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Malāmat and the Ethics of Invisibility: Mysticism, Poetic Witnessing, and Moral Critique in Late Modernity

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Abstract

This article reconceptualizes malāmat not as a marginal Sufi discipline but as a distinct ethical paradigm that redefines the relationship between selfhood, action, and moral legitimacy. Situating the discussion within late-modern conditions shaped by technological mediation, algorithmic evaluation, and regimes of visibility, it argues that ethical value has increasingly been externalized through performance, recognition, and quantifiable outputs. Against this background, malāmat is examined as an alternative ethical model grounded in inward vigilance, relational practice, and the deliberate concealment of virtue. Drawing on early Malāmatī texts—particularly al-Sulamī—and their later elaboration in Ibn Arabī, the study demonstrates that ethical subjectivity is constituted through continuous self-critique and responsibility before the Divine rather than through public validation. The argument is further developed through a comparative engagement with Aristotle, Kant, Kierkegaard, and MacIntyre. It shows that, unlike these frameworks, malāmat sustains ethical life as an ongoing tension rather than a state of equilibrium or a universalizable norm. The article also highlights the role of classical Turkish and Persian poetry—especially Fuzûlî, Nâbî, and Şeyh Gâlib—in articulating malāmat as a lived ethical sensibility. Ultimately, the study proposes malāmat as a critical counter-model to contemporary regimes of visibility, offering an ethics grounded in inwardness, concealment, and irreducible personal responsibility.

Keywords: malāmat; sufism; ethics of invisibility; moral subjectivity; visibility regimes; Islamic ethics; Ottoman poetry; mysticism; late modernity; ethical selfhood

1. Introduction

While this intrinsic link between mysticism and ethics appears conceptually stable, it comes under increasing strain in the conditions of modernity. Modern forms of life are increasingly shaped by technological mediation, algorithmic evaluation, and regimes of visibility. Within this emerging context, ethical value is progressively detached from inner orientations and rearticulated in terms of measurable indicators of performance. Recognition, visibility, and optimization no longer function merely as criteria of social success; they also begin to operate as metrics of ethical worth. As a result, ethical action risks being displaced from a practice of inward responsibility and reconfigured as a form of externally assessed performance.

This transformation has been extensively analyzed within modern social theory. Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere, for instance, demonstrates how communication has shifted away from a ground of rational deliberation toward a domain of representational visibility. According to Habermas, the public sphere—initially constituted as a

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space of critical debate—has, under the influence of media and advertising, been progressively reduced to a field of "representative visibility" (Habermas 1991, p. 236). This shift converges with what he later conceptualizes as the "colonization of the lifeworld by the system," wherein communicative action becomes increasingly subsumed under strategic and instrumental rationality (Habermas 1987, p. 196).

At a deeper level, Guy Debord's concept of the "society of the spectacle" reveals the ontological dimension of this transformation. In modern society, real social relations are increasingly supplanted by relations mediated through images; as Debord notes, "the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people mediated by images" (Debord 1994, p. 12). Visibility thus ceases to function merely as a dimension of communication and instead becomes the organizing principle of social reality. Under such conditions, ethical action is increasingly evaluated in terms of its representability and exposure.

In the digital age, this process assumes a more radical form. As Byung-Chul Han argues, transparency is not merely an ethical ideal but a structural imperative that accelerates the functioning of contemporary capitalism. Society, in his terms, has become a "positivity society" in which negativity is systematically expelled. Within this regime, everything is compelled to conform to the logic of uninterrupted circulation, while surveillance—unlike Jeremy Bentham's classical panopticon—takes the form of a "digital panopticon" in which individuals voluntarily expose themselves. The subject thus becomes both the one who is watched and the one who discloses itself.

In a manner consonant with Walter Benjamin's notion of "exhibition value," value in modern society is increasingly constituted through visibility. Yet this process simultaneously entails the erosion of privacy and the flattening of aesthetic experience; as Han suggests, where mystery disappears, what prevails is no longer the erotic but a pornographic regime of visibility (Han 2015a, pp. 7–28). Visibility, in this sense, no longer functions as a medium but as an imperative.

Accordingly, in late-modern society the individual shifts from the "obedience-subject" of disciplinary regimes to an "achievement-subject" compelled to enhance its own performance. Power operates less through external coercion than through internalized self-optimization, articulated in the imperative "you can." Within digital culture, this condition becomes increasingly quantifiable, as metrics of exposure and interaction come to determine individual value. In what Han describes as an "excess of positivity," the subject is reconfigured as both a self-optimizing and a self-exploiting agent. When coupled with the data-driven surveillance analyzed by Shoshana Zuboff, this configuration gives rise to a social order structured by visibility and performance (Han 2015b, pp. 24–27; 2017, pp. 37–44).

Taken together, these analyses suggest that contemporary society is increasingly taking the form of a structure in which communication is supplanted by visibility and meaning by performance. This transformation signals not only a cultural shift but also a profound ethical rupture. As Shoshana Zuboff's conceptualization of "surveillance capitalism" demonstrates, the modern digital economy operates through a logic that converts human experience into behavioral data and, in turn, into economic value. Within this process, the individual is no longer primarily positioned as a subject of the system but is increasingly reduced to a source of data production (Zuboff 2019, pp. 10–16).

More significantly, this model does not merely record behavior; it renders it predictable and subject to intervention. In doing so, foundational normative commitments—such as autonomy, privacy, and free will—begin to erode. The personalized services offered by digital platforms often function as ideological interfaces that obscure the processes of extraction on which they depend. The apparent convenience of modern life thus conceals a deeper transformation in which moral value itself is being reconfigured (Zuboff 2019, pp. 18–26).

In this context, Zygmunt Bauman's analysis of "liquid modernity" offers a critical perspective on the existential dimension of this transformation. The issue is no longer merely the reconfiguration of the boundary between the public and the private, but its dissolution. Privacy ceases to function as a domain in need of protection and instead becomes a threshold that individuals themselves willingly erode in pursuit of recognition (Bauman 2013, pp. 108–20). Extending the imperative of visibility identified by Debord, this process culminates in the emergence of a subject who actively exposes itself.

Thus, the contemporary digital order produces a configuration in which moral worth is detached from inward orientation and rearticulated through external metrics. Yet, as Han argues, a regime grounded in data and performance lacks the capacity to disclose truth: data do not generate meaning; they merely accelerate circulation. Processes such as thinking, contemplation, and inner discipline are thereby increasingly marginalized (Han 2021, pp. 52–53).

At this juncture, premodern mystical–ethical traditions acquire renewed significance. They should not be treated merely as historical curiosities but as conceptual resources for interpreting contemporary ethical conditions. Contrary to common assumptions, these traditions do not advocate withdrawal from the world; rather, they seek to transform the meaning of one's relation to it. As Annemarie Schimmel emphasizes, Sufism is not a rejection of the outward world but a mode of rendering existence meaningful through inner transformation (Schimmel 1975, pp. 11–18).

Similarly, Ahmet Yaşar Ocak underscores that Anatolian Sufi traditions are not detached from social life but actively generate a moral language that reshapes it (Ocak 2011, pp. 45–52). Mystical ethics, therefore, should not be reduced to inward retreat; it constitutes an active interrogation of the structures of meaning that organize the visible.

Within this broader framework, the doctrine of malāmat occupies a distinctive position. As Ahmet T. Karamustafa notes, it is not merely an ascetic discipline but a radical ethical stance that entails a critique of prevailing social norms and conventional forms of piety (Karamustafa 2007b, pp. 171–72). The Malāmatī subject deliberately conceals virtue, thereby resisting the identification of moral worth with public recognition. From this perspective, malāmat articulates an ethical orientation that runs counter to the modern economy of visibility: value resides not in representation, but in concealment.

Within modern thought, the erosion of a stable ethical orientation has been diagnosed through diverse yet converging critiques. Peter L. Berger, for instance, argues that modernity displaces the sacred from the social fabric, rendering the production of meaning increasingly fragile and individualized (Berger 1967, pp. 107–15). Ethical action, in this configuration, becomes detached from transcendent referents and reconstituted on a relative and performative ground. In a parallel vein, Gustave Thibon characterizes modern humanity as a "consciousness uprooted from its roots," in which inner depth gives way to a flattened and superficial mode of existence (G. Thibon 1951, pp. 23–30).

Against this background, mystical traditions emerge not merely as theological alternatives but as frameworks capable of restoring a sense of ontological balance. They reconfigure the human relation to the world beyond the imperatives of speed, visibility, and utility, foregrounding instead meaning, measure, and inner discipline. Contemporary scholarship reinforces this perspective. Shahzad Bashir Chowdhury, for example, underscores that within Islamic thought, the ethical subject is not reducible to normative compliance but is constituted through continuous self-surveillance and transformation (Chowdhury 2015, pp. 64–72). This perspective establishes a productive resonance between classical Malāmatī vigilance and contemporary ethical concerns.

