

The Body as Mosque: A Sacred Reframing of Erotic Perception

Maksudul Shadat Akash *

Department of Public Health & Informatics, Bangladesh University of Professionals, Dhaka,
Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores a novel theological and symbolic framework for addressing lust: perceiving the human body as a sacred architectural form, akin to a mosque. Drawing on Islamic mysticism (Sufism), feminist philosophy, and embodied theology, the study interprets the dome and minaret as gendered metaphors, representing the breast and phallus, respectively, to reframe the naked body not as an object of desire, but as a symbolic site of divine presence. By sacralizing the gaze, this reinterpretation transforms carnal perception into contemplative vision, redirecting erotic impulse toward spiritual reverence. The paper engages Islamic ethics, including concerns around aniconism and modesty, while drawing from Sufi traditions that embrace symbolic eroticism as a path to divine union. It further explores how sacral aesthetics can shape perception and moral discipline, offering practical insights for spiritual seekers in a hyper-sexualized visual culture. Ultimately, this interdisciplinary approach invites a renewed ethic of vision, wherein the body becomes not a source of temptation, but a sacred geometry that mirrors divine order. Future research is encouraged to explore cross-religious analogies, gender symbolism in sacred architecture, and the mystical aesthetics of modesty.

Keywords: Lust, Sacred Architecture, Sufism, Mosque Symbolism, Embodied Theology, Gender, Erotic Mysticism, Islamic Ethics, Spiritual Gaze, Sacred Aesthetics

INTRODUCTION

Lust, traditionally recognized as one of the seven cardinal sins, is characterized by an intense and often uncontrolled sexual desire. In theological discourse, it is viewed as a disordered inclination that prioritizes personal gratification over spiritual and moral order. This perspective is rooted in the understanding that such desires, when unchecked, can lead individuals away from their spiritual obligations and towards actions that are contrary to divine law [1-3].

The challenge of managing lust has been a central concern in various spiritual disciplines. Practices aimed at cultivating virtues like chastity and temperance are often employed to counteract the impulses associated with lust. These disciplines emphasize the importance of redirecting one's focus from carnal desires to higher spiritual pursuits, thereby fostering a sense of inner harmony and alignment with divine will [1].

In this context, the concept of sublimation becomes particularly relevant. Sublimation refers to the psychological process by which socially unacceptable impulses or desires are transformed into socially acceptable actions or behaviors. Sigmund Freud identified sublimation as a mature defense mechanism, allowing individuals to channel their base instincts into productive and culturally valued activities [3].

Building upon this framework, this paper proposes a novel approach to addressing the challenges posed by lust: perceiving the human body as a sacred architectural form, akin to a mosque. This metaphorical reframing draws inspiration from architectural symbolism, where elements of mosque design, such as the dome and minaret are interpreted as representations of feminine and masculine principles, respectively [4].

By adopting this perspective, the naked human body is not merely seen as an object of desire but as a vessel of spiritual significance. This shift in perception aims to transform carnal impulses into contemplative appreciation, fostering a deeper connection between the physical form and its spiritual essence. In doing so, it aligns with the broader objectives of spiritual disciplines that seek to harmonize bodily desires with higher moral and spiritual ideals.

By reimagining the human body through the lens of sacred architecture, it becomes possible to redirect the energy associated with lust towards spiritual awareness and growth. This approach offers a transformative pathway that integrates psychological insights with theological principles, providing a holistic strategy for managing one of the most pervasive challenges in spiritual practice.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative conceptual research design grounded in theological reflection, symbolic interpretation, and interdisciplinary textual analysis. Rather than collecting empirical data, the paper develops a theoretical framework for understanding how the symbolic perception of the human body as sacred architecture may contribute to the sublimation of lust and the cultivation of contemplative vision. The research is exploratory and interpretive in nature, seeking to generate new insights through the synthesis of religious, philosophical, psychological, and architectural literature.

The study is informed by three primary theoretical traditions. First, it draws upon Islamic mystical thought, particularly the works of Ibn Arabi and the broader Sufi tradition, which emphasize symbolic interpretation, the imaginal realm (*barzakh*), and the possibility of perceiving divine realities through material forms. Second, the research engages embodied theology and feminist philosophy, especially Luce Irigaray's concept of the "sensible transcendental," which explores the relationship between embodiment, gender, and transcendence. Third, psychological theories of perception, objectification, and sublimation are incorporated to examine how cognitive reframing may transform erotic desire into spiritual contemplation.

