



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

'Do not say they are dead' : the political use of mystical and religious concepts in the Persian poetry of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88)

Nematollahi Mahani, M.A.

Citation

Nematollahi Mahani, M. A. (2014, May 15). *'Do not say they are dead' : the political use of mystical and religious concepts in the Persian poetry of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88)*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/25764>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/25764>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/25764> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation

Author: Nematollahi Mahani, Mahnia A.

Title: 'Do not say they are dead' : the political use of mystical and religious concepts in the Persian poetry of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88)

Issue Date: 2014-05-15

CHAPTER THREE

MYSTICAL MOTIFS IN THE POETRY OF THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

INTRODUCTION

In the second chapter, I explained how the mystical motif of love adopted by the mystics found a new political meaning in the war poetry. The purpose of this chapter is to focus on other mystical motifs chosen by the Iranian war poets to define fight as spiritual self-mortification and death as spiritual elevation. In mystic treatises, Hallāj is represented as the archetypical lover but the war poets made a reference to him and his utterances in order to introduce him as a fighter for the sake of love and religion. In the ensuing paragraphs, I will explain how the war poets deployed and reinterpreted Hallājian motifs such as the cry, I am the Truth (*bāng-e ana al-Haqq*), the gallows of love (*dār-e ‘eshq*), and the witness to the ascension (*shāhed-e me‘rāj*) to justify the war and motivate young Iranian men to sacrifice themselves in the fight against the enemy. I will begin with a *mathnavi* by the war poet ‘Ali-Rezā Qazve to show how the mystical concept of the spiritual master (*pir*), shifted into a political context, inspires the youth to lay down their lives.

halā! pir-e hoshyār-e dard-āshnā
beriz az mey-e sabr dar jām-e mā
man az sharmsārān-e ru-ye to-am
*ze dordi-keshān-e sabu-ye to-am*³⁰²

Draw near! Wise old sage inured to pain,
Fill our cups with the wine of patience
On meeting you, I am abashed,
I drink the dregs from your goblet

³⁰² ‘A.R. Qazve, *Az nakhlestān tā khiyābān*, p. 40.

The poet asks the spiritual master, the *pir*, to pour the wine of patience into his cup. In classical mystical literature, the spiritual master teaches the principles of self-purification to the novice, and leads him through the mystic path to achieve the stage of self-annihilation (*fanā*). ‘Ali-Rezā Qazve applies the motif of the *pir* to his poem to draw an analogy between Ayatollah Khomeini and a spiritual master who leads the soldiers to the final spiritual stage. He guides them to the battlefield where they, like mystics, deny their worldly needs to gain spiritual elevation. The poet compares the soldier to a mystic who asks his master to pour the wine of patience (*sabr*) into his cup. The spiritual stage of *sabr* is obtained by mortifying the body. Here it alludes to the hardships that the soldier endures on the military front, and stimulates him to obey Ayatollah Khomeini, the *pir*, and to fight against the enemy. This may purify his soul from negative character traits. During the war, many people called Ayatollah Khomeini both the leader of the Islamic Revolution and the spiritual master. People of various classes followed his principles as if he was their spiritual leader. They called him imam, literally ‘meaning leader,’ in both a religious and political sense, and followed the principles prescribed by him. For the soldiers, giving up their lives in the battle was the same as following the orders of their master.

The concept of *pir* also has an antinomian connotation. The master is commonly associated with a Zoroastrian priest or the old magus who resides in a tavern, and guides the mystic to find and understand the Truth. The poet asserts that the master’s cup contains the dregs (*dordi*) of sorrow. This reminds the reader of the hardships that the master has endured in the path to spiritual perfection. He therefore knows the principles of self-purification and the rules of abstaining from worldly ties. In classical Persian literature, the motif of the wine of patience (*mey-e sabr*) stands for total rejection of worldly desires, and patience in suffering. In the war poetry, it implies absolute obedience to Ayatollah Khomeini. It entails purification of the soul, and tranquility of the heart.

MOTIFS BASED ON THE MYSTIC MARTYR HALLĀJ

The war poets use the mystic martyr Hosein Ebn Mansur Hallāj as an archetype of sacrificing one’s life for the sake of mystic doctrines. Hallājian motifs refer to Hallāj’s

mystical utterances and his execution on the gallows by the order of the Sunni court at Baghdad. The war poets employed these motifs to draw an analogy between a soldier's death on the front line and Hallāj's death as a mystic martyr. In this section I will explain something of the background of Hallāj, and the motif of 'the cry, I am the Truth,' his most famous ecstatic utterance. Then I will explain the motifs of 'the tongue is a tale-bearer (*ghāmmaz budan-e zabān*), the gallows of love (*dār-e 'eshq*), ablution by blood (*vozu be khun gereftan*), and Hallāj and the ascension from the gallows (*Hallāj-o dār-e me'rāj*). Ascension (*me'rāj*) is associated with several elements in the prophet's ascension to the heavens. In mystic literature, the prophet's ascension is cited to show that man is truly capable of spiritual progress and of a personal vision of God. These elements are used in the war poetry to imply that death on the front line guarantees one's place before the throne of God. To illustrate how these motifs were applied to encourage soldiers to offer their lives on the battlefield, I will explain the following ascension motifs: the witness of ascension (*shāhed-e Me'rāj*), the *Borāq* of love (*Borāq-e 'eshq*), and two bow lengths (*qāb-e qowsein*).

HOSEIN EBN MANSUR HALLĀJ AS A ROLE-MODEL

The Iranian war poets referred to Hallāj's life, and his ecstatic utterances, to draw a comparison between a soldier's death at the front and Hallāj's martyrdom as a mystic, to show the superiority of death over life, to underline the differences between Sunni and Shiite Islam, and between mysticism and orthodoxy, Arab and Persian, and the tyrant's court and the constitutional government. Hallāj was born in 858 in the city of Tur in the province of Fars (Southwestern Iran). He moved with his family to Wasit later to Tustar where he became a disciple of the mystic al-Tustari in 876.³⁰³ Hallāj's reputation for mystical insight grew after his first pilgrimage to Mecca, where he made a vow to stay for one year, and pray to God. He performed religious rituals such as prayer and fasting. He also began to act against "the discipline of secrecy" and shared his mystical insights. From

³⁰³ M. Trexler, in *Holy People of the World: A Cross Cultural Encyclopedia*, ed. Ph. G. Jestice, California: ABC-CLIO, 2004, under Hallāj Hosayn b. Mansur al, p. 343-4.

this time onwards, he taught his pupils how to know God in their hearts. For this reason, he was called *Hallāj al-Asrār* ('the carder of secrets'). During his second pilgrimage, Hallāj prayed to God to reduce his soul to nothingness, so that he could become a servant through whose lips God grants access to Himself. In his third and last pilgrimage to Mecca, Hallāj made a new proclamation, which led to his brutal death. He made a clay model of the Ka'be in his home, where he performed religious rituals. At night, he would pray beside tombs, and by day he wandered through the town, asking people to kill him. He said: "O, Muslims save me from God"... "God has made my blood lawful to you: kill me." He also said his famous *shath* (theophanic exclamation): "I am the Truth." This exclamation showed that there was no distance between him and God.³⁰⁴ Hallāj claimed a close relationship with God by saying, "What He wants, I want; and what I want He wants."³⁰⁵ Hallāj refers to the mystical experience called 'the unity of the Presence' (*vahdat al-shohud*). In a mystic sense, *shohud* means the actual presence of God in the heart of His servant. This union happens through faith and love; it is not a physical union. One who empties his heart of his self, allows it to be filled with God's love "the essence whose Essence is Love."³⁰⁶ Hallāj was arrested at the orders of the Abbasid caliph, al-Moqtader, and executed at Baghdad wearing a crown on his head. According to the mystics, he was executed because of his love for the divine, and his absolute submission to God. It is said that on the first day Hallāj was beaten, and the next day his head was cut off and his body was burned, then the ashes were thrown into the Tigris.³⁰⁷

After Hallāj's death, his disciples from Baghdad fled to Persia and transmitted his ideas secretly. A mystic from Shiraz, Ruzbehān Baqli (d. 1209) wrote commentaries on Hallāj's *Ketab at-Tawwāsin* and made his theory understandable for people.³⁰⁸ Later, Sufis developed Hallāj's ideas, and honored him as a martyr. They interpreted his *shath*, "I am

³⁰⁴ A.T. Karamustafa argues that the legendary account of '*ana al-Haqq*' attributed to Hallāj may be inaccurate. See A.T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*, California: University of California Press, 2007, pp. 25-6.

³⁰⁵ H.W. Mason, *Al-Hallaj*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 1995, p. 72.

³⁰⁶ L. Massignon & L. Gardet, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under al-Hallādj.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., For more information about Hallāj and his life see L. Massignon, *The Passion of Hallāj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, trans. H. Mason, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982.

³⁰⁸ A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 74.

[God] the Truth,” as the utterance of an ideal believer.³⁰⁹ Hallāj is famous for both his symbolic role as a lover who suffers from the pain of separation, and a lover who reveals the secrets of his Beloved.³¹⁰ Hallāj has become a model for all lovers who have been punished because they have unveiled the Beloved’s secrets, and talked openly about the mysteries of love. This is his greatest sin, according to the mystics.³¹¹ They made a myth of Hallāj’s death, presenting it as a way of achieving the love of God. From Hallāj’s life and death, they developed mystical motifs to show their inner state and their mystical relationship with God. A motif popular with the mystical love poets is “headlessness.”³¹² This points to his decapitation.

Aspects of Hallāj’s life became favorite motifs in mystic poetry. The mystic poet ‘Attār Neyshāburi, contributed considerably to the legend of Hallāj. In works such as *Tadhkerat al-Owliyā*, *Manteq al-Teyr*, *Elāhi-nāme*, *Asrār-nāme*, and *Mosibat-nāme*, ‘Attār refers to Hallāj’s mystical state and his dramatic death. ‘Attār holds that he too had successfully annihilated his ego, and so achieved ultimate union with Hallāj.³¹³ In *Mazhar al-‘Ajāyeb* (‘Manifestation of Wonders’), a book attributed to him, ‘Attār compares himself to Hallāj: “‘Attār, like Mansur, cries ‘I am the Truth’ setting the whole world on fire.” He encourages the reader to follow Hallāj’s way of life, taking the path of perfection to experience the mystical stage of annihilation. In *Haylāj-nāme* (‘The Story of Hallāj’) attributed to ‘Attār, he repeats ‘the outcry of *ana al-Haqq*’ (‘I am the Truth’), and says that he is united with Hallāj: “You are one with me in heart and soul – You are I, and I am You, master of union!” Several mystics such as Abd al-Rahmān Jāmi (1414-1492) have affirmed ‘Attār’s claim that he had a spiritual relationship with Hallāj, and that he achieved ultimate union with him. In his *Nafahāt al-Ons* (‘The Odor of Friendship’), Jāmi writes that “the light of Mansur [Hallāj] after one hundred fifty years manifested to the spirit of Farid al-

³⁰⁹ R. A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, p. 80.

