Original Research Article

An Analysis of the Thematic and Structural Characteristics of Mashhadi Aghajan Lahijani's Murals in Agha Seyed Ali's shrine (Mote'aleq Mahalle -Lahijan)

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Abstract

Murals in holy shrines in Guilan Province are an illustrated compendium of Shiite history and religious customs. These paintings, which are often associated with Ashura and are painted by both local and unknown artists, include visual and symbolic values in Iranian-Islamic art. This study attempts to scrutinize the thematic and structural elements of Mashhadi Aghajan Lahijani's murals in Agha Seyed Ali's shrine in Mote'aleq Mahalle. Moreover, this study analyzes and explores the link between stories and paintings at this sacred site. What are the thematic and structural characteristics of the murals in the aforementioned shrine? The data of the current study which are qualitative were analyzed using the descriptive-analytical method. The results demonstrate that one of the distinctive features of the murals in this shrine is the direct and explicit expression used by the artist in representing religious and folk themes. In fact, he depicted the narratives as were conceived by the lay people. By creating a harmony between the themes and the structures of the murals, he made a kind of religious and emotional connection between the audience and the work of art. Some of the structural features of his works include adherence to the two-dimensional surface, such as miniature, conventional characteristics of faces and image elements, and color harmony via multiple colors. Likewise, the thematic features of his works include the narrative of the religious story, along with the artist's individual feelings, faith, and imagination, as well as the depiction of the position of power and victory of religious heroes, such as the pre-victorious kings, even though they will be martyred.

Keywords: *Shrines in Guilan, Religious Murals, Agha Seyed Ali's Shrine, Mashhadi Aghajan Lahijani, Folk Paintings.*

Introduction

Imamzadehs[1], sacred and holy places, or shrines in Guilan are higher in number compared to other cities in Iran. The similarities of these sites to the villagers' houses symbolize their intimacy with the people (Khakban, 2002, 96), and the belief in healing and fulfillment of needs in these holy places reflect their spiritual importance for the people (Eliade, 2006, 108). The emergence of murals in Guilan's shrine is traced to

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the Safavid period when Shia Islam started to spread in the 12th century (Mahmoudinejad, 2009, 19). However, more than 120 years have passed since the date of the oldest existing paintings in the shrines, and most of them date from the end of the Qajar dynasty. The growth of the Shia faith during the Qajar dynasty, as well as holding particular Shia religious events and their depiction in the visual arts, resulted in the proliferation of religious murals in Guilan province. More than forty shrines in Guilan used to have murals. Today, many of them have been

lost due to reconstruction and demolition. The architect and builder of the shrine did not plan ahead of time to select a place for painting, but once the construction was completed, the authorities or residents would ask an artist to paint the interior and exterior walls of the shrine at the request or command of the founders. These paintings frequently reflect Karbala events (Jaktaji, 2006, 49). Agha Seyed Ali[2]'s shrine is next to a mosque and a cemetery in the village of Mutalaq-Mahalleh, in Lahijan city, belonging to the Qajar period. This shrine is known among the locals as the shrine of heaven and hell due to the famous murals at the entrance of its east iwan with the theme of Sirat Bridge. The people of Guilan used to pay their vows because of their broad beliefs. One of the forms of vows is donating paintings, and for this reason, most imamzades, in the east of Guilan have religious-based murals (Shad Ghazvini, 2011, 14). At the western entrance, the names of two people who ordered paintings, "Ali Kadkhoda son of Ali Akbar" and "Karbalai Jafar son of Asghar" and the date of the paintings (1974) can be seen. These people were among the ten recognized people. The person buried in this shrine is Seyed Ali, one of the survivors of the emperors of Kiai. The heredity of Sadat Kiai goes back to the fourth Imam Ali bin Hossein (Rabino, 1991, 25). The Sadat Kiai family, who called their rule Karkia or Alkia (Ghafari Ghazvini, 1964, 84), ruled from 769 to 1000 A.H. in the region of Biyeh before Guilan. The main themes of the religious murals of the shrines were generally taken from the words of the reciters, chanters, and prayer reciters. The artists borrowed the rules and techniques from the scenes of Naqali paintings or lithographic books and applied them in the architectural space which allowed a new change and narration. This article seeks to answer the question: What are the thematic and structural characteristics of the murals in the aforementioned shrine?

