Poetry in Iran’s contemporary theo-political culture

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Persian poetry and Islam have maintained a close relationship through the vicissitudes of Iranian history. According to conventions of classical Persian poetry, verses are centered in the middle of the page, perhaps a visual reminder of the central role of poetry as a genre in Iranian literature and culture. For example, verses by the 14th-century canonical poet Hafez, which are widely read by ordinary Iranians today, reveal the continuing confluence of religion and poetry in Iranian culture. After the Quran, Hafez’s *Diwan* remains the most revered book in Iran, invariably cited on festive as well as mourning occasions. The poet’s penname ‘Hafez’ (‘memorizer’) references his prodigious ability to memorize different readings (*riwayahs*) of the Quran, many verses of which are ingeniously woven into his poetry. Infused with allusions to Perso-Islamic history and proverbs, his poetry caters to religious and non-religious Iranians alike. The recurrent references to ‘Love,’ ‘Beloved,’ and ‘Wine’ in Hafez’s verse differ in meaning depending on the interpreter’s worldview: one may not see beyond the literal and jurisprudentially impermissible (*haram*) wine, whereas others can interpret it as the metaphorical ‘wine of knowledge’ (*mey-ye ma’rifat*). Hafez’s poetry pushes his readers to delve deeper into the spirit of faith (*tariqah*) where, according to him, dry pedantic piety (*zohd*), linear logic (*’aqeli*), complacency borne by inexperience (*khami*), and the absence of ‘Love’ are sins. As Hafez’s pre-eminent status suggests, the study of poetry should be made more integral to our understanding of Islamic culture, past and present, a point this chapter illustrates in relation to Iran.

The role of poetry as a significant medium of Shi’ite religion and a contender to sacred authority can be traced back to the Safavid period (1501–1736), when Shiism was officially established in Iran. The Safavids, who succeeded to power by claiming their legitimacy as the rightful descendants of the Prophet Mohammad and the first Shiite Imam ‘Ali, relied significantly on the clergy for the public promotion of their rule (Toghyani 2006, p. 60). The Safavids’ theo-political advancement depended on the official reframing of Iran’s past in the light of the newly established Shiite worldview. As a result, the era is characterized by increased clerical intervention. Numerous jurisprudential treatises were composed in order to officially delineate the tenets of the newly established faith. At the same time, poetry that portrayed the Prophet and the Imams was proactively encouraged and generously rewarded.
(Ahmadpour and Zarouni 2014, p. 19). As a consequence, poetry gained significant theo-political currency and Shiite jurisprudential terms infiltrated its verses. Significant Shiite rituals such as public expressions of allegiance to the Shiite Imams (tawalla), public denunciation of the enemies of Shiism (tabarra), and dramatic commemoration of the martyrdom of the Shiite Imams (ta’ziyeh) were performed in poetry, significant residual aspects of which have survived to this day.

Here, I will introduce the role of poetry in Iran’s contemporary theo-political culture by exploring two prominent poetry presentations that were performed at two defining points in recent Iranian history: the first presidential telephone conversation between the leaders of Iran and the United States in over three decades that took place in 2013, and the national debate surrounding the UNESCO ‘Agenda 2030’ for Sustainable Development in 2017. By reading these poetic interventions, which were performed in the context of official religious ceremonies, and attending to their viral reception, I will illuminate the way poetry remains enmeshed in contemporary Iranian religious practices and political proceedings.

**Context**

In Iranian culture, it is not uncommon to open one’s statements, whether in speech or writing, with a few verses of poetry, albeit only after the mention of God’s name and laudation of the Prophet. Even an official bureaucratic letter request in Iran today may occasionally begin or end with a few lines of poetry that are carefully selected to contextualize the letter’s contents. The supremacy of poetry as a genre is also reflected in annual Shiite rites of longing and belonging, which I will introduce in this chapter.

The first poetry performance in the context of Shiite rites that I will analyze in this chapter was jointly composed by four poets in the Persian language: Meysam Motiee, Mohammad Mehdi Sayyar, Milad Erfanpour, and Ali Mohammad Moaddab. Motiee performed the poem individually at Tehran’s Imam Khomeini Grand Prayer Grounds (Mosalla) before the congregational prayer celebrating the conclusion of the month of Ramadan on June 24, 2017. During the performance, which was broadcasted on state television, Motiee delivered the poem about Iran’s internal and international politics in a sing-song tone before an assembly of high-ranking officials and the general public. The performance was widely publicized on Iranian social media channels and news media.

