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Maqtal Writing in the Qajar Period: The Reflection of Sufi Teachings in Ritual Literature and Islamic Culture

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Abstract

The event of Ashura, within the Shiʿi tradition, transcends its historical dimension and has become a platform for the representation of religious, emotional, and cultural meanings. Among the various modes of narrating Ashura, *maqtal* writing stands as one of the most significant narrative genres. During the Qajar period, this genre underwent notable transformations under the influence of the era's socio-cultural conditions, particularly Sufi teachings. The central question of this study is how, and through which mechanisms, Sufi doctrines influenced the style and content of Qajar-era *maqtal* writing, and what consequences these influences had for the representation of the Ashura narrative. Employing a historical–analytical approach and utilizing qualitative content analysis, this research examines prominent *maqātil* associated with this period, including *Muḥriq al-Qulūb* by Narāqī, *Iksīr al-ʿIbādāt* by Mullā Āqā Darbandī, *ʿUnwān al-Kalām* by Fashārakī, and *Tadhkirat al-Shuhadāʾ* by Sharīf Kāshānī. The findings indicate that the penetration of concepts such as divine love, contentment and submission (*riḍā* and *taslīm*), *futuwwa*, valorization of spiritual charisma, and mystical storytelling led Qajar-era *maqātil* away from purely historical narration toward a ritualistic, emotive, and symbolic discourse. Overall, the study demonstrates that Sufism played a fundamental role in redefining the language, content, and function of *maqtal* writing during the Qajar period.

Keywords: Ashura; Qajar-era Maqātil; Sufi Teachings; Mystical Storytelling; Emotional–Affective Interpretation.

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Introduction

The event of Ashura, as a pivotal moment in Islamic history and Shiʿi identity, has consistently functioned as more than a mere historical occurrence; it has served as a cultural, doctrinal, and ritual paradigm within Muslim thought. Owing to its profound symbolic and emotional weight, Ashura has provided a fertile ground for diverse reinterpretations over the centuries, expressed through both written and oral forms. One of the most significant of these reinterpretative modes is *maqtal* writing—a branch of historical narration that, in close association with mourning rituals and the collective memory of Shiʿi society, has fulfilled functions extending beyond the simple recording of events. Among the factors that reshaped *maqtal* writing, Sufi teachings occupy a particularly prominent position. This transformation is intelligible not merely from the perspective of personal mysticism but as a manifestation of Islamic intellectual and cultural history. Qajar-era *maqtal* writing emerged within the continuity of Shiʿi and mystical traditions of Islam and took shape at the intersection of religious experience, ritual literature, and the collective memory of the Islamic community. From the earliest centuries of Islam to later periods, Sufi circles—through their emphasis on doctrines such as divine love, contentment and submission (*riḍā* and *taslīm*), *futuwwa* and self-sacrifice, tears and the acceptance of suffering, as well as through narrative techniques centered on storytelling and the valorization of charismatic miracles (*karāmāt*)—added an emotional–spiritual dimension to the narration of Ashura. Initially grounded primarily in doctrinal affinity and devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt, this relationship gradually permeated the structure and content of *maqtal* writing itself, to the extent that some texts—particularly during the Qajar period—came to reflect Sufi literary taste and sensibilities more than strictly documented historical reports. The Qajar period, due to its political, social, and cultural circumstances, represents a distinctive phase in this process. Royal patronage of Sufi orders—especially during the reign of Muḥammad Shāh, known for his Sufi inclinations, and throughout the Nāṣirī era—along with the expansion of networks of *khānaqāhs* and *takāyā*, created favorable conditions for the integration of Sufi values and styles into the public sphere of Shiʿi culture. This influence manifested not only in thematic content but also in the narrative form and style of *maqātil*, characterized by story-driven narration, the use of exaggeration and miracle-centered discourse, the prioritization of emotional appeal over historical rationality, and a tendency toward mystical–providential interpretations. A paradigmatic example of this influence can be observed in *Rawḍat al-Shuhadāʾ* by Mullā Ḥusayn Wāʿiẓ Kāshifī—a text that, through its Sufi-oriented and narrative-driven approach, laid the foundations for the tradition of *rawḍa*-recitation and became a narrative model for many Qajar-era *maqātil*. Moreover,

despite the chronological focus of the present study on the Qajar period, addressing *al-Muntakhab fī Jamʿ al-Marāthī wa-l-Khuṭab* by Ṭurayḥī (11th century AH) is indispensable due to its direct influence and paradigmatic role in shaping Qajar *maqtal* writing. An illustrative case is the narration of the episode concerning the letter of amnesty brought for al-ʿAbbās (peace be upon him), which Mullā Āqā Darbandī cites explicitly on the authority of *al-Muntakhab* (Darbandī, vol. 1, 1250 AH, p. 775). The present study adopts a historical–analytical method and extracts its data from five prominent *maqātil* associated with this period: *al-Muntakhab* by Ṭurayḥī, *Muḥriq al-Qulūb* by Narāqī, *Iksīr al-ʿIbādāt* by Mullā Āqā Darbandī, *ʿUnwān al-Kalām* by Fashārakī, and *Tadhkirat al-Shuhadāʾ* by Sharīf Kāshānī. This methodological framework enables the integration of three analytical levels in a coherent and causal manner: (1) the historical and social contexts facilitating the penetration of Sufism, (2) the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of Sufi teachings, and (3) textual instances of Qajar-era *maqtal* writing.

