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‘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)

by

Mahnia A. Nematollahi Mahani

1. Iranian war poets relied on classical mystic motifs and metaphors to convince their audience that dying on the battlefield was the final stage of spiritual perfection and the beginning of an eternal union with the Beloved.
2. Medieval concepts of love and hate were employed by the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran to create familiar concepts of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ placing Iranians as the ‘beloved center’ and the rest of the world as the ‘hated other.’
3. Hoseyn Mansur Hallāj’s execution in 922 was interpreted by the Islamic Republic of Iran as an ideal union with God. It was in this context of Love-death that Hallāj became a model of self-sacrifice for Iranian soldiers.
4. Hoseyn Mansur Hallāj was a Sunni but the Islamic Republic of Iran presented him as a Shiite, using him as a role-model for Iranian soldiers.
5. The prophet Mohammed’s ascension to the Throne of God is a metaphor for spiritual growth, but during the Iran-Iraq war ascension was placed in the context of martyrdom, and dying on the battlefield was compared to ascension to the Throne of God.

6. Iranian war poets used verses and concepts from the Qur'an to justify Iran's war against Iraq, emphasizing the rewards soldiers would receive in the hereafter.

7. Firmly believing that the death of the third Shiite Imam Hoseyn was unjust, the Islamic Republic of Iran espoused the paradigm of Āshurā into a political metaphor, fostering a dynamic of 'us' and 'them' regarding animosity between Shiites and Sunnis.

8. Calling a war Holy gives a religious aura to the conflict, inspiring soldiers to offer their lives.

9. The concept of martyrdom is used all over the world, even by secular states, to inspire the population to fight against their enemy.

10. Commemorating the death of innocent victims killed by terrorists fosters the feeling of common enemy.

11. Many governments create the concept of 'enemy' to unify the community and to emphasize the necessity of their presence.