, but if one speaks falsehood, his silence is better than his speech* (Al-Hujwīrī 1911, p. 356). Al-Hujwīrī further describes the rank of those who are “made to speak” (*intāq*) by claiming that they can speak when they are bidden to speak by God (*intāq al-Haqq*). Their speech is grounded in contemplation and “vision” (*dīdār*), and speech not resting on contemplation is spiritually worthless (Al-Hujwīrī 1911, pp. 356–57). Junayd al-Baghdādī’s famous dictum brings this point into sharp focus: *He [the gnostic; al-‘ārīf] who speaks of your secret, even though you yourself remain silent* (Al-Qushayrī 2007, p. 43). When the heart is in Divine Presence and contemplating Divine Beauty, the tongue cannot describe it; silence then becomes the superior rank (Al-Hujwīrī 1911, p. 333). Even where the tongue speaks, the heart may remain silent, entrusting speech to its true owner; i.e., God (Al-Qushayrī 2007, p. 139). Silence also functions as a forbearance that guards from evil (Al-Qushayrī 2007, p. 142), and the one who possesses the secret of knowledge is the one on whose behalf God speaks inwardly: “The gnostic is someone on behalf of whose innermost soul God speaks, while he remains silent” (Al-Qushayrī 2007, p. 323).

In some cases, the definition of silence in a metaphysical context is directed toward its contemplative dimension. For instance, Ibn al-‘Arabī treats silence as one of the elements associated with the *abdāl*—a technical term designating a certain group consisting of the friends of God—and argues that silence has both state and station grounded in the seeker’s contemplation of God. As existence properly belongs only to God, the servant can only remain silent and speak indirectly. Yet, inward silence is complicated by continual remembrance; speech can be “included” in silence under obligation or when remembrance compels expression. Ibn al-‘Arabī proposes that the truly silent are those whose intention becomes realised without sign—such persons are “silent” in the strict sense (Ibn-al-‘Arabī 1992, vol. XIII, p. 585). To put it another way, if something comes to the mind of those who are truly silent and becomes a reality without any sign, then they are “silent.” In the chapter on Luqmān in his work *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, Ibn al-Arabī claims that wisdom refers to something that is spoken at times and kept silent at another. The verse, “My child! Know

that even if what you do is as small as a mustard seed, hidden in a rock or in the heavens or in the depths of the earth, Allah will bring it to His scale" (Qur'an, 31:16) is given as an example of wisdom that is spoken. Luqmān's silence regarding those to whom the mustard seed is brought exemplifies strategic withholding that directs attention to God's encompassing knowledge (Ibn al-'Arabī 2024, p. 327). Here, the inadequacy of human perception before the Absolute can be defined as bewilderment (*ḥayrah*), the fundamental characteristic of which is silence. It is possible to approach the meaning itself in a state of bewilderment that transcends letters and words. Thus, one could argue that meaning, as a primary goal, is something attained without verbal limitation; in other words, it is not expressed in words but, rather, conveyed through silence. In such a state of silence, the servants are compelled to submit to Divine Decree, acting only in accordance with their inherent nature. Therefore, it may not be possible for them to remain silent, as human beings are enjoined to remember God and their silence in the ordinary sense implies inaction. While the condition of outward silence is valid, inward silence is not possible as the remembrance of God remains present. If this remembrance is absent, speech is included in silence. Consequently, the person would not be silent. Alternatively, the words of those whose actions and gaze are ineffective cannot be influential. Their speech is based on whims, and the luminosity of their words is proportional only to the luminosity of their hearts; it is for this reason that those who are sincere speak primarily through the "tongue of state" (*lisān al-ḥāl*), rather than through verbal discourse (*qāl*) (Shihāb al-Dīn Umar al-Suhrawardī 2022, p. 379).

2.1. Silence as a General Attitude of Sūfī Decorum (*Ādāb*)

In classical discussions on language, speech includes both mental content and its audible manifestation (Key 2018, pp. 87–89). Resorting to silence to reach meaning indicated by vocal forms may, therefore, be understood as directing attention toward listening and receptivity. In Sūfī contexts, silence should be differentiated across at least three registers: silence rooted in Sūfī decorum, silence arising from the inadequacy of words before Divine Essence, and silence due to the insufficiency of words themselves (see Çakmaklıoğlu 2007).