With particular emphasis on the ritual significance and cultural status of Qajar-era *rawḍa* and *maqtal* texts, this study simultaneously examines three interrelated trajectories:

1) The transformation of Sufi thought and narrative style across preceding centuries;

2) The social and political changes of the Qajar period that provided a conducive environment for the manifestation of these teachings within *maqātil*;

3) The response and adaptation of Qajar *maqtal* writing to the emotional and ritual needs of its contemporary audience.

A review of the existing scholarship indicates that prior studies have either addressed the history and foundations of Sufism or *maqtal* writing in isolation, or have confined themselves to descriptive introductions of texts and historical reports without establishing a systematic and causal relationship between these two domains. For instance, Mohsen Ranjbar's *A Historical Genealogy of Readings and Approaches to Ashura from the Safavid Period to the Constitutional Era* and the doctoral dissertation by Sayyid Mohsen Tabatabaʾi, *A Typology of Ashura-Centered Readings and Approaches from the Post-Constitutional Era to the Islamic Revolution*, offer broad overviews of the evolution of Ashura-related discourses but lack a focused analysis of the application of Sufi teachings within *maqtal* narrative styles. Similarly, works such as Mohammad Mashhadi Nushabadi's *Iranian Sufism and Ashura Mourning Rituals: The Role of Sufism, Futuwwa Associations, and Qalandariyya in the Formation of Muharram Rituals*, and Rasul Jaʿfarian's *Mullā Āqā Darbandī and Maqtal Writing: Perspectives, Innovations, and Sources*, despite acknowledging the roles of individuals and movements, do not systematically

examine the relationship between these influences and the narrative structures of *maqātil*. Likewise, several theses and articles—such as *The Influence of Sufism on Karbala Maqtal Writing from the Seventh to the Tenth Century AH*, *The Role of Sufis in the Representation of Ashura with Emphasis on Post-Safavid Maqātil*, *A Pathology of Qajar-Era Maqtal Writing*, and the article *The Impact of Sufism on Mourning Rituals*—address specific aspects of this influence but fall short of offering a unified theoretical framework and a causal analysis of stylistic and thematic interconnections. Even studies adopting a critical or pathological perspective, including dissertations such as *A Critical Study of Ashura Research from the Pahlavi Era to the Islamic Revolution* or works like *The Relationship between ʿUlamāʾ and Storytellers in the Safavid Period*, tend to emphasize social and cultural dimensions rather than focusing on narrative elements and Sufi belief structures. This methodological gap has motivated the present study to undertake a precise and systematic examination of this relationship through the analysis of five key Qajar-era *maqātil* using historical and analytical methods. Drawing upon findings from previous research alongside data extracted from relevant historical sources of the Qajar period, and supported by documented references, the study seeks to fill this gap by presenting text-based evidence and offering a comprehensive analytical portrayal of this interaction. The significance of such a study extends beyond theoretical enrichment to practical applications, as its findings may inform critical evaluations of Ashura-related sources, contribute to the revision of contemporary ritual content, and assist in the reconstruction of Ashura texts grounded in documented and analytical approaches. Accordingly, this article represents an effort to move beyond mere historical reporting toward an analytical exploration of the intellectual and cultural interconnections embodied within historical and literary events. The theoretical foundation of this research rests upon analyzing the intellectual and stylistic relationship between Sufi teachings and *maqtal* writing during the Qajar period—a task that necessitates precise definitions of the key concepts involved. As Sufi doctrines evolved historically from ascetic withdrawal to active participation in cultural and social spheres, they influenced *maqtal* writing on three principal levels:

1) Doctrinal level: Concepts such as *wilāya*, *futuwwa*, *riḍā*, and *tawakkul*, which contributed to redefining the roles of the Imam, his companions, and his family within the events of Karbala;

2) Emotional–affective level: Elements including divine love, tears, sacrifice, and intercession, which intensified the emphasis on sorrow and spiritual attraction in the narratives;

3) Narrative–artistic level: Storytelling, miracle construction, and symbolism, which shifted Ashura narratives from the structure of historical

reporting toward a performative and ritualized form.

This conceptual categorization enables a systematic and causal examination of the influence of Sufi thought on *maqtal* content and prevents analytical fragmentation. Based on this framework, and with the aim of assessing both the extent and mechanisms of Sufi influence on Qajar *maqtal* writing, the study employs an organized methodology for data collection, classification, and analysis. The research approach is descriptive–analytical, grounded in qualitative content analysis and historical comparison. Data were collected from prominent *maqātil* associated with the Qajar period and subsequently classified according to the aforementioned conceptual framework. The analysis was conducted in two stages:

1) Identifying Sufi teachings and documenting their manifestations within *maqtal* texts;

2) Comparing these manifestations with contemporaneous and earlier works to trace trajectories of stylistic and thematic transformation.

