



## RESEARCH PAPER

### Semantics of *Qawwali*: Poetry, Perception, and Cultural Consumption

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Received:</b> October 13, 2021</p> <p><b>Accepted:</b> December 29, 2021</p> <p><b>Online:</b> December 31, 2021</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Cognition, Culture Poetry, Qawwal, Qawwali, Semantics</p> <p><b>*Corresponding Author:</b>  raonadeem@qau.edu.pk</p>	<p>Semantics is about meanings and meanings are arbitrary and shared. Understanding qawwali context requires comprehension of semantics or process of meaning creation and meaning sharing among the qawwal party and the audience. This interactive activity might frequently be hindered when interrupted by subjective meanings creation during cultural consumption. Qawwali is a cultural tradition, its semantics are conditioned by axiological premises of poetry and perceptions which are transforming. The previous researches revealed that qawwali is associated with religion which provides the religious message by singing <i>hamd</i> and <i>naat</i>. It was a means to experience Divine; therefore, semantics are multi-layered and often crossroad with values and subjective experiences. It is novel due to its ritual of <i>Sama</i>. It has the therapeutic power that helps mentally disturbed people and they find refuge. This study is exploratory having a small sample size of twenty purposively selected audiences. This phenomenological inquiry used ethnographic method of conversational interviews at selected shrines and cultural spaces in Islamabad. The results indicate that qawwali is a strong refuge for people facing miseries of life and they attend <i>Sama</i> with a belief that attending and listening will consequently resolve their issues, either psychological or physiological. They participate in <i>Sama</i> which teaches them how to be optimistic in a negative situation; this paper brings forth this nodal phenomenon using the verbatim explanations by the interlocutors. Semantics of Qawwali are conditioned and some of these elements are highlighted including poetry and axiology based perceptions and cultural consumption of a cultural realm.</p>

## Introduction

Music is a cultural universal, albeit it is so diverse that it can provide idiosyncratic identity to certain cultural groups. Music, it is said, has the power to bring the soul close to God. It plays a very important role in the life of a *Sufi* and the disciples. *Qawwali* is a music that is performed, has the wisdom of mystical closeness to God. *Qawwali* lyrics tribute saints, *Sufis*, and other spiritual mentors. Many *Qawwalis* just speak about spiritual love. It

includes different genres or expressions of poetry, including *hamd*, *naat*, *manqabat*, *qasida*, and *Darood pak*. Contemporary Qawwali is also using lyrics of or for songs. *Qawwali* is performed by a group of people known as *Qawwal party* (Bhattacharjee & Alam, 2012). It is led by a vocal person and other group members use different traditional instruments such as *table* (twin hand drums), harmonium, *duff* (percussion), and *sarangi* (short-neck fiddle). Hand clapping is the most important thing which creates a rhythm in the performative and acoustic structure of *Qawwali*. It is a communal experience, having a group who sit together on the floor and create rhythmic aura of *Qawwali*. The mystical song is sung by the leading person with repetition and hypnotic rhythm to make the audience feel it and go into a trance; initiates the feeling of ecstasy. The audience's contribution is very stimulated to truly experience the traditional understanding of *Qawwali* music (Qureshi, 1987).

*Qawwali's* origin was founded about 1800 years before arriving Islam. It is classical music which has *Raga and Tala*. It was a tradition in Hinduism where they sing songs at their temples for the praise of their deity gods and goddesses. Firstly, it was only for Buddhists, they did not include other people at their temple, the music was only for them (Rashid, *Qawwali and the Art of Devotional Singing*, 2007). *Qawwali* is unique due to its *mehfil* (gathering) of *Sama* in South Asia. Hazrat Amir Khusru, the great musician and poet, started it. He was well versed in Persian and Indian languages. He was a staunch follower of the Chishti saints, he belonged and there he familiarized Arabic fundamentals too for the music of South Asia. Mystical music is means to access mystical or divine experiential knowledge. It is a source of mystical realization. *Sama* is novel and many *Sufis* died during it due to intense emotions, it is a state of concentration on Allah (Anjum, 2006).