Research Background

Many studies have been undertaken on the paintings of holy shrines in Guilan Province, but no research has focused on Mashhadi Aghajan's painting in the shrine of Agha Seyed Ali situated in Mahalleh. Studies on "The Paintings of the Iranian Holy Shrines" (Mirzaee Mehr, 2007) and "Naghashiha-ye Divari-ye Bogheha-ye Gilan [Murals of Guilan shrines]" (Mahmoudinejad, 2009) examined murals and their artists in the Guilan province descriptively. In her paper "Observation of subject and aesthetic in the religious naive fresco in Licha Boghee" (Shad Ghazvini, 2018), author concluded that these murals are a mirror of the entire suffering and hardship of Ahl al-Bayt and the aesthetics of these works are tied with their hearts full of love for the Prophet's family. In an article titled "Divarnegariha-ye Emamzadeha va Bogha-e Mantaghe-ye Lahijan [Murals of Imamzadeh and Shrines in the Lahijan Region]" (Khakban, 2002) authors investigated the location of these paintings from historical, social, and theological standpoints. In an essay titled "The effects of Ashura incident on Charpadshah monument and correspond it with Ghahvehkhane (Traditional Iranian Tea House) painting" (Shayestehfar, 2010) examined the Ashura event and compared the attitude of artists and styles with the ones in coffee house paintings. This research presented differences in the proportions of these two types of paintings, the place of the paintings and the perceptions of artists, and differences from the profit aspect associated with architecture. In an article titled "Analysis of Qajar era Religious Murals with Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutic Approach (With Emphasis on the Holy Shrines of Gilan and Isfahan)" (Zamanpour & Chitsazian, 2022) authors evaluated the impact of the semantic horizon and the combination of horizons on the works of Qajari artists in the two regions of Guilan and Isfahan. Youzbashi, Hoseini & Chareie published a paper on "Identifying the Causes of the Emergence of Religious Themes and Its Important Components in the Murals of Religious Monuments of the Qajar Era (Case Study: Sacred Shrines of Guilan Province)" (Youzbashi, Hoseini & Chareie, 2022) conclude that the relationship between religious buildings and their murals is important. The social significance of these areas has grown vivid with Shiite notions and communal rites associated with

Shiite religion. The findings of Zamanpour's master's thesis entitled "An investigation of the Samples of Good and Evil in the Paintings of the Holy Shrine in Guilan (Langrod & Lahijan Regions)" (Zamanpour, 2013) showed the existence of a variety and abundance of good motifs than evil motifs, and among the motifs related to 'good', the religious themes on the image of the Prophet and the religious narrations of the imams is more noticeable . Also, Mirmojtabai's master's thesis entitled "Identification of Ancient Iranian Specimens in the Holy Shrines of Gilan Province" (Mirmojtabai, 2018) investigated the hidden symbols and archetypes in these paintings.

Research Method

In this article, the history and characteristics of holy shrines in Guilan Province are briefly discussed. Moreover, the themes of the paintings of Agha Seyed Ali's shrine on the three murals painted in that shrine are analyzed analytically and thematically. The research method in this article is descriptive-analytical, and the method of data collection is through library and image interpretation and field studies. Also, the data analysis method is qualitative. In the current research, two categories of theme and structure were analyzed. It should be noted that according to the definition, theme, subject, role, or content are the artist's work, objects, living things, events, and situations that he chooses to work. The subject may be objective and real or subjective and imaginary (for example, a natural landscape, a human face, inanimate objects, a historical or legendary event, or a dream) (Pakbaz, 2002, 550). It can be a repetitive and distinctive feature in the text that reflects a specific understanding of and experience with research questions (King & Horrocks, 2010, 150). The descriptive thematic analysis method is used for recognizing, analyzing, and reporting patterns in qualitative data. These textual data, of any kind, have turned scattered and diverse content into detailed data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 80; Holloway & Todres, 2003). This method is a process of examining the text, having a deep understanding of seemingly