The second poetic performance was authored by Mohammad Ali Karimi and delivered by two performers, Mostafa Mohsenzadeh and Souroush Rahmani, during the mourning month of Muharram in November 2014. In addition to its fresh interpretation of Shiite mourning rituals, the performance is predominantly notable for the corresponding choreographic movements between the two performers and the community of mourners. A short video recording of the event, which took place at the annual gathering of Shiite mourners at Hazireh Mosque in the city of Yazd, was widely publicized over a year later on social media channels for its different and creative deliverance of Shiite mourning rites.

Iranian Shiites annually commemorate two main historic events: the martyrdom of the Prophet’s successor Imam ‘Ali in the fasting month of Ramadan (AD 661) and the martyrdom of the third Shiite Imam Hoseyn in the Battle of Karbala during the Islamic month of Muharram (AD 680). Singing songs of lament (nouyeh-khwan), mourning performance by dramatic narration of martyrdom to invoke emotions in the audience...
rowzeh-khwani), unanimous chanting and beating of chests in bereavement (sineh-zani), and self-flagellation with chains (zanjir-zani) are some of the characteristic rituals surrounding these anniversaries that rose to prominence during the Safavid era.

Most of these mourning rituals are accompanied with poetry. The plight of Imam Hoseyn and the martyrdom of his seventy-two loyal followers who battled against Yazid’s army of 30,000 soldiers is envisaged as the war between Good and Evil. Though the Imam’s head is severed by the enemy, the Shiite principles that he and his martyrdom embodied continue to thrive. He, and by extension the Shiite community, are the victors who stand by their convictions—for Justice and Truth—against all odds.

Given this highly charged moral and political message, it is no wonder that spaces specifically designed for rituals commemorating the Imam (hoseynieh) were also the site of significant political meetings before the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The most important was Hoseynieh Ershad where one of the main ideologues of the Revolution, ‘Ali Shari’ati, delivered his famous speeches against the soon-to-be-deposed Shah of Iran. In fact, in one of his extensive lectures at the Hoseynieh during Ramadan 1971, later published as a booklet entitled ‘Alavi Shiism and Safavid Shiism, ‘Ali Shari’ati himself delineated the significance of Perso-Shiite mourning rituals as a revolutionary strategy to safeguard Shiite history (2013, p. 202). As poetry is an essential component of all these rituals, the implication is that poetry has a foundational role in shaping and commemoration of Perso-Islamic history.

Two poetic performances

The political and religious role of poetry continues into the present in Iranian culture. In the analysis of the two poetic performances that follows, I show how the martyrdom of Imam ‘Ali and the saga of Karbala are utilized as concurrently peace-promulgating and justice-seeking as well as ethically binding and defiance-inducing accounts.

We are not [a people] trainable by the West
We do not burn in the temptations of the West
The palace-dweller will be slapped down by the slum-dweller
And land speculators will eventually fall to the ground.
What is ‘Agenda 2030’, when we educate the world with our heart?
Indeed, this is the Islamic Republic of Iran
If the West issues a prescription, it’s [nothing but] illness
It’s a sleeping pill and the remedy is our awakening
We are forever trained by [our] Leader’s [wali’s] love
We learn lessons through the honor in the eyebrows of ‘Ali. (Film-e Kamel 2017)

The long critical poem from which I quote above, composed in 66 rhyming couplets, was performed by Meysam Motiee, a university lecturer and professionally prodigious maddah, an official performer at Shiite mourning ceremonies. The poem was read out emphatically, occasionally in a swaggering and confrontational tone, before the Eid al-Fitr congregational prayer led by Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei that celebrated the end of Ramadan on June 24, 2017.

