

Deconstructing the Divine: Postmodern Shifts in Qawwali and Islam

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Abstract

Qawwali, deeply rooted in the spiritual traditions of Islamic mysticism, has long served as a profound medium of divine remembrance and communal devotion. Traditionally performed in sacred settings, its purpose has been both spiritual and transformative. However, in the context of the postmodern era—characterized by skepticism, relativism, and the erosion of absolute truths—Qawwali has experienced significant shifts. This study examines how its sacred essence is increasingly reinterpreted, and at times diluted, within commercialized and entertainment-focused frameworks. Drawing on postmodern theoretical perspectives and contemporary Islamic thought, the research investigates how evolving cultural meanings have impacted not only the musical form of Qawwali but also its spiritual function. While global exposure has enhanced its visibility and reach, it has simultaneously introduced tensions between maintaining devotional authenticity and accommodating modern sensibilities. The study advocates for a nuanced cultural approach that safeguards Qawwali's spiritual integrity while engaging with the realities of a changing world. More broadly, it offers insights into the ways Islamic spiritual arts confront and adapt to the complexities of postmodern life.

Keywords: Qawwali, Islamic mysticism, postmodernism, spiritual arts, cultural transformation

Introduction

Qawwali, as a devotional musical form rooted in the Sufi tradition of Islam, has historically functioned as a spiritual bridge between the human and the divine. Originating in the shrines of the Indian subcontinent, it has been celebrated for its emotive power, poetic richness, and capacity to induce states of spiritual ecstasy among listeners. Traditionally performed in sacred settings, Qawwali was never merely entertainment—it was an act of worship, a means of remembrance (dhikr), and a communal expression of divine love. However, in the context of a postmodern world shaped by commercialism, cultural hybridity, and a general decline in spiritual consciousness, Qawwali has undergone noticeable transformation. Once confined to the courtyards of Sufi saints, it now resonates on global stages, in films, and digital platforms, often stripped of its original spiritual intent. This paper explores how Qawwali's role, meaning, and reception have been reconfigured in the postmodern era, examining the tension between sacred tradition and contemporary reinvention.

The time shifts and molds human thought, affecting religion, art, literature, culture, and more. The development of the human mind allows us to explore this shift. The current era, from the mid-20th century onwards, is known as the age of postmodernity, a reaction and being more specific a "Rejection" of modernism, which involves breaking rules, rejecting science, and focusing on new perspectives. Postmodernism has greatly influenced art and music, leading to shifts in their conceptualization and purpose.

Most of the scholars nominated "Post Modern Art Work" to be the first example of postmodernism like Butler claimed that "rectangular pile of bricks" by Carl Andre is the example of change of viewpoint from modern to postmodernism.¹ McEvilley associated this shift with the work of Marcel Duchamp in 1914.² The same argument can also be found in S. J. Grenz's book where he introduced the shift of this movement through Art and Architecture.³ Systematically postmodernism can be defined as "A style and development in Art, writing, etc. in the late twentieth century that responded against modernism."⁴

Postmodernism Unraveled: Revolutionizing Art and Music

Before delving deeper, it is essential to clarify the conceptual framework of postmodernism in contrast to modernism. According to the Oxford Literary Dictionary, modernist writers and artists sought deep meaning through symbols,

myths, or complex structures. In contrast, postmodern thinkers often respond to the confusion and absurdity of modern life with indifference or irony, preferring works that are intentionally superficial, fragmented, or experimental in style.⁵

Similarly, literary theorist Ihab Hassan describes postmodernism as a major shift in artistic expression, distinct from earlier movements like Cubism or Dadaism, particularly in how it breaks away from traditional forms and embraces ambiguity.⁶