Sūfī manuals of decorum (*ādāb*) frequently emphasise the importance of silence in the framework of abstinence, and express the significance of refraining from certain pleasures or being content with less (*qillāh*)—eating less, speaking less, sleeping less—considered as disciplines that support the seekers on their spiritual journey (Abū Tālib al-Makkī 2001, I/281–282; Shihāb al-Dīn Umar al-Suhrawardī 2022, p. 581). Speaking less has both an outward dimension (disciplining the tongue) and an inward dimension (disciplining the heart and mind). Excessive speech is condemned, either as a breach of etiquette (Abū Tālib al-Makkī 2001, p. 47; Al-Qushayrī 2007, p. 138) or because it weakens meaning when speech becomes mechanical production. Excessive speech is often associated with ordinary people, while necessary speech is excused (Sülemî 2020, p. 53).

Some Sūfis claim that unless one's "homeland" (*mawḥin*) is the silence of heart and tongue, one may remain preoccupied even while outwardly silent. According to Abū Bakr al-Fārisī: "If a man has not made silence his homeland, he is talkative even though he is silent. Silence is not limited to the tongue; it should be applied to the heart and all of the limbs" (Al-Qushayrī 2007, p. 140). On the other hand, Ibn al-'Arabī articulates an interior discipline by describing the "fasting of the heart" (*ṣawm al-qalb*): the heart must be purified of everything other than God to become a locus of divine manifestation (*tajallī*). This purification is described as the heart's fasting or silence (Ibn al-'Arabī 1992, vol. IX, p. 109). It can be inferred from this line of thought that silence can serve as an opportunity to attain wisdom through certain methods, such as fasting of the heart to maintain contemplative thinking. Such silence may also function as protection even where one has much to say, and the disclosure of realities to the unqualified may dissipate their value.

Rūmī's pseudonym "*khāmūsh*" similarly signals the ineffability of mysteries and the significance of silence (Arberry 1965, p. 7). Moreover, it reiterates the same view that adopting silence as a habit is the basis of good character traits (Mevlānā Celāleddīn 2009, p. 205). Rūmī also warns about expressing thoughts on love to others who will not be able to grasp their significance. These ecstatic expressions are so intense that language and human understanding cannot convey them, and they are beyond the comprehension of ordinary people. At this point, he adopted contemplative silence stemming essentially from having too much to speak; at first glance, he appeared dissatisfied with this situation, concealing it behind a veil, expressing the immense intensity of affection that is beyond what language can transmit. Otherwise, the esoteric mysteries could be in danger of reaching the ears of those who are not qualified to receive them: *"He that buys cheaply gives cheaply: a child will give a pearl for a loaf of bread. I am drowned in a love (so deep) that therein are drowned the first loves and the last. I have told it summarily, I have not explained it (at length), otherwise both (thy) perceptions and (my) tongue would be consumed... By reason of (inward) sweetness, I sit with sour face: from fullness of speech I am silent, that in the mask of sour-facedness, my sweetness may be kept hidden from the two worlds. In order that this subject may not come to every ear, I am telling (only) one out of a hundred esoteric mysteries"* (Nicholson 1925, I/1756–1759, p. 96).

