





A Comparative Study of the Curtain of “Noon Ashura” in Hosseiniyeh Kababi of Birjand and the “Noon Ashura” Curtain by Hossein Qollar Aghasi Based on Formal and Narrative Analysis

Mobina Sefidrooz Master’s Student in Historical Studies of Islamic Art, University of Birjand, Birjand, Iran.

Reza Khazaei   Lecturer at the Faculty of Art, University of Birjand, Birjand, Iran.

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Abstract

Coffeehouse painting is a narrative school of oil painting that flourished during the Qajar period with martial, festive, and religious themes. Among its most significant subjects is the depiction of the Ashura tragedy. The “Noon Ashura” curtain of Hosseiniyeh Kababi in Birjand, dated 1338 AH and registered as a national heritage work, represents the events of Ashura with distinctive formal and narrative features. This study aims to identify and analyze the formal structure and narrative system of this curtain and to compare it with the “Noon Ashura” curtain by Hossein Qollar Aghasi. The research addresses two main questions: (1) What similarities and differences exist between the visual and narrative elements of the two curtains in terms of form and content? (2) How are the depictions of saints (awliya) and villains (ashqiya) differentiated in these works? The research adopts a descriptive–analytical approach using a comparative method. Data were collected through field observation, library research, and online resources. Findings indicate both similarities and significant differences between the two works. The Hosseiniyeh Kababi curtain demonstrates narrative limitation and compositional symmetry with fewer characters, whereas Qollar Aghasi’s work presents a more complex, spiral composition with a higher density of figures and extended narrative scope.

Keywords: Coffeehouse painting, Hosseiniyeh Kababi of Birjand, Pardeh Darvishi, Hossein Qollar Aghasi, Comparative study.

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Introduction

The “Noon Ashura” curtain represents one of the most significant expressions of Iranian religious and performative art. Traditionally displayed during mourning ceremonies in Muharram, particularly on Tasua and Ashura, these curtains visually narrate the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and his companions through symbolic and expressive imagery.

Coffeehouse painting emerged in late Qajar Iran alongside social and constitutional movements. Unlike court painting, which emphasized aristocratic grandeur, coffeehouse painting was a popular art form rooted in collective religious memory and public spaces such as coffeehouses. It reflected Shi'i devotion and responded to the cultural needs of ordinary people.

The Ashura uprising, one of the foundational events in Shi'i Islam, profoundly influenced Iranian literature, ritual, and visual culture. Within coffeehouse painting, this event became a central narrative theme. The Hosseiniyeh Kababi curtain in Birjand is the only known signed Ashura curtain in South Khorasan Province. Registered as a national heritage artifact, it holds ritual significance and is treated as a sacred object by local mourners.

Similarly, the “Noon Ashura” curtain by Hossein Qollar Aghasi represents a powerful narrative discourse within Iranian religious art. Qollar Aghasi, deeply influenced by Shi'i beliefs, epic literature such as the *Shahnameh*, and moral storytelling, depicted sacred history in a symbolic yet accessible manner. This study compares the two works in order to analyze their visual structure, narrative organization, compositional systems, and characterization of saints and villains.

Research Methodology

This study is fundamental in purpose and qualitative in nature. Data were analyzed through a descriptive-analytical, and comparative framework.

Information was collected through:

- Field observation of the Hosseiniyeh Kababi curtain
- Archival documentation (National Heritage registration files)
- Library sources on coffeehouse painting
- Visual analysis of Qollar Aghasi's curtain

The research sample was purposefully selected and includes:

- The “Noon Ashura” curtain of Hosseiniyeh Kababi, Birjand
- The “Noon Ashura” curtain by Hossein Qollar Aghasi

The analysis focuses on composition, narrative sequencing, characterization, symbolic elements, color palette, spatial organization, and inscriptional framing.

Discussion

1. Coffeehouse Painting and Ritual Narrative Context

Both the Hosseiniyeh Kababi curtain and the “Noon Ashura” curtain by Hossein Qollar Aghasi belong to the tradition of Iranian coffeehouse painting, a popular religious art form that emerged during the late Qajar period. Unlike court painting, which served aristocratic patronage and emphasized grandeur, coffeehouse painting developed within public and devotional spaces. It was closely connected to ritual practices such as *pardeh-khani* (curtain recitation), in which visual images functioned as narrative guides for oral storytelling during mourning ceremonies.

Within this framework, Ashura curtains were not passive artworks; they operated as performative visual texts. Their purpose was didactic, emotional, and commemorative. Both curtains under study reflect Shi'i theology, collective memory, and moral dualism, yet they articulate these themes through distinct formal and narrative strategies.

2. Compositional Structure

2.1 Symmetry and Centralization in the Hosseiniyeh Kababi Curtain

The Hosseiniyeh Kababi curtain is structured around a symmetrical and centripetal composition. The visual weight is distributed evenly along horizontal and vertical axes, creating balance across the pictorial field.

The principal sacred figures—Imam Husayn and Hazrat Abbas—occupy dominant positions aligned near the center of the composition.

Movement within the image converges toward this central axis, reinforcing theological hierarchy and devotional focus. No area of the canvas visually overpowers another. The seven narrative scenes are clearly distinguishable, and their placement ensures visual clarity. This symmetry produces an atmosphere of solemnity and ritual order.

2.2 Spiral Dynamism in Qollar Aghasi's Curtain

In contrast, Qollar Aghasi's curtain is organized around a spiral compositional system. Rather than stabilizing the image through symmetry, the artist generates motion through curvilinear flow. The viewer's gaze circulates across the canvas, discovering successive episodes embedded within the spiral arrangement. The density of figures is significantly higher, and narrative clusters appear in dynamic zones, particularly in the lower and lateral sections. This spiral configuration introduces visual energy and dramatic tension, distinguishing it from the restrained equilibrium of the Kababi curtain.