³¹⁰ A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 65.

³¹¹ Ibid., p. 59; also see Ibid., pp. 64-5.

³¹² C.W. Ernst, “On Losing One’s Head: Hallājian Motifs and Authorial Identity in Poems Ascribed to Attār,” in *Attār and the Persian Sufi Tradition: The Art of Spiritual Flight*, eds. L. Lewisohn & Ch. Shackle, London & New York: I.B Tauris, London: The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2006, p. 333.

³¹³ Ibid., pp. 330-333.

Din ‘Attār and becomes his spiritual authority.”³¹⁴ ‘Attār disseminated Hallāj’s fame by referring to his life, the afflictions that he suffered, his death, and his utterances. The French scholar Massignon states: “It was above all due to the literary works of ‘Attār that the Hallājīan theme became one of the most famous leitmotifs in Iranian Muslim poetics, wherever Islam was propagated together with the love of Persian poetry because Persian poetry was used for the propagation of Islam.”³¹⁵

In the course of time, Hallāj’s life and death has become a legend. Hallāj was executed because he built a ka‘be in his courtyard and performed the pilgrimage ritual walking around it.³¹⁶ This was considered blasphemous by the political authorities. The mystics made a myth around his death and said that Hallāj was executed because he revealed the divine secret.³¹⁷ His name, life, and teachings have been used as tools for political purposes in the 20th century. He is transformed into a political character in a poem by Shafī‘i-Kadkani (b. 1939) in his collection of poetry entitled *Dar kuche bāghhā-ye Neyshābur* (‘In the Alleys of Neyshābur’). He introduces Hallāj as an activist who protested against social injustice. The poet says that Hallāj appears in the heart of a lover who is singing his famous ecstatic utterance: ‘I am the Truth.’ The poet draws a comparison between Hallāj’s utterance and the prayer of love (*namāz-e ‘eshq*).³¹⁸

...
bāz ān sorud-e sorkh-e ana al-Haqq
verd-e zabān-e ust
to dar namāz-e ‘eshq che khāndi?
ke sālkhāst bālā-ye dār rafti va in shahnehāy-e pir
az morde-at hanuz
*parhiz mikonand*³¹⁹

³¹⁴ C.W. Ernst, “On Losing One’s Head: Hallājīan Motifs and Authorial Identity in Poems Ascribed to Attār,” pp. 333-34.

³¹⁵ Ibid., p. 336.

³¹⁶ A.T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*, p. 25.

³¹⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

³¹⁸ F. Keshavarz, *Recite in the Name of the Red Rose: Poetic Sacred Making in Twentieth-century Iran*, Colombia: University of the South Carolina Press, 2006, p. 82.

³¹⁹ M.R. Shafī‘i-Kadkani, *Dar kuche bāghhā-ye Neyshābur*, Tehran: Enteshārāt-e Tus, 1350/1972, pp. 46-47.

Again that red chant of *I am the Truth*
 is the daily practice of his tongue.
 What was it you recited, in the prayer of love?
 For it is years since you climbed the scaffold but yet
 These old watchmen are still
 avoiding your corpse.

Shafi'i-Kadkani provides a political reading of Hallāj's death, attributing it to his defiance of the caliph. He asserts that Hallāj, aware of the caliph's illegitimacy, attempted to make the people of Baghdad aware of this, and motivated them to create uproar. The poet identifies the caliph's guards as the old town watchmen (*shahnehā-ye pir*) who arrested Hallāj and put him on the gallows. Literally, *shahne* means 'watchman'. The word is popular with classical love poets. For example, the fourteenth century Persian poet Hāfez used it to say that the moral police, in secret, behaved immorally. In his poem, Shafi'i-Kadkani equates Iranian revolutionary activists with Hallāj to inspire them to protest against the Pahlavi monarch. Hallāj was put on trial because he recited the prayer of love. However, the watchmen are afraid of his dead body, and the guards of the Pahlavi monarch are afraid of activists' dead bodies, because their deaths will awaken the Iranian population, leading to the overthrow of the regime.

Shafi'i-Kadkani's use of Hallāj in a modern context is not an isolated case but rather an example of how classical literary motifs have been used in modern times for political purposes. Hallāj was a champion not only during the Revolution, but also during the Iran-Iraq war. He became a living legend and served as the archetype of self-sacrifice in the path of love. The war poets employed Hallājian motifs to connect the fight against the Iraqi enemy to the spiritual self-denial that unites the mystic with the Beloved. In the ensuing paragraphs, I will analyze several Hallājian motifs frequently used in war poetry to illustrate how, within a political context, they served to motivate Iranian youth to lay down their lives on the battlefield.

THE OUTCRY OF I AM THE TRUTH

According to traditional accounts, one of the reasons for Hallāj's execution was his ecstatic statement: 'I am the Truth' (*ana al-Haqq*). During the war, his utterance was applied in war poetry asserting that self-sacrifice at the front unites the soldier with the Beloved. For example, the war poet Seyed Hasan Hoseini applies Hallāj's mystical utterance in a quatrain entitled 'The Prologue of Love' (*dibāche-ye 'eshq*), emphasizing that the first step in love is to offer one's life:

tā khāk ze khun-e pāk rangin nashavad
in dasht-e berahne lāle-āzin nashavad
tā lāle-rokhān bāng-e ana al-Haqq nazanand
*dibāche-ye sorkh-e 'eshq tadvin nashavad*³²⁰

As long as the soil is not colored with pure blood
 As long as this barren desert is not adorned with tulips
 As long as the tulip-faced people do not cry out, *I am the Truth*
 The red prologue of love will not be written.

Hoseini compares the war between Iran and Iraq to the mystical path towards perfection. He suggests that writing the red prologue of love (*dibāche-ye sorkh-e 'eshq*) requires several steps. The first step is to use one's own blood to color the soil. The image implies the act of self-sacrifice because it reminds the Persian reader of the bloody deaths of imam Hosein and his companions. The second step is filling the desert with tulips, which in Persian literature symbolizes martyrdom. During the war and afterwards, the tulip has been used in mural paintings to refer to the soldiers killed on the battlefield. Moreover, in Tehran and other cities of Iran, the cemeteries of martyrs are decorated with tulips made of metals or other materials. During the war, a ballad (*tasnif*), composed by 'Āref from Qazvin (1882-1934), a politically engaged poet-singer during the Constitutional Revolution, was very popular. The first line reads: "Tulips are growing from the blood of the youth of the

³²⁰ S.H. Hoseini, *Ham-sedā bā halq-e Esmā'il*, p. 132.

homeland” (*az khun-e javānān-e vatan lāle damide*). ‘Āref composed this ballad to motivate Iranians to act against the Qājār monarchy, to establish a new social and political order. In the years of the war, ‘Āref’s poem was broadcast on public radio across the country on a daily basis. It often ran several times a day in order to inspire the crowd to participate in the struggle.³²¹ The third step is that the tulip-faced soldiers should cry out ‘I am the Truth’ (*ana al-Haqq*), Hallāj’s ecstatic utterance. Hallāj says that God bestowed spiritual progress upon him: “O people! When *al-Haqq* (God) takes possession of a heart, He empties it of all else but Himself; and when He keeps a man for Himself, He ruins him for all else but Himself. When He lovingly desires a servant, He incites His other servants to enmity against him, so as to bring him close to Himself.”³²² Therefore, one who is elected by God suffers in the mundane world to purify his or her lower soul from negative traits, in preparation for union with God. Applying Hallāj’s utterance in the poem of war implies that a soldier who repeats this utterance and consequently dies at the front will attain the same spiritual perfection that Hallāj had, and will ultimately be united with the Beloved. The three images together stress the importance of self-sacrifice for the sake of enduring love.

To illustrate Iranian clerics’ appraisal of Hallāj’s mystical utterance, I will give several examples from the *Divān* (‘The Collection of Poems’) of Ayatollah Khomeini, who refers to Hallāj’s outcry “I am the truth” and criticizes him. Khomeini asserts that those groups (i.e., the Sufis) who publicly cry I am the truth are ‘pretenders’ or ‘intruders’ (*modda’iyān*).

zin modda’iyān ke fāsh ana al-Haqq guyand
*bā khod-bini vafā nadidam hargez*³²³

From these pretenders who proclaim aloud, I am the Truth,
 I’ve never seen fidelity, for their eyes are on themselves

³²¹ J. Matīnī, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under ‘Āref Qazvīnī.

³²² H.W. Mason, *Al-Hallaj*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 1995, p. 70.

³²³ Ayatollah Khomeini, *Divān-e Emām*, 1377/1998, p. 217.

Khomeini is placing himself in the millennium-old Persian mystic tradition. Classical poets such as Hafez use the term *modda‘i* to allude to Satan who claimed to be more in love with God than Adam. Satan’s argument with God resulted in his expulsion from heaven. Khomeini is criticizing Hallāj because he is boasting of his love for God. In boasting, he resembles Satan. In addition, Khomeini holds that “one who has never seen the beauty of the Friend, makes so much tumult.”³²⁴ Khomeini’s next reference to Hallāj has a critical tone. In a quatrain, he characterizes Hallāj as a selfish (*khodbin*) man. Literally it means one who sees his own self, who is self-centred. Khomeini says, “a self-centered man is an infidel/a selfless man does not boast ‘I am the Truth.’”³²⁵

Despite this criticism of Hallāj, in a *ghazal* entitled ‘The Love of the Beloved’ (*‘eshq-e deldār*), Khomeini makes an example out of Hallāj’s death: “The love of the Beloved affected me so that/ like Mansur, it took me from my land and put me on the gallows.”³²⁶ Ayatollah Khomeini follows Hallāj’s mystical path, but he condemns Hallāj because he publicized his love through his ecstatic utterances. Ayatollah Khomeini holds that revealing love is the easier way, which Hallāj has chosen, while hiding love is the more difficult path of love. It is interesting to see that despite Khomeini’s critical approach to Hallāj, this classic mystic was used in various ways in Persian war poetry to mobilize the Iranian population.