2.2. Speech qua Symbolic Discourse as Preserving the Secrets

Where speech occurs in Sūfī contexts, it is occasionally determined through symbolic means—signs (*ishārāh*), metaphors, allusions, and hints—that both convey and conceal. In other words, the symbolic discourse is both speech and silence, which amounts to saying that it has the function of veiling and unveiling depending on readiness to receive them. In this context, *ishārāh* refers to a condition in which the speaker cannot explain verbally due to the hidden nature of meaning, and thus, conveys it without direct exposition (Erginli 2006, p. 496). Such discourse also operates apologetically, protecting Sūfīs from external critiques while reserving deeper meanings for qualified recipients. However, the symbolic expression may become difficult even for the qualified when necessary, reflecting deliberate concealment (Demirli 2015, p. 85). Therefore, some classical works treat signs (*ishārāt*) and symbols (*ramz*) not merely as literary ornamentation, but as a pedagogical and epistemic guide. They prevent disclosure to the unqualified while transmitting essential meaning across generations. Silence may be preferred in assemblies where a listener lacks competence; otherwise, meanings may be exposed and diluted: *"Sometimes silence falls upon the speaker for a reason that has something to do with his audience—for instance, when there is among them someone who is not fit to hear his speech and therefore God Most High protects the tongue of the speaker out of jealousy to keep that speech from someone who is not supposed to hear it"* (Al-Qushayri 2007, p. 141). Likewise, the disclosure of esoteric realities to the general public is likewise criticised (Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhī 1935, pp. 147–48). All that the seeker of truth needs is to focus on the Absolute and remain silent in public: *O you who scatter letters, be silent; listen like those who are silent. Do not interpret for the public; where is your state, where are your words in terms of state* (Mevlānā Celāleddīn 1992e, vol. VII, p. 212). It is essential to remain silent or vigilant against those who are unqualified, even if one has sufficient words to speak: *The mouth is full of words, but enough, do not speak too much... Because this letter, this breath, this rhyme is foreign* (Mevlānā Celāleddīn 1992e, vol. VII, p. 299). Rūmī also warns about a paradox, in that excessive speaking conceals meaning: *Be silent, be silent, the affairs of love are always contrary; by speaking too much, meanings are concealed* (Mevlānā Celāleddīn 1992a, vol. III, p. 190). He emphasises that letters and words often function as provisional vehicles; signs are valuable, but are not the goal. The seeker's task is to orient toward the Absolute while exercising restraint in public, including vigilance regarding "foreign" assemblies where speech becomes misaligned

with the state of the seeker: *The mouth is full of words, but enough, do not speak too much... Because this letter, this breath, this rhyme is foreign* (Mevlânâ Celâleddîn 1992e, vol. VII, p. 299). Where there are no “strangers” (*aghyār*), silence becomes an alternative mode of expression. In this context, it becomes possible to think about a Divine address that is without words (Nicholson 1934, VI/1071, p. 317), and the Şūfī may “repent” mere letters, seeking another register of expression: *I have repented to the letter; to those who desire, unfurl another banner of expression with letters full of meaning and now reign supreme* (Mevlânâ Celâleddîn 1992e, vol. VII, p. 244). The Ascension (*mi‘rāj*) is invoked as a paradigm of communication beyond ordinary language, echoed in Süleyman Çelebî’s (d. 825/1422) depiction of the Divine Word “without letters, words, or sound” in *Wasīlat al-Najāt*: “That Sultan, with no letters or sounds/told Muṣṭafa in ease” (Kemikli 2018, p. 59). For Rūmī, this register is “letterless news” and “wordless speech,” which requires contemplative hearing rather than vocal repetition (Mevlânâ Celâleddîn 1992e, vol. VII, p. 50). In an assembly where speech is wordless, it necessitates contemplation along with a similar method: *Open your ears in the tavern of immortality, listen to the music/Cease repeating the letters abjad-hutti* (Mevlânâ Celâleddîn 1992e, vol. VII, p. 530).

Nevertheless, symbolic or allegorical expression can be regarded as a mode of expression developed as part of Şūfism, in contrast to a more static theoretical expression. Hence, the Şūfīs promoted a form of discourse whereby they concealed or veiled matters they refrained from expressing, communicating them only to those with the capacity to access them. This became a kind of conscious silence, or a method of learning and contemplation through silence.

3. Silence as Being Receptive to Gnosis (Ma‘rifā)

From the standpoint of Divine Unity, the cosmos is described as a single word; from the standpoint of eternal knowledge, each word contains innumerable meanings (Shihāb al-Dīn Umar al-Suhrawardī 2022, p. 189). Meaning, in this sense, continuously exceeds discursive understanding. Rūmī suggests that even thousands of books cannot exhaust meaning (Nicholson 1930, III/1228, p. 69), as at each stage new meaning emerges (Nicholson 1934, VI/4746–4747, p. 520). Meaning is thus more substantial than the outward form, which is akin to mere shadow (Nicholson 1934, VI/4873, p. 527), and readiness or capability (*isti‘dād*) become essential for receiving it.