Conventionally, the public platform is open to university students who address the audience before the official sermon (khutbah) and prayer (Az Mazmun-e Ash’ar 2017). Although the poem was performed before President Rouhani’s arrival at the ceremony,
many considered it to be a direct critique of his government’s ongoing negotiations with the West about lifting the sanctions that were imposed as a result of Iran’s nuclear activities. Protest over implementation of the UNESCO Agenda 2030 was also in the air. Official resistance against the Agenda was encapsulated in the views of the member of Iran’s Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, Hassan Rahimpour Azghadi, who criticized it as incongruent with Islamic education (Tebq-e Sanad-e 2030 2017). Azghadi’s remarks were interpreted as a swipe at Rouhani’s endeavors to negotiate with the West, and a criticism of unsolicited foreign intervention in Iran’s domestic and international affairs.

At the outset of the poem, Motiee opened in a liturgical sing-song tone with a devotional acknowledgement of the new crescent moon that signifies the end of Ramadan and the commencement of Eid celebrations. He recapitulated the spiritual advantages of fasting, accentuating how in testing his own tolerance for thirst he had reminisced about the water deprivation of Imam Hoseyn and his family in Karbala. Motiee gradually eased into a social criticism of poverty, acknowledging the holy labor of workers. The callused hands of manual laborers, he sang meditatively, are not inferior to the wrinkled foreheads of thinkers, a metonymic point of reference to the overestimated importance of intellectual labor over manual work. As sacred as a laborer’s sweat may be, none wish for the sweat out of embarrassment at financial difficulties.

In these few verses, Motiee unequivocally addressed two of the main concerns of Iranian citizens in the past decades: soaring inflation and Iran’s struggling economy under the debilitating impact of severe economic sanctions. Addressing ‘those sitting in the [prayer] front lines,’ which is generally reserved for authorities and those close to the centers of power, he cautioned against loss of vision that comes with political pride. The power conferred by the people, he said, is a ‘trust’ (amanat)—a Quranic concept indicating immense responsibility. Inviting a ‘you’—commonly supposed to be President Rouhani—to follow the path of Imam ‘Ali, the embodiment of justice, integrity, and equanimity for Shiites, Motiee advised against deviating from the Imam’s teachings. In fact, he intimates, there is no other example to follow but that of the first Shiite leader ‘Ali and his true descendants, past and present. Why then, asks the poet, is the Iranian Shiite community to be trained according to Western ideals? Justice will prevail and divine order will be restored to the world. The oppressed are the final victors and the slum-dwellers will avenge their rightful dignity one day, when the twelfth Shiite Imam al-Mahdi, hidden until his apocalyptic emergence, will redeem the world. If world transformation is to be anticipated, the poet suggests, it will flow from centuries-long pursuit of justice embedded in the lives and martyrdom of Shiite figures whose wisdom and teachings are guarded down the generations by jurists who lead the community in the absence of the twelfth Imam.

A month before this performance, in response to the UNESCO Agenda, Iran’s Supreme Leader had disparaged the audacity of intrusive world powers attempting to program ‘nations with different history, culture and civilization.’ He emphasized that the Islamic Republic of Iran is essentially governed by Islam and the Quran (Keshvar Taslim Nemishavad 2017). Motiee’s Eid poetry performance reinforced the Supreme Leader’s message, referring to him as one whose ‘love’ and ‘teachings’ nurture religious and national pride. The moral sensibility of Imam ‘Ali, which compelled him to frown at and act against injustice, is the true source of education for the Shiite community. Through a wordplay on first names, the poem denounces not only those who do not honor ‘Ali, the first Imam, but also, by extension, the present leader Ayatollah ‘Ali Khamenei, both the embodiment of Shiite teachings.
One of the major areas of controversy concerning Agenda 2030 was its prescription of sexual education for primary level students ‘who have not matured sexually,’ as argued by Azghadi, ‘in the name of hygiene’ (Tebq-e Sanad-e 2030 2017). Some protested against the Agenda’s idea of a legal marriage age, with Azghadi counter proposing that ‘boys or girls should marry at any age that is in their best interest’ while also noting that biological age does not determine social maturity. He challenged the Western idea of a freedom that legally endorses sexual rights for minorities, but continues to oppose the right to wear hijab, as with the Burqa Ban in France (Weaver 2018). Evaluating the Agenda as a form of ‘cultural-educational capitulation,’ Azghadi questioned its ‘secular’ approach that would jeopardize Iran’s position through accountability to the West (Tebq-e Sanad-e 2030 2017). Citing the Agenda as an anti-Shari’ah force, he argued that the West’s propagation of ‘violence-free peace’ would outlaw religious practices, including the annual commemorative mourning rituals for Imam Hoseyn as ‘a form of violence’ (Ibid.).