THE TONGUE IS A TALE-TELLER

One of the motifs which is popular with Persian mystical poets and the war poets is the tongue is a tale-teller. The tongue reveals the lover’s secret, disgraces him, and makes him a target of censure. Mystic poets used the motif to assert that the adept should hide his spiritual station from one who has no mystical experience. Hallāj is the type of lover who reveals the secret of the Beloved, and was beheaded as a result.³²⁷ In mystical treatises, love

³²⁴ Ibid., p. 246.

³²⁵ Ibid., p. 246.

³²⁶ Ibid., p. 82.

³²⁷ C.W. Ernst, “On Losing One’s Head: Hallājīan Motifs and Authorial Identity in Poems Ascribed to Attār,”

itself is a tale-teller (*ghammāz*) because it changes the lover's appearance and behavior, and unveils his secret.³²⁸

Even before Hallāj's execution, the question of hiding or revealing one's spiritual state, referred to the secret of love, was a matter of great concern. Two powerful mystical schools in Baghdad and Khorāsān addressed the subject. Those who followed the School of Baghdad, led by al-Joneyd, asserted that one should hide the inner secrets of one's heart and one's mystical states and experiences. Al-Joneyd taught his students to try "to remain on good terms with the religious and secular authorities of the capital."³²⁹ The mystics of this school believed that they should unveil their mystical experiences only for the members of their own circle. Nevertheless, several mystics of this school openly talked about their state, the most famous being Hallāj himself. In contrast to the school of Baghdad, the school of Khorāsān, led by Abu Yazid Bastāmi, spoke of being intoxicated with divine love.³³⁰ The followers of this school did not hide their love and their spiritual stations. A famous example is Abu Yazid Bastāmi who talked about his experiences. He is the first mystic to have claimed that he had ascended (*me 'rāj*) to the heavens.³³¹

The trope of revealing one's love has been popular in Persian literature until modern times. In Persian war poetry, the mystical motif of 'the tongue is a tale-teller' is used to draw an analogy between imam Hosein and Hallāj. They aim to identify the former's death as a mystical martyrdom. For instance, Seyed Hasan Hoseini applies the motif of unveiling the secret in a quatrain (*robā'i*) entitled 'The Unspoken Secret' (*serr-e magu*):

gar bar setam-e qorun bar-āshoft Hosein
bidāri-ye mā khāst, be khun khoft Hosein
ānjā ke zabān mahram-e asrār nabud

p. 339.

³²⁸ See in this study, chapter on Mystic Love in Iran-Iraq War Poetry, subtitle, Abandoning reason for the cause of spiritual perfection, pp. 67-72.

³²⁹ A. Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History*, Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2000, p. 61; for further information see L. Ridgeon, *Morals and Mysticism in Persian Sufism: A History of Sufi-futuwwat in Iran*, New York: Routledge, 2010, p. 32.

³³⁰ S.H. Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition*, New York: Harper One, 2007, p. 179.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

*bā lahje-ye khun serr-e magu goft Hosein*³³²

When Hosein rebelled against the tyranny of centuries
 He wished to waken us, before he slept in blood
 As there was no language to confide the secrets
 Hosein revealed the unspoken secret with the tongue of blood.

In this poem, the word ‘centuries’ (*qorun*) refers to the oppression imposed on human beings since the beginning of human history, when Kane murdered his brother Abel.³³³ Shiites believe that tyranny and oppression on earth started when Kane killed his brother Abel. From then on, the cycle of revenge was handed down from generation to generation, until it ended with Hosein’s death, which has not been yet avenged.³³⁴ He sacrificed his life to awaken the Muslims and to mobilize them to protest against unjust and illegitimate rulers. The poet Hoseini uses the idiom ‘to sleep in blood’ (*be khun khoftan*) to symbolize imam Hosein’s death. It transmits the reader the feeling that Hosein death was unjust and cruel, and fans hatred and the desire for revenge. According to Shiite accounts, after the execution of Hosein and his companions, their enemies cut off their heads and trampled their bodies. This image is used repeatedly in annual Passion Play re-enactments of imam Hosein’s death. During the war the plays intensified the audience’s hatred for Sunni Muslims and the Iraqi enemy. Iranian propaganda presented them and the Iraqi soldiers as enemies of imam Hosein, as well as of Iranians.

According to the poet, imam Hosein had a message and a mission, to rouse Muslims to fight against tyrants and offer their lives for this goal. Iranian should follow Hosein’s example. He is the archetype of self-sacrifice in the path of God. The poet uses the motif of the storyteller to connect Hosein’s martyrdom to Hallāj’s mystical martyrdom. They were both beheaded and their bodies were not protected. The poet also makes a contrast between

³³² S.H. Hoseini, *Ham-sedā bā halq-e Esmā’il*, p. 111.

³³³ For further information about the continuity of oppression during history see ‘A. Shariati, “Hosein vāreth-e Ādam,” in *Hosein vāreth-e Ādam, Majmu’-ye āthār* 19, pp. 35-57.

³³⁴ ‘A. Shariati, *Hosein vāreth-e Ādam*, pp. 35-57.

imam Hosein and Hallāj. Unlike Hallāj, imam Hosein hid the secret of love, but his bloody death revealed it to those who understand it. Thus the soldier should also hide the secret of love from the Iraqi enemy and from people unable to understand it, but his bloody death at the front will reveal the secret. The soldier's death transforms him into a holy figure, a part of the archetype of self-sacrifice. He becomes a model whom the Iranian community should emulate.

THE GALLOWS OF LOVE

Another motif connected with Hallāj is the gallows of love (*dār-e 'eshq*) used frequently in war poetry to draw an analogy between Hallāj's execution and a soldier's death on the battlefield. The gallows symbolizes love, and the utmost sacrifice that a mystic can make to achieve union with the Beloved. The war poet Seyed Hasan Hoseini applies the gallows of love motif in 'The Outcry' (*faryād*) to equate a soldier's death to mystical martyrdom.

*'ārefi ku dar ghazal faryād ras
jān-e mā rā mozhde-hā midād ku
'eshq-bāzi tā farāz-e dār-e 'eshq
shive-i digar nahad bonyād ku*³³⁵

Where is a sage who could defend us in his *ghazal*
giving our soul much joyful news
Practicing love even on the summit of love's gallows
establishing a new foundation for love, where is he

The poet looks for the sage who gave good news and practiced love to the summit of the gallows. In this poem, the sage stands for a spiritual master, a familiar character in the *ghazals* of the fourteenth century poet, Hafez from Shiraz. In Persian literature, the sage may be a leader, an advisor, a kind friend, or a companion. In the poem of war, the sage

³³⁵ S.H. Hoseini, *Ham-sedā bā halq-e Esmā'il*, p. 97.

refers to Ayatollah Khomeini who led the soldiers to the battlefield, and asked them to sacrifice their lives for the cause of the Islamic Revolution. Although there is no direct reference to Hallāj's execution, in the second line, the motif of the gallows of love (*dār-e 'eshq*) refers to his execution. The soldier's familiarity with the narrative of Hallāj life, his execution, and his mystical elevation provides the poet with the opportunity to convince the soldier that his death is a path to spiritual perfection. Hoseini draws an analogy between the battlefield, where the soldier lays down his life and the gallows where Hallāj was hanged. The poem appears to create a dichotomy between the Iranian Hallāj and the Iraqi soldiers; between the heavenly objective for which the Iranian young men sacrifice their lives, and the earthly objective that the Iraqi soldiers are fighting for it. The poet contrasts mysticism with orthodox Islam. Inspired by mystical motives, Iranian young men, like Hallāj, strive to offer their lives to become one with Him and achieve eternal salvation. Furthermore, they choose death to preserve "the truth of God's teaching and law."³³⁶

Ablution in blood (*vozu be khun gereftan*) is an element of the gallows of love motif, which was popular with the war poets. The kind of ablutions referred to the 'lesser ablutions' performed before obligatory prayers. In the war poetry this motif is uniquely used in a non-metaphorical sense. In a *robā'i*, the war poet, Mohammad-Rezā Sohrābi refers to Hallāj's death using the motif of ablution:

dar ma'reke-hā jonun gereftim cho tigh
sad bār vozu be khun gereftim cho tigh
hengāme-ye tufān-e khatar sā'e qevār
*jān az tan-e khasm-e dun gereftim cho tigh*³³⁷

Like the blade, we become mad on the battlefield
 Like the blade, we perform ablutions in blood, one hundred times
 At the time of typhoon of danger, we thunder-like
 Have taken the soul of the enemy from his body

³³⁶ H.W. Mason, *Al-Hallaj*, p. 41.

³³⁷ *Gozide-ye she'r-e jang va defā'e moqaddas*, p. 89.

Sohrābi draws a comparison between the soldier and a sharp blade that kills. The motif of the mad blade symbolizes killing the enemy without any fear of death. It refers to the fact that during the war the Iranian soldiers attacked the enemy although they did not have adequate weapons. In the second line, we come across the motif of ablution in blood. Literally, 'ablution means washing parts of the body with pure water, to prepare oneself for prayer'. Ablution in blood refers to Hallāj's execution. The mystic poet, 'Attār relates that when his hands were cut off, he covered his face with blood so that no one would think he was afraid of death.³³⁸ Later, the mystics called this 'performing ablutions in blood.' One who embarks on the path of love, like Hallāj, should cleanse his body with his own blood. The poet, Sohrābi employs the motif to draw a comparison between death at the front, and mystic martyrdom. Aware of his impending death, the soldier leaves his loved ones and his belongings behind, just as a mystic who embarks upon the path of love denies his worldly desires, and metaphorically sacrifices his life, to achieve spiritual perfection. Inspired by the poems and state propaganda, soldiers were led to believe that through death they would attain to the same stage of perfection that Hallāj reached.