unrelated data, analyzing qualitative data, carrying systematic observation, and transforming qualitative data into quantitative (Boyatzis, 1998, 4). Also, the term 'structure' refers to the three-dimensional representation of shapes in the perspective space, and visual structure is the general pattern of relationships and functions of the constituent elements in the work. This formal or visual structure is also the regularity of visual forces and not their accidental arrangement (Pakbaz, 2002, 293). In the creation of a work of art, the artist looks for the most attractive and expressive way of presenting an idea in the work to achieve unity. The themes of these paintings were examined by referring to stories from two books, 'Rawzah al-Shahada and 'Tofan al-Baqa', which play a significant role in promoting popular narratives about the Karbala event. Also, all the photos used in this article belong to the author's archive and were photographed during numerous visits to this shrine.

Theoretical Foundation
• Mashhad Aghajan Lahijani (Painter)

Even though the artist of most of the works is unknown, the name of the artist is written on an inscription on the west wall of this building, that is, "Done by Mashhad Aghajan Lahijani, the Son of Ustad Gholamhossein Naghash" (Fig. 1). This building includes his last works
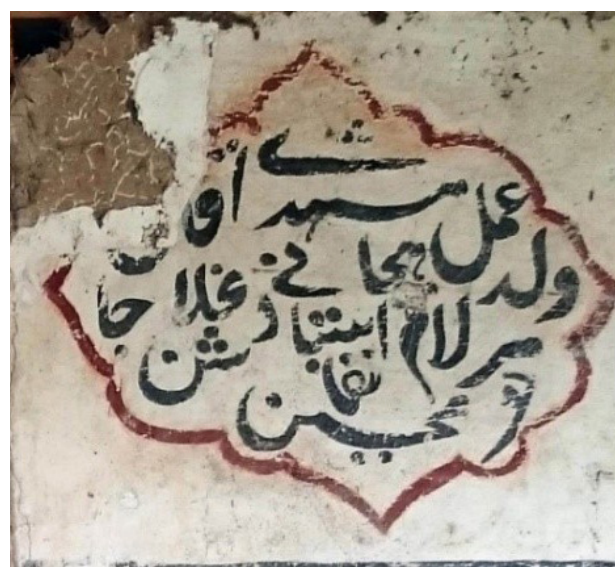

Fig. 1. Signature of the painter on the west wall.
Source: Author's Archive.

painted in old age, in 1974 (Mirzaee Mehr, 2007, 33). We do not know the exact year of his birth, but we know that he was born at the end of the 13th century of the Hijri to an artist family in the old neighborhood of Khmerkla (Khmerkalaye) in Lahijan (ibid., 102). Of the signed works of the artist, only five sets of paintings have remained today. In addition, several unsigned paintings, which are close to Aghajan's works in terms of style, have remained which are probably either not dated and signed by the artist or are among the destroyed parts.

• **The architecture of Agha Seyed Ali**

The shrine of Agha Seyed Ali used to have four iwans facing four directions, but when in its adjacency, a mosque was built; the murals on its northern side were destroyed. The method of creating residential buildings unique to Jalgah localities was used in the design of this shrine. Only the wall ornamentation, i.e., murals, distinguishes the holy shrine from the neighboring buildings (Khakban, 2002, 100). The iwans are surrounded by wooden quadrangular pillars with terracotta roofs (Fig. 2). The walls of the shrine have been made of bricks and straw, and they have been plastered. The shrine has two entries on the east and west sides and a stairway on the west side. This phrase has been engraved on the eastern right side of the door: May Almighty God have mercy on the creator and builder in the year 1224 (probably lunar). On the left side of this door, the following sentence can be seen: Done by Mirza Hasan Najjar, the son of the late Mirza Muhammad Ali, a resident of Kushal. Inside the

shrine, a wooden mesh shrine has a Chinese knot known as Chaharqal (Sotudeh, 1969, 203). Currently, there are no murals on the inner walls but the three outer sides of the iwans are covered in paintings. Despite the extensive damage, the paintings can still be seen.