This process facilitates the identification of both direct and indirect influences and, in parallel with source analysis, helps elucidate the reasons underlying Qajar authors' inclination toward Sufi elements. Ultimately, by focusing on the modes through which Sufi teachings permeated *maqtal*—or *rawḍa*—writing during the Qajar period, this article seeks to present a clear depiction of the relationship between religious culture and ritual literature. The historical review of this interaction, combined with conceptual categorization and stylistic and thematic analysis of *maqātil*, demonstrates that these teachings not only transformed narrative structure and tone but also contributed to the formation and consolidation of rituals such as *rawḍa*-recitation, *taʿziya*, and *naqqālī* gatherings. Through the language and logic of Sufism, these rituals transcended historical reporting and entered the realms of symbolism, storytelling, and ritual performance. By offering a novel perspective on narrative and artistic transformations within the Ashura-writing tradition, this study may also provide a foundation for future research on the reciprocal influences of intellectual and religious movements on ritual literature.

1. Historical Contexts and Structural Grounds for the Penetration of Sufism into Ashura Culture during the Qajar Period

Understanding the impact of Sufi teachings on Qajar-era *maqtal* writing remains incomplete without examining the political, social, and artistic conditions of this period. This influence emerged from the convergence of a set of **historical contexts**—events and circumstances—and **structural grounds**—institutions and frameworks that enabled the transmission and consolidation of these teachings.

1-1. Political–Religious Context and the Structure of Power

The Qajar period provided an exceptional environment for the introduction and institutionalization of Sufi teachings within Ashura-related *maqtal* writing. This penetration resulted from the interconnection of mystical beliefs with mechanisms of political and religious power, to the extent that the institution of monarchy itself became one of the most influential agents in transforming the content and narrative style of Ashura representations. Muḥammad Shāh Qajar (r. 1250–1264 AH), from his youth, was educated under the guidance of Niʿmatullāhī Sufi masters, most notably Mullā ʿAbbās Mākūʾī, widely known as Ḥājī Mīrzā Āqāsī (Afshārī, 1997, p. 47). With the latter's appointment as grand vizier and spiritual mentor, this relationship reached its peak. This appointment was not merely a political maneuver; rather, it paved the way for the direct involvement of Sufi guides and masters in the production and patronage of religious works. More specifically, this power structure enabled narrators and *rawḍa*-reciters affiliated with *khānaqāhs* to conduct official court ceremonies based on a providential and *wilāya*-centered narrative model. In Qajar *maqtal* writing, this model is reflected in the recurrent emphasis on themes such as "contentment with divine decree," "submission," and "divine will." Furthermore, available evidence suggests that competition between jurists (*ʿulamāʾ*) and Sufi masters over the legitimation of royal authority during the period of occultation fostered the emergence of two distinct Ashura narratives: one promoted by jurists, which denied the legitimacy of monarchy, and another advanced by Sufis, which framed royal authority as a continuation of prophetic and Alid *wilāya*. In political and mystical advisory texts such as *Chahār Faṣl-i Sulṭānī* and *Tuḥfat al-Nāṣiriyya*, this notion of the continuity of *wilāya*, with an emphasis on the "spiritual leader," entered popular religious culture (Zargari-Nezhād, 2007, vol. 1, p. 16). The consequence of this process within *maqtal* writing was a shift in the portrayal of Imam Ḥusayn (peace be upon him) from a "leader of a revolt against injustice" to a "divine guardian executing a predetermined divine mission"—a transformation evident both in the tone of *rawḍa* narratives and in the selection of narrated events (Jaʿfarian, 2002, p. 359). Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh similarly instrumentalized religious and mystical rituals. In confronting political and social crises, he presented religious ceremonies as supporters of royal authority. Financial and organizational patronage of *taʿziya* performances and *rawḍa* gatherings imbued with mystical themes encouraged *maqtal* authors to gravitate toward emotional–providential narratives (Mostowfī, 2005, p. 30). These conditions directed the production of *maqtal* texts toward an increased reliance on miraculous tales, visionary experiences, angelic presence, and spiritual symbolism—elements that aligned with both the mystical tastes of society and the ideological preferences of the ruling establishment. As a result,

Qajar state support for Shiʿi–Sufi rituals facilitated the incorporation of mystical teachings into *maqtal* writing through structures of power. By constructing and equipping *takāyā* and *khānaqāhs*, the court brought ritual spaces under its supervision and transformed them into official arenas for the narration of Ashura. Preachers and *maqtal*-reciters emerging from Sufi circles, relying on concepts such as "contentment with divine decree," "submission," "divine will," and "the miracles of saints," reshaped narratives into a providential and *wilāya*-centered framework (Jaʿfarian, 2002, p. 82). Over time, this orientation migrated from the oral domain of ritual gatherings into written texts. To secure social acceptance and royal patronage, *maqtal* authors aligned their writings with narratives performed in *takāyā*, particularly by incorporating scenes of visions, angelic حضور, and luminous symbolism into the events of Karbala. Under governmental emphasis on a providential interpretation of Ashura, Imam Ḥusayn's position in these works shifted from that of a "leader of resistance" to a "guardian commissioned by divine decree."

The official atmosphere and royal sponsorship consolidated this narrative style. The grandeur of Nāṣirī and Muḥammad-Shāhī ceremonies shaped audience expectations toward emotional–mystical narratives. This taste, functioning as a form of social feedback, influenced revised versions of *maqātil*, elevating elements such as divine love, contentment, *wilāya*, and miraculous acts to central narrative scenes. Consequently, the Qajar *maqtal* underwent a transformation from a historical report into a dramatic and story-driven work, with Sufi teachings embedded not at its margins but at its very core.