Azghadi’s appraisal of the Agenda was an indirect reprimand of Rouhani, who had promised during his second presidential campaign in 2017 to work towards lifting economic sanctions against Iran and to abide with Agenda 2030 ‘within Iran’s legal and cultural framework’ (Rouhani: Dowlat-e Davazdahom 2017). This apparent moderation of his reformist approach temporarily quelled pressure from principlists who criticized Rouhani’s alleged acceptance of the Agenda without the formal approval of Iran’s Parliament and the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution. The principlists (osulgarayan), literally meaning principle-oriented, and the reformists are the two main camps in the post-Revolution political spectrum of Iran. The principlists by definition adhere to original principles of the Islamic Revolution in governance (Pesaran 2011, p. 164) and are generally known by their continuous resistance against coercive Western policies. These political contestations were creatively reflected in Motiee’s Eid poetry performance:

Yet another sanction bill was introduced to the [US] senate
The spirit of BARJAM [JCPOA] was annihilated like its body
It was wrong to pointlessly rejoice over BARJAM
It was wrong, it was wrong to rely on Uncle Sam’s promise
[…]
It’s a battlefield, take firm and confident steps
Speak of peace, [but] pick up your weapon too!
[…]
Don’t sit back in sadness, the night [sham] of calamity shall pass
Our path is paved through the journey of Karbala. (Film-e Kamel 2017)

The Farsi acronym ‘BARJAM’ is an in-house term for the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) landmark agreement between Iran and the UN Security Council’s five permanent members plus one group of countries (P5+1), commonly known as the Nuclear Deal. This political term may echo farjam, a quasi-poetic word that can be translated as ‘conclusion’ or ‘destined ending.’ A verse by Hafez offers an existential interpretation of the word:

I did not fall by my own will from the mosque into the tavern
Such has been my destiny [farjam] since the dawn of eternity. (Khatib Rahbar 1998, p. 150)
It is by divine benevolence that Hafez has found his destined path in an intoxicating oblivion that annihilates the ego and saves him from a form of piety that culminates only in self-righteousness. The term ‘BARJAM’ may have been formulated to signal a similarly auspicious end to the ominous challenges in Iran-West relations, a conclusion to the country’s decades-long economic challenges as a consequence of sanctions. The two rhyming words often appear as creative questioning headlines in the news: *Farjam-e BARJAM* (Conclusion to the Nuclear Deal). BARJAM potentially marked a new chapter of challenge and hope in Iran-West relations.

Motiee’s poetry performance highlighted the sentiment of many principlists who distrusted the JCPOA’s promise of sanctions’ relief and particularly mistrusted direct relations with the United States—both initiatives fostered by Rouhani’s enthusiasm for international negotiations. The poetic admonition was directed not only at new US sanctions against Iran initiated less than two weeks before the Eid al-Fitr ceremony (Schor 2017) but also referenced Rouhani’s earlier attempts at reinstating direct Iran-US relations.

On September 27, 2013, over three months after Rouhani was first voted into office, he and the US President Barack Obama had conversed in a historic phone call, breaking over three decades of silence between Iran and US leaders (Besante 2013). This phone call opened a new epoch in Iran-US relations, packed with hopeful prospects of direct, high level negotiations that might bring relief from the ever-impending threat of war and over three decades of ‘back-breaking’ sanctions (Khaterat-e Talkh 2017).