*Sama* supports the emotions, makes the heart soft, and strengthens the imagination to reach ecstasy, where the mind slowly forgets the words, sounds, lyrics and enters into a spiritual realm (Gribetz, 1991). That's why *Sama* activates the soul, burns the person, and enables them to feel and hear the mystical from each particle (Tewari, 8-13 August 2007).

Ritual ceremonies help to maintain the culture. There are hierarchical positions in *Qawwali* arrangements and also have a social structure. *Qawwals* explain the place between the material world and the Divine. A hierarchy and specific arrangements maintain the process and provide the structure of *Qawwali* performances. *Qawwali* has its unique ingredients and a specific process that make it unique and novel among other musical performances. Albeit with time, its nature is changing. Original *Qawwali* has been changed, the film and techno *Qawwali* taking place of it. Thus, 'authentic' in *Qawwali* was Divine experience and absence of it in commercial *Qawwali* replications provides interesting insights about phenomenological accounts of individuals and their axiological positions within the cultural framework. And there is not enough work on *Qawwali*, so this is the time to document its uniqueness before it is totally transformed. So, this paper aims to explore the individual's cognitive and cultural understanding of *Qawwali's* poetry

semantics that they use to appease them during the hardships of life. As music is part of the culture and there is not enough research or studies on music and culture in Pakistan. This partially ethno-music inspired research is highly significant because it sheds light on music and culture intersection in Pakistan by exploring *Qawwali* music which is not much researched yet.

The current study brings forth emic perspective. It is a qualitative and anthropological study on Qawwali, its semantics, and consumption. Previous researches superficially explained Qawwali and did not cover objectives as this research carries. There is not much curriculum of music and anthropology in Pakistan, it will help to contribute to it. It will also contribute to inspire the ethnomusicology researchers of Pakistan. This study will reveal at least one dimension of the dynamic experiential knowledge that reciprocates with the axiological positions of individuals during the consumption of a cultural product.

### **Operationalization of Key Terms in the Light of the Literature Review**

#### **Cognitive Appropriation**

Cognitive and socio-culture theories concluded that to overcome the isolation there is a need for a relationship between social and cognitive contributions to thinking and acting. The social and cultural perspectives provide the construction of knowledge and the cognitive development of humans (Billett, 1998). An appropriation is a tool of interpretations that how people perceive a new action that acquires a new mental stage and focuses on cognitive aspects. Cognitive appropriation is about the construction of knowledge from the surroundings including culture and society (Salovaara, 2008). Therefore, music-centric cognitive appropriation is a vital *schemata* where range of appropriation can be present.

#### **Axiology**

Axiology is a separate discipline within the field of philosophical inquiry which articulates the important aspects of conscious experiences. Axiology tells about the nature of values, tells the ongoing interaction between humans and reality (Hart, 1971). It is the study of values that defines and distinct good and bad. It defines for an individual, 'what is intrinsically good or bad?' (Hatzimoysis, 2003).

#### **Cultural being**

According to anthropologists culture is a social and complex phenomenon. It patterns the ways that how to think, feel, react, acquire, and it is transmitted through symbols. Its knowledge about particular groups encircles language, religion, art, and music. Every individual contributes to the enrichment and continuity or change of the culture.

Culture has some common goals that are depicted by people in all cultures (Tov & Diener, 2013). Cultures are independent of each other. Each culture has unique qualities that are different from others. The structure for living is different. People's emotions and cognitions are different than how they welcome happiness, sorrows, and peace. That is how they fulfill their life satisfaction. There are some norms that individuals keep in mind to feel in a culture (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003). Every individual is a cultural being because he or she communicates using symbols and consumes symbols within the sphere where he or she shares the semiotics of symbols. And this sphere is called 'in-group' that consequently have 'out-group' to compare with. 'Out-group' refers to all other groups of individuals who are assumed to have a different culture because they use different set of symbols or different semiotics of the symbols.