A comparable critical impulse can be discerned in Friedrich Nietzsche's genealogy of morality, which exposes the detachment of values from their originary grounds and their

subsequent degeneration into empty conventions (Nietzsche 1998, pp. 25–34). Although Nietzsche's project follows a distinct philosophical trajectory, his diagnostic framework converges with the Malāmatī stance in its interrogation of the processes through which value is constituted beneath the surface of visibility.

This line of critique finds a more systematic articulation in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. In After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, MacIntyre reconceptualizes ethics through the interrelated notions of practice, virtue, and tradition. A practice, as he defines it, is a socially established, cooperative, and complex form of human activity through which goods internal to that practice become attainable (MacIntyre 2007, p. 187). Virtue, accordingly, is not oriented toward external rewards but designates a cultivated excellence that emerges through sustained participation in such practices. Ethical competence, in this sense, is neither abstract nor purely individual; it is formed within concrete social contexts and derives its intelligibility from them.

This framework is further developed through MacIntyre's dynamic conception of tradition as "an historically extended, socially embodied argument" (MacIntyre 2007, p. 222). Tradition is neither static nor merely transmissive; it is sustained through ongoing contestation and reinterpretation. The continuity of virtues depends on this process, since the meaning of practices and their internal goods cannot be grasped outside the historical horizons that sustain them. Ethics, from this perspective, is inseparable from narrative continuity and communal life, thereby challenging modern individualist accounts of moral agency.

Yet the conceptual density of philosophical discourse has historically addressed only a limited intellectual milieu. Across broader social contexts, ethical and ontological reflection has taken on alternative expressive forms. In the Anatolian case, this transformation is evident in the flourishing of poetic, hagiographical, and oral traditions, where abstraction gives way to image, rhythm, and resonance. Here, wisdom circulates not through systematic treatises but through living language.

Forms such as *nefes*, *deyiş*,[1] and *menāqibnāme* are therefore not merely aesthetic productions but vehicles of ethical and ontological knowledge. To interpret these forms solely as strategies of concealment would be reductive. Rather, they constitute historically situated modes through which truth becomes articulated. The defiant register of şaṭḥiyāt[2] further demonstrates that this tradition is grounded not in caution but in a form of courage sustained by an inner certainty of truth (Harmancı 2023, p. 73).

Within this framework, the relationship between malāmat and poetry rests not on a superficial aesthetic affinity but on a deeper ethical consonance. While malāmat deliberately refuses the public display of virtue, grounding value in inward fidelity, poetry provides a medium through which this inward truth can be articulated. The nature of love—resistant to direct conceptualization—finds its most adequate expression in poetic form; for this reason, a structural correspondence emerges between the Malāmatī sensibility and poetic discourse.

Originating in Nishapur and reaching a heightened articulation in Persian poetry, this mode of thought was subsequently transmitted into Ottoman classical literature, generating a long-standing aesthetic–ethical continuity. This trajectory constitutes not merely a literary inheritance but a regime of meaning that shapes the existential configuration of the âşık figure in Anatolia. Love, poetry, and malāmat thus converge within a structure that simultaneously withdraws from visibility and intensifies meaning.

Through selected couplets from key Malāmatī poets, this study demonstrates how such a value structure operates in practice. In this context, poetry may also function as a mode of indirection—circumventing doctrinal constraints and evading political or theological censorship. The execution of Mansur al-Hallaj rendered such strategies historically

necessary, while Ibn ʿArabī later articulated the protective capacity of symbolic and polyvalent language. As interpreted by Claude Addas, such discourse serves as a privileged vehicle for the transmission of sapiential knowledge, preserving it from those unprepared to receive it (J.-J. Thibon 2019, pp. 16–17).

Poetry and mystical discourse constitute enduring modes of philosophizing—forms through which human experience has articulated itself across centuries. Within this continuum, malāmat emerges as one of the most intense configurations of ethical and spiritual focus. Despite the marginalizing representations[3] often attached to itinerant dervish groups such as the Kalenderis, Haydaris, and Abdals, the experiential and intellectual depth of this tradition has reached a broad social base.

Accordingly, this study approaches malāmat neither as a purely historical phenomenon nor as an abstract ethical model detached from context. Rather, it reconsiders the relationship between mystical value systems and ethical action through the concept of salāmah. Beyond its theological connotations of salvation or well-being, salāmah designates the possibility of sustaining inner integrity under the conditions of worldly existence.

2. Why Malāmat? Toward an Ethics of Concealment and Critique

Mystical traditions across diverse religious cultures have generated a wide range of ethical responses to the human encounter with transcendence. Practices structured around love, the annihilation of the self (*fanāʾ*), ascetic withdrawal, contemplative stillness, or ecstatic union have each given rise to distinct moral vocabularies and corresponding forms of life. Within this plurality, particular attention must be accorded to the *Malāmatīyya*—an ascetic current that emerged within the framework of Islamic belief and exerted a sustained and influential presence across centuries.

From its inception, *malāmat* has remained a path marked by a deliberate economy of concealment, a feature grounded in its own doctrinal principles. Along the path of *maʿrifa*[4], practitioners are enjoined to conceal the spiritual states bestowed upon them by the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*), preserving them as a form of sacred trust. The disclosure of such inner states is understood to risk their dissipation, thereby weakening—or even severing—the bond between the Real and the wayfarer. This principled reticence has had a decisive consequence: the absence of a fully developed, internally authored textual corpus specific to the tradition.

Indeed, insofar as the explicit articulation of spiritual states contradicts the ethos of *malāmat*, the textual materials associated with this path were, for the most part, compiled posthumously—typically by disciples or later adherents rather than by the Malāmatīs themselves. What survives, therefore, is not a self-systematized doctrine but a mediated archive shaped through transmission, recollection, and interpretive reconstruction.

The first Sufi author to identify *malāmat* as a distinct station (*maqām*) within the hierarchical structure of Sufi experience was Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami.[5] Among the most important sources for the doctrine is his *Risālat al-Malāmatiyya* (De Jong 1991, p. 223), although it has been suggested that this treatise may have been composed by one of his disciples and subsequently attributed to him (Uludağ 2010, p. 54). His student, Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri, similarly confined himself to a concise epistolary form,[6] transmitting the principles of Sufi interpretation without attempting a systematic elaboration of the Malāmatī path.

Historically, this Sufi orientation emerged in the eleventh century in Khurāsān—encompassing major urban centers such as Merv, Herat, Balkh, and Nishapur—and attained particular prominence in Nishapur, from which its influence extended across time and space. Adherents of this path were designated by various appellations, including *ahl al-malāma*, *malāmī*, and *malāmatī*, while the movement itself came to be known as *Malāmatiyya* or *Malāmiyya* (Azamat 2004, p. 24).

According to Gustave Thibon, drawing on his work with Sulamī's *Ṭabaqāt*, the path of *malāmat* was one that had to remain concealed—not only for doctrinal reasons but also because of the exceptional rigor of its ethical demands. It constituted a mode of spiritual discipline that could neither be universally prescribed nor easily sustained by all disciples. Furthermore, the legacy of Hamdun al-Qassar (d. 884/885) remained largely confined to Nishapur and its immediate environs. By contrast, the disciples of Abu Hafs al-Haddad and Abu Uthman al-Hiri traveled extensively—particularly to Baghdad—thereby facilitating encounters between distinct Sufi lineages and contributing to the broader diffusion of Malāmatī sensibilities (J.-J. Thibon 2019, p. 29).

In his classificatory framework, Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami examines the principal groups within the Muslim spiritual milieu—whom he designates as the "people of states" (*ahl al-ḥāl*) and the "people of knowledge" (*ahl al-ʿilm*)—by organizing them into three categories: the scholars, the Gnostics, and the Malāmatīs. The first category encompasses the *ʿulamāʾ*, associated with the madrasa-based legal and theological establishment, as well as those Sufis who interpret the practical and theoretical dimensions of religion through reason and transmitted knowledge. The second group consists of Sufis wholly devoted to God, characterized by withdrawal from worldly concerns and an orientation toward inner realization.

Yet, as expected, the Malāmatīs are distinguished from both the scholars and the Gnostics and are constituted as a discrete third category within Sulamī's classificatory scheme (Hartmann 1918, pp. 158–59). Sulamī emphasizes that they were explicitly prohibited from articulating spiritual claims (*daʿwā*)[7], displaying miracles, or publicizing extraordinary states.[8] Their experiences were to remain concealed, while their outward conduct was marked by composure and conformity, even as their inner orientation remained aligned with divine approval. As Richard Hartmann observes, such states—often exceeding the limits of ordinary perception—have long remained open to debate, particularly with respect to their psychological and corporeal implications.

In its earliest formulation in ninth-century Nishapur, this orientation emerged as a corrective response to what were perceived as the inadequacies of existing Sufi practices in confronting the *nafs*. It developed as an alternative path of purification, closely associated with the ethical ideals of *ukhuwwa* (spiritual fraternity) and *futuwwa* (chivalric virtue), both of which likewise entail a disciplined and courageous struggle against the self. What unites these traditions is their shared emphasis on an intensified form of inner combat. At the same time, the persistent ambiguity surrounding *malāmat*—already evident in the earliest sources—should not be regarded as a deficiency but as intrinsic to its very structure.

