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THE LADY OF HEAVEN (UK 2011) and Representations of Early Shi'i Islam in Films and TV Series

Abstract

This article examines the portrayal of early Shi'i Islamic history in films and television series, highlighting the range of interpretative approaches and varying degrees of historical accuracy. These productions aim to educate audiences about the formative moments of Islam but are often criticized for their lack of historical fidelity and failure to be sensitive to religious contexts. Sectarian tensions further complicate these depictions, particularly in light of the diverse interpretations of early Shi'i Islamic history. This article focuses on the representation of key events from early Shi'i history, in particular in the film *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* (Eli King, UK 2011). The film's selection for this study was driven by the controversy it sparked, leading to its ban not only in several Sunni-majority countries but also in the secular United Kingdom and in Shi'i-majority Iran, making it a unique illustrative case.

Keywords

Digital Religion, Shi'i Islam, Islam and Film, Early Islam, *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* (Eli King, UK 2011)

Biography

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Introduction

The filmic has entered the age of unlimited electronic reproduction and thus also unlimited exploitation.¹ It has been widely used to convey narratives and depict history, including religious history. Particularly in light of the broader implications of media representations on public perception and cultural understanding, research on the depiction of Islam and Muslims in film and on television has become a growing area of academic inquiry. Scholars in this field examine how Muslims and Islamic themes or figures are portrayed, focusing on the accuracy, biases, and cultural impact of these representations.² Such studies often explore how films and TV series navigate religious and historical authenticity while engaging with narrative and visual aesthetics.³ For instance, scholars have investigated the portrayal of key Islamic historical events, such as the lives of the Prophet Muḥammad or his Companions, and the extent to which these depictions align with the historical record or religious teachings. Additionally, scholars have investigated how media representations reinforce or challenge prevailing stereotypes about Islam and its adherents and thereby influence societal attitudes and intercultural relations.⁴ Some research has focused specifically on the portrayal of Shi'ism, mainly within the Iranian context.⁵

The representation of Islamic history in films and TV series involves a complex interplay between historical accuracy, cultural sensitivity, and narrative dramatization. Media portrayals often grapple with the challenge of balancing religious reverence with storytelling. Films and TV series exploring Islamic historical narratives frequently face criticism for their interpretation of religious events and figures, which can range from respectful and educational to controversial and sensationalized. Academic scrutiny of such portrayals has revealed that while some productions aim to portray insightful historical and cultural contexts, others perpetuate stereotypes or simplify complex religious practices for dramatic effect. This dichotomy underscores broader issues within media studies regarding the representation of religious traditions, highlighting the need for

1 Zielinski 1999, 12.

2 See Petersen 2021a.

3 See Petersen 2021b.

4 See Petersen 2021a.

5 See Pak-Shiraz 2011; Pak-Shiraz 2015.

nuanced approaches that respect both historical integrity and audience engagement.

Early Islamic history has been the subject of various cinematic and television portrayals. While these productions aim to provide audiences with an understanding of the formative moments of Islam, their questionable historical accuracy and response to religious sensitivities may skew their message. Sectarian tensions also complicate these portrayals. Filmmakers may select a singular narrative of early Islamic history that sidesteps historical complexities. These films tend to consider Sunni narratives representative of Islam and often discount Muslims who did not adhere to what became the dominant, or “canonical”, view, namely Sunni Islam.⁶ Islamic scholars also exemplify this oversight by failing to address non-Sunni perspectives, a methodological approach also observable within Islamic studies, where minority Muslim groups are frequently characterized as mere “sects” or are altogether excluded from consideration.⁷

Shi'i Islam, a diverse religious tradition, and its early history, have been depicted by various actors, each driven by their own motivations and interpretations of early Islamic events. The cases analyzed in this article illustrate this diversity. All are prominent examples of historical cinematography. They were chosen for their cultural, theological, and cinematic significance and can be explored in light of their religious interpretations, narrative strategies, and impact on contemporary audiences. I have categorized these films and TV series into three groups that are indicative of the variety of approaches to narrating early Islamic history: (1) non-denominational history, (2) Sunni perspectives, and (3) Shi'i representations.

For evaluating representations of Islamic history in these works, several points are particularly important. One depiction may involve a nuanced and accurate portrayal of key figures and events significant to each respective tradition, avoiding the misrepresentation of Shi'i or other minority beliefs or their reduction to sectarian stereotypes. By contrast, a less authentic portrayal may include historical inaccuracies, simplified narratives, or caricatured depictions of key figures and values.

