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The Lion of God: Function, Expression and Reception of Popular Devotional Posters

Abstract

This study seeks to analyse the iconic representations of Imam Ali depicted in popular Shia religious art displayed in domestic and public settings. It has a great significance in the ritual and devotional life of majority of the Shia community in the province of Punjab. Therefore the function of such posters has been discussed in ritual and devotional context. This study explores the achievable meanings and characters of Imam Ali imaginary depictions in the popular posters and personal piety. This study further discusses the representation of status and roles by also considering the signification of paraphernalia and attributes. We discussed the local viewer's response and reception of such devotional posters in their immediate environments from various perspectives: in relations to iconographic convention, local viewer's interpretive strategies and opinions, and the function of images. We argue that the objects of devotion discussed in this study weld the unity between the image itself and the beholder. The popular posters of Imam Ali are often served as votive images, the vow is presented to God through holy personages. In this context, during ethnographic field research and through the statements of many interlocutors we attempt to account for the expression, reception and function of imageries in the living tradition of Shia community's religious life.

With the help of many male informants, this study is based on an ethnographic field research conducted in selected cities and their suburbs in the province of Punjab (Pakistan).

Keywords: *Ethnographic research, Iconography, Devotion, Identity, Response and reception, Popular Posters.*

Introduction

In her extensive study, Susan Stewart performed an analysis of the diverse group of cultural forms and the ways in which every day objects and semiotics play an

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important role to create a relationship between object and the agent (Stewart 1993). This relationship between object and the agent has been widely studied by many anthropologists in the field of social sciences (Halle 1993; Starrett 1996; Morgan 1998, 2005; Flaskerud 2010; Asghar 2016;). The colorful prints are the objects of devotion which are produced by mechanical mode of printing, make relationship with their viewers. The printing industry entirely changed in the end of nineteenth century to produce popular cheap images which influenced medium of visual communication in all societies. The nineteenth century and present age is called the age of mechanical reproduction. In his seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” Walter Benjamin draws attention to the mechanical means of modern visual reproduction from lithography to film as well as the ideological role of images in the politics of modern culture (Benjamin 2008, 8; Asghar 2016). Apart from the production of advertisements and other commercial items, the printed religious icons became one of the most influential items in many societies (Neumayer and Schelberger 2003, 1-2). The following study aims at examining the spaces occupied by Shia religious prints and their adoption by the local public in their immediate environments. Such religious prints enjoy prime status in many other religions such as in Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Judaism. Such religious prints serve as the votive images that according to anthropologist Ingvild Flaskerud “the vow is presented ultimately to God but through the intercession of holy personages, who are considered to act as mediators between God and human beings. A supplication may concern protection, healing, material and spiritual assistance in this life and the safeguard of the souls of deceased friends and family members in the hereafter, as well as personal redemption” (Flaskerud 2012, 161). Particularly both in Sunni and Shia Islam, such votive images play a pivotal role to establish contact with God through the saints’ intercession in order to receive protection and benediction, and help in spiritual, mental and material problems (Asghar, 2016). This study deals with the investigation of contemporary Shia devotional prints which are employed at domestic particularly public spaces. Images expressing religious themes could be seen in decorating shops interiors, office spaces, public buildings, (*imam bargah*), private transports such as in cars and in homes. Many believers keep medallions with representations of Imam Ali or Imam Hussain particularly at home. Some keep a small sticker size pictures with a representations of a holy person in their wallet, or display such stickers on their home’s door, on visible places in the shops or offices or display them on the car dashboard or on windows (Asghar 2016). During our survey we found Shia religious posters in the small establishments of the middle and lower class strata situated both in urban and rural areas.

Consequently, Shia popular iconography did not only appeal to the religious masses, but is appreciated by members of the clergy or religious elite (Flaskerud 2010). There are also many who reject such representations because of their imaginary visual content as Sufi devotional images are rejected by many people in Sufi Islam (Asghar 2016; Graber 1973; Flaskerud 2008). Like Sunni Berelvi domestic and public spaces are decorated with popular devotional art similarly, in fact probably more so, Shia religious posters are different in many ways and more

