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Historical Evolution of Shia Urdu Majalis in Pakistan

Abstract:

Shia majalis is a broad term which encompasses variety of religious gatherings adorned with diversity of speech acts. In Pakistan, Shia majalis are performed into different lingual and cultural backgrounds. Urdu majalis surpass the rest of lingual expressions in the popularity and number of performances. This paper, after describing the language based ontological and epistemological differences in the performance of majalis, argues that a remarkable change has been occurred in the composition and commencement of Urdu Shia Majalis over a period of time. It intends to bring the language in majalis discourse by analytically explaining the historical evolution of Urdu majalis. It maintains that Urdu majalis have gone through existential changes over the course of time. These changes can be periodically categorized in the reformatory, polemical and excommunicative trends in Urdu majalis in an evolutionary manner. During this course both genre and language are reflecting the surrounding social process. Argument is verified by analyzing the transitional behavior of structural components of majalis which include content, space and personalities

Keywords:

Shia Majalis Religious Theological Marsia Noha

Introduction:

Shia majalis is a broad term which encompasses variety of religious

gatherings adorned with diversity of speech acts. Majlis is not merely a speech act but is a composition of audiences, religious symbols, religious space and time based subjectivities. All these components combine to construct a majlis. Shiite Majalis are even more diverse in Pakistan. Language differences add to the diversity of components of a majlis in Pakistan. Urdu, Seraiki, Pushto, Sindhi and Punjabi are the main languages which are used in the commencement of majlis. Apparently it seems that language difference is ordinary one but, in fact, it brings forth even some ontological differences in the orientation of constituent elements of a majlis. Language decides the audiences, nature and design of symbols, space and time. Majalis discourse presents a plethora of discursive patterns based on content, ideology and practices to describe the division of Majalis but language has not been brought to this discursivity. This paper intends to bring the language in Majalis discourse by analytically explaining the historical evolution of Urdu Majalis. It maintains that Urdu Majalis have gone through existential changes over the course of time. During this course both genre and language are reflecting the surrounding social process. This paper deals with the personalization, contents and spatial evolution in the Shia Urdu Majalis to comprehend the overall process of structural transition in the Majalis.

History:

History of Shia Majalis in subcontinent dates back to the evolution of Urdu language. Urdu language and Shia Majalis have a strong bond of reflexivity. Both have benefitted from each other. Urdu literature and language reflected Shiite influences in the construction of genre of Marsiyya. Marsiyya, on the other hand, conferred upon Shiaism a dignified place in Urdu language and provided it with significant audiences. Lucknow emerged as a prominent Shia center in colonial India. The other important centers in this regard were Hyderabad and Delhi. These centers not only facilitated the growth of Shia congregations but also produced the notable Shiite scholarship. Syed Dildar Ali Shah, Syed Muhammad Dehlvi, Rasheed Turabi, Mufti Jaffar Hussain are the products of these centers. These scholars have a considerable contribution in the spread of modern Shi'ism and the current shape of Shiite congregations. These are the main figures that brought the Urdu Shia Majalis to the areas comprising today's Pakistan. Although

Urdu had been introduced through religious seminaries and Shia nationwide movements yet the Urdu Shia Majalis owes considerably to the efforts of the above mentioned religious scholars. It was a difficult task to convene Urdu Majalis in the areas with lingual diversity. Urdu Majalis in Punjabi, Seraiki, Sindi and Pashtun backgrounds became popular with the passage of time. Till date the popularity of Urdu Majalis has increased day by day. This evolution took place over a period of time. It will be interesting to know that how Urdu Majalis have passed this time. The evolution includes many performative transformations in the nature and structure of Majalis. Proceeding section details the different modes of significant transition in the evolution of Urdu Majalis.

Evolutionary Currents:

This part explains the argument that Urdu Majalis have gone through many structural transformations since the inception of Pakistan till now. Present study focusses on three major areas which demonstrate these transformations. These three areas are narrators, content and space of Urdu Majalis.

1. Narrators:

As described above that the Urdu Majalis owes their existence in Pakistan to the efforts and contribution of the religious scholars i.e. Syed Muhammad Dehlvi, Rasheed Turabi, Mufti Jaffar Hussain and Talib Jauhri. All of them belonged to migrants from India. They were born in the areas which are currently included in India. They are the first generation of Urdu narrators of Shia Majalis. Others who were the part of this first generation include many indigenous names i.e. Muhammad Yar Shah and Muhammad Hussain Najfi. This indigenous scholarship did not belong to migrant class but they were trained on the patterns which were supposed to be the landmark of Shiite scholarship. They were trained from the religious seminary of Najaf and were also attached with the local modern religious seminaries. This aspect made them close to the native speakers of Urdu Majalis. The first generation of Urdu speakers was well versed in the religious sciences. They had expertise in history, fiqh, Quranic exegesis and other fields of religious knowledge. Their performative expressions reflected their knowledge. They also played active role in the social and religious Shia movements. They always took care of the content they presented in the congregation.