### **Qawwali**

Qawwali can be defined as hearing or listening to mystical lines and doing *dhamal* (ecstatic whirling dance) and getting into a state of religious ecstasy. It is a beautiful and mystical song that clarifies the heart, purifies the soul, and connects with God (Rashid, Music and Islam: A Deeper Look, 1997). Qawwali etimologically is derived from Persian and Arabic word "Qawl" means to say or to utter. Therefore, when it is assumed as a hermeneutic practice of Divine words, it is titled as Qawwali. The speaker (Divine) is represented by the Qawwal, one who is conveying the message by saying it aloud. Therefore, audiences are supposedly only 'listeners'; therefore, the arrangement of the performance is called *Sama* that means listening. Spiritual poetry is set to music; improved by a powerful rhythm and repetition (Powers, 1989).

### **Semantics**

Semantics is the study of the meanings of words and sayings of any language in a particular context. The meanings are embedded in a specific context, it works as a symbol that communicates and convey message or intelligence. The message can be written form, nonverbal, any gesture and sounds (Bhasker, 2013). Semantic conveys the knowledge and facts about worlds. The semantics aim is to precise the values that what sentence represent what. In any language sentences and words has implicit meanings and message (Soames, 1989).

### **General Semantics**

General semantics is about the philosophy of language and representation of reality. It deals with the relationship between words and symbols and with other symbols. It deals with representations and explanations. General semantics talks about the words that how we can perceive, construct and evaluate communications, sentences, and life experiences (Hauck, 2008). General semantics play with the words. Language has an impact on the

words and words impact the action. Individuals relate or attach the meanings with words and imply those words. General semantics is a theory of language. It provides a new paradigm for human communication and interaction (Levinson, 2010). Thus semantics in the context are about meaning creations and interaction of cultural beings with the Qawwali performance and consequential consumption.

### **Semantics in Poetry**

Poetry works as therapy. It's a tool that is used as psychotherapy. It has appropriate or suitable aspects that heal the individual and his experiences. People feel good and energetic when they read a poem that matches their feelings. Poetry helps individuals to facilitate themselves. Through reading and writing poetry people gain self-esteem. Poetry helps to imagine, dream, interpretation and filter emotions. General semantics in poetry label the things that belong to reality and symbolize them (Lerner, 1991). Poetry is discussed in the literature. It's an effective medium of communication that we use on daily basis. Poetry has a structure to produce meanings. It has covert meanings (Herbelot, 2014). Poetry frequently uses metaphors which are poly-vocal. The intrinsic conversations within and individual, when he or she is a listener; invokes unique feelings during *Sama*. Individual relates listening experience to subjective circumstances conditioned by axiology or value-laden frame and consumes poetry as per subjective perception.

### **Material and Methods**

The present study is about the cultural consumption of Qawwali semantics. Particularly; how individuals relate their lifeworlds to the semantic inferences of Qawwali. Qualitative phenomenological research used ethnographic methods of participant observation and conversational interviews to collect primary data. This research is ontologically exploratory. Sample was of twenty audiences selected purposively from multiple locales in Islamabad, including, Pakistan National Council of Arts, Bari Imam, Lok Virsa, and Kalyam Sharif. Therefore, unit of data collection was individuals who attended the *Mehfil-e-Sama*. Thematic analysis is used to analyse the using the vignettes of the conversational interviews as unit of data analysis.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### ***Qawwali* as Therapy**

*Qawwali* has therapeutic power, it heals the mentally disturbed listeners and help them resolves their worries. The researcher observed that many people feel strongly associated with the shrine of the saints they revere and venerate, so they visit such shrines regularly. Frequency of visitors is usually high on Thursdays and Fridays. *Qawwali* is performed often on Thursdays at shrines because it is a celebrated day in the tradition of

Chishtiya chain of saints. Qawwali is a source of distraction from routine, mundane and burdensome. Listeners often claim that they gain satisfaction in listening *Qawwali*.