Rouhani’s first successful conversation with the United States was both welcomed and condemned by Iranians. While his allies and supporters chanted ‘Thank you Rouhani’ and ‘Yes to Rouhani. No to War’ (Hassan Rouhani: Baraye Didar 2013), his opponents saw the initiative as ‘strange and futile’ and a symbol of declining resistance against the US (Eqdam-e ‘Ajib 2013). Principlist politician and cleric, Hamid Rasaee, reproved Rouhani for accepting a phone call from a ‘creature with satanic qualities’ (Cheh Kasani 2013). The exchange, he continued, could only mean trading ‘round pearls for candy’ in nuclear negotiations and would not have occurred had Rouhani been heedful of Ayatollah Khamenei’s advice (Bala Gereftan-e Ekhtelaf 2013). By contrast, Isfahan’s Friday prayers leader, Mohammad Taqi Rahbar, applauded Rouhani for attempting to defuse international tensions and the possibility of sanctions’ relief with ‘political smiles.’ ‘Death to America,’ he said, need not remain a permanent slogan as it is not God’s decree (Ibid.). Iranian analyst, Jamshid Barzegar, referred to the historical conversation as the beginning of the ‘purgatorial’ (barzakh) era in Iran-US relationships (Dowreh-ye Barzakhi 2013). ‘Barzakh’ is the Quranic term for the liminal realm between the corporeal (donya) and spiritual world after death (akhirah), between hell and heaven, where the soul lingers after the demise of the body until the Day of Resurrection (Qiyamah). Barzegar referred to the past three decades of incommunicado as the ‘hell’ and the possibility of a normal political relationship as the promised ‘heaven.’

It is with reference to these earlier events that Motiee invokes the discontent prompted by the West’s unfulfilled political and economic promises to Iran, a predicament that he believes could have been averted by heeding to the forewarnings of ‘our spiritual guide’ (pir-e ma), presumably Iran’s Supreme Leader. Wishing away the terror instigated by the ‘weapon of sanctions’ and the ‘complacency of submission,’ he cautions his intended audience that the country’s best interests lie at ‘home’ and not in the hands of strangers. To speak merely of peace, the poet says, does not protect Iran against aggressive international measures.
Applauding the courage of the martyrs and warriors of the army of Islam who guarantee regional security, Motiee addressed regional apostates (takfir), presumably ISIS terrorists, who were defeated by the roars of Zulfiqar, Imam ‘Ali’s legendary two-edged sword, possibly embodied by the courage of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. ‘Our peace’ and ‘the dawn of victory,’ Motiee sang, demands a bloodied liver, a classical symbol of masculine courage in the face of hardships. There will be another Karbala before a new world order of justice and peace is restored by the last Shiite Imam al-Mahdi who will emerge from occultation. In this battle, however, Zuljanah, Imam Hoseyn’s miraculous horse, is not breathless and the flag of Islam will not fall from the hands of Hoseyn’s loyal martyred brother ‘Abbas, the standard-bearer (’alamdar), whose hands were severed on the tenth day of Muharram (‘Ashura). Al-Quds (Jerusalem), as promised by the scriptures, will be liberated by the twelfth Imam, and the origins of the Qiblah, the direction towards which Muslim pray, will witness an apocalyptic liberation. The poem concludes with a promise that can be read two ways: there will be an end to the night (sham) of calamity; or there will be an end to the misfortunes of the sacred Levant region (Bilad al-Sham). Either way, ‘our journey’ is paved, the poet concludes, through Karbala.

Following the widespread reception of the performance, in an official statement, one of the four authors of the poem, Mohammad Mehdi Sayyar, refuted allegations that the poem was ‘an insult to President Rouhani.’ It was, he said, a well-intentioned reminder to ‘those in the front lines’ of power and a heartfelt reflection of the people’s criticism of the current state of ‘employment, wage labor, justice, resistance to corruption and land speculation’ (Beyti ke 2017). If the verses were infused with any form of hostility, he reiterated, it was aimed at foreign enemies ‘the US, Israel and ISIS.’ Sayyar also claimed that ‘a senior high-ranking official involved in nuclear negotiations has praised the poem as “excellent,”’ and a senior military commander commented that the poem ‘had a longer range than ballistic missiles’ (Mohammad Mehdi Sayyar 2017). A few months later, the Supreme Leader publicly declared his support for Motiee’s performance by refuting the alleged attempts at defamation and referring to himself as one of those in the ‘front lines,’ thereby open to criticism (Nazar-e Rahbar 2017). Ayatollah Khamenei, himself a poet, believes in art as a tool for expression of revolutionary ideas and the power of poetry ‘as one of the most exalted’ art forms (Hovsepian-Bearce 2016, p. 136). He holds annual poetry meetings with selected groups of poets, particularly during the month of Ramadan (Sha’eran Cheguneh 2014).