In the terminology of al-Niffārī—a gnostic of the pre-metaphysical phase of Şūfī thought—contemplative staying or halting in silence (*waqfah*) is part of an epistemic chain from gnosis (*ma‘rifā*) to vision (*ru‘yah*). In relation to the primacy of the meaning, contemplative silence or remaining speechless corresponds to an activity such as “halting or standing still to ponder” to comprehend the Word in all its purity. He links *waqfah* to the symbolism of ‘Arafāt, interpreting it as a convergence of wisdom and a gateway to vision (Al-Niffārī 1935, p. 34). Knowledge may thus be accessed by remaining silent and listening, or by halting and reflecting. On the other hand, Rūmī’s preference for silence and veiled speech is also linked to receiving the same vision: when one is silent, God reveals divine knowledge (Nicholson 1925, I/3642, pp. 197–98). His injunction—*Give ear to (the Divine command), “Keep silence” be mute; since you have not become the tongue (mouth-piece) of God, be an ear* (Nicholson 1925, II/3456, p. 401)—frames silence as the precondition of hearing; this resonates with the Qur’ānic instruction to listen (*ansitū*; Qur’ān 7:204) and with the sacred ḥadīth related to Divine proximity: “My servant approaches Me constantly with (supererogatory acts of worship in addition to the obligatory ones); eventually, I love him. When I love My servant, I become his hearing ear, his seeing eye, his holding hand, and his walking foot” (Bukharī, *Riqāq*, 38). Words sometimes fail to carry intended meaning (Emiroğlu 2002, p. 68) and, in such cases, speaking rather than remaining silent may

cause harm (Mevlânâ Celâleddîn 1992c, vol. V, p. 353). According to some Şūfis including Ibn al-‘Arabī, the highest science is identified as Divine knowledge attained through contemplation and apprehension of the manifestations of Divine Names and Attributes (Ibn-al-‘Arabī 1992, vol. III, p. 79). This knowledge transcends letters and is accompanied by silence or non-verbal expression. As a matter of fact, classical lexicographic reflections on *nuṭq* and *manṭiq* further suggest that speech includes what is understood, even if the speaker is outwardly silent; conversely, if nothing is understood, one is “silent” even if words appear (Raġīb el-Isfahanî 2010, p. 1067).

3.1. Transcending the Boundaries of Words and Staying in Discretion

The pursuit of understanding beyond words and deeds appears across Islamic intellectual traditions, but Şūfism foregrounds it through a preference for silence and reticence over speech. Şūfī tradition, which centres on the pursuit of intellectual and spiritual realities, emerges as a prominent one in that it directs attention toward the preference for silence or reticence over speech, thus emphasising the wordless, letterless, or speechless connotation and manifestation of the knowledge to be attained and the reality to be realised. The Şūfī dictum—“*One who knows oneself knows one’s Lord*”—situates the path as an ascent from self-knowledge to Divine knowledge, and as a move toward purity rather than complexity. Henry Corbin points to the fact that knowing oneself is related to the divinely inscribed features in human beings; as such, becoming aware of them leads one to know the Creator (Corbin 1998, p. 132). By the same token, Şūfism envisages the starting point of knowing oneself, and aims to contribute to the formation of a broad vision of understanding through knowledge and implementation of the inherent meanings in the sacred Book. Given the existing perceptions, the endeavour to concentrate on the meaning through silence and contemplation—rather than through words devoid of essence—necessitates transcending the limits of ordinary speech. As Şūfis generally perceive the material world to be mere imagination and illusion, the conveyance of that which has no reality is considered contradictory. Both truths and speaking about the Divine are too overwhelming to convey in words. Al-Kalābādhi recounts a Şūfī known as Abū Abdillāh, who refused speech on the grounds that phenomenal existence is unworthy of discursive treatment as reality itself: “This existence is but a fancy in the midst of reality, and it is not right to speak of a thing which possesses no reality” (Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhi 1935, p. 151).