1-2. Social–Cultural Context and the Structure of Ritual Gatherings

Khānaqāhs, according to Khwānsārī (2015, p. 665), were first established by Muḥammad b. Karrām (d. 256 AH) as spaces for the gathering and organization of Sufis. During the Ilkhanid and Timurid periods, they evolved—often in the form of *langars* and *ribāṭs* along caravan routes and in urban centers—into major socio-religious institutions of the Islamic Iranian world (Kämpfer, 2024, p. 173). Beyond serving as places of worship and retreat, these centers functioned as venues for teaching foundational Sufi concepts such as *futuwwa*, self-sacrifice, contentment, *wilāya*, and divine love. In the Qajar period, *khānaqāhs* and *takāyā* not only preserved religious and mystical rituals but also became hubs of popular culture and spaces mediating interactions among social strata and between society and the state. According to Sarnā (2011, p. 45), by attracting diverse segments of society—from elites to guild members—these institutions fostered social cohesion and facilitated the transmission of mystical values into everyday life. A prominent example is the *Takiyya-yi Dawlat* in Tehran, constructed by order of Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh, which, according to Hidāyat

(2006, p. 8171), functioned as the principal venue for official *taʿziya* performances and elaborate *rawḍa* recitations. In this space, Sufi themes and scenographic elements were directly incorporated into the texts and performances of mourning rituals. Guilds, long associated with *futuwwa* traditions, played a significant role within this ritual network. *Futuwwat-nāma-yi Sulṭānī* (Kāshifī, n.d., p. 98) and similar texts institutionalized principles such as self-sacrifice, hospitality, defense of the oppressed, and fidelity through guild covenants. These values were reproduced within Ashura mourning rituals, where the heroes of Karbala were portrayed in sermons and *maqātil* as exemplary embodiments of *futuwwa*. According to Salmī (2023, p. 240), storytelling (*naqqālī*) and *rawḍa*-recitation gatherings emerged as the most influential media for transmitting mystical concepts and miracle-centered narratives. In these assemblies, accounts of saints' visions and dreams, angelic - حضـور, the speech of inanimate objects and animals, and extraordinary events in the plain of Karbala were narrated with reference to earlier texts. For instance, *Rawḍat al-Shuhadāʾ* by Kāshifī (pp. 430, 459), through narratives such as the "manifestation of divine light on the Imam's face" or "Imam Ḥusayn inhaling the fragrance of a heavenly apple prior to martyrdom," established motifs that later reappeared in works such as *Tadhkirat al-Shuhadāʾ* by Kāshānī (vol. 2, pp. 121, 264) and *Saʿādāt-i Nāṣiriyya* by Darbandī (pp. 17, 796). Intertwined with *taʿziya* and other ritual performances, these gatherings functioned not only as arenas for interaction between the general populace and religious–mystical elites but also as effective infrastructures for the transmission and consolidation of Sufi teachings within Ashura literature. Continuous public participation in these assemblies created a social environment in which emotional, providential, and mystical motifs derived from the Sufi heritage could penetrate more deeply into collective consciousness and aesthetic sensibilities. Consequently, Ashura narratives—shaped by this milieu—moved away from a strictly historical-reporting mode toward emotionally charged storytelling and providential symbolism. This transformation was not merely a stylistic shift; rather, it resulted from the mediating cultural and communicative functions of these centers of gathering. Through the repeated reproduction and performance of Sufi motifs, they gradually redirected the narrative structure of Qajar *maqātil* toward a dramatic, emotive, and mystically infused text, thereby stabilizing and institutionalizing the transmission of Sufi concepts and imagery into the domain of *maqtal* writing.

1-3. Ritual–Artistic Context and the Sphere of Popular Media

a) Visual Arts (Illustrated Narrativity)

Visual art during the Qajar period—particularly in the forms of **dervish**

curtains (pardeh-ye darvīshī), **iconography (shamāʾil-negārī)**, and **coffeehouse paintings (naqqāshī-ye qahveh-khāneh-ī)**—constituted a crucial medium for stabilizing and transmitting the mystical–providential interpretation of the event of ʿĀshūrāʾ. By combining historical narration with symbolic and miraculous elements, these visual forms shaped a representation in which mystical meaning and emotional resonance prevailed over historical factuality for the general audience. Dervish curtains, one of the most prominent illustrated narrative forms of this period, were displayed in **khānqāhs**, **tekyehs**, and large mourning assemblies and functioned much like an *illustrated book*. These curtains did not merely depict the principal scenes of Karbalāʾ—such as the battle of Imam Ḥusayn (ʿa), the martyrdom of his companions, and the farewell scenes—but were also infused with supernatural elements, including halos of light around the Imam's head, descending angels, assisting animals, and a weeping sky. Such elements were rooted in Sufi miracle narratives that had found their way into maqtal texts. For instance, in *Saʿādāt-e Nāṣerīyeh* by Mullā Āqā Darbandī, the martyrdom of the Imam is described as a "great light in the sky" (Darbandī, vol. 2, 1250 AH: 1509) and as the "transfer of the soul to the abode of Truth accompanied by angels" (ibid., 1510). These depictions closely correspond to the iconography preserved in mourning curtains of the period. Coffeehouse paintings represent another form of illustrated narration in the Qajar era. These works, often produced by popular artists commissioned by guilds or custodians of tekyehs, combined realism with symbolism. The Imams were depicted with golden radiance, enemies with exaggerated and infernal features, and battle scenes arranged to evoke the cosmic struggle between truth and falsehood—thus directing the viewer toward a mystical interpretation of the event. In many such works, visual metaphors were directly inspired by Sufi texts. For example, the motif of the *"riderless horse returning from the battlefield"* recalls the mystical image of the *"disembodied wayfarer"*, who conveys the spirit to its ultimate destination. This symbolism appears narratively in texts such as *Iksīr al-ʿIbādāt fī Asrār al-Shahādāt*.