In their treatises, the mystics employed the motif of ablutions in blood to illustrate the inevitable suffering and death of a lover for the sake of the Beloved. In certain Sufi circles, such as the Ne'matollahi, a candidate should perform five rituals of ablutions before initiation and acceptance in a mystical order. They are: 1) the ablution of repentance from all past sins; 2) the ablution of submission to the will of God; 3) the ablution of spiritual poverty; 4) the ablution of pilgrimage on the Sufi path; 5) the ablution of fulfillment.³³⁹ Through these outward and inward purifications, the pure love of God is revealed in the heart of the mystic. Hallāj performed ablution with his blood to repent from sin and submit himself to the will of God. In an anecdote, 'Attār asserts that ablutions with blood are the prerequisite for elevation to the summit of the gallows of love:

che midāni ke 'āsheq dar che kār ast

³³⁸ *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat al-Owliya* ('Memorial of the Saints'), Fardi al-Din Attar, trans. A.J. Arberry, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966, p. 270.

³³⁹ I.R. Netton, *Sufi Ritual: The Parallel Universe*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000, pp. 30-31.

ke sejdegāh-e u bālā-ye dār ast
bebāyad kard ghosl az khun-e khishat
*ke tā ān sejdegāh ārand pishat*³⁴⁰

What do you know of what the lover is doing
 Because the place he prostrates himself is atop the gallows
 You should perform ablutions with your own blood
 So that you may be led to that place of prostration.

‘Attār supposes that the lover is given the opportunity to perform prayer at the place of worship (*sejdegāh*) where Hallāj prayed, that is, at the gallows, providing he first bathes in blood (in this case the reference is to major ablutions, requiring bathing). ‘Attār implies that one should purify his soul to die on the gallows.

We see that Sohrābi, like other war poets, employs the terminology and motifs which mystics used, to equate death on the battlefield with Hallāj’s martyrdom. The poet means to say that death is a means through which one survives eternally, and achieves unity with the Beloved. Thus, one who enters on the path of spiritual perfection can never be defeated: his death is the beginning of a new life in and with the Beloved. Sohrābi implies that Hallāj offered his life to develop Shiite beliefs. It is worth noting that Hallāj was in fact a Sunni Muslim, but his act of sacrifice is applied in the war literature to inspire a sense of self-sacrifice in the community. In this literature, Hallāj is commonly presented as a Shiite Muslim, as his way of achieving union with the Beloved is blended with the paths of the Shiite saints.

HALLĀJ AND THE GALLOWS OF ASCENSION

Hallāj and the gallows of ascension (*Hallāj-o dār-e me‘rāj*) is another element of the gallows of love motif. Literally, the word ascension (*me‘rāj*) means “ladder,” but the

³⁴⁰ Farid al-Din ‘Attār, *Elāhi-nāme*, with notes and introduction by H. Ritter, Tehran, Enteshārāt-e Tus, 1368/1989, p. 107.

reference is to the prophet Mohammad's ascension to the heavens. The concept of *me'rāj* derives from the Qur'ānic verse: "Glory be to Him who transported His servant by night (*asrā bi abdi-hi laylan*) from the Masjed al-Harām to the Masjed al-Aqsā (the further place of prayer) which We have surrounded with blessing, in order to show him one of our signs" (17:1).³⁴¹ The prophet who ascended to the throne of God and saw Him has achieved the highest spiritual perfection. Then he returned to the earth to guide humans. In mystical treatises, the *me'rāj* is a metaphor for man's spiritual progress, showing that man is capable of ascending to the divine if he purifies his soul by means of self-mortification and self-denial. This metaphoric aspect of *me'rāj* was changed to a dynamic reality by the war poets. The war poets draw an analogy between the prophet Mohammad's ascension and a soldier's death in battle, through which he achieves perfection and becomes a guide for the community.

A popular account, in the sense of Iranians knowledge about *me'rāj*, of the prophet's journey to heaven says that he was sleeping near the Ka'be in Mecca when he was awakened by the archangel Gabriel. He had a winged mount with him named Borāq. The prophet was mounted on Borāq and they began their journey to Jerusalem. On the way, they visited Hebron and Bethlehem. In Jerusalem, they met Abraham, Moses and Jesus, and the obligatory prayer (*salāt*) was performed with the prophet leading the prayers. This shows his superiority to the other prophets.³⁴² From Jerusalem they ascended to heaven. After passing through Hell and Heaven the prophet alone was standing before God's throne.³⁴³ Gabriel was not allowed to draw near to God. Only the prophet, as a human being, could approach God. This refers to man's capacity to understand love, which angels

³⁴¹ B. Schrieke, & J. Horovitz, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under *Mi'rādj*.

³⁴² Ibid., under *Mi'rādj*: In Islamic exegesis and in the popular and mystical tradition of the Arab world.

³⁴³ Ibid., For further information about Borāq see: R. Paret, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under *al-Burāk*; H. Taremy, in *Encyclopaedia of the World of Islam (Dāneshnāme-ye jahān-e Eslām)*, under *Borāq*. The tradition of the ascension can be traced back to pre-Islamic history. According to the *Avestā*, Zarathustra spent ten years "in the best existence" and again joined his kinsmen. Vohā Manō is his companion and guide. Zarathustra passes through four stages until he arrives to the throne of Ahurā Mazdā. A well-known tale exists in Middle Persian texts, called the *Ardā virāf nāme*. It is the story of the magi Ardāvīrāz, who through a spiritual journey visited Heaven and Hell. When he descends, he brings valuable commands for his community. Ebn al-Nadim in his *al-Fehrest* mentions a celebrated angel seen by Mani, the founder of Manichaeism. Mani started his prophetic mission when he saw the angel. Biruni, in his *al-Athār*, refers to the ascension of Jamshid, the great Iranian mythic king, to Heaven. His journey was about defeating death and demons. See De Fouchécour, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under *Mi'rādj*.

lack.³⁴⁴

During this Night Journey, the prophet could “bear the vision” because he did not accept the heavenly offers, such as “fantastic wonders, towering angels and heavenly rivers.”³⁴⁵ He was offered the opportunity to talk with the prophets and angels, but when he realized that they are veils over God’s face, he rejected the offer. Therefore, he obtained a spiritual perfection that led to the divine vision. On this account the Qur’ān says: “He revealed to His servant what He revealed” (53:10).³⁴⁶

The prophet’s ascension to the heavens has been a subject of controversy among various groups of scholars. The mystics and philosophers treat it as an allegory; and Sufis explain the ascension as detachment from the world of sensuality to achieve divine knowledge.³⁴⁷ Hojviri asserts that the prophets’ rank is higher than the mystics’ position because the mystics must follow the prophets’ path until they attain to the presence of God.³⁴⁸ ‘Attār interprets the prophet’s ascension in his mystical work *Elāhi-nāme*. The poet uses the image of the union of “two arches into one single arch.” This image symbolizes God’s oneness (*towhid*).³⁴⁹ He asserts that an arrow removed the letter ‘m’ from the term Ahmad (the prophet’s title) and transformed it into *Ahad* (a name of God, meaning unity).³⁵⁰ Nezāmi of Ganja (ca. 1141-1209) developed the motif of ascension in his romances, to emphasize the spiritual elevation of the soul. For him, the prophet’s ascension is an example of spiritual perfection and detachment from the world of nature.³⁵¹ In his *Haft*

³⁴⁴ For Hāfez’s view on angel’s incapability of understanding love see A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, “Waxing Eloquent”... in *Metaphors and Imagery in Persian Poetry*, pp. 115-6; also see idem, “The Erotic Spirit: Love, Man and Satan in Hāfez’s Poetry,” in *Hafiz and The School of Love in Classical Persian Poetry*, ed. L. Lewisohn, London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 107-21.

³⁴⁵ F. S. Colby, “The Subtitle of the Ascensions: al-Sulamī on the Mi’rāj of the Prophet Mohammad,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 94, 2002, p. 175.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 175-6.

³⁴⁷ B. Schrieke, & J. Horovitz, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under Mi’rādī, In Islamic exegesis and in the popular and mystical tradition of the Arab world.

³⁴⁸ Abo al-Hasan ‘Ali Ebn Othmān al-Jollābi al-Hojviri al-Ghaznavi, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, corrected by V. Zhukovsky, p. 307.

³⁴⁹ C.H. De Fouchecour, “The Story of the Ascension (Mi’rāj) in Nizāmī’s Work,” in *The Poetry of Nizāmī Ganjavi: Knowledge, Love, and Rhetoric*, eds. K. Talattof & J. W. Clinton, Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000, p. 181.

³⁵⁰ C.H. De Fouchecour, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under Mi’rādī.

³⁵¹ For further information on mystical explanations of nature in Nezāmi’s *Haft Paykar* see A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, “A Mystical Reading of Nizāmī’s Use of Nature in the Haft Paykar,” in *A Key to the Treasure of the*

peykar ('Seven Beauties'), Nezāmi shows how Mohammad intercedes for Muslims. The prophet receives the letter (*barāt*) through which he rescues the Muslims from punishment in the hereafter.³⁵²

The war poets connected the concept of ascension with the death of *Hallāj* to further connect it to death at the front line. For this purpose, they use the gallows of ascension motif. The motif is used by Parviz Beygi Habibābādi in a poem titled 'They are Coming from Karbalā' (*az Karbalā miāyand*).

Hallāj-o dār-e me'rāj, khunin-tarin hemāse-ast
*ey kheyli-e nābekārān in qowm sarbedār ast*³⁵³

The bloodiest epic is that of Hallāj, and his ascension on the gallows
O filthy army, this people's head is on the gallows (*Sarbedār*)

In this poem, the motif of the gallows of ascension (*dār-e me'rāj*) refers to Hallāj execution. Blood (*khun*) is one of the significant symbols that Habibābādi employs to depict his death as cruel. Both red and blood symbolize martyrdom. The image of spilling blood on the ground, or on the rocks represents blood is of no use for the body.³⁵⁴ Rather the blood infuses life to the community. The poet signifies Hallāj execution as the bloodiest epic because before his death, his hands and feet were cut off. The poet draws an analogy between Hallāj's execution and Mohammad's ascension to assert that his death has united him with God. Thus, a soldier who emulates his way of life and dies on the battlefield will

Hakīm: Artistic and Humanistic Aspects of Nizāmī's Khamse, eds. J.Ch. Bürgel & Ch. van Ruymbeke, Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2011, pp. 181-93. A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Laylī and Majnūn*, p. 184; C.H. de Fouchécour, "Les Récits d'ascension (Me'rāj) dans l'œuvre de Nizami" in *Études Irano-aryennes Offertes à Gilbert Lazard*, eds. C.H., de Fouchécour & P. Gignoux, Paris, 1989, pp. 99-108.

