

Themes of Quranic Stories and Religious Traditions in Folk Painting of the Qajar Period (A Case Study of Folk Painting in the Mazandaran Province)

Abstract

The themes in paintings in every historical period are closely related to popular culture; thus the legends and beliefs of people play a significant role in their formation. The Qajar period is one of the historical periods of Iran from which many paintings have survived. Some of the traditional paintings of the Qajar period are available in the Mazandaran province. Examining the themes of such paintings can shed light on Iranian culture. The present research has been written in a descriptive and analytical way and by relying on data from library sources and field observations. The effect of motifs on the developments and events of the Qajar period include the spread of Ta'ziyeh in Iran, the use of lithography in the production of printed literary copies and the expansion of popular literature and art. The key issue under study in this article is to examine the folk stories of the Qajar era and how artworks with the mentioned themes are created and to scrutinize their relationship with the identity of Mazandaran art. The findings of the research indicate the event of the Ascension of the Prophet and the story of Solomon from the book “Qesas-al Anbia” are repeatedly depicted on the buildings of Mazandaran. The formation of a religious building as a place to hold Ta'zieh and religious ceremonies initiated from the Qajar era. The political events of the Qajar period and the religious beliefs of the people have played a prominent role in the formation of the identity of this region and have preserved and strengthened the cohesion of the people of this region from the past to the present day.

Research aims:

1. Studying the place of Quranic and religious themes in the traditional paintings of the Qajar period in Mazandaran.
2. Investigating the relationship between folk beliefs and the religious atmosphere of the Qajar period in the themes of traditional paintings of this period.

Research questions:

١. What is the place of Quranic stories and religious themes in the traditional paintings of the Qajar period in Mazandaran?

٢. What is the role of the beliefs and religious atmosphere of the Qajar period in portraying the themes of the traditional paintings of this period?

Keywords: Qur'anic stories, Qajar folk painting, Ascension of the Prophet, religious beliefs.

Introduction

For the origin of folk paintings, there is no solid and reliable document. Although this art flourished during the Qajar period, its roots should be found in the paintings and imprints that Armenian merchants and Christian missionaries brought to Iran during the Safavid period. In addition to coffeehouses, this style of painting was also used in places of mourning, shops, brothels, and bathrooms. The subject of the painting determined its installation location. The painter often had another profession, and based on his faith and interest and through experience, learned the art of screen painting. Undoubtedly, two important factors caused the emergence and spread of folk painting: one was the initiative of the owners of the coffee houses, which brought this painting to the common people. The presence of "Naqal" as a multi-tasking actor, who alone was responsible for both the role of historian and narrator as well as the role of all the actors and characters of the story, gradually caused the need to paint the pictures of the stories that Naqal was narrating and this led to the birth of folk heroes on vast canvases and the creation of various epic and religious works; thus, popular coffeehouse painting was formed. The second factor in the formation of folk painting was the constitutional and liberation movement of the time (Kalantari, ١٩٧٤: ٢-١٥).

Ta'zieh is another factor in the development of coffee house painting. At the beginning of the Qajar dynasty, this ritual had a prominent effect as a ritual-religious performance and went through the process of evolution and development. "At that time, all the people showed a great deal of enthusiasm and connection in building and organizing the Tek'e (place for holding the ceremony) to mourn Imam Hussein (PBUH), his family and the martyrs of the Day of Ashoura and to recite prayers especially in the first decade of the month of Muharram. The founders hoped to earn worldly and hereafter rewards for themselves by building structures and endowment for performing the ceremony" (Gubino, ١٩٩١: ١٨٣). The peak of the evolution of Ta'zieh was during the era of Naser al-Din Shah (١٣١٣-١٢٦٤). He was a prominent figure in the establishment and advancement of the religious ceremony, by his order the Takiye Dowlat, which was built and was very effective in promoting Ta'zieh. The reciters there, who were

actually state reciters, performed in front of the king and the courtiers under the supervision of the court's "Mu'in al-Buka" (Mustafi, ۲۰۰۵: ۲۹۰/۱).