Indeed, as Richard Hartmann notes, Malāmatī practice—especially in its more extreme manifestations—cannot be unproblematically classified as an exclusively "authentic Islamic phenomenon." The striking resemblance of certain Malāmatī figures to late antique philosophical types, particularly the Cynics, suggests a broader comparative horizon in which ascetic defiance, social provocation, and ethical inversion intersect (Hartmann 1918, p. 197).

The historical continuity of the Malāmatiyya remains fragmentary and difficult to reconstruct in a comprehensive manner (Hartmann 1918, p. 202). Nevertheless, within Sufi hierarchies, they are consistently regarded among the foremost of the *rijāl*—the "friends of God"—while their disciples are counted among the spiritual elite. According to Ibn Arabi, only such individuals attain the station of *futuwwa* and ethical excellence before God. Their distinguishing capacity lies in perceiving the veiled reality of the Divine within created existence, even as their own status remains concealed from the world (İbn Arabi 2009, p. 36).

Although Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami was clearly familiar with the notion of spiritual paths (*ṭarīqa*), it remains uncertain whether this concept, as employed in his works,

corresponds to the later institutionalized meaning associated with Sufi orders. In his context, the term appears to designate a mode of inner transformation specific to individual masters rather than a formally structured institutional lineage (J.-J. Thibon 2019, p. 26).

A crucial expansion of the Malāmatī horizon can be observed in the work of Ibn Arabi[9] (1165–1240), whose extensive travels across the Islamic world enabled him to encounter a wide range of Sufi traditions. His intellectual and experiential trajectory may be read as traversing what might be described as a "Malāmatī map." Writing approximately two centuries after Sulamī, he offers—particularly in *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*—a series of detailed observations that help delineate the otherwise elusive contours of this group.

Ibn ʿArabī insists that the Malāmatīs cannot be recognized through outward signs: they do not distinguish themselves from others by any visible behavior that would set them apart within worldly norms. Indeed, any manifestation of their spiritual rank would itself constitute a form of deficiency, insofar as it would introduce pride into their state (İbn Arabi 2008, p. 32). Their defining practice is a continuous self-reproach before God; they refuse to take satisfaction even in the sincerest actions performed by the *nafs*. Were their spiritual rank to become visible, Ibn ʿArabī warns, they might become objects of veneration—thereby compromising the very ethical structure they seek to preserve.

For this reason, they remain concealed beneath a veil of ordinariness, even accepting the blame and disparaging labels imposed upon them by society. Their dignity and authority must not become visible; it is precisely this condition that gives rise to their designation as *malāmī*—those who are blamed. This method, known only to a select group among the "people of God," requires that no external sign, conduct, or distinction mark them as spiritually superior (İbn Arabi 2009, p. 37).

In its early Nishapur context, this Sufi orientation—deeply theocentric in character—required several centuries to develop into a more articulated doctrinal form. What began as an individualized mode of ethical and spiritual discipline gradually underwent processes of diffusion and partial institutionalization, enabling it to assume diverse configurations across a wide geographical expanse—from Khurāsān to al-Andalus, and from Anatolia to North Africa.

At this juncture, it is essential to note that devotion to the *Ahl al-Bayt* constituted one of the central motivational forces underlying this tradition. Over time, however, the political and theological conflicts surrounding the question of *imamate*[10] contributed to the marginalization of Malāmatī-oriented groups, thereby increasing the distance between them and the Sunni orthodoxy associated with the four legal schools. The consolidation of institutional, juridical, and political authority within the Sunni scholarly establishment (*ʿilmiyya*) further intensified this marginalization.

In subsequent centuries, many movements positioned at the margins of orthodoxy—and often in tension with what functioned as the "official ideology" of the Umayyad Caliphate, Abbasid Caliphate, and Ottoman Empire—emerged from within these esoteric milieus. The politicization of Sufi formations influenced by Malāmatī sensibilities, including the Safaviyya, Kalenderiyya, Haydariyya, and Ismāʿīliyya, played a decisive role in shaping this historical trajectory (Ocak 1999, p. 122).

The principal criterion governing the long-standing tension between Malāmatī-oriented groups and dominant religious authority was determined, above all, through Islamic jurisprudence as articulated within the Sunni legal tradition of the period. This political and theological stance was framed in terms of doctrinal orthodoxy (*ʿaqāʾid*), within which Malāmatī groups—frequently associated with esoteric (*bāṭinī*) orientations—were accused of advancing unauthorized claims to spiritual authority before God. Consequently, they were often labeled with terms such as *zindīq*, *mulḥid*, *rāfiḍī*, and *ibāḥī*, and

were judged as heretics (*murtaddūn*)—those deemed to have deviated from or abandoned the faith.[11]

Moreover, the interpretive positions advanced by esoteric thinkers—particularly in relation to doctrines such as *waḥdat al-wujūd*—along with the symbolic and paradoxical modes of expression characteristic of their discourse, were frequently reinterpreted at the level of *ẓāhir* (external appearance) as grounds for accusation. In this way, the very linguistic and conceptual strategies designed to veil inner meaning became instruments through which suspicion was generated.

The cumulative effect of these accusations and institutional pressures rendered it increasingly difficult to sustain or defend the heterodox and often itinerant character of Malāmatī-influenced dervish life. As Richard Hartmann observes, any comprehensive assessment of this field must begin with the writing of a rigorous intellectual history—one that remains, even today, incomplete. Indeed, scholarly consensus has yet to be achieved regarding even its most fundamental conceptual categories, including *bāṭinism*, *Malāmatiyya*, *Shiʿism*, and *Ismāʿīlism*.

Over nearly a millennium, this mystical orientation has traversed vast geographical and cultural landscapes, being appropriated and reinterpreted by diverse societies. As a result, it has acquired a degree of internal complexity that resists reductive classification. A further source of ambiguity lies in its relationship to other Sufi traditions—such as the Yesevī Order, Bayramī Order, Bektaşī Order, Halvetī Order, Mevlevī Order, and Naqshbandī Order lineages—which have historically intersected with Malāmatī sensibilities through various forms of interaction, overlap, and doctrinal exchange (Gölpınarlı 2013, pp. 190–92; Ocak 1999, pp. 193–208; Bolat 2003, pp. 247–55). The founding figures of these traditions often exhibit a discernible affinity with what may be termed the "path of blame," even when such affinities remain implicit rather than doctrinally explicit.

Like other Sufi paths, *malāmat* is grounded in core ethical principles—above all, the purification of the soul and the disciplined struggle against the *nafs*. Yet, as it encountered different historical and cultural environments, it was refracted through diverse symbolic and social matrices shaped by pre-Islamic traditions, ritual continuities, mythic structures, geographical conditions, and political configurations. These encounters gave rise to multiple localized expressions without dissolving the underlying ethical logic of the path.

At its core, however, *malāmat* remains defined by a sustained struggle against the *nafs* and a vigilant resistance to *riyāʾ* (ostentatious piety). It is precisely this systematic practice of self-reproach that distinguishes it from other Sufi traditions (Ocak 1999, pp. 4–10). In this respect, *malāmat* should not be understood as merely one mystical current among others, but as a distinct ethical configuration structured around the continuous interrogation of the self.

From a hermeneutical perspective, Hans-Georg Gadamer's emphasis on acknowledging "the validity of what comes down from the past" (Toprak 2022, p. 122) offers a productive framework for approaching *malāmat*. The question that follows is not merely historical but existential: what does the persistent practice of self-accusation signify for the contemporary human condition?

Whereas many mystical traditions have emphasized withdrawal from the world or the interiorization of experience as pathways to ethical purification, *malāmat* deliberately remains within the world, sustaining itself amid the very structures through which virtue is publicly recognized. Ethical value, in this framework, neither intensifies through display nor is preserved through isolation; rather, it is maintained through prudence, self-suspicion, and the disciplined concealment of moral excellence.

This posture renders *malāmat* particularly significant in contemporary contexts, where ethical life has become deeply entangled with visibility, recognition, and the accumulation

of symbolic capital. In contrast to such regimes, *malāmat* severs the link between virtue and recognition, thereby destabilizing the evaluative frameworks through which moral worth is socially produced.

At the same time, *malāmat* resists the formation of spiritual elitism. Unlike traditions that elevate the mystic as a figure of moral or metaphysical authority, it actively undermines such hierarchies. The Malāmatī subject does not seek recognition as one who has attained spiritual perfection; rather, recognition itself becomes an ethically hazardous condition to be avoided.

This refusal of prestige gives rise to an ethics that does not depend on extraordinary experience or radical withdrawal. Instead, it emerges as an ethics of everyday life—socially embedded, yet inwardly rigorous. From this perspective, *malāmat* articulates a form of ethical mysticism that remains both accessible and critically potent.

According to Ibn Arabi, the possessor of wisdom (*ahl al-ḥikma*) is one who acts in accordance with each situation as it unfolds—a condition that, in its most refined form, characterizes the Malāmatīs (İbn Arabi 2008, p. 32). This situational ethics further reinforces *malāmat*'s capacity to function as a subtle yet pervasive critique of power.