widespread featuring many traditional items and symbols (Asghar 2016). In the investigation that follows, we try to show that in addition to its richness, this art can be remarkably complex. We explore possible meanings and characters of Imam Ali depictions in the popular posters and analyze the representation of status and roles presented in the representations by also considering the signification of paraphernalia and attributes. We also discuss the local viewer's reception in domestic and public domains (Flaskerud 2008; Asghar 2016). In this context, the purpose of this research study is to discuss the existence of popular posters and other objects of devotion in contemporary Shia religion, its iconography, and its relations to religious beliefs and devotional practices in contemporary Pakistani (Punjabi) society.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for this research is basically ethnographic.¹ It has been argued that meanings in visual sources could be studied at the site of production, the image itself, and in the social context (Flaskerud 2008; Baxandall 1988; Pink 2003). The present study deals with the analysis of imaginary sacred icon represented in posters and its content on the one hand, and its reception within a social and religious context, on the other (Flaskerud 2008). More specifically, following anthropologist Ingvild Flaskerud (2008), we perform an analysis of posters and symbolic imageries represented in different popular mediums that involves the identification and the interpretation of the signs depicted in these posters. The aim of this study is to elaborate on our information about the visual vocabulary applied in contemporary Shia popular art and its content or meaning in a recipient community. In addition to introducing and discussing a selection of popular posters, stickers and other items in the followings, we discuss possible functions of posters and images and their role in devotional practices. The posters are discussed from various perspectives: in relations to iconographic convention, local viewer's interpretive strategies and opinions, and the function of images (Flaskerud 2008, 2010). In sum, we attempt to account for the expression, reception and function of imageries in the living tradition of Shia community's religious life.

Data collecting is mainly based on series of field works in various urban and rural sites of Punjab in which we have taken photos where these were displayed, documented their use and the ways of reception. The posters we discuss here belong to that culture which is rich in devotion. As a religious art and expression, they are connected to a long tradition of verbally and visually representing religious figures, events, sacred history, doctrine, emotions and devotions (Asghar 2016; Flaskerud 2010). Moreover the Shia religious literature, with collections of martyrdom narratives, became a source of development of various ritual expressions that allowed believers to express their devotion. According to Flaskerud that the study of iconography, and its representation and reception is situated in its ethnographic and social contexts (Flaskerud 2008). This approach is combined with a review of historical research and anthropology. According to Flaskerud that "this interdisciplinary approach is congruent with the modern study

of iconography, which is methodologically and theoretically inspired by ethnography, anthropology semiotics and reception theory” (Flaskerud 2008, 22-26). This approach has been adopted in the studies of many anthropologists (Brendan 1993; Leeuwen 2005; Banks 2001).

It is imperative to mention that the methodology and theoretical perspectives serve this research topic and throw light on the significance of imagery to Shia contemporary devotional life and ritual space, a topic that has until now received a little attention in Pakistani (Punjabi) domestic and public settings whereas there are several treatises on this subject in other Islamic countries such as in Iran, India, Turkey and in many others countries (Asgar 2016). Following is a brief state of research which is relevant to the subject in hand and basically it has stimulated this study.

“The art and material cultural of Iranian Shi’ism: Iconography and religious devotion in Shi’i Islam” edited by Pedram Khosronejad and published by I.B. Tauris, is a book which contains a diverse collection of essays about the Shia popular art through the lens of religious, political and cultural aspects of various cultures.

Another book titled “Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiism” authored by Ingvild Flaskerud is basically originated as her PhD thesis which was later published by Continuum, is a comprehensive ethnographic research study which focused on the representations of Imam Ali and his family members in Iranian context. Combining iconographic and ethnographic approaches this study is a reflection and precious contribution to the understanding of the twelver Shia perspectives on the production and use of imageries, iconographic representations of Imam Ali and it throw light on the popular religious devotion prevaild in Shia community in Iran. Moreover this study has provided a foundation in writing up the subject in hand.

There are several other treatises about popular Shia religious art however it is impossible to give their review here. The basic foundation of this study is based on the book titled “The Sacred and the Secular” originated as PhD thesis (2016) by the first author of this study.

The present study aims to examine certain possible function and discussion on the popular devotional iconography of Shia devotional art particularly the iconographies of Imam Ali. Many posters that we collected during our field surveys and those they are loaded with generations of motifs, although the style is sometimes altered. The posters which are presented here are reproductions from the original exist in Iran. They displayed in domestic and public settings and are affordable and obtainable in various sizes to a large number of people (Asgar 2016; Flaskerud 2010).