Shiblī’s statement that “the One God was known before letters and boundaries existed” underscores the claim that knowledge of God is limited to names and manifestations, not essence; all knowledge may function as a veil (*hijāb*), and unveiling (*kashf*) does not exhaust meaning (Al-Qushayri 2007, p. 5). Al-Niffarī gives extensive attention to the concept of the “letter,” in view of understanding the essential meaning of things (en-Nifferī 2017, p. 19). He also intensifies this with a critique of letter-based mediation: “Do not listen to any letter concerning Me; do not take My message from a letter. A letter cannot speak of itself, so how can it speak of Me? I am the One who creates the letter and speaks through it. I am the One who conveys news from Myself to whomever I will” (Al-Niffarī 1935, p. 70). The Qur’ānic assertion of the inexhaustible Divine Word reinforces this infinite depth of meaning: *If all the trees on earth were pens and the sea were ink, with seven more seas added to it, the words of Allah would not be exhausted* (Qur’ān 31:27). Thus, God has the Power to address without words; in this context, it becomes possible to think about a Divine address that is without words (Nicholson 1934, VI/1071, p. 317). This would be possible when the path from the tongue to the heart remains open, and the secrets of the universe are bound up with this possibility in contemplation (Mevlânâ Celâleddîn 2009, [verse 463], p. 92).

3.2. Remaining Silent to Attain Meaning

Sūfī authors frequently move from form to meaning in their interpretation of events and revelations. The search for meaning, which is stated in the following *hadith* on outward and inward meaning, refers to different levels of understanding: “Qur’ān was revealed based on seven letters; each letter has an outward and an inward meaning. Likewise, each letter has a limit (*hadd*), and for each limit there is a starting point (*maṭla’*).” This *hadith* provides a framework for layered understanding culminating in realisation (*taḥqīq*), which is beyond mere investigation. Those who reach firmness in understanding are described as *rāsikh*, referring to their ability to understand words precisely as they were meant to be understood (Shihāb al-Dīn Umar al-Suhrawardī 2022, p. 219). Some state that certain factors—including spiritual ecstasy—are quite effective in grasping meaning. Practices generating ecstasy (e.g., *samā’*) are also understood as intensifying receptivity to meaning, as rapture is construed as access to meaning rather than mere sound (Shihāb al-Dīn Umar al-Suhrawardī 2022, p. 521). In parallel with the purport of layers in understanding, Rūmī repeatedly highlights the fact that meaning is given primacy over words: *The letters are the vessel: therein the meaning is (contained) like water; (but) the sea of the meaning is (with God)—with Him is the Ummu ’l-Kitāb* (Nicholson 1925, I/296, p. 19). However, attachment to outward form rather than meaning leads to error: *Thou hast gone after the form, thou hast gone astray: thou canst not find (it) because thou hast abandoned the reality* (Nicholson 1925, II/3670, p. 412). Rūmī describes his *Mathnawī* as truth confined in the “trap of words,” requiring the infusion of spirit into parables so that words may return to soul: *Give the Mathnawī a free and open course, endow the outward form of its parables with the spirit (of life), That all its words may become reason and soul and may fly towards the soul’s everlasting abode. (’Twas) through thy efforts (that) they came from the (world of) spirits into the trap of words and were confined (there)* (Nicholson 1934, VI/184–186, pp. 267–68). The Sūfī book is thus not ink and letters, but a purified heart snow (Nicholson 1925, II/159, p. 230). Seekers of meaning abandon fixation on letters: *Be silent, abandon the letters; for the seeker of meaning would not have been there, circling around the letters* (Mevlānā Celāleddīn 1992d, vol. VI, p. 162); further, the more meaning is prioritised, the less letters dominate: *Since meaning is like a horse and letters are like a saddle, how long will you carry this horseless saddle?* (Mevlānā Celāleddīn 1992d, vol. VI, p. 251).