Rather than opposing authority through direct confrontation or retreating into apolitical inwardness, *malāmat* operates by rendering power ineffective at the level of subjectivity. By severing the connection between piety and recognition, and between virtue and approval, it undermines the symbolic structures through which authority is internalized. This form of resistance does not take the shape of ideological protest; rather, it unfolds as an ethical reconfiguration of the self.[12] For this reason, *malāmat* provides a particularly fertile ground for *Zeitkritik*—a critique not of specific political systems, but of the moral assumptions sedimented within the spirit of an age.

This esoterically structured mode of life has also exerted a profound influence across cultural and artistic domains. Its itinerant character and affinity with oral expression have generated a rich typology of figures, among which the most emblematic is that of the âşık—the lover. As those who walk this path are understood as "lovers of the Real" (*Ḥaqq*), love becomes not merely a theme, but the very condition of ethical existence.

Within the broader Eastern literary tradition, this Malāmatī-inflected language of love found its most characteristic expression in the ghazal, through which a shared poetics of longing, loss, and transcendence was articulated (Çelik 2021, pp. 562–65). Over time, this gave rise to a vast and enduring corpus in which the ethical, the mystical, and the poetic converge in a distinctive and powerful voice.

3. From Melâmet to Civilisation: Ethical Selfhood Between Transcendence and Power

Ibn Arabi articulates the relationship between Sufism and ethics with striking clarity: "Sufism is a form of character; whoever surpasses you in character surpasses you in Sufism" (İbn Arabi 2008, p. 22). This formulation does more than define Sufism; it reorients the very axis of mystical life by grounding it in ethical formation. Understood in these terms, Sufism cannot be reduced to a purely inward or experiential domain but must instead be read as a mode of ethical becoming.

Building on this premise, Jason Welle's study of *Kitāb Ādāb al-Ṣuḥba* offers a crucial interpretive lens. According to Welle, Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami's hermeneutical approach displaces ethics from the confines of individual self-discipline and reconstitutes it within what may be described as a process of "relational becoming." As the text itself makes explicit, "character development could never be construed solely as self-discipline or self-cultivation, but as a dynamic engagement with fellow believers who play a constitutive role in the acquisition of virtue" (Welle 2016, p. 2).

This marks a decisive shift. Virtue is no longer conceived as an excellence attained through inward withdrawal, but as a quality that emerges within interaction. Ethical life, in this sense, is not a solitary achievement but a relational practice. The concept of *ṣuḥba* (companionship) thus assumes a foundational role: it is not merely pedagogical, but ontological. As Welle notes, "ṣuḥba enables a believer to attain saving knowledge, cultivate the virtues, and, in sum, become a better person" (Welle 2016, p. 3). Ethical formation is therefore inseparable from shared life.

A second defining feature of this model lies in its orientation toward a broad social field rather than an exclusive mystical elite. Sulamī's discourse is addressed not to a closed circle of initiates, but to "believers at an earlier stage on their spiritual path," and is explicitly intended for "a more general audience" (Welle 2016, p. 267). This inclusivity is reinforced by a deliberate stylistic choice: the avoidance of technical Sufi terminology in favor of poetry, prophetic reports, and aphoristic wisdom.

This strategy underlies what Welle terms "sufization"—a process through which Sufi ethics ceases to be the possession of a specialized group and instead permeates the fabric of everyday life. Ethics, in this context, is no longer reducible to individual perfection; it becomes a formative force within the social body. Indeed, Sulamī's discourse "quietly saturates the discourse around him… and thus contributes to the health, stability, and common good of the polis" (Welle 2016, p. 268). Ethical life thus unfolds as a shared and cumulative practice.

Within this framework, Sulamī's model resists hierarchical closure. Ethical development is not confined to relations between master and disciple but extends to the domain of ordinary friendships. As Welle observes, Sulamī's attention "revolves around ordinary friendships," and ethical growth often occurs through engagement with individuals who are themselves imperfect. Indeed, "spiritual growth lies in successful navigation of mutual voluntary commitments to people who are weak, sinful, and ignorant" (Welle 2016, pp. 267–70).

Virtue, therefore, is not an idealized perfection but a process constituted through reciprocity and lived interaction. In this respect, Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami's ethical vision departs from classical models centered on interior purification and assumes the form of a socially embedded and practice-oriented theory of virtue.

Within Malāmatī thought, however, this relational structure is complemented—and intensified—by a radical inward turn. Ethics begins with a sustained critique of the self; the continual interrogation of the *nafs* constitutes the ontological ground of ethical existence. This dimension becomes particularly illuminating when placed in dialogue with modern virtue ethics, especially in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. As Jason Welle suggests, "MacIntyre's notion of practice provides a viable analog for what al-Sulamī means by *adab*," while "*taṣawwuf* functions as a good analog for MacIntyre's understanding of a tradition" (Welle 2016, p. 269).

Yet the convergence is only partial. For Aristotle (2019, p. 22), virtue is a balanced disposition cultivated through habituation—"we become just by doing just actions". *Malāmat*, by contrast, does not seek equilibrium but sustains tension. The ethical subject is not stabilized through habit but constituted through continuous self-critique. Ethical life is thus not a state, but a process marked by inner unrest.

This tension becomes more pronounced in the critique of visibility and *riyāʾ* (ostentatious piety). *Malāmat* rejects all approaches that ground ethical value in public display, while simultaneously diverging from modern frameworks shaped by instrumental rationality, as analyzed by Max Weber (Weber 2000). Although a superficial parallel may be drawn with Immanuel Kant—who likewise locates moral worth in intention rather than outcome—the divergence remains fundamental. For Kant, intention is measured against

a universal law; for *malāmat*, the criterion remains irreducibly internal, and visibility itself becomes ethically corrosive.

The principle of concealment deepens this divergence further. In *malāmat*, the ethical is grounded not in what is seen, but in what is hidden. At this point, a striking affinity emerges with Søren Kierkegaard's notion of subjective truth. As Kierkegaard insists, the ethical "cannot be observed by an outsider… it can be realized only by the individual subject" (Kierkegaard 1968, p. 284). This insight resonates directly with the Malāmatī insistence on ethical invisibility.

Yet important distinctions remain. Aristotle situates ethics within the *polis*, while Kierkegaard radicalizes inwardness; Kant, in turn, mediates between the two by grounding autonomy in universal rational law. *Malāmat* diverges from all three by grounding ethical autonomy neither in rational universality nor in social embeddedness alone, but in fidelity to an inner truth that resists both codification and recognition. This orientation extends to the question of humility. Whereas Aristotle elevates *megalopsychia* (magnanimity), *malāmat* treats visible greatness as ethically hazardous. Kant's concept of dignity occupies a more neutral position; *malāmat*, however, seeks to preserve dignity precisely through concealment (Kant 2018, p. 434).

The relation between action and intention further clarifies these distinctions. While Immanuel Kant's notion of action "from duty" parallels *malāmat*'s emphasis on intention, the grounding differs: Kant appeals to rational law, whereas *malāmat* situates intention within an ongoing process of spiritual purification. Freedom, accordingly, is not understood as self-legislation but as liberation from the need for recognition. In this respect, *malāmat* shares a partial affinity with Søren Kierkegaard's existential "leap," yet remains anchored in a disciplined ethical practice (Kant 2018, pp. 393–99).

In the process of self-transcendence and ethical maturation, *malāmat* conceives the ethical not as a fixed state but as a continuous becoming. In this respect, it bears a partial affinity with Aristotle's account of virtue as an excellence acquired through habituation; yet the Malāmatī path relocates this process primarily within the domain of inner struggle and transformation. A closer philosophical proximity may therefore be found in Kierkegaard's notion of existential transformation; wherein ethical truth emerges through lived experience rather than abstract universality.

Accordingly, truth within this mystical orientation is not posited as an external object but realized as an inwardly lived reality. While this perspective resonates with Kierkegaard's conception of subjective truth, it departs both from Aristotle's teleological account of *eudaimonia* and from Kant's ethics of universal law. Kierkegaard's formulation—"Ethically regarded, reality is higher than possibility" (Kierkegaard 1968, p. 284)—aptly captures the experiential grounding of ethical life that *malāmat* foregrounds.

Ethical traditions do not merely regulate conduct; they also constitute specific forms of selfhood and articulate distinct modes of relating to transcendence, authority, and responsibility. From this perspective, *malāmat* cannot be reduced to an idiosyncratic mystical inclination or an exceptional ascetic posture within classical Sufism. Rather, it constitutes a coherent ethical logic grounded in religious experience—one that reconfigures the relationship between the self, moral action, and the sources of ethical legitimacy.

At the center of this logic lies a sustained inward orientation: a vigilant attentiveness to the *nafs*, an uninterrupted practice of self-reckoning, and a conception of moral value grounded not in external recognition but in an inner discipline enacted before God. Moral action, accordingly, does not arise from fear of punishment or the pursuit of recognition, but from an internalized sense of responsibility shaped by an awareness of transcendence. In this sense, *malāmat* exemplifies a form of ethical autonomy that is neither individualistic

nor arbitrary, but theologically grounded. The self is not absolved of obligation; rather, it becomes more deeply bound to it through continuous inner vigilance.