Discussion

Function, Expression and Reception of Popular Posters

Shi’ism possesses a tradition of rich popular art. There are two important categories peculiar to Shi’ism: firstly more human portraits of holy personages,

which express something about their personality rather than the stylized genre of Sufi posters; and secondly narratives, objects and posters that tell a story about historical events. The most common representations in domestic and public settings are of Imam Ali, Imam Hussain, Imam Hussain's half-brother Abu al-Fazl Abbas, Imam Raza and Imam al-Mahdi (Flaskerud 2010; Asghar 2016). The narratives depict important events in the history of Islam, among which the battle of Karbala is the one most frequently illustrated, although there are also symbols associated with Imam Ali. All these religious images are employed at official religious festivals and on *majlises* (a broad category of religious gatherings held either in private parties or in *imam bargas*). Images expressing religious themes can be seen decorating shops interiors, offices spaces, and in homes. There are many believers who carry medallions with representations of Imam Ali or Imam Hussain. Many keep these compact pictures of their beloved Imam in their wallet. Religious Shia stickers and calligraphies are also displayed on cars and even public transport. Posters or small billboards of only text, no figurative representations announcing of *majlis-e-aza*, *zikar-e-Hussain* and other ritual events are pasted in visible locations in the city's streets and suburbs. It is also important to note here that figurative representations are always kept within shops, offices or domestic premises; they are not exhibited in open public spaces such as Sufi posters or banners in streets.

Colour posters depicting scenes from the battle at Karbala are particularly associated with rituals commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, his supporters and family members in 680 A. D. (Kohlberg 1985). The most common poster in the domestic settings of Shia elite is the portrait of Imam Ali with gazing towards his left (Figure 1). Such posters are copied from a painting and are widely admired in Shia upper circles, particularly in Iran as well as in Pakistan. Ingvild Flaskerud argued that; "contemporary pseudo-portraits of Imam Ali are based on a prototypical model, introduced to Iran in 1856. There is ample evidence, such as surviving images and objects, to state that the single portrait of Imam Ali soon was



*Figure 1: An imaginary poster of Imam Ali displayed in elite class domestic space.
Picture: From author's archive. Used in Asghar 2016.*

reproduced in various techniques, media, and sizes, and that is spread throughout the country--portraits of Imam Ali necessarily are interpreted the same way today, as they were when the prototype was introduced to Iran more than a century ago. But it is reasonable to believe that the pseudo-portrait achieved widespread acceptance due to its ability to represent Imam Ali in an adequate way. It has eventually shaped the visual capacity of the Shia interpretive community in Iran through its repetition and stable convention and today this image is reproduced as poster and can be bought in bookstores that specialise on religious literature and in poster stall” (Flaskerud 2008, 64-65).

Similarly in context of widely acceptance of posters of Imam Ali and also everywhere in esoteric Shia literature, Imam Ali is presented as an archetypal medium of the cosmic imam, the highest place of God’s expression. With this theosophic imamology, it is therefore natural that Ali plays the central role in contemplative practices (Moezzi 2012, 30). As mentioned above that the production of popular Shia religious prints also exists in Egypt, Syria, Turkey and India however most of these posters are imported from Iran (Asghar 2016). The posters produced in Iran encompass a more specific Shia understanding of Islam (Ibid). Unlike devotional art of Pakistan, in Iran these are painted by professionally trained artists, some of them having received their education in European art schools and therefore their technique and styles are influenced by Coptic Christian art and European Orientalism (Centlivres-Demont 2003, 106). However, the artists of most of these Iranian prints remain anonymous, thus the economic value of these visual objects derives from the quality of the material, rather than from any artistic originality (Asghar). Apart from reproduction of painting imported from Iran, there are several other original artworks displayed in elite class domestic spaces. The cheap copies of such artworks are widely available for the local public both for middle and poor class. Many original works of art exist particularly in Iran where many painting are derived from Persian miniature paintings which are aesthetically influenced by European paintings (Barakat 2003, 185). Barakat concluded that the European techniques and even their models of paintings “were considered as the most advanced and to copy it it was thought to be the shortest way to advancement and modernity” (Ibid 185). The most important significance of these visual objects is, however, to be found in the motif’s religious meaning and function. It is the reference to the person represented in the portrait and the event described in the narrative, which makes the images valuable for the religious beholder (Asghar 2016),

A wide range of imported motifs appear in these contemporary religious images. The most typically seen design in public and private spaces is the single portrait of Imam Ali. In addition, Ali is represented in a double portraiture together with his son Imam Hussain. He also appears in triple portraits together with his two sons Imam Hassan and Imam Hussain and sometimes Abu al-Fazl as well. In other pictures Imam Ali is also shown seated together with the subsequent ten and sometimes the eleven Imams. Narratives from the life story of Imam Ali span the time from his birth to his death. Apart from these, there are also several

representations of him with his family but they are not that common in domestic and public settings as they are in Iran (Asghar 2016; Flaskerud 2010).