These visual representations exerted three key influences on Qajar maqtal-writing:

1) Cognitive Stabilization of Mystical Themes:

Through repetitive visual exposure in ritual gatherings, concepts such as *fanāʾ* (annihilation), *wiṣāl* (union), and divine destiny became deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness of the general audience.

2) Inspiration for Maqtal Authors:

Observing these iconographic forms, authors incorporated visual metaphors into their narratives. For example, in *Tadhkirat al-Shuhadāʾ* by Sharīf Kāshānī (vol. 2: 121, 264), the Imam's farewell scene mirrors the emotive imagery of

mourning curtains, including motifs such as "radiance upon the face" and "the weeping arms of children."

3) Narrative Reproduction of Miracles:

Visual elements such as "angels hovering over the tents" or "blood raining from the sky," which appear in *Rawḍat al-Shuhadāʾ* (430, 459) and *Muḥriq al-Qulūb* by Narāqī (516), were transferred directly into maqtal narratives, resulting in a providential–mystical mode of storytelling.

Accordingly, visual art functioned not merely as an ornamental medium but as a powerful communicative system that shifted the narrative center of gravity in maqtal-writing from historical documentation toward mystical meaning-making. As symbolic motifs and miraculous imagery became firmly embedded in popular consciousness, Qajar maqtal authors—confident in their audience's familiarity with this symbolic language—deliberately structured their texts upon the same visual and mystical foundations. These texts, consequently, exhibited diminished concern for historical verification and prioritized emotional transmission, destiny, and symbolic resonance.

b) Preaching and Oratorical Arts

Storytelling (naqqālī) and **curtain-reading (pardeh-khānī)**—arts fundamentally rooted in Sufi storytelling traditions and the practices of *manāqib-khān*s (Salamī, 1402: 240)—became widespread media during the Qajar period. Utilizing illustrated curtains and iconographic imagery, narrators recounted events not strictly on the basis of historical texts but by integrating ideals of *futuwwa*, self-sacrifice, and annihilation in the path of Truth, drawn from futuwwa manuals (Kāshifī, n.d.: 98). This emotionally charged narrative approach propelled Qajar maqtals toward slogan-like expressions and dramatic scene construction. Narratives shifted from battlefield reports to dialogical structures, portraying the heroes of Karbalāʾ as *"khānqāh-like young champions."* As a result, in works such as *Tadhkirat al-Shuhadāʾ* by Kāshānī (vol. 2: 121, 264), even depictions of thirst or farewell are enveloped in romantic metaphors and mystical concepts. Similarly, **Qajar-era rawḍa-khānī**—whether in official venues like *Tekyeh Dowlat* or in the homes of elites—became experimental spaces for articulating and consolidating Sufi teachings. Preachers, drawing on works such as *Muḥriq al-Qulūb* by Narāqī (412, 516) and *Saʿādāt-e Nāṣerīyeh*, embedded concepts of *fanāʾ*, *riḍāʾ* (contentment), and divine love into the narratives of Karbalāʾ.

This synthesis led Qajar maqtals to frame suffering as a *"divine trial"* or *"a secret of spiritual wayfaring."* For instance, in narrating the thirst of ʿAlī Akbar (ʿa), the author transforms the scene from a battlefield reality into *"the moment of the lover's trial before the Beloved."*

c) Sufi Literature

Persian Sufi literature—from *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya* to the *Kulliyāt* of Saʿdī and various futuwwa manuals—introduced into maqtal-writing a language and structure grounded in allegory, mystical unveiling, and sacral meaning-making. *Rawḍat al-Shuhadāʾ* by Kāshifī (430, 459) stands as a paradigmatic model in this regard. Through miracle narratives, depictions of supplication, and mystical states of the Imam and his companions, it not only consolidated Sufi themes but also shaped the emotional and narrative structure of later maqtals. [Original Persian poetic and prose quotations preserved verbatim, as in the source text.] Within this interpretive framework, martyrdom is conceptualized as a *"great ransom for preserving religion"* or as *"eternal union with Absolute Truth,"* directly corresponding to the Sufi doctrines of *fanāʾ* and *baqāʾ*.

d) Taʿziyeh

Taʿziyeh reached its apex during the Nāṣerī period and spread widely among the masses in venues such as coffeehouses. Historical narratives and Qurʾanic stories—interwoven with mythological and legendary elements—combined with poetic verses derived from creative reinterpretations of maqtal literature, ignited profound emotional responses in audiences. Dialogues and scenes were frequently infused with mystical vocabulary, emphasizing the Imam's acceptance of divine decree or expressing amorous addresses to the Ahl al-Bayt. Direct royal patronage, particularly by Nāṣer al-Dīn Shāh, through the construction of monumental tekyehs such as *Tekyeh Dowlat*,[1] transformed

1. Tekyeh Dowlat (also known as *Tekyeh-ye Homāyūnī-ye Dowlatī*, *Tekyeh-ye Qaṣr*, or *the Grand Royal Tekyeh*) was a structure erected in Tehran for the performance of *taʿziyeh* and the observance of mourning rituals and *rawḍa-khānī* during the days of ʿĀshūrāʾ. Its construction lasted from 1285 to approximately 1290 AH. Tekyeh Dowlat was built by Dust-ʿAlī Khān Muʿayyar al-Mamālik by order of Nāṣer al-Dīn Shāh and at an estimated cost exceeding three hundred thousand tomans (ذکاء، ص۲۸۷و۲۹۳؛ معیّرالممالک، ص۱۳؛ قس اعتمادالسلطنه، ص۸۸).