Such an ethical configuration resonates strongly with contemporary concerns regarding the erosion of responsibility under externally imposed systems of moral governance and automated regulation. At the same time, it articulates a critical stance toward highly visible, ritualized, and hierarchical forms of religiosity. The Malāmatī orientation privileges the concealment of virtue over its display and the acknowledgment of fault over its concealment. In doing so, it challenges the symbolic economies through which moral authority is produced via public piety, institutional affiliation, and social status.

While this stance limits the accumulation of moral prestige, it simultaneously severs the link between virtue and visibility, thereby safeguarding ethical authenticity. Early mystical texts and hagiographical narratives deliberately preserve the tension between appearing insignificant in the eyes of others and attaining acceptance before God, transforming *malāmat* into both a personal ethical posture and a subtle mode of social critique (Knysh 2010, pp. 144–53).

Despite their ethical force, Malāmatī orientations have rarely aligned seamlessly with centralized structures of authority. Although Sufi figures have often mediated between political power and society, *malāmat*'s insistence on inner legitimacy and ethical anonymity has brought it into sustained tension with systems grounded in visibility, control, and formal obedience. Juridical and institutional discourses have therefore frequently construed such tendencies as destabilizing and resistant to governance (Ocak 2021, pp. 5–12). The source of this unease lies in the ethical architecture of *malāmat* itself: by locating moral evaluation within the self before God, it weakens external claims to authority and limits the reach of symbolic domination.

From within dominant regimes of visibility, the ethical insistence on concealing virtue and exposing fault may initially appear counterintuitive, even self-endangering. It may be misinterpreted as passivity, irresponsibility, or self-sabotage. Yet such readings reduce *malāmat* to a mere inversion of social norms and fail to apprehend its deeper ethical logic. This orientation neither advocates withdrawal from responsibility nor renders the individual passive; on the contrary, it cultivates a form of ethical selfhood grounded in continuous self-confrontation.[13]

Within this mode of life—structured by the ongoing self-reproach of the *nafs*—the disclosure of fault does not function as public confession or moral exhibitionism. Rather, it operates as a disciplinary mechanism that interrupts the self's desire for recognition, superiority, and control, thereby reorienting ethical attention toward inner coherence.

The growing prevalence of burnout, alienation, and meaninglessness in contemporary urban societies may be read as symptoms of the absence of such inner grounding. As individuals are increasingly transformed into objects of evaluation, the relation between labor and meaning is attenuated, and human activity is reduced to measurable outputs. By contrast, *malāmat* redirects ethical attention from outcomes to processes: it neither displays intention nor conceals failure but deepens moral coherence beneath the surface of action.

Perhaps its most significant contribution to modern life lies in its reconfiguration of well-being. Rather than equating it with acceleration, accumulation, or perpetual productivity, *malāmat* privileges balance, moderation, and ethical sufficiency—foregrounding a more measured and sustainable mode of existence. The relation to the world is not rejected but recalibrated; success is no longer assessed through quantitative metrics but through qualitative integrity.

The perception of this spiritual path as archaic or inapplicable today largely stems from the assumption that ethical life must be visible to be valid. Within this framework, the concept of *faqr*[14] (spiritual poverty) proves particularly difficult to apprehend. In a world

structured by accumulation and productivity, the Sufi "doctrine of deprivation" may appear untenable. Yet *faqr* does not signify mere lack; rather, it designates a mode of being in which possession does not become domination, and in which the self remains oriented toward sharing and empathy as conditions of coexistence.

Malāmat, therefore, does not withdraw the individual from the social stage; it seeks instead to dissolve the stage's hold over the individual. From this perspective, it is not an escape from modernity, but a way of inhabiting its conditions without relinquishing ethical depth.

In an age increasingly shaped by regimes of exposure, efficiency, and continuous optimization, *malāmat* retains a quiet yet restorative potential. Its ethical language does not compete with dominant norms; rather, by refusing their terms, it gradually erodes them from within. By privileging inner discipline over external validation and responsibility over recognition, it articulates a form of ethical selfhood capable of resisting the exhaustion produced by regimes of visibility—without withdrawing from the world they govern.

In the classical periods of Islamic and Ottoman civilization, this ethical tension found one of its most powerful expressions in literature and poetry. Figures such as the *rind*, *kalender*, and *abdal* in Ottoman classical poetry embody a Malāmatī sensibility that resists ostentation, rigid legalism, and moral austerity.[15] The âşık, in aspiring to these figures, gives rise to a lyrical discourse deeply intertwined with *malāmat*.

Over time, poetry becomes a privileged medium through which this ethical experience is articulated, tested, and transmitted. The poet thus emerges not merely as an aesthetic subject, but as an ethical witness—one who confronts questions of justice, sincerity, and moral disintegration not through doctrinal exposition, but through irony, paradox, and symbolic inversion.

4. Malāmatī Witnessing in Classical Poetry: Ethics, Time, and Moral Critique

Erich Fromm's conception of human life as an "art" positions self-knowledge as both an ethical and ontological necessity; for the human being, as simultaneously the subject and the object of this art, bears responsibility for shaping the form of its own existence (Fromm 2015, p. 50). Within this framework, knowledge of the good cannot be disentangled from knowledge of the self. When read alongside humanistic ethics—where good and evil are grounded in human nature—this perspective yields a decisive conclusion: ethical insight is inseparable from self-recognition.

This line of thought finds a profound resonance within Sufi traditions. In particular, the Malāmatī emphasis on inward orientation and the purification from *riyā'* (ostentatious piety) reflects a parallel commitment to uncovering an inner truth. Here, the ethical task is not the construction of a visible moral identity, but the cultivation of a mode of being grounded in sincerity and interior integrity.

This convergence attains a striking poetic articulation in Yunus Emre's well-known verse: "To know knowledge is to know oneself; if you do not know yourself, what is the use of all learning?" (Emre 2021, p. 144). In this formulation, knowledge is at once reduced to and elevated through self-awareness: self-knowledge becomes the very condition for the possibility of truth and wisdom. In this sense, Fromm's "art of living" and the Sufi imperative of "knowing oneself" converge upon a shared ethical horizon; more precisely, they reveal that ethical life does not originate in external norms or prescriptive systems, but in the ongoing formation, interrogation, and transformation of the self as the primary site of moral truth.

This shared horizon is further deepened by the well-known maxim that "one who knows oneself knows one's Lord," through which ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics are

drawn into a unified field of meaning. Life, accordingly, is no longer a process to be merely endured, but an integrated art oriented toward the good, the beautiful, and the true.

Within this aesthetic–metaphysical ground, love is reconfigured from a merely human emotion into a mode of cognition and disciplined orientation toward truth. Although it may initially appear directed toward material forms, love functions as a threshold—preparing the individual for a higher plane of existence and knowledge.

This transformation is articulated philosophically by Ibn Sīnā, who argues that love directed toward beauty degenerates into moral weakness when reduced to bodily pleasure, but becomes a path of perfection when grounded in intellectual and ontological understanding. When the beautiful form is apprehended as a reflection of absolute beauty, it directs the individual toward the First Principle, thereby opening the possibility of inner maturation and ethical refinement (Sina 1953, p. 11).

A parallel structure appears in Plato's account of love, which describes an ascent from sensible beauty toward the immutable form of absolute beauty (Eflatun 1972, p. 80). This ascent may be understood as the expression of a fundamental ontological longing—the desire of a fragmented being to recover its unity. Within both frameworks, love emerges as a mediating force that transforms perception into knowledge and desire into ethical formation, thereby situating ethical becoming within a broader metaphysical trajectory.

This transcendental understanding of love found a powerful resonance in Eastern lyrical traditions, where earthly love was interpreted as both a threshold and a pedagogical stage in the cultivation of divine love. Consequently, love came to occupy a central place not only in individual experience but also in cultural production, functioning as a guiding principle that orients the human being toward truth.

In classical Turkish poetry, love is thus not merely an affective state, but a transformative mode of consciousness. Its meaning emerges precisely through its tension with reason. The classical poet Nevres-i Kadim captures this tension with remarkable clarity: "I fell in love; they called me wise; when I followed reason, they said—be gone, madman!" (Akkaya 1995, ghazal 30/1). Here, reason appears as the principle of moderation and social conformity, while love embodies excess, rupture, and the search for truth.

Within this poetic universe, reason often symbolizes the calculative religiosity of the *zāhid*, whereas love, through a *rindane* disposition, signifies sincerity, surrender, and existential depth. Yet love does not simply oppose reason; it transforms it. It becomes a path leading the individual toward *ḥikma* (wisdom), elevating human understanding beyond the limits of rational calculation.

Thus, love functions as a mode of being that liberates the individual from the constraints of instrumental rationality and opens access to a higher form of knowledge—the intuitive apprehension of truth. Classical poetry, therefore, does not seek to reconcile love and reason; rather, it affirms the transformative primacy of love as the condition for ethical and epistemic expansion.