• **The themes of the paintings of Agha Seyed Ali's shrine**

In general, the main theme of the paintings of Agha Seyed Ali's shrine is on the three exterior walls. Like other works of Aghajan in Mashhad, are the events of Karbala and the epic description of the battle of Imam Hussein (a.s.) and his companions on the afternoon of Ashura, Mukhtar Thaqafi's revenge on the perpetrators of the Karbala incident, crossing the Sirat Bridge and the torment of hell.

- Examining the themes of the Eastern murals

On the eastern wall, two scenes can be seen. On the right side of the wall, a large scene presents the vengeance of Mukhtar Thaghafi's blood from the killers of Imam Hossein. In this uprising, he killed Shammar bin Dhi al-Jushan, Kholi bin Yazid, Umar bin Saad, and Obaidullah bin Ziyad. Almost half of the paintings in this part have been destroyed, but the main part of the painting related to the punishment of those responsible for the murder of Imam Hussein and his companions, can still be seen. The picture frame here is dedicated to companions Mokhtar on the right side and Ashqia on the left side (Figs. 3 & 4). The artist has written the names of Ibrahim Ashtar (the torpedo) and Khouli next to their picture.

Fig. 2. The shrine of Agha Seyed Ali. Source: Author's Archive.

Fig. 3. The murals on the eastern wall of the shrine.
Source: Author's Archive.

Ibrahim, the commander of the Mukhtar army, with his helmet and his virtues, riding on a blue-azure-colored ink, is especially distinguished from his army. Next to him, the killers of the imam are painted with terrified eyes in a terrible state, hanging from their ears, and their bodies have been brutally tortured, and countless lighted candles have been inserted into the body of one of them. In the picture, Kholi is squatting with her hands between her legs (Fig. 4). According to the text of Tofan al-Buka Mukhtar, Mukhtar commanded that Khouli be burned in the fire of punishment (Morozi Johari, 2012, 763).

The left side of the Eastern wall (Fig. 5) portrays crossing the Sirat Bridge, equivalent to the Chinwad or Chinot Bridge in Zoroastrianism (Azargoshnasp, 1993, 204–207), in which the artist was strongly influenced by folk

Fig. 5. The mural on the left side of the eastern wall of the shrine. Source: Author's Archive.

Fig. 4. A part of the murals on the right side of the wall, which shows Mukhtar and her companions. Source: Author's Archive.

narratives of heaven and hell and passage. It is from the Sirat Bridge. Pedestrians on the Bridge are divided into two categories: men (naked) and women (with white veils). The artist has depicted the punishment for sinners at the bottom of the Bridge of Sirat showing the people of hell caught in the mouth of a multi-headed dragon, which is probably the snake of Ghashiyyah (Doomsday), while small snakes bitting their heads, and eyes, and tongues, and the scorpion is making them irritated by stinging them, he has depicted scenes of the torment of the hellish people on the day of the Last Judgment. The author of the book Rawzah al-Shuhada called this snake "Shadid" (Kashefi, 2011, 523). The lower part of the work is destroyed. In this section, the image of the angel of divine justice with his scales can be recognized as a sign of fair judgment on the day of judgment day (Fig. 6).

- Examining the themes of the Southern murals

Two major scenes can be observed on this wall. The first scene depicts Hazrat Qasim's fight with the sons of Azraq Shami, while the second scene depicts Hazrat Ali Akbar's (a.s.) arrival in the field. This wall has great visual value in terms of topic choice and composition, and the viewer's attention. The artist has creatively separated these two scenes with Muhram flags and the name of Allah, with two pheasants on each side (Figs. 7 & 8).

The narrative of the Qasim (a.s.) War has been one of the most popular subjects for painting among the artists and artists of the shrine, and Mashhadi Aghajan has depicted this subject with a slight change in several other shrines. In the lower parts of the wall, the painting is severely damaged and distorted. Mashhadi Aghajan has chosen the most dramatic moment of this story for painting. He has shown the moment when Qasim (a.s.) took the hair of Azraq's eldest son and lifted his body (Fig. 9).

Fig. 7. The mural on the southern wall of the shrine.
Source: Author's Archive.