Rūmī also identifies a cultural inversion: *Silence: poetry remains, meanings fly away; if meaning remained, the world would be filled with meanings* (Mevlānā Celāleddīn 1992d, vol. VI, p. 14). He urges movement “from letters to meaning,” warning that reliance on letters resembles infantile dependence: *Enough, be silent and escape from letters to meaning; how long will you continue to suck meaning from letters? Sucking is the food of children whose teeth have not yet come in* (Mevlānā Celāleddīn 1992b, vol. IV, p. 171). Speech may disclose from one angle but conceal from many: *Although from one point of view speech is a revealer, yet from ten points of view it is a curtain and concealer* (Nicholson 1930, IV/2968–2972, p. 436). However, words can also veil meaning, protecting it from those who would destroy or diminish its significance: *The Holy Transcendent One who makes the apple-orchard conceals them (the apples) in a mist of words. From this mist of sound and words and talk (arises such) a screen that naught* (Nicholson 1934, VI/84–85, p. 262). This veil—which is almost impossible to escape—also obscures the paths to attain meaning: *If you take a rose from a letter, where will you extract meaning from; once your foot is stuck in pitch, the land of pitch becomes a veil to you* (Mevlānā Celāleddīn 1992d, vol. VI, p. 9). Even if the veil in question exhibits a semi-transparent opacity, it does not hinder eyes eager to perceive signs of what lies within.

4. Silence as a Means of Contemplation and the Maintenance of Vita Contemplativa

The Ṣūfī literature widely affirms that wisdom is attained through contemplation and silence, especially where thought is foregrounded. As an instance, al-Dinawarī stated that “The wise have acquired their wisdom by silence and contemplation” (Al-Qushayri 2007, p. 140). According to some Ṣūfīs, speech belongs properly to God; the servant, insofar as one purifies the inner self, participates in a wordless mode of address (Al-Qushayri 2007, p. 324). Expression is required chiefly to inform others; between servant and God, language may become redundant. Junayd is reported to treat Divine knowledge as not requiring language; where things are manifest, expression itself can become a veil (Al-Hujwīrī 1911, p. 356). Hence, a “language of silence” becomes essential to avoid veiling. This issue is particularly evident among the Ṣūfī authors who emphasise silence and write extensively on the subject; for instance, Al-Niffarī expresses silence via *waqfah* and *ru'yah*, which he regards as going beyond knowledge and gnosis. His hierarchy is explicit: the authority of the stayer (*wāqif*) is silence (*ṣamt*); the authority of the gnostic is speech (*nutq*); the authority of the knower is knowledge (Al-Niffarī 1935, p. 37). He also develops an ontology of the “letter” (*ḥarf*) as existence-form and as veil, where God cannot be known from the letter or what lies within it (Al-Niffarī 1935, p. 111). The “transmitted meaning” (*wajhiyya*) is not attained through expression but through Divine testimony, belonging to knowledge beyond speech (Al-Niffarī 1935, p. 125). Such silence is linked to the sciences of vision (*ru'yah*) and yields a contemplative life. Even when one is not a locus of Divine Word, one should listen attentively to those who speak with perfection (Konuk 2008, vol. IV, p. 430). Such people, carrying the secret by remaining silent, have adopted an ontological silence even though they speak in various languages. Only those who are silent can truly hear the truths expressed (Nicholson 1930, III/21, p. 6). Silence is, in a sense, the key to hearing the truths, secrets, or wisdom contained in the words of God and the language of the Divine Scripture. This kind of listening allows one to hear a conversation between God and His servant while remaining silent; accordingly, listening becomes a means of understanding (*ifhām*) them (Uludağ 2016, p. 729) when God makes them hear (*ilqā-i sam*).