This ethical–poetic configuration becomes particularly visible in the works of Hayretî, a sixteenth-century poet who himself adopted a Kalenderī way of life. In his *Dīvān*, he articulates the relationship between love and *malāmat* with intensity, describing the path of blame as a secure refuge. Here, *malāmat* emerges not as deviation, but as an ethical shelter (Hayreti 1981, ghazal 110/1).

Across the classical tradition, this orientation is consistently reaffirmed. The lover (*ʿāshiq*) emerges as the central figure through whom sincerity, suffering, and truth are articulated. The tension between the Sufi and the *zāhid* functions as a recurring poetic device, rendering the critique of ostentation both visible and experientially intelligible.

Within this framework, figures such as the *rind*, *abdal*, *kalender*, *majnūn*, and *dīvāne* operate as embodiments of Malāmatī sensibility. These figures are neither purely heroic nor

merely marginal; rather, they inhabit an ambivalent space where suffering, ridicule, and spiritual intensity converge. Over time, the Malāmatī ethos becomes internalized within the figure of the lover itself, even in the absence of explicit reference to Kalenderī identity.

Historical sources further indicate that, in certain cases, bodily suffering—such as self-inflicted wounds—was embraced as a means of demonstrating the sincerity of love. While such practices may appear extreme, they point to a fundamental ethical principle: authenticity is measured not by recognition, but by endurance.

At the same time, the elevation of the lover as a figure of symbolic prestige gave rise to the emergence of counterfeit lovers. This tension between authenticity and imitation further intensifies the ethical dimension of Malāmatī poetics. Genuine lovers respond not through outward display, but through an intensified inward commitment.

In this way, the Malāmatī dimension of love—combined with the destitution and public disrepute associated with the lover—gives rise to a distinctive typology: an "inverted hero" who comes to occupy a central position within the poetic imagination of the East.

Classical Turkish and Persian poetry thus offers a rich archive in which *malāmat* is neither systematized as a formal doctrine nor reduced to abstract moral exhortation; rather, it is articulated as a lived ethical sensibility mediated through metaphor, irony, and a poetics of restraint. Within the poetic form, *malāmat* appears not as a prescriptive code but as an embodied disposition—one that unfolds through language while resisting conceptual closure.

This aesthetic mediation renders *malāmat* translatable beyond its immediate historical and cultural context. Precisely because it resists rigid doctrinal formulation, it remains accessible as an ethical logic capable of addressing contemporary concerns. The convergence of ethical inwardness, resistance to visibility, and poetic articulation thus positions *malāmat* as a particularly fertile horizon for rethinking the relationship between mysticism and ethics in the present.

In the ghazals of Shirazi, this ethical–aesthetic configuration finds one of its most compelling expressions. Through a language at once exuberant and controlled, Hafiz constructs the figures of the *rind* and the Kalenderī in deliberate opposition to ascetic religiosity (*zāhidāne*). Within this symbolic universe, the tavern (*meykhāna*) ceases to function as a merely worldly setting; rather, it becomes a space of ethical reorientation—a refuge from *riyā'* (ostentation) and a site in which sincerity is reconstituted beyond the performative structures of piety. Similarly, the recurring imagery of wine and intoxication signifies not hedonistic indulgence, but the ecstatic condition of divine love—an experience in which the limits of the worldly are transgressed and transformed into a mode of metaphysical ascent (Gölpınarlı 1992, pp. 371–72). In this poetic language, *malāmat* emerges simultaneously as an ethical stance and as a symbolic vocabulary through which inward transformation becomes expressible.

This discourse, first articulated in Persian poetry and subsequently transmitted into Turkish, generates a heightened ethical and affective intensity through the imagery of love-intoxicated dervishes. While often described under the broad rubric of a "Kalenderī style," such a characterization remains insufficient. The language in question demands to be understood as a distinct discursive formation—one in which ethical defiance, existential exposure, and poetic indirection converge. In this respect, Hafiz—much like Omar Khayyam—articulates a form of Malāmatī selfhood grounded in a paradoxical synthesis of vulnerability and inner certainty.

A complementary narrative expression of this ethical logic appears in *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr* by Farid ud-Din Attar. In one striking episode, Attar recounts the encounter of an Arab traveler with a group of Kalenderī dervishes in Iran. These figures are deliberately portrayed in ways that invite social reproach—through images of disorder, shamelessness, and apparent transgression. Yet this provocation conceals a deeper paradox: although

each dervish appears intoxicated, none has in fact consumed wine. As Attar writes, "Each of them held a flask of wine in his hand; none had tasted wine, yet all were intoxicated!" (Attar 1998, pp. 291–92).

Here, intoxication is disclosed not as a material condition but as a sign of inward transformation. The narrative thus exemplifies how mystical traditions encode ethical insight not through systematic exposition, but through paradox, symbol, and narrative inversion.

Such examples underscore a broader point: within mystical traditions, ethical knowledge is rarely transmitted through abstract systematics alone. Rather, it is mediated through poetic and narrative forms in which lived experience, transcendence, and moral reflection intersect. Classical poetry should therefore not be regarded merely as an ornamental vehicle of ethical thought; it constitutes a distinctive mode of ethical witnessing.

The classical Ottoman poet thus emerges as more than an aesthetic agent: he becomes an ethical witness attentive to the fractures, tensions, and qualitative losses shaping his world. This mode of witnessing does not take the form of explicit critique or sociological diagnosis; instead, it operates through metaphor, irony, and symbolic inversion. Poetry enables ethical reflection to surface without collapsing into didacticism, while preserving the central tension of mystical thought between transcendence and worldly engagement.

Within this framework, *malāmat* functions not only as a spiritual orientation but also as an ethical language—one capable of articulating questions of power, temporality, and moral disintegration without recourse to overt normative discourse.

In the Anatolian context, this ethical–poetic tradition acquires further depth through figures such as Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi (1207–1273). Having migrated from Balkh to Anatolia, Rumi articulates a comprehensive vision of love-centered spirituality in his *Masnavī-yi Maʿnavī*, one of the foundational texts of Islamic intellectual and literary history. Within this work, the logic of *malāmat* is expressed through a language of paradox and experiential insight.

Rumi's reflections on blame illuminate its ethical function with clarity: blame, he suggests, resembles a bitter medicine—difficult to endure, yet ultimately transformative. Praise, by contrast, appears sweet but produces a more insidious corruption. "Know everything by its opposite: praise lingers like sugar, but in time it gives rise to a wound… The *nafs*, through excessive praise, became Pharaoh-like. Be humble; do not seek greatness!" (Rûmî 2015, p. 99). In this formulation, blame becomes not degradation but a means of ethical purification, disrupting the self's inclination toward domination and self-exaltation.

Against this conceptual and literary background, the present study turns to the testimony of classical Ottoman poetry between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries—a period in which the tradition attained its stylistic and thematic maturity. Under the consolidating influence of Ottoman political and cultural power, poetic production in this era exhibits both refinement and internal coherence, while continuing to sustain a complex ethical vocabulary.

Accordingly, this study adopts a selective yet representative approach, offering a panoramic view of a three-century discourse through leading poetic figures situated at the intersection of *malāmat*, poetry, and ethics. The selected texts are guided by two principal criteria: first, they belong to poets whose authority is firmly established within the classical tradition; second, they reflect an active engagement with the ethical and aesthetic concerns of their time.

Among these figures, Fuzuli (d. 1556) occupies a central position. Writing in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, Fuzuli articulates a powerful Malāmatī sensibility across his oeuvre, most notably in his *Dīvān* and *Rind ü Zâhid*[16] His poetry may be read as a sustained meditation on love, humility, and ethical exposure—effectively extending the Malāmatī ethos across a vast geographical and cultural horizon stretching from Baghdad to the Balkans.

A selected couplet from his Turkish *Dīvān*, examined in the following section, captures with intensity the ethical and poetic sensibility that defines the sixteenth-century zenith of classical Ottoman literature. By contrast, Şeyh Gâlib (1757–1799), widely regarded as the final great voice of classical Ottoman poetry, represents one of the most refined eighteenth-century articulations of divine love and Malāmatī-inflected discourse through both his *Dīvān* and the mesnevi *Hüsn ü Aşk*[17]. Unlike Fuzuli—who, positioned in the imperial periphery, struggled to secure sustained patronage—Şeyh Gâlib occupied a prominent place at the center of imperial culture, enjoying both the patronage of the Sultan and the post of *shaykh* at the Galata Mevlevī lodge.

Yet this institutional proximity to power renders his engagement with *malāmat* even more striking. Rather than dissolving into the symbolic economy of prestige, his poetry mobilizes *malāmat* as a counter-discourse that reasserts inward autonomy. For this reason, his work is treated here as a second representative axis within the present analysis.