Second generation of narrators succeeded the first. This happened in approximately late seventies and early eighties of previous century. This generation exhibited marked differences from the first stock of Shia Urdu reciters. Ghulfam Hussain Hashmi, TalibJauhary, Agha Naseem Abbas, Irfan HaiderAbidi, Ghazanfar Hashmi and Mohsin Naqvi were among the prominent narrators of the second generation. As mentioned above, this generation showed much difference from the first. The foremost difference lies in the fact that none of them went to Najaf for higher religious education but only two of them opted to join Qum. TalibJauhri and Gulfam Hashmi were trained in the tradition of elders. They followed the lines that were set by their predecessors. This following was restricted to the narration of Majalis. Still they were far away from the scholarly attitude and contributions of people like Mufti Jaffar Hussain, Nasir Ijtehadi and Rasheed Turabi. At the same time, their contemporaries, Agha Nasim Abbas and Irfan HaiderAbidi were focusing more on the oratory at the expense of traditional requisites of Shiite scholarship. They were not formally educated in religious seminaries as were their above mentioned contemporaries. Besides oratory they used polemical language in the commencement of Shiite majlis. Second generation of Urdu narrators also witnessed the inclusion of such people who were at all not trained in the tradition of traditional narrators. Ghazanfar Hashmi is the foremost example in this regard. He focused on the decoding the Islamic history and believes by utilizing Arabic hermeneutics. Mohsin Naqvi, a renowned poet, successfully introduced poetry as a medium of narration in the Shia Urdu congregations.

The transition that started in the scholarly credentials of the second generation of Urdu narrators became more evident in the third generation. This generation of shia Urdu narrators include the names of Shoukat Raza Shoukat, AqeelMohsin Naqvi, JaffarJatoi, Aqil Raza Zaidi and Asif Raza Alvi. This list showed a clear deviation from the format that was set by the first generation of Urdu narrators. None of them is qualified on the same traditional lines as were the elders trained. They took more help from the polemical and romantic methods instead of history and fiqh. It does not mean that the tradition of elders is altogether obsolete. A considerable number of Shiite scholars trained from the

religious seminaries of Qum and Najaf are being inflexed in Pakistan but they are excommunicated from the popular Shia congregations. The popular stage is occupied by the narrators of third generation. They have marginalized the trained scholars.

2. Content:

Urdu Majalis also witnessed the transformations in the selection and presentation of content. Content of Urdu Majalis has been gone through several changes. In fact the content of Shia Urdu majlis is the most controversial aspects discussed in Shiite discourse. This change in the content of majlis is evolutionary and occurred in similar manner as the change in narrators. First generation of Shia scholars adopted As?li lines in the selection and presentation of religious content in Majalis. This transformation can be broadly divided into three parts, reformative, polemical and excommunicative. This division do not out role the possibility of some other trends but to an extent explains the situation. It will be helpful to initiate a discourse to comprehend different aspects of Shiite development.

The first phase of Urdu Majalis, reformative, coincides the first generation of the Urdu narrators. It can be argued that they were the scholars who mainly focused on the reformatory model of presenting Shiite content in majalis. They followed strict As?li pattern. They mainly focused on the interpretation of faith and obligatory practices. Meanwhile, they were also trying to facilitate the availability of basic sources of Shiite tradition to the people. Mufti Jaffar Hussain translated *Nehj al Balagha* and *Sahifa e Sajjadiyya* in Urdu. Similarly, Muhammad Hussain Najfi was also translating the Arabic sources of Shiite faith and practices. Allama Naseer Ijتهادي and Rasheed Turabi were also following the same pattern. These narrators tried their best to rationalize their presentation on the basis of basic sources of Islamic fiqh, jurisprudence and history. They accorded their narration with verses from Quran, rational choice of traditions of Holy Prophet and were very much conscious about narrating the history. They maintained the as?li methodology throughout their career. The main topics of the Urdu majalis included Tauheed, Prophet hood, Imamate and necessity of practicing the obligatory practices. Their conscious and careful management of the subject maid

them acceptable across the borders of shia sect. Rasheed Turabi was the narrator of Majlis e sham Ghariban. He was equally revered by sunni and shia audiences. He was followed by TalibJauhri.

Reformatory tone of the first phase waschanged into polemical in the second phase. The content of Urdu majalis seemed to be dragged towards the polemical end. This transformation occurred in two ways. At first the subjects and topics of the first generation were maintained but their narration became polemical. At second, some narrators changed the subjects and overall matter of presentation of majlis. For example, Agha Naseem Abbas and Irfan Haider Abidi adopted the selection of As?li scholars but their narration was based on Akhbari methodology. The topic of Tauhid, Prophethood and imamate were discussed with a sufi orientation. They brought sufi patterns in the understanding of the Shiite concepts. Their polemical tone became popular with the rise of sectarianism in late eighties. They focused more on the explanation and presentation of their superior claims regarding faith. A less significance was rendered to the obligatory practices. Superiority of belief over practice was maintained in the majalis. This trend highlighted the differences between Shia and Sunni sects. Another shift in this phase took place in the ontological expression of majalis. Puritan content of majlis was replaced by romantic content. It was the reflection of vernacular tradition in the Urdu majalis. Mohsin Naqvi can be regarded as the pioneer of the introduction of romantic patterns of Urdu majalis. He, through his poetry considerably challenged the orientation and content of Urdu majalis. He, too, maintained the polemical voice as his contemporaries did.