3. Narrative Scope and Structure

3.1 Narrative Limitation and Clarity

The Hosseiniyeh Kababi curtain confines its narrative strictly to the events of Ashura day. It contains seven identifiable episodes, each clearly separated and narratively accessible. Characters are countable, and the storyline unfolds in a contained and sequential manner.

This limitation enhances clarity and reinforces the ritual focus on the climactic tragedy of Ashura itself. The viewer is guided through a structured and coherent narrative experience without excessive visual complexity.

3.2 Narrative Expansion and Multiplicity

Qollar Aghasi's curtain expands beyond the temporal boundaries of Ashura day. It includes episodes preceding and following the central tragedy, thereby enlarging the historical and emotional scope of the work. Approximately eleven or more scenes can be extracted from the composition.

This multiplicity of narratives increases the density of characters and introduces temporal layering. The viewer does not encounter a single climactic focus but rather a network of interconnected events that emphasize the magnitude and continuity of the tragedy.

4. Depiction of Saints and Villains

4.1 Shared Iconographic Conventions

Both curtains adhere to the moral dualism central to Shi'i iconography. Saints (*awliya*) are represented with luminous halos, crescent-shaped eyebrows, large expressive eyes, and composed facial expressions. Even in moments of combat, their faces convey serenity and spiritual dignity.

Villains (*ashqiya*), by contrast, are depicted with exaggerated physiognomic distortions—furrowed brows, elongated or drooping mustaches, bulging eyes, and aggressive gestures. These visual contrasts reinforce the ethical polarity between good and evil.

4.2 Differences in Realism and Sanctity

Despite shared conventions, important differences emerge. In the Hosseiniyeh Kababi curtain, certain sacred figures—particularly prophets—are partially veiled with white cloth to preserve their sanctity. The forms are stylized and relatively simple, emphasizing symbolic meaning over anatomical precision. In Qollar Aghasi's work, sacred faces are fully rendered and individualized. The physiognomy is more detailed, and the modeling of features reflects a stronger engagement with expressive realism. This approach intensifies emotional impact and enhances narrative immediacy.

5. Use of Color and Pictorial Technique

5.1 Restrained Palette in the Kababi Curtain

The Hosseiniyeh Kababi curtain employs vegetal pigments, resulting in a limited and harmonized color palette. The repetition of tones contributes to compositional unity but reduces dramatic contrast. The overall chromatic atmosphere is restrained and devotional rather than theatrical.

The decorative border, containing elegiac inscriptions and floral motifs, plays an integral structural role. It frames the narrative both visually and textually, integrating calligraphy and ornamentation into the devotional function of the curtain.

5.2 Chromatic Diversity in Qollar Aghasi's Work

Qollar Aghasi utilizes oil paint, allowing for richer chromatic variation and stronger tonal contrasts. The painterly modeling enhances depth and volume, intensifying the emotional charge of battle scenes. Color functions expressively rather than merely decoratively, contributing to dramatic storytelling.

6. Visual Density and Spatial Organization

The Kababi curtain demonstrates controlled spatial organization. Figures are distributed evenly, and empty spaces prevent visual overcrowding. The image maintains equilibrium, and the narrative remains legible. By contrast, Qollar Aghasi's composition is densely populated. Overlapping figures and layered episodes create visual complexity. This density conveys the magnitude of the historical tragedy but demands more active engagement from the viewer.

7. Comparative Synthesis

The comparative analysis reveals two distinct aesthetic approaches within the same artistic tradition. The Hosseiniyeh Kababi curtain emphasizes symmetry, clarity, ritual containment, and symbolic stylization. Its structure supports devotional concentration and theological hierarchy.

Qollar Aghasi's curtain foregrounds dynamism, multiplicity, expressive realism, and chromatic richness. Its spiral composition and expanded narrative scope create dramatic intensity and emotional immersion. Together, these works demonstrate the flexibility of Iranian coffeehouse painting. While rooted in shared iconographic conventions and religious devotion, the tradition accommodates varied compositional systems and narrative interpretations, reflecting the creative agency of individual artists within a collective sacred framework.

Conclusion

This comparative study demonstrates that while both curtains belong to the tradition of coffeehouse painting and adhere to its symbolic conventions, they differ significantly in compositional strategy, narrative scope, and visual density.

The Hosseiniyeh Kababi curtain presents a structured, symmetrical composition centered on the moral polarity between saints and villains. Its limited color palette, framed inscriptions, and seven discrete narrative episodes create clarity and ritual solemnity. The visual movement converges toward the center, reinforcing theological hierarchy and devotional focus.

In contrast, Hossein Qollar Aghasi's curtain offers a more elaborate and dynamic narrative experience. Its spiral composition generates movement and multiplicity, allowing the inclusion of pre- and post-Ashura episodes. The higher density of figures, richer chromatic variation, and detailed physiognomy enhance dramatic intensity.

Both works depict saints with luminous serenity and villains with exaggerated deformity, reinforcing the dualistic moral structure central to Shi'i iconography. However, the Kababi curtain preserves sanctity through partial veiling, whereas Qollar Aghasi emphasizes expressive realism.

Ultimately, the study reveals how two artists working within the same artistic tradition can produce distinct formal and narrative interpretations of a shared sacred theme. The comparison contributes to a deeper understanding of aesthetic diversity within Iranian coffeehouse painting and highlights the importance of systematic formal analysis in this understudied field.