³⁵² Nezāmi Ganjavi, *Haft Peykar*, noted by B. Thervatiyān, Tehran: Mo'assese-ye enteshārāt-e Amir Kabir, 1387/ 2008, p. 88, bayts 70-74. For further information on the ascension in Nezāmi's romances see, *Leyli va Majnūn*, corrected and annotated by B. Thervatiyān, Tehran: Tus, 1364/1985; Nezāmi Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-Asrār*, corrected, annotated and noted, and proverbs by B. Thervatiyān, Tehran: Tus, 1363/1984. *Dāstān Khosrow va Shirin*, by 'A.-M. Āyati, Tehran: Mo'assese-ye enteshārāt-e Frānklin, 1353/1974.

³⁵³ *Gozide-ye she'r-e jang va defā'e moqaddas*, p. 183. For more examples of the concept of sarbedārān in the war poetry see S. H. Hoseini, *Ham-sedā bā halq-e Esmā'il*, pp. 14, 72.

³⁵⁴ D. Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 117.

become a companion of God in the Hereafter.

The mystics assert that man originates from God in a movement of “cosmic descent” and is intended to return to Him in “mystic ascent.” The return is possible if man realizes that he is made in God’s likeness, and can achieve eternal salvation in unity with Him. To this end, he should consciously experience God’s presence in his every act, and strive for moral perfection through ascetic disciplines.³⁵⁵ The mystics refer to the prophet’s ascension to the heavens to set an example for man’s spiritual progress, which is also an ascent, i.e. breaking the bounds of the physical life and moving upwardly toward God. Because the prophet Mohammad is the ‘perfect man’ (*ensān-e kāmél*), he attains to the presence of God. However as a human being, he is similar to other people in nature and creation. Therefore, every person may experience such an ascent if he cleanses his soul from negative traits. For instance, the mystic Abu Yazid Bastāmi claimed that he ascended to the heavens and experienced God’s presence. He said, “‘Thy obedience to me is greater than my obedience to Thee’; ‘I am the throne and the footstool’; ‘I am the well-preserved tablet.’” He could make such assertions because “In meditation he made flights into the supersensible world.”³⁵⁶

Later, the mystics called Hallāj’s death ascension toward God. The war poet Habibābādi compares Hallāj’s death to the prophet’s ascension and holds that one who dies a mystic’s death ascends to God’s throne. Iranian soldiers should follow Hallāj’s example and sacrifice their lives in the path of perfection, which for them is self-sacrifice on the front. The poet implies that death is the beginning of a heavenly journey toward God and companionship with Him. It is worth noting that the concept of ascension is connected to a return to the physical world. Prophet Mohammad returned from heaven to the physical world and became a model for the Muslims. Not surprisingly, as David Cook puts it, “a number of Hallāj’s followers believed that he would return from the dead after a period of forty days.”³⁵⁷ Without a doubt, Hallāj believed in spiritual annihilation in the Beloved, and because of his love for union with God, he prayed to die. Qāzi Ebn Haddād recounts that

³⁵⁵ G. Böwering, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under *Ensān-e Kāmél*.

³⁵⁶ H. Ritter, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under Abū Yazīd (Bāyazīd) Ṭayfūr b. ‘Īsā b. Surūshān al-Biṣṭāmī.

³⁵⁷ D. Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 68.

Hallāj went to the cemeteries and prayed “...I am asking from you do not return me to myself, after having robbed me of myself... increase the number of my enemies in Your cities, and the number of those among Your faithful who clamor for my death!”³⁵⁸ According to the citation, Hallāj did not expect to return to the physical world after his death. In the war context, a soldier, like Hallāj, achieves the same mystical elevation that the prophet Mohammad achieved. However one who falls in battle does not return to life, but he becomes a blessed holy figure and the archetype of altruism, which the community should imitate.

In the ascension narratives, it is asserted that on the night of ascension, God allowed the prophet to intercede (*shefā’a*) on behalf of Muslims in the hereafter.³⁵⁹ Accordingly, one who experiences ascension may intercede on behalf of the Muslim community. During the Iran-Iraq war, the concept of ascension was applied quite literally. A key was hung on the neck of a youth who was going to walk on the minefields, or who went into battle against the Iraqis. The Iranian authorities told the soldiers that it is the key to paradise. They were promised they would meet the master of the martyrs (imam Hosein) in paradise.

In the second line, Habibābādī employs the compound word *sarbedār*. Literally this means ‘one’s head on the gallows,’ in the sense of, laying one’s neck on the executioner’s block. The poet says that Iranians are ready to offer their lives to preserve Islam. However, the word *Sarbedār* also refers to a 14th century Shiite movement called the *Sarbedārān*, who established a state in *Sabzevār*, a district in the province of *Khorāsān* in North West of Iran. This movement was shaped to limit the power and influence of the Mongol ruler in *Khorāsān*.³⁶⁰ They were a movement that anticipated the coming of the Mahdi and sought to establish an ideal moral kingdom that would please the Lord of the Age when he came. The presence of the Shiite *Sarbedārān*s in *Sabzevār* became a problem for the Sunnis in that region, and a struggle developed between the Sunnis and the *Sarbedārān*. The Sunnis asked the Mongol ruler to assist them. The *Sarbedārān*s taught one should act justly and honestly,

³⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 66.

³⁵⁹ According to C.H. De Fouchecour, Surābādī in his *Tafsir* has added the features of the prophet’s intercession (*shefā’at*) and *bara’t* (Persian *barāt*) “key to deliverance.” For further information see De C.H. Fouchecour, “The Story of the Ascension (*Mi’rāj*) in Nizāmī’s Work,” in *The Poetry of Nizāmī Ganjavi: Knowledge, Love, and Rhetoric*, p.181.

³⁶⁰ C.P. Melville, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under *Sarbadārīds*.

and be ready to fight for the cause of religion.³⁶¹ By saying “this people’s head is on the gallows (*Sarbedār*)” the poet is saying that Iranian soldiers are also ready to lay down their lives to preserve Shiite Islam, and are prepared for the inevitable struggle against the enemies of the Mahdi who will return from occultation before the Last Day. He creates a dichotomy between Iranian Shiites, waiting for the Mahdi’s return, and the Iraqi Sunnis, equivalent to the Mongols, who do not believe in his return.

The war poet, Seyed Hasan Hoseini employs the motif of ascension on the gallows in a *robā’i*:

dar sangar-e haqq hamāre peykār khosh ast
Mansur sefat ‘oruj bar dār khosh ast
ānjā ke resad bāng-e Mohammad bar gush
*raftan be rah-e Buzar-o ‘Ammār khosh ast*³⁶²

Fighting constantly in the trench of truth is joyful
 Ascending the gallows like Mansur is joyful
 Wherever Mohammad’s call is heard
 Following the path of Buzar and ‘Ammār is joyful.

The poet uses the notions of truth (*haqq*) versus void or futile (*bātel*) to legitimize Iranians’ fight against the Iraqis. Iranians are fighting on the trench of truth (*sangar-e haqq*), and God will support them in the fight against the enemy who is identified as *bātel*. Thus, if Iranians are killed they will receive their rewards in the hereafter. The poet refers to Hallāj as one who is killed for the sake of truth to introduce him as a model for Iranian soldiers. He connects Hallāj’s death with the lives of two of Mohammad’s companions: Abuzar al-Ghaffārī (d. 652), and ‘Ammār Ebn Yāser (d. 657). Both fought in a number of battles, and the latter was killed in the battle of Saffīn.³⁶³ In this poem, Hallāj’s death for the sake of

³⁶¹ J.M. Smith, *The History of the Sarbadār Dynasty 1336-1381 A.D. and its Sources*, The Hague & Paris: Mouton, 1970, pp. 55-60.

³⁶² S.H. Hoseini, *Ham-sedā bā halq-e Esmā’il*, p. 144.

³⁶³ H. Reckendorf, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under ‘Ammār b. Yāsir.

divine love is parallel to al-Abuzar and ‘Ammār efforts for the sake of Islam. In short, one who fights against the enemy will achieve the same spiritual elevation that a mystic attains when he resists his carnal soul and its desires.³⁶⁴

OFFERING ONE’S HEAD

The war poets often employed the mystical motif of ‘head-offering’ (*sar dādan*) to encourage young Iranian men to fight and sacrifice their lives. In their treatises, the mystics used the motif to symbolize self-purification and self-mortification to achieve unity with the Beloved. The motif is associated closely with Hallāj’s execution in Baghdad. ‘Attār refers to Hallāj’s spiritual position and his dramatic death so artfully that he transforms “the universal metaphor of headlessness” into a Hallājian motif.³⁶⁵ On the one hand, the war poets used the motif to mobilize the young men for the military front, and on the other hand, the Iranian state employed the motif to propagate, and to define death for the sake of the Islamic Revolution as a praiseworthy act. The state created such an atmosphere that almost everyone longed to acquire such a trait. Many young men laid down their lives, the most famous example being a twelve-year-old youth called Mohammad Hosein Fahmide (d. 1980) who blew himself up under an Iraqi tank in Khorramshahr.³⁶⁶ He was praised by Ayatollah Khomeini, in the following words: “Our leader is that twelve-years-old child who threw himself with his little heart against the enemy. He is worth more than a hundred pens and a hundred tongues”³⁶⁷ This statement presents the necessity of self-sacrifice on the battlefield and why other people should take Fahmide as an example.

In the following quatrain by Seyed Hasan Hoseini, there is an analogy between death on the battlefield and achieving spiritual perfection:

sar-dāde manam ke sar-farāzam guyand

³⁶⁴ For more instances on the subject see *Mosābeqe-ye she’r-e jang*, p. 26.

³⁶⁵ C.W. Ernst, “On Losing One’s Head: Hallājian motifs and authorial identity in poems ascribed to Attār,” p. 333; A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Layli and Majnun*, pp. 130-38.

³⁶⁶ M. Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 415.

³⁶⁷ J.M. Davis, *Martyrs: Innocence, Vengeance, and Despair in the Middle East*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. 49.

āheste be in-o ān cho rāzam guyand
chon āye-ye razm dar jahādam khānand
*chon sure-ye hamd dar namāzam guyand*³⁶⁸

They call me the exalted one because I have given my head
 They say whisper my secret to everyone
 They recite me, like fight verse at the time when *jehād* is performed
 They recite me like the verse praise (*hamd*) in prayer.