Situated between these two figures stands Nabi (d. 1712), a seventeenth-century poet distinguished by his identity as a moralist, intellectual, and bureaucratic thinker. Influenced in part by the *Sebk-i Hind* style, Nâbî constructs an ethical framework grounded in moderation, rational discipline, and the regulation of the *nafs*. In contrast to the more ecstatic registers of Fuzuli and Şeyh Gâlib, his poetry articulates a calibrated balance between Sufi ethics and the demands of social order.

In *Hayriyye*, this balance assumes an explicitly critical dimension, as the institutions of the Ottoman state are subjected to sustained ethical scrutiny. Nâbî's poetic voice, shaped at a historical moment marked by a transition from relative stability toward fragmentation, articulates a form of wisdom (*ḥikma*) that binds together love, discipline, and ethical reflection (Kaplan 2019, p. 4).

Within the poetic universe of Fuzuli, however, *malāmat* assumes a more expansive and collective dimension. No longer confined to an individual disposition, it is reimagined through the metaphor of an "army of gnosis" (*ʿirfān*), patiently awaiting spiritual authority: waiting here signifies not passivity, but an ethical perseverance sustained through time (Kılınç 2021,ghzal 114/1). In this framework, *walāya* (spiritual authority) is explicitly detached from political sovereignty and redefined as a form of moral perfection.

Read against contemporary temporal regimes defined by acceleration and immediacy, this ethic of waiting articulates a counter-temporality grounded in trust, restraint, and continuity.

Taken together, these poetic configurations present *malāmat* as an ethical orientation situated at the intersection of mystical experience, moral action, and aesthetic expression. Poetry, in this context, functions not merely as representation, but as mediation: it bridges transcendence and lived experience, enabling ethical critique without collapsing into prescriptive moralism.

When Fuzuli declares, "I am the sovereign of the land of *malāmat*," (Kılınç 2021, 51/17) he constructs a paradox that lies at the very heart of Malāmatī ethics. Sovereignty—traditionally associated with power, mastery, and visibility—is here reconfigured as a condition of deprivation. To become the "sovereign" of lack is not merely an ironic inversion; rather, it signals a deeper existential disposition: a state in which deprivation is no longer experienced as absence, but as a stabilized mode of being—one that is inwardly assimilated and no longer exposed to display.

A different yet complementary articulation emerges in the poetry of Şeyh Gâlib. Here, *malāmat* is expressed not through lament or exposure, but through irony and aesthetic resistance. His invocation of *faqr* (voluntary poverty) and an *abdāl*-like disposition redefines ethical freedom as a deliberate renunciation of symbolic power. The call to "blow against the age" operates as an ironic gesture of dissent—one that refuses to internalize the normative structures of its time (Okçu 2014, ghazal 160/9).

In this sense, *malāmat* does not withdraw from power; rather, it renders power inoperative by declining to participate in its language. Ethical autonomy is thus achieved not merely through opposition, but through a transformation of the very terms in which power is articulated.

The life of Şeyh Gâlib further intensifies this paradox. Despite his close relationship with Selim III and his position within the imperial center, he maintained the inward discipline characteristic of Sufi life, resisting both political instrumentalization and the seductions of prestige. In this respect, his ethical position may be understood as even more demanding than that of Fuzuli: to sustain inner integrity within proximity to power constitutes a more complex and precarious form of Malāmatī fidelity.

Within a brief life of forty-two years, Gâlib succeeded in establishing a poetic and ethical horizon that would shape Ottoman literary culture for generations, confirming the enduring force of *malāmat* as both an aesthetic and ethical paradigm.

A distinct form of ethical witnessing emerges in the poetry of Nabi. His critique, often framed through deceptively simple metaphors, extends beyond his immediate historical context and acquires the character of a transhistorical *Zeitkritik*. His well-known contrast between the "Kütahya cup" and "Chinese porcelain" encapsulates a broader ethical diagnosis: the displacement of essence by appearance, of mastery by imitation, and of qualitative value by superficial equivalence (Bilkan 2021, ghazal 413/4).

The force of this critique lies not merely in its aesthetic economy, but in its capacity to disclose the structural continuity of moral disintegration across time. Writing in a period marked by political instability, economic strain, and social fragmentation, Nâbî situates his ethical vision within the framework of wisdom (*ḥikma*), addressing themes such as corruption, ignorance, and the erosion of knowledge.

Yet his response does not advocate external transformation as a primary solution; rather, it foregrounds the necessity of inner equilibrium. In this respect, his thought converges with the Sufi ideal of dervishhood, which is a mode of existence defined not by withdrawal, but by disciplined inwardness, ethical restraint, and a refusal of excessive attachment to wealth, status, and recognition.

This ethical orientation emphasizes the recognition of human limitation, humility before divine will, and the cultivation of a form of happiness grounded not in speculative reason, but in existential serenity. Ethics, dervishhood, and doctrine thus converge as an inward mode of resistance to social disintegration.

In this framework, social decay is never confined to a single domain. Moral decline, economic imbalance, political disorder, and cultural erosion unfold as mutually implicated processes. The symbolic contrast in the poetry of Nabi thus extends beyond material culture, disclosing deeper structural oppositions—between speed and patience, surface and depth, imitation and authenticity.

Through the ethical lens of *malāmat*, such distinctions become internalized. The difference between gain and value, profitability and worth, is no longer determined by visibility or immediate outcomes, but by their implications for human dignity, temporal integrity, and moral coherence. As ethical judgment is internalized, external systems of regulation lose their primacy; action is no longer governed by fear or reward, but by an inwardly sustained sense of responsibility (Mengi 1978; pp. 178–83).

At this point, Ibn Arabi offers a formulation that crystallizes the ethical logic of *malāmat*. In his description of the ideal human type (*fatā*), he proposes a radical redistribution of praise and blame: what is worthy of praise is to be attributed to the Real, and what is blameworthy to oneself (İbn Arabi 2008, pp. 344–365). This principle does not merely regulate conduct; rather, it reconfigures the structure of ethical consciousness itself, grounding responsibility in a continuous inward accountability before God.

5. Conclusions

Malāmat should be read not merely as a Sufi discipline or a historically bounded mystical movement, but as a radical configuration of the ethical relationship one establishes with oneself. In classical formulations, malāmat is often defined as "concealing good deeds and revealing faults." At first glance, this appears to be a simple rule of conduct; yet upon closer examination, it reveals a far more complex ethical logic—one grounded in continuous self-critique and the disciplined practice of ethical invisibility.

Viewed in this light, malāmat may be understood as an early articulation of an ethical consciousness that refuses to ground morality in social recognition. Instead, it insists that ethical value must be rooted in inner truthfulness and in the individual's relation to the Divine. This shift—from visibility to inwardness—does not signal a withdrawal from ethical responsibility, but rather its intensification.

From a historical perspective, malāmat can also be approached as a "collective ethical narrative" that took shape between the tenth and twelfth centuries yet exceeded the confines of any single doctrinal or institutional framework. Emerging across a wide geographical expanse—from Khurasan to Anatolia—where diverse religious, cultural, and intellectual traditions intersected, it reflects a form of ethical consciousness distilled from shared human experience.

The gradual transformation of Malāmatī teachings within both oral and written traditions further suggests that this ethical orientation was not merely the product of isolated individuals, but of a collective imagination shaped over time. For this reason, malāmat invites renewed interpretation not only within the history of Sufism, but also in relation to broader questions of ethics, existence, and moral aesthetics.

The decisive point, however, lies in the fact that the seemingly self-reproachful structure of malāmat gives rise to a distinctive form of ethical freedom. As the individual becomes increasingly independent of the judgment of others, the value of action is no longer derived from external reward or recognition, but from an inner orientation toward truth. Ethical agency, in this framework, is not diminished but reconstituted.

In this respect, malāmat may be brought into productive dialogue with the modern philosophical notion of the "authentic subject." The Malāmatī figure rejects the economy of social visibility and instead locates normative weight precisely in concealment. Recognition is no longer the condition of ethical validity; rather, it becomes a potential site of ethical distortion.

This study has therefore sought to reposition malāmat not as a marginal or archaic mystical posture, but as a coherent ethical logic capable of engaging contemporary debates on visibility, selfhood, and moral exhaustion. In doing so, the ethical language articulated over centuries within literary traditions further strengthens this claim.

When considered together, the *Zeitkritik* articulated by Nâbî—grounded in questions of quality, merit, and substance; the aesthetic distance and restraint expressed by Şeyh Gâlib through *faqr* and an *abdāl*-like disposition; and the portrayal by Fuzûlî of malāmat as a form of collective patience and ethical waiting all demonstrate that malāmat is not merely an individual inclination, but a historically situated form of moral consciousness.

Read considering contemporary conditions—characterised by acceleration, image management, and constant comparison—these poetic testimonies reveal both the persistence of ethical fragility and the recurring nature of moral rupture across time. They suggest that the crises of the present are not entirely new, but rather intensified configurations of enduring ethical tensions.

By approaching malāmat not solely through abstract doctrinal formulations, but through its poetic articulations, this study has aimed to demonstrate how ethical resistance operates across aesthetic, historical, and relational dimensions. Such resistance does

not depend upon prescriptive moralism or rigid normative systems; instead, it unfolds through subtle practices of reorientation at the level of the self.