Although the portraits of Shia devotional imagery are quite realistic they are of course only imaginary representations. However, in these portraits and the narratives depicted in the posters Imam Ali's qualities and character traits are reflected in the facial expression (Flaskerud 2010). According to many interlocutors, the face expressed kindness and honesty; qualities that many Shia believe characterize Imam Ali. Moreover the image serves as a role of mediator. One interlocutor who was a medical doctor stated that he perceived that he could connect metaphysically with Imam Ali through the image in his portrait, and that he supervised him in his work and healed his patients. It is our understanding from this and many other interviews that the viewer did find this power of mediation in the image itself; rather, the motif served to spiritually connect the viewer with Imam Ali (albeit only a subjective impression) by directing his mind and heart to the Imam's spirit; his fortitude and piety embodied in the holy face. The image functioned as a focal point of what the viewer aspired to be. When he looked at what he found in the icon, the look in the revered face he ask God to give him Ali's qualities. Imam Ali represents the epitome of holiness and character for Shias (and indeed for others too).

Flaskerud referred to many interlocutors during her multiple visits to Iran for her study that the imaginary pictures of Imam Ali "obtained three functions when used in popular devotional practice: to offer protection from the evil eye, to make the saint present, and to function as a means through which people could express one's alliance to the saint" (Flaskerud 2008, 61).

As discussed above, the images are not perceived as being authentic but adherents believe they present the appearance of a person who they can identify with Imam Ali and similarly for portraits of his family members. Hence these posthumous facsimiles are entirely the product of some believer's visual imagery. Following a definition offered by Richard Brilliant, "we suggest we are dealing with a pseudo-portrait, that is, a portrait that represents all those traits of character that people are prepared to accept as being Imam Ali" (Brilliant 1991, 80). He further argues that "a portrait that has become widely accepted as the image of a well-known historical subject may function very usefully as a portrait of that person even if the features are that of someone else or, I would add, are imaginary" (Ibid 78). However what seems to be the crucial factor is that viewers can associate the portrait with a given name, and with that person's character, appearance, reputation, fate, eminence and the role he played in religion.

It is common assumption in both sects Shia and Sunni that the throughout Islam's history Imam Ali has been and still is, respected and revered as a Caliph, Imam and Sufi. In the Shia theological doctrine of imamate he is ascribed to have meta-historical importance (Flaskerud 2012). Many believers admire his government, see his guidance and are inspired by him in their mystical quest. He is called "*Sher-e-Khuda*" (God's lion). Therefore he is also often represented being seated beside a lion and on his knees is his famous double pointed sword, *Zul-feqar*. We

found various other representations of Imam Ali where he is depicted standing, posing with the sword. In other posters he is depicted seated, with the sword resting on his lap. And many others posters show the sword is placed below the portrait like an emblem. The sword is said to have been obtained by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as booty at the battle at *Badar* (624 A.D.) and later offered to Imam Ali. Since then, both the Imam and the sword have achieved legendary fame. Their reputation is reflected in the proverbial expression “*la fata illa Ali, la saif illa Zul-feqar*”. (There is no true hero like Ali, no sword like Zul-feqar). This is the most commonly used caption in the posters, irrespective of iconographic design which appear often above or below the portraiture of Imam Ali. In Pakistan, also in contemporary Iran, and elsewhere in world where Shia community lives “one may observed banners decorated with the sword in which the sword is supposed to stand for Ali. Also in the media of film and television production, Zul-feqar is applied to represent Ali” (Flaskerud 2010, 49). Apart from this the religious character of Imam Ali and the way he is represented is easily identified by the beholders (Figure 2).

Explaining about the sword of Imam Ali, Flaskerud writes that; “Since the sword of Ali is known to have been used by Ali to fight for Islam, first on behalf of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and ---the sword is also a sign of Ali as an ardent supporter and protector of Islam. The symbolic power of the sword is eventually dependent on its ability to signify and reflect Ali’s characters as the chivalrous young hero, as well as his bravery, strength and agency. Moreover, if one believes that the sword was offered to Ali by the Prophet (PBUH), the sword may also symbolize the close relationship between the Prophet (PBUH) and Imam Ali” (Flaskerud 2010, 49).