Fig. 8. A part of the mural on the southern wall.
Source: Author's Archive.

Fig. 6. The details of the murals on the left side of the eastern wall, Angel of Justice on Doomsday. Source: Author's Archive.

Fig. 9. The murals on the south wall, lifting Qasim (a.s.) the body of Azraq's son. Source: Author's Archive.

He has increased the thrill of the action by keeping a part of Azraq Boy's leg, hand, and sword out. Qasim (a.s.) is mounted on a red ocher horse that has lifted both hands off the ground and assumes an aggressive stance. A body from the opposing corps can be seen beneath the horse's legs. Qasim (a.s.) turns Azraq's son on top of his head with his right hand in a calm, dignified, and relaxed manner, and will most likely knock him down on the ground a second later. Azraq's kid is shown wearing battle gear and carrying a sword, shield, and boots. Mashadi Aghajan depicts Qasim (a.s.) as a man with a white face and joint eyebrows, almond eyes, a

feathered hat, and a holy halo around his head. One of the symbolic elements in the painting in question is the halo around Qasim's (a.s.) head, which is in the shape of a cedar or a leaf, which, of course, resembles a flame. The history of this type of sacred halo goes back to the Timurid and Safavid eras, and it is compatible with the deep and ancient Iranian ideas about respecting events, especially the sanctity of the cedar tree (Mirzaee Mehr, 2007, 144). On the left side of this scene, the artist has broken the frame inside the picture with a diagonal line. The artist has depicted three enemy fighters, two of whom are Azraq Shami and Omar Saad. Azraq can

be seen in the front of the picture. He has a long beard and two horns, weeping, riding on a dark chariot. Behind him, Omar Saad has put his index finger on his mouth in amazement. Although the faces and organs are not depicted based on the science of anatomy, the mental quality of people in various situations is well shown. This is true even in animal facial expressions. The horses on the battlefield are painted with terrified eyes and open mouths, seeming that they have been affected by the violence of the scene.

The painting picture on the left side of the south wall shows the story of Hazrat Ali Akbar (a.s.) going to the battlefield with a delegation specific to Mashhadi Aghajan, riding on his horse, Eagle, while Ali Akbar (a.s.) is farewelling to his family. He is wearing an azure shirt and a dark robe over it, two armbands on his hands and a leather belt on his waist. Like that of other saints, his face cannot be seen. A sacred halo is painted around his head. With war tools and armor, a sword on his waist, and an ocher-colored shield on his back, he is pointing to something at the last moment. Here, the name of the scene is written inside the bergamot "Hazrat Ali Akbar (a.s.) going to the battlefield". The artist introduces characters from the story, such as Um-e-Leila (a.s.) and Zeynab (a.s.), in several scenes around Ali Akbar (a.s.). In the background, the tents of Imam Hossein's companions are put up. Ali Asghar's (a.s.) cradle can be seen at the bottom of the drawn tents. Below and in front of Ali Akbar (a.s.), Imam Hussein is seen praying for his beloved son (Fig. 10). Ali Akbar's (a.s.) horse (Oghab) is decorated like the horses of kings. As mentioned in several texts, "the appearance and body of that Prophet were very similar to the Prophet." (Rahmdel, 2007, 460). Kashefi writes in Rouza al-Shahada that "when he

Fig. 10. The mural on the left side of the south wall, arriving Hazrat Ali Akbar (a.s.) at the battlefield. Source: Author's Archive.

reached the battlefield, the battlefield was illuminated by the glow of his face. "Umar Saad's army was amazed at his beauty; they asked who is this that you have brought us to fight against him?" (Kashefi, 2011, 450).

- Examining the themes of the Western murals

The western wall of this shrine has two main scenes that are separated from each other by a green door, which is one of the two entrances to the building (Fig. 11). On the left side of the mural, there is the scene of "The Battle of Qamar Bani Hashim (Hazrat Abulfazl (a.s.)) against Mardban Sodeif," whose large part has been damaged. The paintings on this part of the wall are a description of the heroic performance of Qamar Bani Hashem in the battle with Mardban Sodeif. In the picture, an armored man can be seen with a feathered conical helmet and mustaches extending to his ears. He has been cut in two by Abbas' sword (a.s.), and blood is gushing from his head. One can imagine how the violence of this scene would have influenced the common people, especially the villagers. On the left side of Mared, Abbas (a.s.) is riding a red ocher horse with combat boots on the stirrup. It is possible that this horse, "Tawieh," is the horse of Mard that the Prophet was riding on (Fig. 12).