The poet speaks in the first person, referring to himself as one who has sacrificed his life (*sar- dāde*). The word is derived from the compound verb *sar-dādan*. Literally, it means ‘giving up one’s head’ usually in the path of love. Metaphorically it means abandoning rational thinking. The poet says that one who gives up rational thinking is not afraid of death because he becomes *sar-farāz*, exalted (literally ‘one’s head raised’). The compound *sar-farāz* refers to Hallāj’s death on gallows. This concept is reflected in the war poetry, emphasizing how those who sacrifice their lives become famous, gaining honour and respect from their community. Using the mystical motif of revealing the secret (*rāz goftan*), Hoseini connects the death of Hallāj with the death of a soldier. The mystics made Hallāj’s death an example for a lover who unveils the secrets of love. The poet uses the motif to identify the soldier with Hallāj. *Sar-bāz* (literally ‘to gamble one’s head or to play on one’s head’) is the common Persian word for a soldier. One who gambles will lose his wealth; a soldier who gambles, will lose his head. In the modern Iranian war context, the reward for this offering ‘the head’ is union with the Beloved, in the same way as a mystic would achieve his goal. The poet creates a dynamic setting that allows the soldier to equate himself with Hallāj; therefore, he sacrifices his life to achieve a higher spiritual station.

In Persian mystical love literature, ‘to make one’s head one’s foot’ (*sar qadam kardan*) indicates that the first step on the path of love is to be prepared to offer one’s life. This motif is used in a *ghazal* entitled ‘The Smell of Apples’ (*bu-ye sib*) by ‘Ali-Rezā Qazve:

³⁶⁸ S.H. Hoseini, *Ham-sedā bā halq-e Esmā’il*, p. 137.

emshab az in ku-ye bon-bast bā pā-ye sar mitavān rast
*rowshan cherāgh-e del-o dast bā nur-e am-man yojib ast*³⁶⁹

Tonight, one may leave this blind alley if one goes with the feet of one's head
 The heart and hand are illumined by the light of *am-man yojib*

The poet draws an analogy between a man's lifetime and a blind alley (*ku-ye bon-bast*). One can leave this blind alley, the world, if one offers one's life. The compound *am-man yojib* refers to the Qur'ān: "He who answers the constrained, when he calls unto Him, and removes the evil" (*amman yojib-o al-moztara ezā do 'ā-ho va yakshef-o su*) (27:63). In the same verse God promises the caliphate of the earth to one who remembers Him: "And appoints you to be successors in the earth." The verse is popular among the Iranians. They would recite the verse when they are in trouble, and soldiers recited it on the battlefield in the hope of divine assistance. The poet's reference to the verse gives the good news that evil, meaning Iraq, will be destroyed thanks to divine assistance, and also that the Iranian soldiers will be the successors of God on earth. One who gives up his life would become free from the blind alley (the physical world). In the second line, the poet's reference to the illumination of the heart and the hand reminds the reader of the time when the soldier was praying, and he raised his hands toward the heavens. Symbolically, he asked for help. Thus, he is eternally illumined by reciting the verse and offering his soul.

These various ways of indicating the necessity of offering one's life derive from classical Persian poetry, in which all these concepts also relate to subordinating the intellect, expressed through a wide range of metaphors. To give one example, in his mystical work *Hadiqat al-Haqiqat*, Sanā'i says that self-denial unites the lover with the Beloved.

avval az bahr-e 'eshq-e deljuyash
*sar qadam kon cho kelk-o mijuyash*³⁷⁰

³⁶⁹ *Gozide-ye she'r-e jang va defā 'e moqaddas*, p. 53.

Firstly, for the sake of the Beloved's love that seeks the heart
make your head your foot as the pen does, and then seek Him.

The motif of transforming head to foot in a Sufi framework may be explained as a mystic's ecstasy and yearning for unifying with the Beloved, which overcomes his intellect. He first renounces the world, then he denies himself. The compound *sar qadam kardan* symbolizes self-sacrifice. In mystics' view, self-denial is the prerequisite for self-sacrifice. The pilgrim in the path of love may not offer his life unless he has denied his self. In the second line, the word *kelk* refers to a pen made of reed. It is used for writing when its head is cut off. Using the word pen (*kelk*), Sanā'i implies that the lover should offer his head in the hope of unity with the Beloved. The pen's movement depends on the calligrapher. In mystical treatises, the pen symbolizes man and the calligrapher is the Creator. Similarly, in the path of love, the lover should obey the Beloved like a self-less pen. To attain such a spiritual level, the mystic lives an ascetic way of life, he renounces the world, he becomes blameworthy, and he gambles his possessions including his head to become one with the Beloved.³⁷¹

LITERARY MOTIFS OF ASCENSION

The war poets draw comparisons between martyrdom and ascension. They relied on every single aspect of the narrative of ascension to inspire the Iranian crowd to fight against the Iraqi enemy. To equate death on the battlefield with the prophet's ascension, Seyed Hasan Hoseini uses the motif of ascension in a poem couched in the form of 'new poetry' (*she'r-e now*), entitled 'The Third Song' (*sorud-e sewwom*),

...
me'rāj-e mardān rā
qāmat basti
be zakhm-e Hosein

³⁷⁰ Sanā'i Ghaznavi, *Hadiqat al-Haqiqat*, p. 30.

³⁷¹ A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Laylī and Majnūn*, p. 300.

*dar zohr-e 'Āshurā*³⁷²

You rise up to ascend, as a man does

You are wounded like Hosein

On the day of 'Āshurā, at noon

By employing the word *man* (*mardān*), Hoseini compares a soldier to a 'perfect man' (*ensān al-kāmel*) who may ascend to the heavens. The 'perfect man' represents a mystical concept of spiritual perfection, developed by the mystic Ebn al-'Arabi. He asserts that an individual who follows the Sufi path and annihilates his attributes in the attributes of God will become one with the universal spirit. The Sufis consider all prophets and imams and sheikhs to be perfect men, but their paradigm is the prophet Mohammad. Man is God's vicegerent on earth (2:30), and he accepted the role of *amānat*, trusteeship, when other creatures refused it (33:72). In his nature, man has two poles; he can ascend toward the angels by purifying his soul through ascetic training, or he can descend to the lowest level if he attaches himself to the terrestrial world. Ebn al-'Arabi explains the concept of the 'perfect man' in his *Fusus al-Hekam* ('The Rings Stones of Wisdom'). He relies on the Qur'anic verse that asserts, "man is the vicegerent (*khalife*) of God on earth."³⁷³ After creating the world God created Adam and polished him by means of the divine command to be a mirror in which His image could be reflected.³⁷⁴ Ayatollah Khomeini was fascinated by the concept of the 'perfect man' as explained by mystics such as Ebn al-'Arabi. It allows for the possibility that man can reach the highest level of perfection and remain in constant communion with God. It is important to note that a Shiite Muslim is allowed to identify himself with the imam of the age (*imām-e asr*) who is known as a perfect model for human beings.³⁷⁵ Ayatollah Khomeini added one intermediary step to man's spiritual journey to God. He says, "by establishing rightful policies, the government of absolute justice and a

³⁷² S.H. Hoseini, *Ham-sedā bā halq-e Esmā'il*, pp. 67-8.

³⁷³ R. Amaldez in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under al-Insān al-Kāmil.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ B. Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 1999, (reprinted in New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2000.) p. 47.

reign of divinity, the ‘perfect man’ will guide society towards absolute perfection.”³⁷⁶ Khomeini compares the ‘just government’ to the ‘perfect man’, who is responsible for guiding the community and purifying it to reach the stage of perfection.

In the above poem, the poet compares imam Hosein who lay down his life to establish a just state, to the ‘perfect man’. Thus, the soldier who is following the path of Hosein and sacrifices his life will attain the station of the ‘perfect man’. One may conclude that the ideals introduced by Ayatollah Khomeini are reflected in the war poetry.

The poet refers to the wounds that Hosein suffered on the day of ‘Āshurā to say that his death made him ascend to the heavens. According to the historian Abu Ja‘far Mohammad Ebn Jarir Tabari, the battle between imam Hosein and Ebn al-Ziyād’s soldiers lasted a long time, until a group of the soldiers attacked and killed him. Such symbols (i.e wounds) remind Iranians of Hosein’s martyrdom. Thus the poem asserts that the soldier may not ascend to the heaven unless, like imam Hosein, the enemy kills him.

Returning from the heavenly journey to the physical world is another aspect of ascension treated in the above poem. The prophet returned to the physical world to lead the Muslim community. But the return of a soldier killed in the fight is not possible. Thus the martyr is introduced, as an archetype of the holy figure who leads the community to spiritual progress towards eternal salvation. To achieve such a stage of perfection, Iranians should emulate the martyr’s act of sacrifice. In sum, in mystical treatises, spiritual progress may lead to the mystic’s ascension to the heavens, whereas in war poetry, death on the battlefield may lead to the soldier’s ascension.

In war poetry, another motif that identifies death as ascension is the witness of ascension (*shāhed-e Me‘rāj*). Hosein Esrāfilī applies the motif in a poem entitled ‘My City Khorramshahr’ (*shahr-e man Khorramshahr*).³⁷⁷

shahr-e man ey shāhed-e bidār-e ‘eshq
shahr-e man ey ma‘zan-e por-bār-e ‘eshq
khāne-vo kāshāne gar tārāj shod

³⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 49.

³⁷⁷ For the city of *Khorramshahr* see p. 123-24 present study.

kuche-hāyat shāhed-e me 'rāj shod
shāhed-e me 'rāj-e ensān tā khodā
*'arse-ye peymān-e ensān tā khodā*³⁷⁸

O my city! You are love's wakeful witness
 O my city! You are a place where love may reveal itself
 Although the houses and apartments have been plundered
 Your alleys bear witness to [the soldiers'] ascension
 [You are] the witness to man's ascension to God
 [You are] the field where man fulfills his pledge to God.

