

Review

“Battle Shi’ism: Martyrdom and Messianism in Urdu Shi’i “Music” Videos”

The article’s subject is important and relevant in two primary ways. Firstly, it is a reminder that theology is not limited to academia and all its technical trappings, but that it concerns everyday life; people and their many tribulations which, in this case, are the very result of religious affiliation. Music and poetry embody this living theology which acts as a medium between the human and the divine. As Hans Christian Andersen once wrote, “where words fail, music speaks.” Secondly, it addresses sectarian extremism within Islam which is often omitted from the Western consciousness due to the perceived idea that Muslims do not suffer the same as those of other faiths as a result of Islamic extremism. In the wake of 9/11, Muslims have often been presented as the perpetrators of violence and not the victims, but sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shi’as in Pakistan has resulted in Muslims being the primary victims. Therefore, the article is important in emphasising that Muslims suffer too.

A strength of the article is the clear approach to the subject because the writer does not assume that the reader is familiar with Islam’s approach to music. Through references to contemporary, authoritative scholars, the writer is able to identify that music composed in praise of Muhammad (peace be upon him) is considered *halal* (permissible). The concept of *nohay* as a form of poetry of mourning is introduced as a staple of Shi’i culture, which is used in commemoration of the martyrdom of Muhammad’s (pbuh) grandson, Husayn. Some *noha* lament sectarian extremism perpetrated against Shi’i Muslims today and the selected example of this is called “Ishq-e-Haider Madad,” which draws parallels between those who suffer from extremism today and the experiences of Muhammad’s (pbuh) son-in-law, Imam Ali. The recitation is powerful as it celebrates the strength of Ali as a source of hope and fervour for Muslims today. This message is then further bolstered by the messianic imagery of the *noha*, as it details the return of the *Mahdi* who Shi’i Muslims believe will return alongside Jesus to defeat the oppressors of evil who terrorise the Shi’ite population. The writer concludes by emphasising the two aspects of this *noha*: “the material and the metaphysical,” with the former seemingly referring to the historical elements associated with Ali and martyrdom which relates to the latter in reference to the eschatological return of the *Mahdi* and the divine powers that will quell the oppressors.

Having watched the music video of this *noha*, the writer’s emphasis on the power of the poem to boost the morale of the Shi’i Muslims is accurate. The reference to the Shi’i understanding of *jihad* as a non-violent concept complements the thesis that *nohay* embodies the heart of the persecuted Shi’i Muslims. They do not respond to violence with violence, but with awe-inspiring praise of the Prophet’s (pbuh) descendants who provide strength to the oppressed and with a call for patience and steadfastness in the face of terrorism with the promise of the *Mahdi*’s return. The writer thus captures the cry of the people while also emphasising that violent retaliation is not the answer. This thesis is thus an inherent form of resistance to

extremism in itself because it reclaims the meanings of *jihad* and duty to which Muslims are called.

The focus on martyrdom is significant given the importance of martyrdom within Islamic and Pakistani culture. It is a way in which the people conceive of and mourn the deaths of their loved ones, which are premature or for some dutiful cause. If someone is a *shahid* (martyr), they will go to *Jannah* (heaven) as suggested in the Islamic tradition. Thus, if innocent Shi'a Muslims are martyred by sectarian extremists, their deaths are mourned but there is comfort in the knowledge that they will return to their creator. As stated in the *Qur'an*, "Indeed we belong to *Allah*, and indeed to Him we will return" (Q2:156). Messianism is similarly a source of comfort to those persecuted by extremism, that believers may suffer now but they will be vindicated in the eschaton. Therefore, the writer's focus on the two concepts highlights how *nohay* not only gives a voice to the persecuted but it also acts as a source of messianic hope.

In sum, the article opens the world of our readers to new horizons through an immersion into Shi'a music. The poetry powerfully captures the feelings of Shi'a Muslims persecuted for their religion and provides them with strength in the knowledge that their forefathers were similarly martyred but that they too will be vindicated. Theology ought to be about the real world that contains authentic people with lamentable experiences. The exploration of messianism and martyrdom as a source of power to the persecuted is an example of this lived theology in action; one that all of the world's persecuted and marginalized can relate to. The article captures the hope that the world's innocent people, persecuted for their faith, will eventually win the day. That the peaceful power of Islam will overcome the hateful destruction of sectarian extremism.

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