The second poetry performance that I will briefly discuss provides a contrast. It does not directly respond to a particular political event, but addresses more general contemporary socio-political anxieties through an unconventional form and content. Composed by Mohammad Ali Karimi, the ceremonial song was performed by two ‘singers of songs of lament’ (nowheh-khwans) Mostafa Mohsenzadeh and Souroush Rahmani at Heyát-e Azadaran-e Kucheh Biyuk, a gathering of dedicated mourners who meet annually during the month of Muharram in Yazd city.

A few minutes into the performance, three features distinguishing it from most contemporary mourning performances were immediately discernible: the presence of two performers in a duet (a comparatively uncommon and fairly new composition in ‘Ashura ceremonies), the relatively fast-paced and nonmonotonic rhythm, and the synchronized choreographic beating of the chests by the choir of mourners who stand in circles responding to the flow and pauses of the singers. The rhythmic beatings of the chests are amplified through consistent and well-orchestrated movements, occasionally alternating between one-handed and two-hand beatings by the mourners. Music instructor and
researcher Ali Shirazi believes the performance’s widespread appeal was mainly due to its unusual employment of traditional Iranian music modes (dastgah) for the purpose of mourning, an instance of fusion between Islamic pursuits and Iranian culture, which diminished in post-1979 ceremonies (Baznashr-e Nowheh 2016).

One of the other salient features of this performance is an emphatic refrain consisting of four rhyming couplets and a single verse which is sung by the circle of mourners through synchronized gesticulations. When the two nowheh-khwans on the stage pause in meditation, the audience of mourners standing below the platform fold their arms over their chests and immediately respond in a unified sing-song chant:

Allah! Allah! We cry from oppression of [our] Time
Allah! Allah! We cry from the forces of evil [Ahriman]
Faith stagnates because of evil and conspiracy
Alas, [these] days of loneliness!
O Lord, where is that messianic breath?
O Heart, sigh a prayer
May the soul of immortality arrive
Where is the redeemer of the world? Where is the redeemer of the world? (Allah Allah 2014)

Invoking Allah, the mourners then raise their heads and both hands towards the sky with open palms, a symbolic gesture of their prayer and humility before the divine. After acknowledging despair as a consequence of encounters with ‘oppression’ and ‘evildoers’ of the present age, the mourners place their folded arms over their chests and chant meditatively about the decline of faith as a consequence of, presumably, conspiracies fostered by misguided politics that could only culminate in the ‘slaughter of humanity’ and ‘transmutation of faith’ (Ibid.). Standing in reverence, the mourners sing out the ultimate expectation of their faith in the form of a repeated rhetorical question by the end of the refrain. The use of the term ‘evil forces’ (ahriman) appears to be deliberate. Ahriman is a Zoroastrian term of reference for ‘Evil,’ the destructive spirit, and counter to Ahura Mazda, the constructive spirit. The darkness associated with Ahriman, the ‘destroyer of the faith and the country of Iran’ (Yastrebova 2012, p. 93) is dispelled by the galloping arrival of ‘the dawn of hope’ (Baznashr-e Nowheh 2016). The image of Ahriman, which emerges in the eleventh-century Shahnameh (The Book of Kings), Iran’s long national epic poem, is contextualized here to represent the evil forces in the Battle of Karbala and symbolizes political conspiracies against today’s Iran, an instance of Iran’s pre-Islamic past reframed in the context of its present Perso-Islamic history.

The poem, however, concludes with the bright promise of transformation:

O grief-stricken heart, I have good news, the sorrows of the world will end
This winter will go away, there will be other news
[...]
Rise O Loyal Ones, Rise O Liberated Spirit
‘One must wash one’s eyes, one must see another way’
How long will hatred and war last, this ever-present hell?