The study relies exclusively on secondary sources, including classical Islamic texts, Sufi literature, theological writings, philosophical works, and relevant psychological research. Key sources include the writings of Ibn Arabi, Jalal al-Din Rumi, Al-Ghazali, William Chittick, Annemarie Schimmel, Luce Irigaray, and Sigmund Freud, alongside contemporary scholarship on objectification, visual perception, and sacred architecture. In addition, the symbolic architectural framework presented in the source text concerning mosque symbolism serves as a foundational reference for developing the central metaphor explored in this paper.

A hermeneutic and symbolic interpretive approach was employed to analyze the selected texts. Hermeneutics was used to examine how meanings are generated through metaphor, symbolism, and theological reflection. The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes related to sacred embodiment, gender symbolism, spiritual perception, and the transformation of desire.

The study proceeded through four analytical stages. First, relevant literature on lust, sacred architecture, and embodied spirituality was reviewed. Second, symbolic correspondences between mosque architecture and the human body were identified and examined. Third, theological and philosophical concepts were analyzed to explore how these correspondences might reframe visual perception. Finally, ethical and practical implications of this symbolic framework were evaluated within Islamic and broader spiritual contexts.

The research utilizes an interdisciplinary synthesis method, integrating insights from theology, religious studies, philosophy, architecture, psychology, and aesthetics. Rather than privileging a single disciplinary perspective, the study seeks to establish a dialogue among these fields to develop a comprehensive understanding of how symbolic perception may influence moral and spiritual experience.

Given the sensitive nature of discussions involving sexuality, the human body, and religious symbolism, this study approaches all themes with theological respect and academic rigor. The proposed body-mosque analogy is presented as a symbolic and contemplative framework rather than a literal doctrinal claim. The intention is

neither to anthropomorphize sacred architecture nor to eroticize religious symbols, but to explore how metaphorical perception may contribute to spiritual discipline and ethical self-formation.

As a conceptual and theoretical study, the findings are interpretive rather than empirically verifiable. The proposed framework has not been tested through experimental or observational research and should therefore be understood as a philosophical and theological contribution. Future studies may employ qualitative interviews, phenomenological investigations, or experimental designs to assess the practical effectiveness of sacred-symbolic reframing in addressing experiences of lust and visual objectification.

SACRED ARCHITECTURE AND EMBODIED SYMBOLISM

Islamic sacred architecture has long embodied metaphysical principles through symbolic forms, particularly the interplay of gendered dualities in the mosque's structural design. As articulated in a paper, the dome and minaret serve not merely functional or aesthetic purposes, but represent a deeper cosmological union: the dome's expansive, enveloping form evokes the feminine principle, nurturing, encompassing, maternal, while the minaret's verticality and outward projection embody the masculine, assertive, directional, and transcendent. These architectural features thus become visible metaphors of gender complementarity, anchoring the mosque as a symbolic microcosm of the divine unity achieved through the balance of opposites [4].

Extending this symbolism to the human form, one may trace similar contours: the curves of the chest or womb-like belly mirror the dome's protective roundness, while the upright spine or extended limbs may be likened to the aspirational trajectory of the minaret. Through such embodied analogies, the naked body, often viewed as a trigger for lust, may be reframed as a reflection of sacred geometry. Just as mosque architecture encodes spiritual principles in spatial form, the human body, when perceived contemplatively, can be seen as a vessel for divine expression rather than an object of carnal desire.

The metaphysical basis for this symbolic reading is further enriched by the Islamic mystical concept of **barzakh**. Introduced by the 13th-century Sufi philosopher Ibn Arabi, *barzakh* denotes the imaginal realm that mediates between opposites, such as body and spirit, masculine and feminine, or matter and divine presence. It is neither purely material nor purely spiritual, but a threshold through which theophanic realities are made perceivable in this world [5]. Within this framework, both mosque and body function as *barzakhs*, intermediary forms that allow the unseen to be experienced through the seen.

In this light, perceiving the human form through the lens of sacred architecture does not merely neutralize lust, it sanctifies perception. Erotic vision becomes contemplative vision when the body is encountered not as temptation, but as testimony: a revelation of divine harmony inscribed in flesh and form.