One of the interlocutor responded;

*Mein jab bhi FSc k paper daita tha mein fail ho jata tha, phir meri mother ny mujhy shrine py bajha, mein ny bohat Qawwalian suni or unko feel kia. To mein agly bar apny papers mein achy numbron sy pas ho gya.*

**Translation** whenever I took exams I failed. I failed in FSc. I was a complete failure; therefore, my mother sent me to the shrines. I listened and felt many *Qawwali* and then next time I got good marks in my exam.

There might be certain other reasons that lead to the passing of exam for the boy, but his conviction that it was the blessings of attending *Qawwali* is strikingly important. One may argue that attending such musical performances where altered state of mind is achievable may lead to reduction of stress and anxiety and anyone performs better if free from anxiety. *Sama* is a medium for people to escape anxiety and create an axiological frame where act of listening to *Qawwali* gains positive value and thus consumed accordingly.

One interlocutor, who was a truck driver, stated that listening to *Qawwali* in his own language helps not only enjoy the journey but also helps him attain integrity and resilience. It strengthened his faith and expelled him from disappointment.

*Qawwali* is inspirational. One of the respondents stated,

*Mein jb bhi preshan hota hun to mein ye Qawwali suntan hun, eski kuch lines mujhy bht matasr krte hain;*

تو کجا من کجا

تو امیرِ حرم، میں فقیرِ عجم

تو حقیقت ہے میں صرف احساس ہوں

تو سمندر میں بھٹکی ہوئی پیاس ہوں

تو عطا ہی عطا، میں خطا ہی خطا

**Translation:** whenever I am depressed, I listen to *Qawwali*, few verses in particular inspire me the most:

Where are you from

You are the *Amir-e-Haram*, I am a poor non-Arab

You are the truth, I'm just feeling

You are the sea; I am just a wandering thirst

You are the continuous giver, I am just thankless

In this *Qawwali*, the Prophet is praised and describes the dichotomy of the qualities of the prophet and the believer. The prophet is the highest and followers are at the lowest. He bestowed a lot to his followers and continues to bestow despite them being sinners and unthankful.

He added that *Qawwali* is magical in its own right, it is not only the aura of *Sama* that makes it effective, rather listening to recorded *Qawwali* is so impactful for him as a person that it enables and empowers him. The only condition is that listener needs to listen to it by his heart instead of ears. This metaphorical and cultural expression refers to the ability of a cultural being to transcend between realms that depends on the meaning creations and associating these meanings to the feeling of being present in the protection of divinity.

*Qawwali*, like any other music, is capable of invoking core emotional memories and empathy (Hodge & Wilkins, 2015). It leads to improved performance in other domains, for instance language, which translates music into the cultural connectedness.

*Qawwali* affects the listener emotionally and psychologically. During listening to *qawwali* one concomitantly extracts and gives meanings to the poetic expressions and latent connotations and historical or religious references. This consequently makes *Qawwali* an expression of religiosity for many and they believe that it resolves their problems and issues. It also converges to the larger frame where religiosity is often assumed rhetorically one solution to all problems.

During interviewing a girl, who was accompanied by her family and attended *Qawwali* at a shrine, it was stated by the girl that her mentally ill brother was not recovering despite the consultation and frequent visits to the medical professionals and doctors. Nevertheless, when she brought him to a shrine, he started responding positively to a particular *Qawwali*. The *qawwali* is:

میرے مولا تو میرے تے رحم کر دے

تینوں تیری رحیمی دا واسطہ

تینوں تیری کریمی دا واسطہ

مصطفیٰ دی یتیمی دا واسطہ

**Translation:**

My lord, have mercy on me

I beg in the name of your mercy

I beg in the name of your mercy

I beg in the name of Prophet Muhammad's orphan hood.

So, in this *Qawwali* one only remembers Allah Almighty. In which he is saying to Allah SWT that O Allah forgives and have kindness on me because you are *Rahim* (the Merciful) and *Karim* (the Generous). And forgive me for the sake of Hazrat Mustafa's orphanage, as you love Him so for the sake of Him forgive me and have mercy on me.