The theme of the scene on the right side of the wall is Hazrat Seyed al-Shahda (a.s.) who is going to the

Fig. 12. a part of the murals on the western wall, The Battle of Qamar Bani Hashim (Hazrat Abulfazl (a.s.)) against Mardban Sodeif.
Source: Author's Archive.

battlefield with Ali Asghar (a.s.). Here, the main concern is asking for water for six-month-old Ali Asghar (a.s.). Mashhadi Aghajan has used asynchronous events in his composition more than other pictures. However, the main issue is tangible. Imam Hussain (a.s.), riding on Zul-Janah, has a spear in his right hand. His face is covered as a saint, and a holy halo in the shape of a cedar tree surrounds his head. The way of designing the head of that saint is as if Mughom is leaning on a spear. On the arms of the imam, there is a warrior's armband; on the back is a red ocher shield; and a long sword is hanging from the waist (Fig. 13). The sword is a combination of the swords used in the Zandiya and Qajar eras. Ali Asghar (a.s.) is depicted with a broad face and a holy halo around his head. His calm and well-groomed face adds to his innocence. Two people are seen in front of the imam's horse. The first person is Kabuli Dervish, who is in a red robe, Dervish hat, Kashkul, and Tabrizin. He is offering his Keshkul full of water to the Imam. Behind him and a little lower is the image of a man with a letter in his hand. According to the writing next to the picture, he is the same as the Arab man who brought and presented a letter to the imam on behalf of the imam's sick daughter, who stayed in Medina and was not with

Fig. 11. The murals on the western wall of the shrine.
Source: Author's Archive.

the caravan. A tall, pale purple mountain behind Imam Hossein's head divides the painting space into two parts, like a line. The way it is designed and painted is reminiscent of the works of the famous artist of the second school of Tabriz, Sultan Mohammad. On both sides of this mountain, the army of demons led by "Zafar Genie " and their swords all set to fight on the right side and, in front of them, there is a picture of "Prophets

Fig. 13. The mural on the right side of the western wall of the shrine, going Hazrat Seyed al-Shahda to the battlefield with Ali Asghar (a.s.). Source: Author's Archive.

of the Salaf" with long and white clothes and covered faces and halos around their heads (Figs. 14 & 15). There are divine prophets from Adam to Khatam who rushed to help after hearing the call of Imam Hussain at noon in Ashura, but Imam did not accept their help. Zafar Genie is wearing a crown in the picture, and the goblin army is wearing a conical hat. On the right side of the image, below the army of demons, the angels led by "King Mansour" are also ready to enter the campaign at the order of the Imam. Mansoor Malik's army has crowns on their heads and swords in their hands. Imam Hussain (a.s.) and Dhul-Janah occupy a large part of the picture, and the focus is on them. Drawing Imam Hossein in the middle of the field of view of the painting, while he is bigger than the rest of the characters in the story, has made the importance of his personality more emphasized. Mashhadi Aghajan has arranged numerous elements and narratives in such a way as to direct the observer's eye toward the central characters.

Findings
• The structure and aesthetics of the paintings of Agha Seyed Ali's shrine
One of the factors contributing to the emergence of numerous murals in holy shrines is the influence

Fig. 14. A part of the murals on the western wall of the shrine, the past prophets. Source: Author's Archive.