LUST AS DISORDERED VISION

Lust, classified among the cardinal sins in Christian theology, is traditionally understood as an inordinate or excessive craving for sexual pleasure that detaches the act of desire from its spiritual, emotional, or procreative context. In the Catholic tradition, Thomas Aquinas described lust as the pursuit of sexual gratification divorced from rational love and divine order, rendering it a form of spiritual blindness that leads the soul away from its higher purpose [6]. Similarly, in Islamic theology, lust (*shahwa*) is acknowledged as a natural human impulse but becomes blameworthy (*mahzuma*) when it overpowers the intellect (*'aql*) and leads to moral or spiritual transgression. The Qur'an frequently warns against allowing one's desires to dominate one's actions (Qur'an 79:40), affirming that unrestrained lust compromises both spiritual integrity and moral judgment [7].

Psychologically, lust can be seen as a form of cognitive distortion in visual perception. Neuroscience research demonstrates that sexual stimuli activate brain regions associated with reward and objectification, particularly the ventral striatum and anterior cingulate cortex [8]. Studies have shown that when individuals perceive sexually explicit images, they often engage in a form of "objectifying gaze," which neurologically and

behaviorally reduces the perceived person to a collection of body parts rather than as a whole, sentient being [9]. This fragmented vision diminishes empathy and impairs moral reasoning by dehumanizing the subject.

Such a mode of seeing dominated by lust, estranges the viewer from the deeper spiritual or symbolic meanings that the human form can embody. The body, rather than being perceived as a sacred vessel or a sign of divine craftsmanship, becomes merely an instrument for gratification. In this sense, lust represents a *disordered vision*, a way of seeing that is not just ethically problematic but epistemologically flawed.

However, if vision can be distorted, it can also be corrected. Mystical and spiritual traditions across religions, including Sufism, Christian mysticism, and Yogic tantra, have posited that perception itself can be purified. In these traditions, the gaze becomes not a tool for possession but a vehicle for reverence. Reframing the way one perceives the body, by viewing it not through the lens of lust, but through the symbolic richness of sacred architecture, opens a pathway for transforming carnal desire into spiritual awe. The body ceases to be a temptation and becomes a *text* of the divine, legible through the eyes of contemplative vision.

REFRAMING THE GAZE: FROM OBJECTIFICATION TO CONTEMPLATION

The transformation of lustful perception into contemplative vision requires a deliberate reconfiguration of the gaze, from a mode of possession to a modality of reverence. Within mystical traditions, vision is not merely a biological function but a spiritual faculty capable of apprehending deeper truths. In Sufism, for instance, the gaze (*nazar*) is considered capable of becoming sanctified through intention and purification of the heart (*qalb*), allowing one to witness the divine in creation rather than merely the material form [5].

Reframing the naked body as a symbolic microcosm of sacred architecture, particularly the mosque, invites a reorientation of visual engagement. The dome and minaret represent nurturing femininity and aspirational masculinity, respectively, creating a gendered yet unified sacred space [4]. When this architectural schema is applied to the human form, the body ceases to be an erotic object and becomes a contemplative symbol, an embodied reflection of divine harmony. The act of looking is no longer driven by lust but becomes an aesthetic and metaphysical meditation.

Philosopher Luce Irigaray's notion of the "sensible transcendental" provides a feminist framework to further support this reorientation. She proposes that the divine can be experienced through the material and the embodied, especially when mediated by love and reverence rather than domination or consumption [10]. Thus, rather than suppressing desire, this reframed gaze sublimates it, transforming eros into *agape*, and seeing into knowing.

This contemplative mode resonates with Ibn Arabi's metaphysical concept of *barzakh*, the isthmus or imaginal realm that mediates between body and spirit, form and meaning. Just as the *barzakh* holds together opposites without collapsing them into sameness, the reframed gaze holds the tension between beauty and transcendence, sensuality and sanctity [11]. It perceives the body not as a temptation to be repressed but as a mystery to be revered.

Art and sacred architecture often serve this purpose: to awaken a non-possessive form of attention. By extending this aesthetic logic to the human body, particularly within spiritually disciplined contexts, one may engage in a mode of seeing that is neither prurient nor prudish, but contemplative. Such a gaze can disarm lust by revealing the sacred structure embedded within human embodiment, a structure that echoes the very architecture of worship.

SACRALIZING THE GAZE: SEEING THE BODY AS MOSQUE

The gaze, what one chooses to see and how one interprets it, is not a neutral act. It is shaped by desire, discipline, and the metaphors through which meaning is constructed. When the body is viewed through a profane lens, it becomes a site of temptation and possession. However, if one intentionally shifts this perception, seeing in the breast, the protective, nurturing dome and in the phallus, the assertive, aspirational

minaret, the body is recontextualized as a sacred architecture. In this sacred framing, the human form becomes a *site of theophany*, a visible sign of divine presence, rather than a source of lust [4].