In the context of this study, the focus lies on postmodernism's tendency toward meaninglessness—a quality increasingly reflected in contemporary Qawwali. While Qawwali integrates various postmodern themes, the most critical transformation is its shift away from its meaningful spiritual origins, adopting a new identity that, though modernized, is often viewed as detached or diluted from its sacred essence. Another key element in this discourse is Nietzsche's notion of the "Death of God," which symbolizes the fading presence of the divine in human consciousness. While originally framed within the context of Christianity, similar signs of spiritual decline are visible in Muslim societies as well—where outward rituals often lack the inner conviction once held by the righteous. This erosion of faith is mirrored in cultural expressions too: what once was Qawwali—a devotional art rooted in divine love—has increasingly become a medium of entertainment. Though not universal, the prevalence of Qawwali nights and musical shows reflects a broader shift from spiritual immersion to performative enjoyment. In postmodern era every spiritual fall is somehow caused by the scientific knowledge and especially postmodernism.⁷

Having explored postmodernism's impact, we now turn to art and music, examining its transformative disruption of traditional structures. Carl Andre's 1966 Rectangular Pile of Bricks sparked postmodernism in art, its influence rippling far beyond early theories. Postmodernism reshapes art, dance, film, religion, and music videos by shattering traditional boundaries.⁸

Postmodernism arrived in musicology later than in other fields. Scholars define postmodern music differently; some say it's simply music created during the postmodern era, which would mean it began before the mid-20th century, like in other disciplines. Others argue it came later, with its own unique style and themes. To understand postmodern music, we need to consider changes in style, instruments, subjects, and the way it responds to or differs from modern music. By the 1990s, many elements in music reflected postmodern ideas. One early example is Górecki's Symphony of Sorrowful Songs (1976), a slow, emotional piece that marked a shift in Polish music and was widely seen as a postmodern work. Its themes of sorrow and emptiness echoed the post-war mood and were also present in postmodern literature and poetry.

Górecki's three movements in this symphony reflect postmodern themes, such as a child's separation from a parent and the setting of a prison—showing that not just the style, but also the themes and emotions matter. His composition style also shifted from earlier complex forms to something more direct and emotional. The piece was later used in the 1993 film *Fearless*, connecting it to the trauma of a plane crash—another postmodern interpretation. A key aspect of postmodernism here is the breaking of modernist rules. In an interview, Górecki said:

"I never write for my listeners... I have something to tell them, but they must also make an effort to understand it."⁹

This reflects the postmodern idea that meaning is shared between the creator and the audience, not dictated by the composer alone. According to David Beard, some other newer features and concepts like feminism and critical theory which influenced musicology were key figures to make music a postmodern or even later genre.¹⁰

Writers discussing postmodernism, post-colonialism, and related ideas in musicology agree that music reflects the changing human mind. As thought evolves, so does music—shifting from classical to modern, and then to postmodern forms. In our region, Qawwali is traditionally seen as classical music, but with postmodern influence, not just its sound but its entire concept has changed. Today, the old definition of Qawwali no longer fully applies. We must now ask: is Qawwali a new art form that needs a fresh definition, or should it return to its original purpose—music that leads to divine truth?

Postmodernism Unveiled: Transforming Islamic Thought and Practice

To understand the influence of postmodernity, Islamic history can be divided into three major phases:

1. **Traditional Islam:** Rooted in the divine principles which revealed to mankind, represented by the Qur'an and Hadith, forming the core of the Islamic tradition.¹¹
2. **Modern Islam:** Defined by the Enlightenment-humanist rejection of not only Islamic but all traditions in favor of reason and science. Muslims responded in three ways: some completely rejected modernity (e.g., Madrasa

thought), others fully embraced it (secularists), and some developed Islamic reform movements like the Faraizi Movement, giving rise to Islamic Modernism.¹²

3. **Postmodern Islam:** Postmodernism is often described as the unruly child of the modern world, where we can see the extremism of modernity.¹³

Many in our region adopt postmodernity unconsciously. As discussed earlier, postmodernism reacts to modernism through ideas like deconstruction and belief in multiple realities. It challenges all dominant worldviews—social, political, or religious—including Marxism, secular humanism, Christianity, and Islam.¹⁴