Accordingly, malāmat should not be interpreted as a call to reduce visibility, withdraw from social life, or retreat into silence. On the contrary, it affirms the possibility of sustaining ethical action within the world—yet without recourse to display. It proposes not disappearance, but a reconfiguration of presence.

In an age in which visibility increasingly functions as the primary measure of moral value, malāmat acquires renewed significance as a practice of courageous ordinariness, ethical simplicity, and disciplined moderation that resists both excess and exhibition.

At the same time, this study does not advance malāmat as a universal prescription or a normative programme to be mechanically applied to contemporary life. Rather, it offers a critical perspective—an invitation to reconsider the relationship that the modern subject establishes with itself, particularly within environments shaped by technological mediation, continuous evaluation, and external governance.

In this respect, malāmat operates less as an instruction than as a reminder that despite systems of surveillance, normative regulation, and technological convenience, ethical responsibility remains irreducibly personal. It cannot be delegated, automated, or fully externalised.

Perhaps, then, what malāmat ultimately discloses is not a hidden doctrine, but a forgotten possibility: that genuine ethical life may still persist in the least visible places—in the quiet endurance of goodness and in the depth of a life no longer structured by the demand to appear. Malāmat thus emerges not only as a historical ethical formation, but also as a conceptual counter-model to modern regimes of visibility.

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Notes

1 Poems performed by Malāmatī folk poets, most commonly within Bektashi rituals.

2 The discourse of love that exposes Malāmatī dervishes to blame and judgment.

3 In a similar vein, examining dervish piety challenges the scholarly tendency to dismiss so-called "marginal" religious phenomena. Such inquiry reveals the central role of renunciatory traditions in both Islamic history and Sufism, while also reframing Sufism as a form of this-worldly mystical piety. Ultimately, it suggests that nothing is truly marginal in the history of religions (Karamustafa 2007a, p. 96).

4 Sufism is, to a great extent, a path of maʿrifa—that is, intuitive knowledge. In its institutionalized form, Sufi thought is commonly conceived as a four-stage path, the final stage of which is the state of maʿrifa. One who reaches this stage is counted among the ʿārifūn, possessing irfān (gnostic insight). At this point, fewer formal religious obligations are expected of the individual, for he has also surpassed the stage of ḥaqīqa (ultimate truth). He attains a level at which reality becomes directly and clearly perceivable. Al-Ghazali defines maʿrifa as "a light that God casts into the heart of His servant, through which the servant comes to see clearly what he had previously known only by name" (Uludağ 2003, p. 55).

5 In his important work *Ṭabaqāt*, a striking omission becomes apparent: the near absence of any reference to the Malāmatiyya. The only notable exception is Hamdun al-Qassar, who is presented as the shaykh of the Malāmatīs in Nishapur. However, Al-Sulami does not explicitly identify him as the founder of this movement; rather, he merely states that the path of blame (the Malāmatī school) spread through him (J.-J. Thibon 2019, p. 28).

6 Al-Qushayri likewise draws much of the material used in his biographical section from Al-Sulami. The information provided about the shaykhs largely corresponds to that found in the *Ṭabaqāt*, and many of the reported sayings are transmitted through Sulamī. Nevertheless, Qushayrī occasionally includes statements that are not present in the *Ṭabaqāt*. The principal difference between the two authors lies in the nature of their respective literary projects. In Qushayrī's work, the accounts of the shaykhs constitute only one section of a broader Sufi manual—and not even its most central component. Their function is to embody and give life to the Sufi doctrine elaborated in the other parts of the work (J.-J. Thibon 2019, p. 35).

7 The claim of a right or entitlement before God on the basis of one's pious deeds or mystical states (Hartmann 1918, p. 61).

8 In Sufism, "extraordinary states" (*khawāriq al-ʿāda*) refer to experiences of the Sufi that appear to transcend the ordinary order of habit (*ʿāda*). This notion is generally subsumed under the concept of *karama* (miracle), and is understood to arise not from the servant's own power, but from divine grace.

9 Perhaps the most significant contribution to delineating the contours of malāmat comes from Ibn Arabi. Regarded as an authority in Sufism and therefore known as *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* (the Greatest Master) (Kılıç 1999, p. 493), Ibn ʿArabī, after his formative years within the intellectual milieu of al-Andalus, first engaged with Sufis in North Africa, particularly in Morocco and Tunisia. In 1200, he set out for Mecca to perform the pilgrimage, never to return to the European continent. From there, he continued his extensive travels, meeting and exchanging with Sufis across regions such as North Africa, Egypt, and Jerusalem. Following his periods in Mecca and Medina, he journeyed to northern Iraq—visiting Mosul and then Baghdad—before proceeding into Anatolia via Diyarbakır, eventually arriving in Malatya. His travels brought him as far as Konya, the city later associated with Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi. After undertaking another pilgrimage, Ibn ʿArabī returned to Konya, and subsequently traveled again to Malatya and Sivas. He ultimately passed away in Damascus in 1240 (Kılıç 1999, pp. 493–495).

10 In Shiʿism, the concept of *imama* constitutes a central theological principle. The imām is regarded as a divinely appointed and infallible (sinless) leader. Beginning with ʿAlī, the doctrine of the Twelve Imams (*Imāmiyya*) establishes this system on a fully developed theological foundation.

11 This group includes numerous examples. Perhaps one of the most tragic life stories is that of Hamza Bali, whose fate ultimately led to the formation of the Hamzaviyya branch of the Malāmatiyya (Gölpınarlı 2013, pp. 72–77).

12 The marginalization of the Malāmatiyya and its emergence as a form of political opposition constitute a highly complex and multilayered field of inquiry. The climate of conflict—particularly evident in movements such as the Ismāʿīliyya, the Safaviyya, and especially the Kalenderiyya, and further intensified by sectarian tensions—extends far beyond the scope of this article. Within Ottoman territories, Malāmatī currents have been associated with a range of socio-political movements, including those linked to Kızıl Deli, Torlak Kemal, Şeyh Bedreddin, Şahkulu, Börklüce Mustafa, Bozoklu Celal, and Şah Kalender. In each of these cases, strands of Malāmatī thought or affiliation can be discerned (Ocak 1999, pp. 126–32).

13 One of the early pioneers of malāmat, Yusuf Hemedani, recounts an anecdote in his work Rutbat al-Ḥayāt to illustrate the stubborn resistance of the nafs: "They asked Bayezid Bastami, the sultan of the gnostics, 'What was the greatest trial that the Exalted God brought upon you on this path?' He replied, 'Even if I were to tell you, you would not have the strength to hear it.' They then asked, 'What was the smallest trial?' He answered, 'You do not have the strength to hear that either.' Finally, they asked, 'Then what was the greatest trial you brought upon yourself?' He said, 'I invited my nafs to obedience, but it refused. So, I deprived it of sustenance for a year'" (Hemedânî 2000, p. 93).

14 Al-Qushayri emphasizes this concept with the statement: "The paths leading to God are as numerous as the stars, and the best of them is faqr" (El-Kuşeyri 1980, p. 321). Early Sufis regarded faqr as a virtue occupying the fourth rank within the spiritual hierarchy of Sufism. Although differing interpretations exist, it is most defined as an "internalized state of deprivation." In this sense, it signifies the inward assimilation of a condition of neediness—an existential awareness of dependence in the face of both material and spiritual existence.

15 Official sources concerning Kalenderī groups—widely accepted among nomadic communities—frequently portray them through accusations of heresy (zandaqa) and antinomianism (ibāḥa). Yet these same sources also record the presence, within such circles, of numerous figures regarded as awliyāʾ (friends of God) and recognized as moral and spiritual authorities. Referred to by various designations such as rind, cavlak, torlak, ışık, babāʾī, kalenderī, edhemī, haydarī, and abdāl, these heterodox groups represent forms of dervishhood that stand outside established religious and social norms. In this respect, they embody a type of "deviant" or nonconforming mystic subjectivity. The term abdāl acquires a more specific semantic scope from the twelfth century onward, especially in Anatolia, where it comes to denote Kalenderī and Haydarī dervishes. Within this framework, the abdāls are depicted as ascetic-mystical figures who prefer celibacy, remain indifferent to the prevailing sharīʿa-based and moral regulations of their time, and attract attention through their unconventional appearance—often shaving their hair, beard, moustache, and even eyebrows, thereby cultivating a distinctive bodily form (Ocak 2000, pp. 67–68; Harmancı 2018, p. 268).

[16] "It may be said that, in this work—composed from a mystical perspective—Fuzûlî, to a certain extent, reflects his own worldview within the limited expressive possibilities of classical literature. In this prose text, which contains the debates between an ascetic father and his rind son, the rind represents the poet's heart, while the ascetic represents his intellect." (Karahan 1996, p. 245).

[17] In Hüsn ü Aşk, love is a journey that compels the subject to transcend the limits of language and representation; this journey makes possible a participation in a deeper order of being, even at the cost of the dissolution of the self (Holbrook 2014, pp. 91–93).

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