Hosein Esrāfili asserts that in Khorramshahr love reveals itself; therefore, the lovers sacrifice their lives for its sake. They ascend to the heavens while the city witnesses their journey. The poet personifies the city, calling it a wakeful witness of love (*shāhed-e bidār-e 'eshq*). The poem is associated with the 22 September 1980 invasion of Iraq when Iraqi soldiers occupied Khorramshahr. Iranians regained control of the city on 23 May 1982.³⁷⁹ During the fight many Iranians were killed, the city was bombarded, and reduced to ruins. The poet compares the people who fought against the Iraqi soldiers street by street to the lovers who offer their heads in the path of love. The soldiers' act of sacrifice originates in the spiritual progress they have achieved. The city of Khorramshahr witnessed the hardships they have endured to free the city, and their self-sacrificing acts of altruism. In Persian literature, love kills the lover to make it possible for him to attain union with the Beloved. In this poem, the city as the place where love reveals itself, and Iranian soldiers hurry, out of love, to free the town and to be united with the Beloved: love of homeland and mystic love are combined.

In this poem the rank of the soldiers killed in defense of the city is elevated to that of the prophet during his ascension (*me 'rāj*). When Khorramshahr was occupied, the human-wave attacks by the Iranian soldiers forced Iraq to abandon its military equipment

³⁷⁸ *Mosābeqe-ye she'r-e jang*, p. 52.

³⁷⁹ E. Goldstein, *Wars and Peace Treaties 1816-1991*, New York: Routledge, 2005, p.125.

and leave.³⁸⁰ The poet refers to this historical fact in saying that the city's alleys witnessed the ascension of the soldiers. By using the word ascension, the poet avoids referring to the bloody deaths of Iranian soldiers, and instead draws an analogy between the soldier and a mystic who overcomes the temptations of his lower soul in a spiritual battle and experiences ascension. Such a definition of death motivates the soldier to sacrifice his life in the hope of attaining the presence of God. The poet combines the witness of ascension motif to the Qur'ānic concept of the primordial covenant (7:171). The Qur'ān also says that at the time of the primordial covenant, God commanded the children of Adam "you should not serve Satan, surely he is a manifest foe" (36:60). The soldier keeps that ancient promise when he offers his life on the battlefield, in fighting the enemy.³⁸¹

To legitimize the war, the concept of renewing the covenant was propagated during Friday prayers. For instance, in a Friday sermon, Ayatollah Tāleqāni (1911-1979) addressed the martyrs of the war and said: "Today we are standing above their tomb, we are visiting their shrines, but this presence is different from a normal visit and the traditional reciting of the Opening (*fātehe*).³⁸² The reason for our presence is that we want to renew our commitment. O youth! Sleeping under this soil... after one year we have come to renew our covenant with you. We keep our covenant by avenging your blood, and keeping alive your cry: 'God is the Greatest.' ... Know that we renew our covenant to show our opposition to oppression, deception and colonialism for the sake of humanity and all peoples' freedom. We renew the covenant to implement the principles of Islam and the Qur'ān, which had been covered by dust and used only for recitation"³⁸³ These words mean that one may renew one's covenant with God if one follows the martyrs' example and sacrifices one's life. It should be added that after the Islamic Revolution the West and the United States of America, were presented as deceiving the people and establishing colonialism.

The poet Mohammad-Rezā Abd al-Mālekiyān draws an analogy between death on

³⁸⁰ A.H. Cordesman & A. R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War*, vol. II, The Iran- Iran War, Boulder, & San Francisco: Westview Press, 1990, p. 138.

³⁸¹ For future information on the concept of covenant between man and God see chapter on mystic love in Iran-Iraq war poetry in present study.

³⁸² *Fātehe* is the first verse in the Qur'ān. This verse is recited to wish the blessing of God for the deceased.

³⁸³ *Dar maktab-e jom'e: majmu'e-ye khotbehā-ye namāz-e jom'e-ye Tehran*, compiled and ordered by markaz-e madārek-e farhangi-ye enqelāb-e eslāmi, vol. 1, week 1-25, Tehran: Enteshārāt-e chāpkhāne-ye Vezārat-e Ershād-e Eslāmi, 1364/1983, p. 48, (sermon of 16/06/1358).

the military front and ascension to the heavens, in a poem entitled ‘The Letter’ (*nāme*).

man bā do cheshm-e khish
didam ke didebān-e jebhe-ye mā bā do bāl-e sabz
parvāz kard-o raft
tā bi-karān-e ‘arsh
*tā khālvat-e khodā*³⁸⁴

I saw with both my eyes
 That the watchman on the front line
 Ascended by means of two green wings
 So far as the infinity of the throne
 So far as the private chambers of God.

The poet uses several motifs and metaphors to define the death of a lookout as a heavenly journey. Martyrdom is compared to ascension; the watcher is compared to a winged angel. The images of flying to the infinity of the throne of God and to His private chambers signify ascension to heavens. The watchman flies on two green wings: green symbolizes martyrdom, and points to the martyr’s eternal life in heaven. A famous *hadith* says of those who are killed in the path of God (*jehād*) “Allah puts their souls into the bodies of green birds, which quench their thirst in the rivers of Eden, and eat of its fruits.”³⁸⁵ Most Shiites are familiar with such prophetic traditions, so the poet’s reference to green wings will assure the reader that the watchman now resides beside God.

During the war, the leaders of the Islamic Republic used the concept of the martyr’s presence beside God to exalt the spiritual position of death on the battlefield. For example, in his sermons, Ayatollah Khāmenei compares the soldiers killed by the enemy to “martyrs who have settled beside God (*javār-e khodā*)”.³⁸⁶ This sentence originates from the

³⁸⁴ *Gozide-ye she‘r-e jang va defā‘e moqaddas*, p. 269.

³⁸⁵ A. Morabia, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under Lawn (a.). For future information on the symbolic meanings of the color green, red and yellow see *Ibid*.

³⁸⁶ *Dar maktab-e jom‘e: majmu‘e-ye khotbehā-ye jom‘e-ye Tehrān*, compiled and ordered by markaz-e

Qur'ānic verse (3:169) in which God promises that those who are killed in his path will reside beside His throne. Ayatollah Khāmenei assures his audience that the martyred youth are blessed, they are enjoying the bliss of the garden (i.e heaven).

Another element in the theme of ascension in modern war poetry is 'the prophet's companionship with the archangel, Gabriel.' It is narrated that on the night of ascension, Gabriel guided the prophet to the heavens, but he was not allowed to go beyond the limits of the throne.³⁸⁷ The war poets relied on this to draw an analogy between the prophet and the volunteer soldiers (*basijis*) who sacrifice their lives at the front. For instance, it may refer to one who runs into minefields to clear the way for the artillery.³⁸⁸

The war poet, Sheikh Hosein-Ali Rahmāni applies the motif of the angel's companionship (*ham-'enān dāshtan-e malak*) in a *ghazal* called 'The Basiji's Station' (*maqām-e basiji*):

shab-e me'rāj andar bazm-e ekhlās
*malak rā ham-'enān dārad basiji*³⁸⁹

On the night of ascension, in the banquet of sincerity
 The Basiji rides [his horse] beside the angel.

Here, Rahmāni states that an angel guides a martyred basiji to heaven. He likens a *basiji*'s death with the prophet's ascension. The poet compares the battlefield to the banquet of sincerity (*bazm-e ekhlās*). *Ekhlās* is a Qur'ānic word meaning purity and salvation. It is defined as "dedicating, devoting or consecrating oneself to something." Such a profound devotion refers to the sincerity and purity in performing religious principles, "absolute

madārek-e farhangi-ye enqelāb-e eslāmi, vol. 3, week 71-113, Tehran: Enteshārāt-e chāpkhāne-ye Vezārat-e Ershād-e Eslāmi, 1365/ 1984, p. 53.

³⁸⁷ B. Schrieke & J. Horovitz, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under "Mi'rādī", In Islamic exegesis and in the popular and mystical tradition of the Arab world; W. Madelung, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under Malā'ika.

³⁸⁸ E.L. Daniel, *The History of Iran*, Westport, Connecticut, London: Westwood Press, 2001, p. 208.

³⁸⁹ *Kuche por az 'atr-e nāme to: majmu'e-ye ash'ār-e defā'-e moqaddas*, ed. A. Binā'i, p. 39.

devotion to God and to the community of the Believers.”³⁹⁰ The image refers to the soldier’s profound devotion to the Islamic Revolution and its religious principles. He is fighting against Iraqi soldiers, called unbelievers by the state. The *basiji*’s death is identified as participating in the banquet of sincerity, since he proves his fidelity by his death. In sum, the poet creates a dynamic setting to encourage the youth to participate in the fight. He asserts that the death of the young men on the military front is a means through which his soul ascends toward heavens, and he begins a new life beside God.

In a *ghazal* entitled ‘The Scent of Clothing’ (*rāyehe-ye pirāhan*), ‘Abbās-‘Ali Mahdi combines martyrdom with the concept of Gabriel’s accompanying the prophet:

emruz be hengām-e ‘oruj-e to malā’ek
*goftand be man qesse-ye par-par zadanat rā*³⁹¹

Today, at the moment of your ascension, the angels
 Told me how you were flying while offering your life

In this poem, the angels are witnessing a soldier’s death. The poet employs the infinitive *par-par zadan* to refer to the soldier’s unexpected death. Literally, *par-par zadan* or *par-par shodan* means ‘fluttering with wings,’ i.e. sudden death without illness or after a short period of illness. The infinitive symbolizes flattering the upward movement of the soldier’s soul. The poet identifies the angels (*malā’ek*) as those who bear witness to the soldier’s death. They guide him to the heavens and finally tell the community that the soldier has ascended.

The Borāq of love (*Borāq-e ‘eshq*) is another motif associated with the prophet’s ascension. The war poets employ this motif to equate death on the battlefield to Borāq, the winged horse that carried the prophet during his night journey. It also relates ironically to the angel of death (*Malak al-Mowt*) who takes the soul to the presence of God. In the war poetry, the mount Borāq is merged with the angel of death. A soldier who dies is mounting

³⁹⁰ L. Gardet, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under *Ikhlaṣ*.

³⁹¹ *Gozide-ye she’r-e jang va defā ‘e moqaddas*, p. 187.

on Borāq to begin his journey toward heaven. In mystical love literature, the Borāq of love motif identifies love as the means through which the prophet ascended to the heavens. The mystics hold that one must purify one's heart until it becomes a place where love is manifest. Then, he may unite with the Beloved. For instance, Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi signifies the roles that love plays in attaining spiritual perfection: "Love is ascension towards the roof of the Sultan of Beauty."³⁹² Rumi holds that when one purifies his heart, and fills it with love he will see the beauty of God.