For many Ṣūfīs, contemplation attributed to the heart (*sirr*) cannot be expressed except through metaphor and allusion; therefore, silence is ranked above speech. Al-Hujwīrī noted that silence signals contemplation (*mushāhadāt*), while speech signals testimony (*shahādat*) (Al-Hujwīrī 1911, p. 333). Furthermore, Ibn al-‘Arabī posits a certain stance: that the most competent among those with unveiling understand that inspiration comes from God, and that God speaks to those who are silent. In existence, nothing truly speaks in its own right; everything other than God is silent in essence. In the final analysis, speech appears only through loci of manifestation, and the decisive task is to hear what is inspired from God—that is, absolute hearing (*samā‘ al-muṭlaq*). If the servant responds to God through the remembrance of Him, a kind of reciprocal conversation (*muḥādatha*) occurs (Ibn-al-‘Arabī 1992, vol. XII, pp. 324–25). In this sense, silence is not passive withdrawal but a deliberate method: it relocates attention from verbal production to contemplative understanding and sustains *vita contemplativa*.

5. Conclusions

Acquiring knowledge and access to the secrets that are not available to everyone, behind the ordinary means of knowing, has been a goal pursued by those dedicated to the search for knowledge for centuries. However, without extraordinary means of obtaining such knowledge, it seemed impossible to go beyond ordinary sources of information. Like many other traditions, Ṣūfism has also sought ways to reach the layers of meaning be-

yond what words can convey. As an example of this, the Sūfīs generally emphasise the importance of silence (*al-ṣamt*) as a method of contemplation and accessing deeper meanings, believing that the use of speech by the majority to the maximum extent possible is an obstacle to reaching the aforementioned knowledge. Those who reach a certain level of awareness eventually turn to forms of expression beyond language, due to the inherent limitations of language per se and its ability to convey only specific matters, to lead a contemplative life through contemplation and reflection (*mushadāt*) or *vita comtemplativa*. However, regardless of whether the search for non-verbal expression stems from *apophysis* (the avoidance of saying something) or silence arising from reverence, it is a matter moulded by the intellectual milieu to which the individual belongs. While recent studies in the West have focused on the *apophatic* character of unsaying about God, religious and linguistic views that determine the preference between speaking and remaining silent are also being presented. The preference and priority of silence among Sūfī circles has been highlighted through concepts and methods such as *qillah al-kalām* (meaning speaking little), as well as the lucid silence that is a style of non-expression under the influence of God's transcendence, beyond the constraints of letters, words, and speech, pointing to the necessity of speaking without words—either symbolically or through the behaviours.

The Sūfī view of speech (*al-nuṭq*) and silence (*al-ṣamt*) involves a certain hierarchy in approaching the nature of realities. Speech is praised when truthful and necessary; silence is praised as decorum or *ādāb*, as protective discipline, and as a mode of epistemic receptivity that enables gnosis (*ma'rifa*) and sustains contemplative life. Silence serves as a method of preserving meaning against dilution, of veiling secrets from the unqualified, and of transcending the boundaries of ordinary linguistic forms. It is not silence born of incapacity, but instead an outward quiet that supports inward articulation through the “tongue of state” (*lisān al-hāl*) and attentive hearing. The pursuit of silence, which appears as a paradoxical situation in the lifestyles of the Sūfīs, is directed toward both writing/speaking and a wordless/silent search of meaning, essentially consisting of layers such as an assurance against disclosure to those who are incompetent or unqualified, paying attention to grasp the nature of realities, and the desire to reach hidden meaning by going beyond the ordinary style of speech.

Therefore, it is not a kind of silence stemming from intellectual and emotional inadequacy but, rather, a type of speech that is silent outwardly. Thus, there exists the possibility of speech in the context of contemplative silence, rather than mere speaking, in the transmission and acquisition of knowledge that goes beyond words. Therefore, it is possible to state that the unspeakable realities in the context of a contemplative life can be realised through silence. However, it flows inwardly, accessing the secrets contained in the Divine Word and embodying a form of “communication” beyond words toward a life in contemplation. In this sense, silence in Sūfī thought and practice emerges as a kind of active participation in knowledge: it is a discipline of disclosure without exposure, a mode of communication beyond words, and a practical means through which the contemplative life (*vita comtemplativa*) remains possible. In the final analysis, silence appears as a method that has been prominent among Sūfīs for centuries regarding the establishment of a life in contemplation as well as the acquisition of wisdom or gnosis.

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