This transmutation of perception draws deeply from Sufi erotic mysticism. Jalal al-Din Rumi often spoke of the beloved's body as both deeply sensual and profoundly sacred, where longing for the beloved became a metaphor for longing for the Divine. In his poems, the lips, the hair, the embrace, each is charged not with lust but with spiritual hunger, and the object of desire is not the body, but what shines *through* it [12]. Similarly, Ibn Arabi posited that the beauty of creation, especially the beauty of the human body, serves as a mirror for the divine names. He famously wrote that “the most perfect contemplation of God is in the form of woman” not in a literal sense, but as a metaphysical insight: divine beauty manifests through the embodied world [13].

Feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray offers a parallel insight from a contemporary Western philosophical standpoint. Her concept of the “sensible transcendental” refers to the experience of the divine through the material, especially the gendered and erotic body, when that body is approached with love, reverence, and ethical openness [10]. For Irigaray, sacredness is not denied in the flesh but is discovered through a deeper mode of presence and relation. When applied to Islamic architecture and its analogies with the body, this framework suggests that reverence for the dome and minaret can be extended to the embodied breast and phallus, not to eroticize them, but to perceive them as sacred signs.

Such a shift in perception, this *sacralization of the gaze*, has the potential to weaken the grip of lust. Lust thrives on disconnection and objectification. But when the gaze is spiritually reoriented, it draws the viewer into an ethical, metaphysical relationship with the seen. It invokes awe rather than appetite. In this sacred vision, the naked body is not a temptation to be conquered, but a mystery to be contemplated. Just as one does not desire the mihrab or the dome of a mosque but is moved by their beauty and symbolism, so too can the body, reframed as a symbolic mosque, inspire reverence rather than lust.

In this way, the architectural metaphor becomes a spiritual discipline. It offers a new lens through which to see, inviting the heart and eye to meet in worship, not of the body itself, but of the divine unity reflected within it.

ETHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Reframing the human body as a symbolic mosque, where breasts reflect domes and the phallus evokes minarets, provokes both theological intrigue and ethical caution. Within Islamic tradition, especially in jurisprudential and orthodox circles, two key concerns immediately surface: **aniconism** and **modesty**.

Islamic ethics traditionally upholds **aniconism**, the prohibition against representing God, the prophets, or any sacred form through anthropomorphic imagery. While this perspective is primarily directed against visual depictions in art, it also informs a broader sensitivity toward using the human body as a metaphor for divine or sacred realities [14]. Similarly, **modesty** (*ḥayāʾ*) is a central ethical virtue in Islam, governing not only clothing and behavior but also the gaze, thoughts, and representations of the body. From this viewpoint, any reading that draws attention to physical features, especially sexual anatomy, risks being interpreted as inappropriate or even blasphemous, regardless of intent [15].

However, **Sufi traditions** offer a parallel lineage that complicates this ethical framework in a constructive way. Mystical Islam frequently uses the language of the body, often eroticized, not to inflame desire, but to express divine longing. As Annemarie Schimmel notes, the erotic metaphors used by Rumi, Hafiz, and Ibn Arabi are deeply symbolic and spiritualized, often masking complex theological truths within corporeal language [16]. Ibn Arabi's assertion that divine beauty is most perfectly manifested in the human form, especially the feminine form, was not intended to sexualize God, but to reveal the divine names (*al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā*) reflected in creation [13].

This symbolic reading, therefore, is not an instance of **literal anthropomorphism**. It does not claim that the breast *is* a dome or the phallus *is* a minaret in any empirical or physical sense. Rather, it is a **poetic and mystical metaphor**, a way of reading the body through the lens of sacred aesthetics, just as one might see the

rose as a symbol of divine love or the night as a metaphor for spiritual unknowing. The metaphorical gaze does not eroticize the mosque or sacralize the body in a profane way; rather, it spiritualizes vision itself.

Of course, there will be **legitimate objections** to this approach, especially from those concerned with maintaining doctrinal clarity and protecting the sanctity of sacred symbols. Such concerns are not unfounded, and this paper acknowledges the importance of distinguishing between devotional theology and speculative aesthetics. The symbolic reading offered here is not meant to be universal doctrine but a contemplative framework, a spiritual tool that may aid certain individuals in sublimating lust and restoring reverence for the body.