*Qawwali* helps people spiritually. As one respondent said that:

*Mujhy pata hai mein aj sy bees sal baad nahi hong a k mein abhe tees sal ka hon. Mein ny apni bht risht e daron ko marty dakha hai jo k bht materialistic thy. Mein ny qawwali sy ye seekha k mujhy apny sath koi Saman ly k ni jana, meri rooh ka acha hona zaruri hai q k wo he mery sath jay ge. Mein qawwali mein aa k kalam suntan hun or mujh pr naimtain hote hain q k hum bht sy dunaiwe kam chor kr aaty hn. Or ye to aulia ka pak kalam hota hai.*

**Translation:** I know I will not be here after twenty years, I am thirty. I saw my relatives who were so materialistic and they died. I learned from *Qawwali* I have to leave this world empty-handed, that I should pure my soul instead of collecting the material things. I listen to the *Qawwali* because the words uttered are sacred, these are the words of *Aulia* (the saints). We leave the worldly affairs and listen to the blessed words that bring us blessings.

Poetic expressions of *Qawwali* are revered source of resilience. The listeners assign meanings to the poetry and to the impressions created through the musical performance of that poetry. It is perceived and negotiated for its spiritual and religious outcomes for the devout listeners. The perception of *Qawwali* as sacred and construction of it in opposition to worldly engagements is vital when phenomenological meaning creation is analyzed.



### **Qawwali and Sama**

*Qawwali* is associated with closeness to God. *Qawwali* uses idiosyncratic phrasing of Islamic metaphors, which results in stimulating the religious ecstasy among the performer and the listeners where they feel the presence of divine surrounding them. It gives them a supernatural experience. Invoked emotions result in transformation from one consciousness to another, an altered state of mind, an ecstasy or hyper emotions that are in line with the faith. The listeners of *Sama* claim to be in contact with the almighty. This experience of ecstasy is known as *wajd*, where a person is free from mundane, busy routine, social and religious activities and connects with God. Music exists in all societies; Sufi music consists of Sufi poetry. This is mostly played in shrines on the death and birth anniversary of Sufi saints. It happens for the sake of pleasure, it happens for the purification of the heart from all kinds of evils, and spiritual knowledge. It is also pure one's thoughts. Sufi create the music having a specific rhythm and melody, after listening the one's state of mind alters and links with God which cannot be explained in words.

One of my respondents said that:

*Sama ka taluq tasawuf sy hai. Es ka taluq dargaho or sufia karam sy bohat daireena hai. Es k jo asraat hain wo insan ke rooh par hoty hain. Sama khali hota hai kyun k es mein buzurgan e din ka kalam shamil hota hai. Sama mein aisy aisy marahil aaty hain k jis mein sary masly hal ho jaty hain. Lakin es lamhy ka Qawwali mein aana bohat zaruri hai.*

**Translation:** *Sama* belongs to shrines of sufis and it is related to *tasawuf* (mysticism). It affects the human soul because of its belongingness to the sufis. There is a moment in *Qawwali* where all the worries are solved but it is essential to have that moment in the *Qawwali*.

As my respondents said that:

*Jehra bnda Sama wich bey janda aay, jery ody bara bara sal dy msly hal ni hundy o sekinta wich hal ho jandy nay. Lakin zarrori aay k o lmha aaway Qawwali wich.*

**Translation:** The person who sits in *Sama*, his all problems and worries solved within seconds which were not solved from the last twelve years. But the moment must come in *Qawwali*.