In the Islamic context, deconstruction and plurality are significant. Postmodernity impacts Islamic tradition mainly through two ideas: the deconstruction of Islamism and the rise of plurality. Deconstruction here refers to rethinking or reforming Islam. Scholars like Mohammed Arkoun led this approach—he challenged traditional Islam and, in *Rethinking Islam*, described his method as a battle against the mythologization and ideologization of Islam imposed by various groups.¹⁵ He further explains that in this text he is going to critique procedures of logical reasoning available in Islamic discourse at first and this critical study is “historical and epistemological.” He also accepts that it is not possible without liberation of thought from all (traditional) theories, and it is the only way to tackle Islam.¹⁶

This deconstruction of Islamic tradition is a clear example of postmodernity’s impact on Islam. Secondly, Postmodernity reshaped the idea of plurality by merging it with identity, offering tools like Orientalism (E. Said) to counter rising Islamophobia. After 9/11, Muslims faced intensified “othering,” turning old biases into a global racist movement. Postmodern thought, by accepting multiple truths, helps resist such discrimination.

Postmodernism has influenced Islamic revival by both questioning modernity and reshaping tradition. While it shares ideas like critique of Western thought and rethinking Islam, it has also led to unchecked changes in Muslim society. Examples like cultural Islam, paid prayers, modernized Qawwali, the “Aurat March,” and even acceptance of practices like homosexuality show how deeply postmodern ideas have merged with daily life—often blurring the line between true revival and distortion of Islamic values.

The Evolution of Postmodern Music in Islamic Mysticism

Muslim Sufis traveled subcontinent and brought the concept of Persian Islamic samaa which merged with the Indian Music and becomes Qawwali.¹⁷ The same composition of Persia and India can be seen in Khusrow’s Raga, e.g. He mixed “Gaur”, “Saarang” and “Bilawal” with Persian Raga “Raast” and formed a new Raga named “Sar Pardah”.¹⁸

While defending Qawwali and samaa, Sufi scholars traced its origin from Quranic verses and Hadith books. For example, one of their arguments is:

“عن عائشة: أن أبا بكر رضي الله عنه، دخل عليها وعندها جارتان في أيام منى تدفغان، وتضريان، والنبي صلى الله عليه وسلم متغش بثوبه، فأنتهرهما أبو بكر، فكشف النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم عن وجهه، فقال: «دعهما يا أبا بكر، فإنها أيام عيد، وتلك الأيام أيام منى».¹⁹

“Aisha RA narrated that her father Abu Bakr RA visited her, two girls singing and playing Daf (musical Instrument) there and the Prophet SAW was resting there and His face was covered. Abu Bakr prevented them from doing so then the Holy Prophet SAW unveiled His face and said, Abu Bakr leave them don’t stop them these are ‘Eid days.”

Another event showing the Companions’ allowance of musical instruments—besides the Prophet’s entry into Madinah—is their listening to al-Nasb (a form of Arab music), as recorded in Al-Sunan by Al-Bayhaqi.²⁰

In the same sense, Imam al Ghazali wrote an event of a famous Hadith Scholar and saint Dhūl-Nūn Abū l-Fayḍ Thawbān b. Ibrāhīm al-Miṣrī, who entered in Cairo and mystics gathered around him (with mystic singer).²¹

“Qawwali is a musical form of Art hence the shift to postmodernism can also be seen in Qawwali as well, Indian Qawwali which was founded by Amir Khusrow started in 13th century and developed in a proper musical form since then. Till the 20th century there is no considerable change in the context (devotional Music of the Sufis) of Qawwali”, as mentioned by A. Sharma (Research Scholar) that this devotional music was performed mainly at Sufi shrines.²² So we can conclude that the first change was found in this Art with the contribution of Amir Khusrow in 13th century and the next shift can be found in 20th century with the influence of Modern and Postmodern movement.