Based on extant descriptions of the interior space of Tekyeh Dowlat, it may be argued that interior decoration was of greater importance than the overall architectural structure or the external façade. This was particularly evident in the extensive use of multi-branched candelabra, wall-mounted lamps, chandeliers, candles, and similar elements, which rendered the lighting of the tekyeh remarkably striking. A large chandelier was suspended from the center of the ceiling (فروغ، همانجا), which for a period was illuminated using electric power (بنجامین، ص۲۹۸؛ کرزن، ج۱، ص۴۳۴).

The decoration of each arch was entrusted to one of the state dignitaries, and competition among them resulted in increasingly elaborate ornamental displays. Certain sections were allocated to dervishes and adorned with symbols associated with Sufi life, such as *takht-e pūst* (animal-skin platforms), *kashkūl*, horns, and prayer beads (مستوفی، ج۱، ص۳۰۱).

Travelers' accounts (see: الگـار، ص۲۴۴؛ ظهیرالدولـه، ص۱۷۴), who refers to Churchill's presence at Tekyeh Dowlat), together with surviving visual representations, assist in reconstructing a mental image of this now-destroyed structure. Tekyeh Dowlat may thus be regarded as a symbolic landmark of Tehran during the Nāṣerī period (see: سرنا، ص۲۴۲).

taʿziyeh into a mass medium shaping popular religious sensibilities.

The hybrid nature of taʿziyeh—merging ritual mourning with dramatic performance—enabled audiences to emotionally experience complex mystical concepts. The figures of Karbalāʾ were thus reimagined not as military or political heroes, but as spiritual wayfarers toward *fanāʾ fī-llāh* and lovers of the Eternal Beloved, a portrayal deeply rooted in futuwwa traditions and khānqāh culture. [Original quotations from *Futuwwat-nāmeh-ye Sulṭānī*, *Muḥriq al-Qulūb*, and poetic citations preserved verbatim.][1] Through symbolic staging, recurring motifs, and emotionally dominant language, maqtal-writing moved away from mere historical reporting toward scene-based, affective, and mystically saturated narratives. Repeated symbolic imagery in performances became embedded in collective memory, facilitating their migration into written texts. Consequently, Qajar maqtals evolved into hybrid media—part historical record, part artistic creation, and part vehicle for mystical teachings—aimed at evoking emotion, reinforcing sacred belief, and affirming divine destiny.

2. Content-Based and Methodological Analysis of Three Ashura-Oriented Readings in Qajar-Era Maqtals

In the martyrological literature (*maqtal-writing*) of the Qajar period, three dominant modes of reading—**emotional–affective**, **heroic–mythological**, and **deterministic–mystical**—played the most significant role in narrating the event of Karbala. Each of these readings, in its formation, whether in lexical choices, scene construction, or the ultimate narrative purpose, was profoundly influenced by Sufi language, imagery, and worldview.

2-1. The Emotional–Affective Reading

This mode of narration primarily focuses on stimulating emotions and evoking empathetic identification in the audience. The Qajar-era maqtal writer, inspired by the techniques of Sufi elegiac chanting and *rawḍa-khwānī*, embellishes scenes with extensive detail and vivid description so that the listener may feel personally immersed in the event. For instance, the account of the thirst

1. An example from the *taʿziyeh* of ʿAlī Akbar (peace be upon him):

"When, on the day of ʿĀshūrāʾ, the heart-burning sun rose from the horizon of sorrow, the army of oppression, from every side, drew the bowstring of enmity with the intent of hunting the sanctified household, and many of the young men of the progeny of Āl Ṭāhā were martyred. At that moment, ʿAlī Akbar became restless and came into the presence of his noble father. With the intention of kissing the dust [before him], he laid his face upon the ground and said: *From Your Excellency I humbly hope that you grant me permission to sacrifice my life in your service. Grant me leave, so that I may go to the battlefield and, through the edge of the sword, quench the thirst [of martyrdom]. Is not my cypress-like stature a sapling nourished by your flowing stream? Is not my head, upon my body, worthy to be offered as a sacrifice to you?* …" (شهیدی، 1380: 5050)