One of my respondents has a very unique perspective about *Sama*, as he said that:

*Sama aik kafiyaat ka muqam hai, ye Hazrat Muhammad (SAW) ke zaat sy shuru hua, ye madina walo ke kafiyaat hai, kyun k unho ny sehra parha or duff ka istemal kia, wo duff bajaty jaty or sath parhty; Tala al Badru Alynaah. Es raqs sy unho ny khush amdeed bola to wahan*

*sys ama shuru hua jab logon ny dakha k welcome kasy krty hain. Sama wo halal hai jis mein insan apny hosh o hwas gnaw dy. Sama k baad aisi halat hote hai k insan ko bukhari ho jata hai, ye koi bemari nahi hote bal k kafiayat hote hai. Sama rahy ga apny ishq k sath, or agr es mein bethain gyn to jaldi rooh pohnc jaye ge. Masly jaldi hal ho jaty hain. Sama mein aisy bethna k aagy peachy sy kuch yad na rahy or aulia karam mein bilkul gum ho jana. Zinadage sanwr jate hai.*

**Translation:** *Sama* started when Hazrat Muhammad SAW came to Madina, then people of Madina welcome him by saying *Tala al Badru Alynaah* using percussion. That *Sama* is acceptable in which a person goes into a trance or unconscious. After *Sama*, a person feels a fever but this is not any kind of illness but it's a feeling. *Sama* will continue, because it expresses love, and who belongs to *Sama* his soul will pass away soon. A person has to sit in *Sama* and forget all his worries and remember only Aulia Karam (the revered saints). Due to it life becomes beautiful. It takes away all the problems.

The melody of *Sama* is divine music. While listening to it listeners go into trance and connect to God. *Sama* purifies the hearts and souls and solves all the problems, hardships, and worries of the listeners. It is about recognizing the inner and indulging in shades. People symbolize their problems with *Sama*. They visit shrines of Sufi saints regularly and once a week like every Thursday to get closer. They consider that association with shrines will help them eliminate their problems.

*Sama* has psychological effects on health. Psychologically it solves all the problems and gives satisfaction to the mind and purifies the heart and soul. There is no such case of healing in *Qawwali* like in shamanism. But the listeners symbolize with the Almighty that He has supreme power, the worshiper who understands all the hardships and heals them. In this case, the symbol (*Sama*) is sacred so its values are also sacred which heals the subject. As anthropologically we see the wellbeing of people from cultural (local) understanding. That is what local people understand about cultural beliefs about health and illness. In all religions belief systems are unseen. The one who believes in unseen beliefs guides him. So, this is the case with *Qawwali*, with its text and song. The lyrics I wrote previously are the lines. After listening to those lines, understand their message and believe in it. Like one of my respondents sang some lines that heals the listeners are:

بڑا لچپال علی ، جو لگیاں نبھا جاندے نے

او سوینا میرا مولا علی، نواباں دا نواب علی

جو عزتوں ودھا جاندے نے

## **Translation**

Dignified Ali, who fulfills all his promises

That Gorgeous is my lord, The *Nawab* among *Nawabs*

His lordship is the source of honor to me

These lines are about Imam Ali, one of the four prominent Caliphs of Islam and a cousin of Prophet Muhammad. There is a strong tradition of sectarian followers of Ali, who is revered as second to the Prophet because he is the father of grandsons of the Prophet. The ancestral closeness to the Prophet and the services offered to protect the Prophet and promote the cause of the Prophet rendered him a very high pedestal among other companions of the Prophet. He is often referred to as *wali* (saint), a guardian and custodian for the faithful. He is one of the leading metaphors used in the Qawwali. Meanings associated to the metaphorical reference of Ali are countless and out of the scope for this brief paper. However, he is often assumed as a magical *messiah* who, if remembered in hardships, can get a faithful out of his troubles.

Qawwali in essence is not only a musical experience but also a cultural product that is attended and perceived because it is functional to regulate the culture and commune.

## **Conclusion**

Semantics are omnipresent in any cultural group and that group not only produces meaning but conditions and negotiates them according to the culturally relative axiology or system of values during the cultural consumption of the meanings. Qawwali provides an individual to have Maslow's *peak experiences* where self-actualization takes place and this self-actualization is relative to the axiology and culture.

Religious connotations and metaphors are strong actors that invoke positive feelings because of the positive axiological position and cultural construction of religious figures as aspiration for love and empathy.

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