According to Qureshi,²³ Qawwali is defined as “the authentic spiritual song that transport the mystic toward union with God”. Qawwali, traditionally defined as the poetic repetition of Sufi sayings by groups called Qawwals—with or without instruments—was once a sacred form of devotion aimed at attaining divine love. While modern influences

spread rapidly across Asia, Qawwali remained rooted in its original form for some time. However, the postmodern era brought a quiet shift: Qawwali moved from shrines to concerts and films, its purpose shifting from spiritual elevation to entertainment. Sacred boundaries faded, instruments modernized, and the deep Sufi essence began to erode under the weight of postmodern reinterpretation. First female as a Qawwal (Sufi singer) in public can be seen in 1957CE with the entry of Shakila Banu according to Akmal Hyderabad.²⁴

Postmodernism has played a major role in reshaping Qawwali, shifting it from a sacred Sufi tradition to a diverse and often secular musical form. One visible change is the rise of female Sufi performers in the subcontinent—once unheard of in traditional Qawwali settings. Another significant development is Orchestral Qawwali, a modern fusion that blends multiple musical cultures and voices, often detaching the genre from its spiritual roots.²⁵ Researchers often trace this transformation back to Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, whose unmatched talent and global reach introduced Qawwali to international audiences.²⁶

While his contributions opened doors, they also set a new trend where the focus shifted from divine connection to entertainment, fame, and artistic experimentation. Today, Qawwali is performed in concerts, films, and media—frequently for enjoyment or cultural display rather than spiritual awakening. Even the poetry has changed: instead of invoking divine love, many modern Qawwalis revolve around worldly love, personal longing, or romantic themes. The beloved once symbolized God; now, it is often a human figure. In many cases, the deep spiritual essence of Qawwali has faded, replaced by a performance that entertains but rarely uplifts the soul. To explore these transformations in greater depth, with detailed analysis, examples, and references, the reader is invited to consult the author's full research dissertation.²⁷

Discussion

Postmodernity's impact on Qawwali reveals a tension between tradition and transformation. Its deconstruction and pluralism have globalized Qawwali, with artists like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan bringing it to wider audiences through modern instruments and secular themes. Yet, this shift from sacred practice to entertainment risks eroding its spiritual essence, as performances prioritize accessibility over divine connection. This mirrors broader changes in Islamic thought, where pluralistic interpretations challenge traditional norms.

The move from shrines to concert halls highlights Qawwali's adaptation to postmodern consumerism, necessitating cultural education to preserve its devotional core. These findings underscore the need to balance Qawwali's heritage with its evolving role in a pluralistic world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that postmodernism has had a profound impact on both Islam and music, particularly in the context of Qawwali. The shift from a sacred spiritual practice to a form of entertainment, driven by postmodernity, has transformed Qawwali's role in contemporary society. The deconstruction of Islamic traditions and the acceptance of multiple truths have also contributed to the evolution of Islamic practices in the postmodern era. However, this transformation has led to a loss of the original spiritual essence of Qawwali, with the art form now often serving entertainment purposes rather than spiritual devotion.

The findings of this study highlight the need for a balanced understanding of postmodernity's effects on traditional practices like Qawwali. While the cultural landscape continues to evolve, it is crucial to preserve the spiritual and cultural heritage of these practices. Efforts should be made to ensure that the sacred purpose of Qawwali and other Islamic traditions is not lost in the face of commercialization and modernization.

Recommendations

- Efforts should be made to preserve the spiritual essence of Qawwali and other traditional Islamic practices, resisting the trend toward commercialization and entertainment.
- Educating the audience about the historical and spiritual significance of Qawwali can help prevent the loss of its original meaning.

Future studies could explore how postmodernity has affected other forms of Islamic art and culture, offering deeper insights into the relationship between postmodern thought and religious practices.

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