In this sense, the metaphor is neither heretical nor perverse but mystically provocative. It calls attention to the **sacramental potential of embodiment**, inviting a renewed ethic of perception, one where the eye becomes not an instrument of desire, but a window to the divine.

EMBODIED THEOLOGY: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND PERCEPTION

The reimagining of the human body as a symbolic mosque offers not only theoretical insight but also practical spiritual utility, particularly in the realm of **moral formation and perceptual discipline**. If perception shapes desire, then cultivating a *sacred gaze* has the potential to redirect even the most potent impulses, such as lust, toward contemplative reverence.

One clear application lies in the practice of **mindful viewing**, whether of one's own body or that of others. This means learning to see the body not as an object for consumption, but as a sacred architecture that mirrors divine order. For example, the curvature of the breast might be viewed as the gentle dome that shelters and nurtures, while the upright form of the phallus may evoke the directional aspiration of the minaret. This symbolic perception can transform physical features into visual cues for spiritual reflection, fostering inner restraint and reverence [4].

This transformation of the gaze could be especially impactful for **young people or spiritual seekers** who struggle with lust in the age of hyper-visual media. In a cultural landscape saturated with objectification and commodification of the body, sacralizing the body through symbolic architecture offers a counter-narrative. Rather than repressing desire, which often leads to guilt and shame, this model invites its **sublimation** into spiritual energy and aesthetic contemplation [17]. It provides a framework wherein the body is not feared or denied, but spiritually recontextualized.

Art and architecture can play a significant role in reinforcing this vision. **Sacral aesthetics**, such as Islamic geometric design, calligraphy, and harmonious spatial proportion, have long been used to train the eye and soul toward unity, order, and transcendence. If the body is understood as part of this aesthetic cosmos, then bodily presence, posture, and even artistic representation can participate in this moral formation. Sculptural, architectural, and even pedagogical tools could be designed to reflect these metaphors, not to eroticize the body, but to elevate perception of it.

This perspective also supports the development of a **disciplinary spirituality**, one that integrates theology, aesthetics, and psychology. By training perception to move from carnal reaction to contemplative awareness, a new kind of spiritual literacy can emerge. This would not deny the body's beauty or sensuality but would reinterpret it as a pathway to divine intimacy and moral clarity.

Ultimately, this approach invites believers to inhabit a worldview where body and soul, architecture and flesh, desire and devotion are not enemies but **co-creators of sacred perception**. It is a theology of the incarnate, the architectural, and the everyday, one that invites the worshipper to see everybody as a reminder of the sacred space it was always meant to be.

CONCLUSION

This paper has proposed a bold and contemplative thesis: that perceiving the human body as a sacred space, symbolically aligned with the architectural features of a mosque, can serve as a spiritual corrective to the disordered vision of lust. By viewing the breast as a dome and the phallus as a minaret, the body is reframed not as an object of desire, but as a vessel of divine symbolism. In doing so, the gaze is no longer a channel of temptation, but a site of transformation, reoriented from carnal fixation to contemplative reverence.

This reinterpretation draws from an interdisciplinary spectrum of theology, Sufi mysticism, feminist philosophy, and cognitive psychology. It challenges dominant moral paradigms that either suppress bodily desire or objectify the body entirely, offering instead a spiritually grounded aesthetic that integrates form, faith, and perception. Ethically, it opens a space for engaging lust not with guilt or fear, but with sacred symbolism that encourages discipline, reverence, and self-awareness. Theologically, it affirms the possibility that sacredness is not absent from the flesh, but encoded within it, awaiting a gaze trained to see.

Future scholarship might build on this framework by exploring cross-religious architectural-body analogies, such as the temple in Hinduism, the cathedral in Christianity, or the stupa in Buddhism, as symbolic maps of the human form. Further inquiry could also address the interplay between gender and sacred form, examining how both masculine and feminine embodiments are mirrored and spiritualized in architectural traditions. Finally, the concept of mystical aesthetics of modesty deserves deeper attention, not as a tool of repression, but as a creative, sacred discipline of perception and presentation.

In reimagining the body as mosque, this paper does not merely offer a metaphor, it offers a spiritual vision. One that turns lust into liturgy, and the human gaze into an act of worship.

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Competing Interests

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

AI Assistance Statement

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