of ʿAlī Akbar (peace be upon him) in the midst of the battlefield reflects a fusion of physical thirst with spiritual love, portraying the episode not merely as a corporeal occurrence but as a profound spiritual knot: "O my father! Thirst has slain me. Truly, if but a single drop of water were to reach my throat, I would wreak havoc upon these wicked people." Imam Ḥusayn (peace be upon him) summoned him, wiped the dust from his lips and mouth, placed the ring of the Messenger of God (peace be upon him and his family) in his mouth for him to suck upon, whereby his thirst was eased, and he once again turned toward the battlefield. (Kāshifī, 908 AH: 420) A similar narrative concerning Qāsim (peace be upon him), with emphasis on his young age and innocence, renders the moment of death in a lyrical and tender tone that compels the audience to weep and grieve. Qāsim stood briefly before the army, and seeing no one advancing to combat him, returned to his noble uncle and said: "O my uncle! Thirst, thirst! Come to my aid with a draught of water! My liver burns from thirst and my bones have melted." The Imam replied: "Be patient, for God loves the patient," and according to another report, placed his ring in Qāsim's mouth. Qāsim said: "When he placed the ring in my mouth, it was as though a spring of water flowed therein, and I became quenched." (Darbandī, vol. 2, 1250 AH: 385) Scenes of farewell between the Imam (peace be upon him) and his family abound with intimate familial imagery and affectionate addresses. The language in these sections removes the narrative from the martial sphere and situates it within the private, intimate domain of the lover and the divine Beloved: "A cry and lamentation arose from the Household; the vessel of patience and composure fell into the whirlpool of bewilderment and the flood of anxiety. The waves of the sea of tribulation and sorrow surged and converged, and the eyes of time wept for the grief of the noble members of the family. The tongue of time began to chant this heart-rending lament." (Kāshifī, 908 AH: 241–242) The emotional climax of this reading is found in the narrative of the "newlywed youth." Before sending her son to the battlefield, Qāsim's mother shed torrents of tears and, in the language of lament, addressed that مظلوم of Karbala, saying: "Grant permission, O king of parched lips, That tonight I may henna him with the blood of my heart." (Narāqī, 1238 AH: 413) These accounts were performed in gatherings accompanied by mournful music and slow, deliberate movements. The language and imagery of this section strongly recall Sufi traditions that exalt *fanāʾ fī Allāh* (annihilation in God) and the renunciation of worldly attachments. Another example of this reading appears in reports of the captives' anguish upon encountering the bodies of the martyrs, as recorded in *Tadhkirat al-Shuhadāʾ*, citing *Asrār al-Shahāda*, which states that when the caravan passed by the bodies of the martyrs, the members of the Household threw themselves from their mounts to the ground. (Darbandī, vol. 2, 1250 AH: 270)

2-2. The Heroic–Mythological Reading

In this reading, the Qajar maqtal writer—under the influence of Iranian epic literature and Sufi models of hero-making—transforms the event of Ashura into an endless battlefield between good and evil. Methodologically, this influence manifests through majestic introductions and conclusions, sermon-like dialogues, and the exaggeration of the enemy's forces and weaponry. (Kāshifī, 908 AH: 39) Narratives such as the "piercing blood" motif symbolically portray the spiritual and physical power of the hero as surpassing that of ordinary humans: "When Ibn Ziyād placed the head of Imam Ḥusayn (peace be upon him) upon his thigh, a drop of blood fell upon his robe, pierced his cloak, tunic, and waistcloth, reached the flesh of his thigh, exited from the other side, pierced the bedding and the throne, fell upon the ground, and vanished—yet the wound in his thigh remained incurable." (Kāshifī, 908 AH: 455) Accounts such as "the jinn seeking permission to enter the battlefield" (Darbandī, vol. 2, 1250 AH: 1339) and the "trans-temporal assistance of the Imam to the king of India" extend the narrative beyond historical realism and introduce supernatural and mythological elements. In these accounts, the protagonists are depicted as supra-human heroes endowed with spiritual power and supported by sacred and otherworldly beings—concepts comparable to the Sufi understanding of saints (*awliyāʾ*) and their miracles (*karāmāt*).

2-3. The Deterministic–Mystical Reading

The defining feature of this reading is its perception of the Karbala event as a preordained episode within the trajectory of mystical union. Narratives such as the "imaginal water-bearer dervish" (Darbandī, 1250 AH: 129), which depicts ʿAbbās (peace be upon him) as a *futuwwa*-oriented spiritual wayfarer, directly draw upon chivalric Sufi traditions and the symbolic role of water-bearing in khānaqāhs. Accounts framed as "sacrificial martyrdom"(Esfandiyārī, 1402: 83–90) and "devotional martyrdom"(Ibid., 77–82) explicitly assert that the martyrdom of the Imam and his companions was not a defeat, but the complete realization of divine will and the condition for mystical union—concepts articulated in Sufi discourse as *riḍā* (contentment) and *fanāʾ fī Allāh*. Accordingly, all three readings—despite their differences in expression and purpose—share a common worldview: a Sufi-inspired vision that treats Karbala as a multi-layered text, simultaneously saturated with emotion, heroism, and the path to ultimate truth. What rendered these readings prominent in Qajar-era maqtals was their reliance on symbolic language, spiritual imagery, and narrative techniques derived from Sufi practices such as storytelling (*naqqālī*), *taʿziyeh*, and iconographic recitation (*shamāʾil-khwānī*). Consequently, the maqtal evolved from a dry historical report into a **hybrid religious–artistic**

medium, whose mission was to evoke emotion, solidify belief, and guide the audience spiritually.

- Concluding Analytical Remark

A comparative examination of the emotional–affective, heroic–mythological, and deterministic–mystical readings in Qajar-era maqtals, and their deep entanglement with Sufi teachings, demonstrates that these texts progressively distanced themselves from strict historical narration. Instead, through shared narrative techniques—repetition for emphasis, the fusion of history and allegory, and the deployment of mystical metaphors such as *journey*, *union*, and *light of truth*—they transformed Ashura from a purely historical event into a powerful cultural and artistic symbol. This transformation provides a solid foundation for the final evaluation of the role of Sufism in shaping Qajar-period martyrological literature.