One of the universal and recurring themes in the Islamic and Qajar periods is the Holy Quran, the story of "Qesas-al Anbia", local stories and other folklore, which often contain points and lessons. Since the story has been influential and effective among different ethnic groups and cultures, the Glorious Qur'an has also paid special attention to the element of story and combined it with the eloquence and miracle of revelation, and throughout the history of the Islamic call, people have learned from the stories of the Qur'an while understanding its message and from the very beginning of the promotion of Islam, storytelling of the Qur'an has been one of its main tools for endorsing this religion (Hosseini Jharfa, ۱۹۹۷: ۱۹). Considering that during the Qajar period, especially the constitutional movement in Iran, when art was altering its form and style to harmonize with the new ideals and thinking of the people, a type of folk painting and mural painting along with reciting the Shahnameh and Ta'zieh ceremony formed in the heart of the society and among the masses of people taken from popular literature and folk tales. Also, the themes and literary works that were mostly illustrated in Qajar period in Mazandaran are: Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, Qesas-al Anbia, Khamseh Nezami, Ajaib al-Makhluqat Qazvini and folk stories. The foundation of the current research is based on the question that what role do the Qur'anic stories play in visualizing folk and religious themes of the Qajar period and in the Mazandaran province?

The hypotheses of the present research are that the story of the Ascension of the Holy Prophet and Prophet Solomon from the collection of Qesas-al Anbia", which are frequently depicted in the folk paintings of the Mazandaran period. Also, religious and popular beliefs, including belief in angels, the afterlife, and religious traditions are among the images of this age. Considering the popularity of folk painting in the Qajar period, it seems that there is a deep connection between these motifs, religious beliefs, myths and national epics with religious and social functions, which played a prominent role in the development of the region's identity and helped preserve and strengthen the cohesion of the people of this region for they have been present from the past until today. The general purpose of the article is to examine the themes of Quranic stories and religious traditions in Qajar paintings of Mazandaran and to find the connection between these paintings and the art of the Qajar period.

The research method is a combination of descriptive, causal, analytical-historical methods. First, the motifs are described, analyzed and their cause of origin is studied. This article

examines the pictorial themes of folk painting from the perspective of meaning and content. In order to examine the theme and content of religious motifs related to Ta'zieh texts, the variables that have a direct relationship with religion, popular culture and the identity of the target region have been selected.

Conclusion

Considering that the religious buildings in Mazandaran were erected for the religious ceremony for the martyrdom of Imam Hussain (PBUH) and his companions, the role of the materials of these buildings also has a function beyond decoration and they act in line with the religious function of such structures. From a sociological point of view, Ta'zieh finds its special form and structure due to the diversity of communities in Iran and the cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity and considering the different climates of each region. The influence of the art of Ta'zieh and reciting, which from the point of view of the structure and texture of the society, the customs and culture of the people and local and native rituals and traditions, this art finds a special base in this region, especially that part of the territory of the institution of religion, which is one of the divine institutions and is fully evident in their motifs. These religious places were built to gather the masses of people together to raise the national and religious spirit of the people in the society. Their space was continuously covered with deep religious beliefs and heroic behavior of mythological, epic, national and religious warriors and society's young men. The religious motifs used in the religious buildings of Mazandaran include the motifs of the Prophets and Imams, religious historical events, paintings related to the afterlife, and so on. Religious beliefs and convictions have played an important role in creating the characters of Saqa Khanehs. A group of these beliefs about the afterlife, rewards and punishments, the measurement of good and bad deeds, and angels are related to these religious beliefs. Religious traditions have depicted many cases, and most of these themes are related to the incident of Karbala, the holy Imams, especially Imam Ali (PBUH) some of these topics are mentioned in the Khavaran-nameh.

General religious themes include: rites and mourning ceremonies for the Karbala incident, folk beliefs, Quranic stories, images of Imams and Prophets, belief in the world after death, and resurrection, reward of the good and the punishment of the sinners, angels with letters of reward and Satan with letters of black deeds, Azrael's presence on the patient's bed, the question of Nakir and Mankar, and pond of Kowsar; the space of heaven and hell with the punishment of sinners and the reward of the righteous, the world of the hereafter, reward and punishment, measurement of good and bad deeds, symbols related to water that directly and indirectly

include the concepts of water and irrigation, Qur'anic stories, including: the Ascension of the Prophet (PBUH) and the court of Solomon the Prophet and finally the pictorial themes of such structures can be considered in accordance with the religion, literature and popular culture of the Qajar period. These motifs originate from Ta'zieh texts, coffeehouse paintings and lithographic books of the Qajar period and include archetypes and myths hidden in the beliefs of the people of the region.

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