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‘One must go under the rain,’ one must wash away the resentments
This purgatorial loneliness has to end. (Baznashr-e Nowheh 2016)

Rather than relaying conventional images and statements associated with Imam Hoseyn’s martyrdom in mourning ceremonies, the poem poses a range of questions and challenges the absurdity of war and hatred, which is described as ‘a placeless hell.’ Invoking Imam Hoseyn and his sister Zaynab who carried on the message of resistance after her brother’s martyrdom, the poet craves a ‘new cry’ and the splintering of the ‘palace of the oppressor.’ Borrowing words from modern Iranian poet Sohrab Sepehri’s poem ‘The Sound of Water’s Footsteps,’ the performance calls for rain to extinguish the hellish fire of animosity and war through its purgative qualities (Sepehri 2010, p. 184). The ‘purgatorial loneliness,’ perhaps evocative of Barzegar’s remarks on Iran–US political purgatory, and the denunciation of war could be read as a desperate desire to end Iran’s international isolation, a politics-free longing of the Iranian people to connect and create, as the poet indicates, ‘a universe of love’ (Baznashr-e Nowheh 2016).

A few years after the performance, one of the two singers, Soroush Rahmani, said in an interview that a maddah’s performance should reflect the concerns of the age (Maddahan Bayad 2017). Read in this light, one may read the poem’s anxious questions such as ‘where is the redeemer of the world?’ and ‘when will human suffering end?’ (Allah Allah 2014), as a creative attempt to reframe urgent questions through highlighting a transcendental rather than literal reading of the Imam’s martyrdom. Unconventionally, no enemy names are mentioned and instead the names of the heroes and the ethos of Karbala, justice and liberation, are made central. Contrary to the conventional interpretations which regard world chaos and relentless violence as the apocalyptic upheavals that necessitate the emergence of a world redeemer, the poem ends with a call for transformative hope, proposing a ‘new spring’ and the arrival of a ‘knight’ on the day humanity connects through a universal sense of love.

**Conclusion**

Looking at these two performances, it is clear that the Shiite forever-present-past is perpetually reframed and reenvisaged by the visions of the future that it carries. The supremacy of Karbala as an underlying theme in all quests for justice and liberation is summed up in the celebrated Shiite adage attributed to the sixth Shiite Imam al-Sadeq: ‘Every month is Muharram, every day is ‘Ashura, every land is Karbala’ (Shari’ati 2017, pp. 49–50). Karbala, as Shari’ati reiterates, is the undying battle against oppression, and poetry, as instantiated in this chapter, is the unrivaled medium to keep it alive. Poetic ambiguities and allusions transcend the perils of a literal approach and foster new imaginative spaces to accommodate urgent and emergent socio-political questions. Persian poetry is a cultural microcosm of the interplay of worldly and spiritual pursuits entrenched in the Perso-Shiite worldview, accommodating the erudite and the abstract as well as the mundane and vernacular of world news and international politics. The supremacy of poetry as a genre in Iranian literature and its wide historical appeal to the Iranian state and public continues to endorse poetry as a politicized culture-making and culture-sustaining tool.

It has been believed for years in Iran that a few verses by the thirteenth-century Iranian poet Sa’di are inscribed on the UN headquarters main entrance:
Human beings are the members of one body
They are created from one spirit, one essence
When one member is in pain
Other members restless remain
If untroubled by Others’ affliction remain you can
You do not deserve the title ‘Human.’ (Sa’di 2006, p. 31)

The origins of this continued urban legend are unclear. Nevertheless, the universal love, radical empathy, and connectedness the poem promotes remain a source of cultural pride for Iranians. In 2005, after several failed attempts to locate the legendary inscription, Iranian diplomat Javad Zarif presented to the UN a carpet by Mohammad Seirafian at the center of which Sa’di’s poem is woven in gold calligraphic letters, adorning a wall at the UN headquarters to this day. The United Nations, Zarif commented, is perhaps founded on the same humanitarian principles that Sa’di’s poetry reflects (Jaye Vaqei 2013), a proclamation that indicates how misconstrued our readings of Iran’s current religious and political culture would be if we do not incorporate poetry as a significant theo-cultural force in (re)configurations of Iranian society. Research on instances where verse and the sacred intersect in discourses of people and the state can further our understanding of religion, culture, and politics in Iran.

Further reading

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