Conclusion

The present study, employing a historical-analytical approach, examined the penetration of Sufi teachings into Qajar-era *maqtal* writing and demonstrated that this influence resulted from a complex network of political, cultural, and literary connections. An investigation of the historical background, religious and social transformations, and an analysis of five prominent *maqtals* of the period—namely *al-Muntaḵab Ṭarīḥī*, *Maḥraq al-Ḳulūb* by Narāqī, *Aksīr al-ʿIbādāt* by Darbandī, *ʿUnwān al-Kalām* by Fashārakī, and *Tadhkirat al-Shuhadāʾ* by Sharīf Kāshānī—revealed that Qajar-era *maqtal* writing was not merely a reflection of the events of Ashura but a reconstruction and re-creation using the language, logic, and narrative techniques of Sufi traditions. At the political and religious levels, the direct support of the court—particularly by Muḥammad Shāh, who was inclined toward Sufism, and Nāṣer al-Dīn Shāh—for Sufi orders and sheikhs, along with the organization of formal mourning gatherings in *tekkehs* and *khānaqāhs*, transformed *maqtal* writing into a tool for legitimizing monarchy and promoting a determinist, *wilāya*-oriented interpretation of Ashura. This approach repositioned Imam Ḥusayn (peace be upon him) in the texts from "leader of rebellion against tyranny" to "saintly agent of divine will," spreading themes such as *riḍā* (contentment), submission, and the miracles of the saints (*karāmāt*). Within this framework, Ashura was redefined not merely as a historical event but within the context of Islamic theology and the sacred worldview of Shiʿi culture, reflecting a convergence in which Sufism and Shiʿism represent two branches of a single mystical tree in *maqtal* narration. At the cultural and social levels, an extensive network of ritual spaces—including *tekkehs*, *khānaqāhs*, marketplaces, and guild circles of practitioners of *futuwwa* and folk arts such as *taʿziyeh*, *naqqālī*, *pardeh-khwānī*,

and *rawḍa-khwānī*—provided a platform for transmitting and consolidating mystical imagery in the narration of Ashura. These spaces, blending oral and written elements, integrated historical content with narrative embellishment, spiritual allegories, and metaphysical insights, shaping public taste toward emotional and performative narratives. In this way, *maqtal* writing became one of the manifestations of Islamic-Shiʿi culture, in which the values of *futuwwa*, sacrifice, spiritual authority, and divine love were reproduced and reinforced through religious storytelling. At the literary and artistic levels, the direct influence of the written Sufi heritage—from classical treatises such as *Risāla Qushayrīya* and *Kashf al-Maḥjūb* to literary works including Saʿdī's *Kulliyāt* and *Futuwwa* manuals—led to transformations in the structure and tone of *maqtals*. The use of mystical metaphors, symbolic imagery, celebration of spiritual miracles, and poetic depiction elevated the Ashura narrative from mere historical report to artistic and ritualized text. Content analysis of these *maqtals* identified three principal readings underpinning the Qajar style: emotional–affective, heroic–mythological, and deterministic–mystical. In the emotional–affective reading, emphasis on scenes of grief and attraction drew the audience into empathy and tears, often intensifying emotional impact through additional non-documentary details. The heroic–mythological reading, through exaggeration of enemy numbers, battlefield grandeur, and the presence of supernatural forces, accentuated the extraordinary and heroic dimension of the events. The deterministic–mystical reading portrayed Ashura as the manifestation of divine will and mystical union, enveloping scenes with light, spiritual vision, and miracles. A common feature of these three readings was their detachment from strictly historical documentation, transforming the Ashura narrative into a hybrid medium—simultaneously religious, cultural, and artistic—that could address the needs of ritual practice, popular taste, and the prevailing political framework. From this perspective, Qajar-era *maqtal* writing represents a linguistic and artistic manifestation of Islamic culture in which mysticism, literature, and ritual converge to articulate the Shiʿi religious experience. The findings indicate that Sufism in the Qajar period was not marginal but central to *maqtal* writing, becoming a decisive force in shaping both content and style. While this influence enriched language and enhanced emotional persuasiveness, the introduction of non-documentary and exaggerated elements also created the potential for narrative distortion. Nonetheless, from the broader perspective of Islamic studies, this influence should be seen as part of the dynamic internal interaction among Islamic intellectual traditions, in which mysticism and jurisprudence, aesthetic sensibility and reason, and Sufi experience and Shiʿi theology intersected and manifested through ritual literature and *maqtal* writing. This duality underscores the need for critical

reevaluation of this heritage to ensure that contemporary Ashura-related productions preserve cultural and artistic values while avoiding the reproduction of past weaknesses. Finally, a comparative study of these interconnections with pre- and post-Qajar periods can provide new insights into the evolution of Ashura culture, the role of intellectual currents in shaping religious narratives, and the interplay among politics, culture, and literature in Iranian history. In this regard, situating Qajar-era *maqtal* writing within the broader Islamic cultural context offers a pathway to understanding the continuity of mystical and theological dimensions of Islam in Iranian ritual literature.

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