Fig. 15. A part of the murals on the western wall of the shrine, Zafar Genie and his companions. Source: Author's Archive.

and expansion of literature and folk culture in the Qajar period." Religious stories found their way into lithographic books through recitations, elegies, and religious prayers. The structure of these stories is derived from the lives of prophets and imams and stories related to the tragedy of Karbala. Rural folk artists have been inspired by lithographic images to paint murals of shrines (Akhaviyan, 2013, 49). This style of painting has a narrative style, and the atmosphere created by paintings is such that common people and low-educated people easily interact with it. The complicated structure in the paintings of Agha Seyed Ali's shrine is the result of combining the main stories with secondary stories in one frame. Like other Iranian art forms such as Ta'ziyeh and narrative, the artist establishes a link between the main event, his ideal and exemplary, as well as the secondary characters of the story. Like Pardeh Khany[3] and Ta'ziyeh, the murals of shrines present the art of interpreting the language of images and serve as a means of expressing mourning in the form of images. The motifs and characters are placed on the walls in a way as if they had been prepared for the narrative." Ta'ziyeh has played the same role in the creation of murals in the shrines of Guilan. The ceremony is generally performed at a certain time of the year, such as Muharram and Safar, or after the rice harvest, in the courtyard of the shrine in the squares of the cities and villages of Guilan. The artist of the shrines in Guilan probably tried to engrave this importance on the minds and eyes of the people of the region by repeating the themes of Ta'ziyeh constantly (Khakban, 2002, 96 & 97).

The murals of Mashhadi Aghajan Lahijani in the shrine of Agha Seyed Ali are featured in the depiction of the conflict between right and wrong (good and evil). There is a noticeable difference in the design and coloring of these two elements. The viewer can easily distinguish the differences at the first glance. Saints are depicted at the height of their dignity and purity, and lovers at the end of their disgust. Here, the artist uses his usual conventions for the image of saints such as joint eyebrows, light skin color, and Hashmi mole, the sacred halo around the head. Against the dark skin, he used mustaches from the ears, knotted eyebrows, and torn eyes. Most of them are painted in awe of the hero's bravery and courage (Fig. 16). Almost none of the faces are drawn from the side. The faces of people are not a representation of them, but a manifestation of good and evil. Evil and cruel people have been shown with unusual and hateful faces, and good and kind people are represented with oppressed, delicate faces in soft colors. In this way, the composition and colors are ideal. The artists of this style are much influenced by their imagination in showing good and evil and moral themes, associated the bigness and smallness of the images with the roles of people, and the more important things were bigger and in the center of the canvas, and people with the smaller position are in the border. In this way, the viewer easily understands the flow of the story (Shayestehfar, 2010, 50 & 51).

In depicting ghosts, goblins, infernals, and evil creatures and drawing terrifying places such as hell and the Mahshar desert, the artist's imagination goes beyond the limit. The demons (Zafar and his army) are shown with a human body. And the only difference between them and humans is their cat-like whiskers. Angels are also depicted with the body of a human but have a crown on their head. The clothes and war tools, including helmets,

Fig. 16. Part of the mural on the southern wall of the shrine. Source: Author's Archive.

shields, swords, etc. seem to be borrowed from Ta'ziyeh and inspired by the Qajar period (Fig. 17). "The appearance, clothing, and make-up of people are the same in both arts. Zeynab (a.s.) is wearing the same clothes as Taazieh in the mural of the shrine. Qasim (a.s.) and Abul Fazl (a.s.) also have the same weapons in Ta'ziyya that can be seen warriors in the paintings of Bekaa used to crush the enemies. Women must wear it on both their faces. The colors of the clothes and the symbolism of the color of the clothes are completely common in both arts. Heroes and anti-heroes are common in both arts" (Mirzaee Mehr, 2007, 122).

The basis of the composition in this mural is decentralized and diffused and the priority is given to the hero. Imams' characters are painted brighter and bigger than other characters and elements, and other elements are set around them. Aghajan has placed the incidents and events together in an episodic manner. The close combination of pictures is such that there is no space between the scenes on the picture, and the characters (main and secondary) and the scenes are so close that the transition from one scene to another can be done quickly." This type of going from one time and place to another time and place and leaving the description of the main event to deal with parallel and secondary events is called ``escape'' in folk literature and also exists in the artistic behavior of preachers and prayer singers.

The preacher may refer to Karbala while describing any event. This type of visual composition can be evaluated in parallel with evasion and preaching (ibid., 122).