Figure 2: A famous imaginary poster of Imam Ali (right) displayed in a shop.
Picture: From author’s archive.

The context of the poster that is often displayed in various shops has a great significance. Such posters are often displayed in poor class or lower middle class shops. In many shops, the owner has arranged his and his family’s photos in the frame or displayed them near the holy image. Other shop owners may also give importance to calligraphic retrospectives apart from figural representations of Shia imagery, according the interlocutor of a vegetable shop; “--- such posters that don’t show any figures increase the interest of the viewers and are generally

accepted by all those who come to my shop either Shia or Sunni. I have to maintain this religious plurality so that I and my business may not be effected". Religious plurality in Pakistan particularly in Punjab has been under a lot of pressure due to Shia Sunni conflicts which have taken hundreds of lives. But contemporary Punjabi society is experiencing better religious plurality despite several unfortunate and heinous incidents.

There are many educated people both in Shia and Sunni sects who disapprove of people invoking useless artifacts like Sufi posters and other religious commodities that purport to link with the divine and imagine that these can assure metaphysical favor or protection. But still many of these educated middle class acknowledge that Quranic verses and holy aphorisms do have power as display items, asserting that the latter have authority because of the word of God. According to Starrett that "---they sometimes compare these other commodities with the type of powerful objects they believe in" (Starrett 1995, 60). Like in many Muslim countries, Pakistan too, positioning these objects is an important factor in placing them in the home, shop or office. As Starrett further stated that the "---religious objects should enjoy pride of place with respect to other objects. They should be placed in a protected space and high up; maybe on a wall or high shelf where they are safe from being handled and have maximum visibility" (Ibid, 56).



*Figure 3: A luxurious car loaded with portrait of Imam Ali hanging up on other personal pictures.
Picture: From author's archive*

Although one can see several religious inscriptions and icons on private vehicles in Muslim countries but in Pakistani particularly Punjabi context, the religious icons both the Sufi posters, large stickers as well as small stickers of Imam Ali and religious protective formulas occupy prominent places especially in private vehicles such as hanging on rare-view mirror, rare windows. During our field research we questioned a driver of a luxurious car in the posh Lahore defense area. His vehicle was festooned with the portraits of a *Sayed* family (apparently that of his *pir*) hanging in line below a portrait of Imam Ali. We asked him how were they effective? He told us after a little thought; "--- the pictures hung in front of me gave protection because of their piousness. My *pir's* family is always in front of me and so are their blessings." We can argue from this revealing statement that such objects of devotion weld the unity between the image itself and the beholder and this unity safe the beholder from the evil eye and misfortune.

In context of this revealing statement by an educated interlocutor, we came to the conclusion that the role of such figures of piety is that they control the behaviors of the beholders in their daily life as well as they influence specific actions to be performed by the beholders such as praying to God, do charity and help others. Islamic religious commodities are found elsewhere particularly near the shrines of Sufi saints throughout in Pakistan. The religious commodities are the imitation of original works of art, mass production as well as craft production. This transition is studied by anthropologist Gregory Starrett in context of his study of “Religious Commodities in Cairo”. He argues that; “---the change from craft production to mass production of religious commodities has been accompanied by a further series of cultural changes that have altered Egyptian attitudes towards the public display of sacred writing. The variety of religious commodities has expanded as a result of the innovation required by a market-driven economy. At the same time, economic changes have increased demand for these commodities” (Starrett 1995, 52).

Flaskerud referred to art historian Michael Baxandall who addresses the relationship between receiver’s agency and the “role of his or her community in interpreting meanings. In studies of painting and experience in fifteenth-century Christian art in Renaissance Italy” (Flaskerud 2010, 12). She further refers Baxandall argument that “when a viewer is looking at an image one knows it has been made with the purpose of representing something (Ibid, 21). According to her that “a key point in his argument is that in the process of understanding what is shown, the viewer refers to his or her experience of representational conventions and that this visual experience is affected by the viewer’s society and culture” (Ibid, 21).