Polemical tone of Urdu majalis got reaction from the As?li scholars but it was too late to be tackled. As?li scholarship got marginalized and became confined to the space of mosque and madrassa at the end of second phase. The reformatory content became almost obsolete from the popular Urdu majalis and its custodians were reduced to the religious seminaries. Third phase of Urdu majalis marked with the rising pattern of excommunication. The reformatory and polemical trends regarding the selection and presentation of content got replaced with excommunicative trend. 'Othering' became parts and parcel of the majlis content. The narrators i.e. Aqil Raza Zaidi, Asif Alvi and JaffarJatoi focused more on

defining the 'other' inside and outside the fold of shi'ism. They demarcated clear lines between their concept of shia'ism and all other discursive positions. They clarified their Akhbari position and openly criticized the understanding of the first stock of reformatory shia scholars. They claim that reformatory tone has distorted the real face of Shia sect. reformation, according to them is to pollute the belief. Their 'other' includes all the Sunnis and a large number of Shia communities as well. Shaukat Raza Shaukat, a poet, went ahead of Mohsin Naqvi as for as inclusion of new subjects in the content of majalis concerned. His voice also shows a clear excommunicative tone as compared to the polemical tone of Mohsin Naqvi.

3. Space:

Third main transition in shia Majalis is witnessed in the spatial evolution. After the partition of subcontinent, migrants from India established their enclaves in urban centers of Sind and Punjab. Integration process of migrants was affected and delayed due to several political and administrative reasons. These administrative and political confusions added to the exclusive trends in migrant communities in Sind and Punjab. There exclusion is evident from the establishment of separate places of worship by the migrants. One can find various Imam bargahs with the title of 'Imam bargah Muhajreen' in different districts of province Punjab. These spaces were established to perform the rituals of azadari. Their establishment is based on several reasons. The foremost issue was related with the language. Migrants were unaware of the local languages and also were alien to the local rituals of azadari. On the other hand indigenous Shias were indifferent to Urdu language. They could not share the space of Imam bargah, especially, in the early days. So the Urdu Majalis were confined to the space of these 'Muhajreen Imam bargahs.

Urdu Majalis became spatially popular in two steps. At first Urdu flourished in the space of religious seminaries. Urdu became the sophisticated language for the religious development because of its strong literary tradition as compared to other local languages. Local languages were still struggling for the establishment of script. Urdu attracted the religious scholars who had to translate the Arabic and Persian sources. It also helped to attract the educated class towards the religion. So religious seminaries adopted Urdu and Majalis were started to be commenced in

Urdu. These religious seminaries produced a large number of narrators who not only performed Majalis but also helped the madaris to spread specific ideological and political point of views. As described above in the section of content that reformatory Majalis were confined to the space of religious seminaries in the second phase of development of Shia Majalis. Urdu attracted the educated audience of the Shia Majalis and through these Majalis they also got linked with the seminaries. This spatial shift challenged the credibility and authenticity of vernacular aspects of Shia Majalis. They reflected this challenge by adopting Urdu as a medium of transmission of their message. This was, in fact, start of the third spatial phase.

In third phase the popular space of Imam bargah was opened for the Urdu narrators. The polemical and excommunicative phases of content adopted Urdu to accredit their narration. Now Urdu has become a popular language in the Shia Majalis and its canvas has been broadened with the inclusion of new ideas, rituals and modes of narration of Shia Majlis. Meanwhile another shift was also taking place in the reformatory Majalis which are mostly confined to the space of religious seminaries. Now there is significant number of Punjabi and Seraiki narrators of the reformatory patterns.

Conclusion:

History of Urdu Majalis reveals that they have gone through structural changes in an evolutionary manner. Historical narration of different phases and modes of transformation in Shia Majalis in this article strengthen the argument of change and at the same time also proves its evolutionary development. It is observed that in all the phases of narrators and content, Urdu has strengthened its grip on the overall development Shiite congregations. It has given voice to multiple trends. From reformation to excommunicative phase it has proved its worth. Urdu Majalis, as a medium of narration, has also shown inclusive flexibility. It can be inferred from the findings in the above discussion that Urdu will not only maintain its present influence but this influence will be enhanced in the future as well. The tradition of Urdu Majalis owes much to the literary superiority of Urdu over the local languages.

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31. AllamaHasnainGardaizi, Syed Jawad Naqvi and Syed Muhammad Najfi are examples of the scholars who represent their madaris in Islamabad and Lahore.
32. Language has been considered as one of interesting demarcation between a Zakir and scholar. Urdu narration itself conferred upon a narrator the status of scholar.
33. Urdu is used to attract the attention of emerging educated middle classes. The local languages, although rich in representative genre, are considered to be less progressive and fashionable.