I will explain a poem by Seyed Hasan Hoseini to show how the Borāq of love motif was used in a modern Persian literature to motivate the Iranian population to go to the battlefield. In his 'Narrative of the Martyrs' (*mathnavi-ye shahidān*), Seyed Hasan Hoseini uses this motif to assert that martyred soldiers are taken from the battlefield to heaven:

chābok Borāq-e 'āsheqi rā zin nahādand

pā dar rekāb-e bāre-ye dirin nahādand

...

bā Zo al-Jenāh-e nur tā me 'rāj rāndand

*tā va 'de-gāh-e 'eshq tā Hallāj rāndand*³⁹³

They saddled the light-footed *Borāq* of love

They put their feet in the stirrups of the ancient horse

...

Mounting on *Zo al-Jenāh* of light, they ride to the ascension

They went to love's promised place, to Hallāj

The poet links Hallāj's death with the prophet's ascension and a soldier's martyrdom. In the second line, he stresses that one who dies for the love of God, like Hallāj, will be taken to love's promised place, meaning heaven. Hoseini relies on the mystical motif of the Borāq of love to equate death with mounting Borāq.

³⁹² A. Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun, A Study of the Works of Jalāloddin Rumi*, p. 336.

³⁹³ S.H. Hoseini, *Ham-sedā bā halq-e Esmā'il*, p. 40.

Hoseini asserts that the Iranian soldiers saddle Borāq, meaning they prepare themselves for death. The verb *zin nahādan* (to saddle a horse) is used as a metaphor for beginning a journey. The soldier knowingly begins on a journey towards the Beloved that requires self-sacrifice. The poet uses the adjective ancient (*dirin*) to indicate that the soldier's death is a heavenly journey.

In the third line quoted above, Hoseini employs the idiom *Zo al-Jenāh* to equate imam Hosein's martyrdom with ascension. *Zo al-Jenāh* means 'one who has two wings.' It is the name of imam Hosein's horse during the battle of Karbalā. It is reported that his horse returned to the women's tent after Hosein's death. In this line, *Zo al-Jenāh* is compared to light (*nur*). One who is killed by the enemy will be lifted to the heavens by light. In Islamic terminology, light is God's manifestation on earth. He is pure light; therefore, one who purifies his soul receives His Light in his heart.³⁹⁴ In the last line, Hallāj is introduced as one to be encountered in the promised place (*va 'de-gāh*) of love. The implication is that the gallows where Hallāj was executed is the promised place (*va 'de-gāh*) where the lover meets the Beloved. In Persian literature, *va 'de* means promise or a vow that one undertakes to fulfill. *Va 'de-gāh* is a place where the promise is fulfilled.³⁹⁵ In the war context, the battlefield is *va 'de-gāh* where the lover is united with the Beloved. The union is impossible unless the lover sacrifices his life, like Hallāj. It may be said that in this poem, imam Hosein's martyrdom is compared to the mystical death of Hallāj. Death is the *Zo al-Jenāh* of light that ascends with the lover to the throne of the Beloved. During the war the verse "Count not those who were slain in God's way as dead, but rather living with their lord, by Him provided" (3:169) was repeatedly broadcasted on the radio to assure the soldiers that they were entering paradise.

Borāq appears in 'Ali Mo'allem's narrative poem 'By Dawn that Sun is Behind the Gate' (*qasam be fajr, sobh posht-e darvāze ast*).

Borāq-e hādethe zin kon 'oruj bāyad kard

³⁹⁴ *The Niche of Lights (Meshkāt al-Anwār): A Parallel English –Arabic Text*, by Mohammad Ghazālī, pp. xxxii-xxxiii.

³⁹⁵ 'A.A. Dehkhodā, *Loghat nāme*, under *Va 'de*.

*tolu 'e sobh-e degar rā khoruj bāyad kard*³⁹⁶

Put the saddle on the Borāq of events
one should bring out a different dawn

Mo'alleem says that the soldier should be prepared to go forth against the enemy, putting the saddle on the Borāq of events and mount it. The word *hādethe* means 'an event, or an accident or incident referring here to the events of the war. The word derives from the root ha-da-tha referring in Persian love mysticism to the accidental nature of profane love and how profane love can be transformed to transcendental love. The word *hadethe* in Modern Persian means accident or tragic event, but this meaning of transformation of accidental love to a spiritual is also implicit here. The 'tragic events' are represented as Borāq which ensure the soldier's presence before the throne of God.

The two bows length (*qāb-e qowsein*) is another motif that links the story of the prophet's ascension to a soldier's death. The motif originates in the Qur'ān, verse 53:9, which says that when the prophet approached God's throne: "[He] was at a distance of but two bow-lengths or (even) nearer." The motif of *qāb-e qowsein* is frequently used in *me'rāj-nāmes* ('The Books of Ascension'), especially by mystic poets such as Nezāmi, showing how the prophet ascends higher than the Throne, entering the circle of God's nearness. In this station, he sees God and hears His word. Nezāmi says that this nearness happened when the prophet disregarded worldly existence.³⁹⁷ In Nezāmi's poems, the prophet's spiritual perfection is the main reason for his nearness to God. Therefore, one may attain to extreme nearness if he abandons worldly pleasures and purifies his soul, according to the mystics.

In the war poetry, the motif of *qāb-e qowsein* implies that the soldier will arrive at God's presence at the moment he is killed. The war poet 'Ali-Rezā Qazve employs the

³⁹⁶ M. 'A. Mo'alleem Dāmghāni, *Rej'at-e sorkh-e setāre*, p. 19.

³⁹⁷ Nezāmi Ganjavi, *Leyli va Majnun*, with notes and annotations by B. Thervatiyān, Tehran: Tus, 1364/1985, p. 37, *beyts* 36-40; for further information about the reason that the prophet "drew close" to God see F. S. Colby, "The Subtitles of the Ascension: Al-Sulamī on the Mi'rāj of the Prophet Mohammad," in *Studia Islamica*, no. 94, 2002, p. 174.

motif in a *mathnavi* entitled ‘So many Josefs’ (*in hame Yusof*).

hame mastān-e bazm-e qāb-e qowsein
hame nur al-qolub-o qorrat al-‘eyn
hamānhāi ke bā u mineshinand
*kharāb az sokr-e kenz al-‘Ārefin-and*³⁹⁸

They are drunkard in the banquet of “two bows lengths”
 They are “the light of the heart” and the sight of the eye
 The ones who are in company with Him
 Are ruined by the intoxication of the “treasury of Gnostics”

‘Ali-Rezā Qazve compares the martyred soldiers to one who is drunk from nearness to God. In the first line, the poet uses the Qur’ānic motif of *qāb-e qowsein* to say that self-sacrifice on the battlefield transports the soldier to a banquet with God. The word banquet (*bazm*) shows the happiness and pleasure that the martyr enjoys in the Garden of Eden. Because the soldier achieves the same spiritual progress that the prophet did, he experiences the same nearness to God that the prophet experienced on the night of ascension.

In the last line, ‘Ali-Rezā Qazve employs the motif of the treasury of the hearts (*kenz al-qolub*) to illustrate how perfectly the soldier knows God. *Kenz al-qolub* alludes to the prophetic tradition (*hadith-e godsi*) in which God compares Himself to a treasure that wants to be known.³⁹⁹ In mystical treatises the tradition refers to the necessity of purifying the heart from negative character traits because God wishes to reveal His beauty in the heart of His servant. When the heart is ruined (*kharāb*), God reveals Himself. In Persian literature, the word ruined (*kharāb*) alludes to the treasury hidden in a ruined place. The gnosis of God is a treasury hidden in man’s heart. It cannot be revealed unless man ruins his heart by inflicting pain and suffering upon himself, which purify the soul and elevate it into

³⁹⁸ ‘A.R. Qazve, *Qatār-e andimeshk va tarānahā-ye jang*, p. 110.

³⁹⁹ For further information see: A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 189.

divine state. Similarly, participating in the fight is considered as a discipline that cleans man's soul.

CONCLUSION

My purpose in writing this chapter has been to show how the Hallājīan and ascension motifs in the war poetry encouraged the Iranians to sacrifice their lives on the military front. The war poets draw an analogy between the fight against the enemy and spiritual perfection and ascension.

Using Hallājīan motifs and comparing imam Hosein to Hallāj reminds the Iranians that the mystic's death was cruel. This comparison provides the opportunity for the soldiers to believe that the battle of Karbalā was a spiritual fight as well as a political battle, and the imam Hosein's fight against illegitimate ruler, Yazid, resulted in his spiritual perfection. Thus, Iranians' fight against the tyranny of Saddam Hosein would lead to their own spiritual perfection and higher status in the hereafter. Comparing the soldier to Hallāj makes the former equate his fight against the Sunni enemy with the protests of Hallāj, against the Sunni authorities of his time. With this assumption, the soldier who is killed by the Sunni authority is dying in the path of mystical love and will reach the highest mystical elevation.

Using the concept of ascension, the war poets compare the soldiers' deaths on the military front to the prophet's ascension. Having the accounts of the prophet's ascension in mind, the soldier believes that one who gives up his life in the path of God is a favored one and he will ascend directly to the heavens and stands before the throne of God. The soldier who attains such a spiritual stage will not only survive eternally and enjoy the heaven, he may also intercede on behalf of his family and his companions. Thus, he, like the prophet brings salvation to his community. This assumption helps to overcome the fear of death, motivating the soldier to fight eagerly until he dies. The soldier is also transformed into a model who teaches the rest of the community how to sacrifice their lives to attain such a spiritual position. The cycle of belief in being guided and favored by God repeats for the next generation. They are prepared to lay down their lives. The soldiers' continuing witness (for example in murals) encourages the Iranian public to emulate their path of self-sacrifice.

To define the war as a religious and spiritual battle, Iraq is called Satan, the enemy of God and of His prophet. Iranian soldiers fighting against Satan may attain the same spiritual progress that a mystic achieves through self-purification and self-mortification. The ideal of spiritual progress was a strong motivation that led the soldiers to fight against the enemy. Although the idea of self-sacrifice for a higher cause was not typical to Iranians and their fight against Iraq, the associations with the unfortunate death of the prophet grandson, Hosein, at Karbalā that the war poets applied gave their work a unique connection to Iranian-Shi'ism, which is the topic to which we turn next.