The posters representing Imam Ali are sometimes accompanied by text. The text often reveals by a local interpretation about the person being depicted. The combination of image and the text invites different readings of the images depending on the viewer’s competence. They are liked by many interlocutors because they were used to seeing these posters since their childhood. From a connotation perspective, long time exposure to Imam Ali representational mode had instigated many interlocutors a feeling of delight and familiarity when looking at it. According to David Morgan that gazing at devotional icon is itself a devotional act and generates a visual piety (Morgan 1998). Upon answering our question why some Shia chose to display images of Imam Ali in their home as well as in their shops, many interlocutors explained that it was necessary for them to bring the benediction and protection in their spaces. Flaskerud interviewed several interlocutors for her study of Shia posters and local viewer’s reception of Imam Ali in Iran. She referred to one interlocutor that; “--- we keep photographs or our loved ones who are dear to us. So it is natural that we should display images of the saints” (Flaskerud 2008, 103). She further referred to this interlocutor’s statement that he “expressed the notion that living people may establish close and long-lasting relations with saints, who despite their physical absence are believed to be spiritually present and active” (Ibid, 103).

The sale of sacred pictures and their use in domestic and public settings automatically triggers the devotional acts (Morgan 1998). These objects of love prompt the beholder to respond to them as to a tangible manifestation of God's presence in the universe. Referring to these objects of material art, transferred from the world of factory machinery to the world of manufactured religious commodities, anthropologist Gregory Starrett states Marx's famous description of alienation which literally becomes true that: "--- we become servants to the objects we create" (Starrett 1995, 61). Usually in Pakistan almost all vehicles either private or public carry sacred names of Allah and Muhammad (PBUH) or often some prayer for travelling. The primary purpose of carrying these sacred names in a vehicle is for protecting against misfortune or an accident. However carrying the personal photos of a family along with the imaginary portrait of Imam Ali is something very rare. Concluding that the reception of the posters of Imam Ali particularly in public spaces and in private vehicles brings protection and *Barakat* to that particular space where they are displayed. Several interlocutors expressed that the visual representations of Imam Ali based on hagiographic literature serves a guiding role in their lives similar in Iran where many interlocutors expressed that "the image of Imam Ali played an important role in mentally connecting to the spirit of Imam Ali, a process facilitated by looking at the image. In addition, looking at the saint's image kept alive the memory of a relationship with the saint, renewing it and prolonging it, and strengthening the viewer's emotional attachment with Imam Ali" (Flaskerud 2008, 117). The posters and small stickers of Imam Ali are equally popular among new and younger generation of Shia community. All interlocutors discussed in this study stated that they were inspired by Ali's characters when looking at the posters. The all spaces where the posters of Imam Ali hang were referred as beautiful and protected spaces.

This ethnographic field research suggests that the reception of the posters of Imam Ali in various settings of relatively middle to lower strata provides more palpable interaction with his portrait in regard to the supplicant's personal affection and relationship for the Imam. This impression depicted through the posters is accentuated by the stern, direct gaze, which gives Imam Ali a dynamic appearance, which, when combined with his positioning in relation to the viewer, induces vigorous authority. According to Shia tradition, viewing the imams gains access to God, which strengthens faith and makes saying the *kalima* (the *kalima* of Shias is slightly different to that of Sunnis) a more powerful act by the beholder.

Concluding Remarks

This ethnographic field research suggests that the reception of the posters of Imam Ali in various settings of relatively middle to lower strata provides more palpable interaction with his portrait in regard to the supplicant's personal affection and relationship for the Imam. This impression depicted through the posters is accentuated by the stern, direct gaze, which gives Imam Ali a dynamic appearance, which, when combined with his positioning in relation to the viewer, induces vigorous authority. According to Shia tradition, viewing the imams gains access to God, which strengthens faith and makes saying the *kalima* (the *kalima* of Shias is slightly different to that of Sunnis) a more powerful act by the beholder.

The signs and elements presented with the portraiture of Imam Ali in the posters depict various ways to depict Ali, to represent his character, his status and his role. The posters of Imam Ali are also very important for the relationship between the self and society because the selective and controlled display of sacred visuals establishes and reinforce piety and personal identity (Asgar, 2016). Finally, the manifestations of Shia visual art and how important they are to them also serve to weld unity in their community, thus strengthening their identity.

Notes & References

¹ This paper is extracted from the ethnographic field research which was carried out in various cities and their suburbs of Punjab province for HEC (Higher Education Commission of Pakistan) funded project titled "Identities and Manifestation: The Material Context of Art and Visual Culture inside Domestic and Public Spaces" under Thematic Research Grants Programs during 2016 to 2017. The project was submitted to HEC in October 2017.

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