Each group of general themes includes sub-themes, and on each wall, the artist connects different topics next to each other and along the length of the wall with special methods, which may seem packed and disorderly at first, but for the knowledgeable viewer, he is very familiar with the stories. The different collections of paintings on a common wall are separated by tabulations similar to those previously seen in Iranian paintings. The plinths of the walls and near the ceiling, according to the tradition of Bekaa Guilan, have religious inscriptions such as "Anna Fathana Lak Fatha Mobina"[4] (Quran, Fath Surah, Verse 1), "Ya Abba Abdullah Hossein", "Ya Muhammad", or "Ya Ali" and poems from the famous poem of Mohtsham Kashani, such as "Kufians skimped on water" inside. The trinkets are decorated and have the same function as the frame (Fig. 18).

"Sometimes the artist has taken initiatives under the influence of his surroundings; for example, he has used some simple pattern of the flag used for the Muharram ceremony to limit the images. Also, the artist has used themes aligned with the common tradition of the region in the pictures, for example, the traditional cradle common in Guilan, or he has used the role of native animals and birds to decorate the paintings (Khakban, 2002, 98). In

Fig. 17. Two samples of the way Ta'ziyeh singers dressed in the past. Sources: www. iichs.org and www. deabel.org.

Fig. 17. Two samples of the way Ta'ziyeh singers dressed in the past. Sources: www. iichs.org and www. deabel.org.

this case, we can refer to the role of the pheasant, which was one of the native birds and a favorite of the people of Guilan.The painting technique is tempera on a layer of plaster, and the artist has used limited colors (natural and vegetable colors) for his paintings based on the facilities he has for making colors. The colors used here, including azure blue, green, black, red, ocher red, ocher yellow, and yellow, are well placed next to each other. As usual, the artist uses flat colors and horizontal lines and is not interested in showing the volume or natural representation of the scenes. There is no sign of light shadow here, and the paints of faces and figures are not volumetric. The lines surrounding the images play a very important role in counteracting the static energies in the image. Lines cover flat paints and bring different elements together.

Conclusion

Mashadi Aghajan shows deep and transcendental concepts such as love, sacrifice, freedom, and truth in the painting of the shrine of Agha Seyed Ali, and serves to guide his audience to the truth of the story with a mysterious look at historical events and resorting to visual symbols and signs. His religious beliefs and references to popular culture in drawing the characters of the paintings are important points of this mural. Mashadi Aghajan expresses his wants on the walls of this shrine eloquently, directly, simply, and unpretentiously. The most important structural features of Aghajan's paintings in this mural are adherence to a two-dimensional surface, limited use of colors, drawing of characters according to conventional characteristics, with regards to ranking and diffuse composition, and avoiding the use of shadows. He has borrowed the rules and customs from the artists of

the past and his contemporaries. However, by applying those rules in a new format, that is, the rural architecture of the shrine, he has also interpreted the themes in today's language. One of the important features of the thematic analysis of this mural is that, after choosing the themes, the artist has not only described the story but has also faithfully reflected his feelings in this mural, and like any skilled artist, he has adapted the content of the event to the current situation. The quality of the subject and the story has given its opinion; however, it has not strayed away from the truth of the event and has used subtle and precise points that imply artistic features in the paintings of this shrine. He has used a combination of faith, emotion, and imagination as the basis of his work. The artist has clearly shown the scenes of the victory of good over evil in this shrine. Although his audience knows that all these generals and heroes will be martyred, he delicately chooses scenes for painting that show them in a position of power. His heroes are pre-victory kings. In the eastern wall, he punishes the perpetrators of Imam Hossein's murder with two scenes of Mukhtar's revenge and doomsday, and in this way, he depicts the characteristics of folk culture, beliefs, and religious values, as well as the anti-oppression spirit of the people.

Endnotes

1. The shrine of an imam's descendants.
2. Seyed Ali bin Musa Kazem (a.s.)
3. Pardeh Khany is a kind of Iranian religious show in which someone uses drawn images to narrate the sufferings of religious figures.
4.«إِنَّا فَتَحْنَا لَكَ فَتْحاً مُبِيناً».

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