This article focuses on the film *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* (Eli King, UK 2011), a historical drama that was one of the first major cinematic depictions of Fāṭima, the daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad and is notable for its focus

6 Sahner 2023, 19.

7 Sahner 2023, 22.

on Shi'i Islamic history. The controversy surrounding the film led to its ban in several Sunni-majority countries, as well as in the secular United Kingdom and in Shi'i-majority Iran, making it a unique example.

The article begins with a brief overview of films and TV series about early Shi'i Islam and their creators. The second section is devoted to a case study of the film *THE LADY OF HEAVEN*, providing an overview of its plot, the narratives depicted in the movie, its creators, and the controversies surrounding it.

Early Shi'i Islam in Films and TV Series: Overview

Shi'i Islam has been portrayed in various ways in films and TV series. These portrayals, like the depiction of historical events in films and TV series generally, are significantly influenced by the perspectives of the creators, their goals, and the cultural or political contexts in which these works are produced. Most of the films/series analyzed here have been reviewed in popular cinema magazines but have not received substantial academic attention.⁸ Following Banks's criteria for "good visual research", I pay attention to both the internal and external narratives of the films studied. As Banks pointed out, their materiality, their similarity to other objects in their class, and their uniqueness as particular manifestations of that class must all be assessed through an initial reading of the internal narrative. Simultaneously, all films and artworks are products of human action and are intertwined to varying degrees with human social relations.⁹ Therefore, a broader frame of analysis is also required – a reading of the external narrative that extends beyond the visual text itself, which in these instances includes public/state reactions to their release.

Attempts to Present a Non-Denominational History

The most famous and widely studied film depicting early Islam is *AR-RISĀLAH* (*THE MESSAGE*, Moustapha Akkad, US 1976). This historical drama chronicles the life and early mission of the Prophet Muḥammad and the birth of Islam. The film is notable for its respectful portrayal of the Prophet, who does not appear directly on screen, in adherence to Islamic traditions that prohibit

8 Bakker 2006, 77.

9 Banks 2001, 12.

such depictions. Akkad's initial efforts to produce a film about the Prophet Muḥammad were resisted by Hollywood, prompting him to seek funding outside the United States. King Hassan II of Morocco and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi ultimately sponsored the production.

Akkad collaborated with writers and scholars from Al-Azhar University to avoid controversy, having the script meticulously scrutinized and approved page by page by scholars from Cairo. The Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council of Lebanon also gave its approval. To ensure compliance with Islamic principles, Akkad decided that the Prophet himself would not be depicted on screen; only his cane and camel would be shown. Despite these precautions, the production faced significant challenges. After filming began in 1974, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia pressured Morocco's King Hassan II to expel the filmmakers. The Muslim World League in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, ultimately rejected the project, and the scholars who had initially approved the script withdrew their support, labeling the completed film "an insult to Islam".¹⁰ Al-Azhar asserted that it is also forbidden to depict in a film any of al-'ashara al-mubashsharūn (the ten Companions of the Prophet to whom Paradise was promised during their lifetime, according to Sunni Islamic tradition), and Akkad's film included depictions of Abū Bakr and some other Companions.¹¹ As subsequent case studies will demonstrate, similar issues have arisen in other films and TV series.

Despite these challenges and bans in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Egypt, *THE MESSAGE* has become a significant cultural and educational tool, particularly within the Muslim world. It remains one of the few major cinematic works that portray the life of the Prophet Muḥammad and the origins of Islam, making it a landmark film in both religious and historical cinema.¹²

MOHAMMAD RASOOLLOLAH (MUHAMMAD: THE MESSENGER OF GOD, Majid Majidi, IR 2015) presents an extensive cinematic portrayal of the early life of the Prophet Muḥammad, concentrating on the period before he received his first revelations and became the prophet. Directed by Majid Majidi, who had been Oscar-nominated for the foreign-language film *BACHEHA-YE ASEMAN (THE CHILDREN OF HEAVEN*, IR 1997), this film is Iran's most expensive production to date, with a budget of \$40 million. The film drew on notable talents, including cinematographer Vittorio Storaro and composer A. R. Rah-

10 Yorulmaz 2021, 128; Bakker 2006, 78.

11 Bakker 2006, 88.

12 Greene 2016.

man.¹³ Seven years in production, it was intended to be the first installment of a trilogy and portrays the Prophet's life from his birth to age twelve.

Majidi consulted with Sunni and Shi'i scholars from Iran, Algeria, Morocco, Lebanon, and Iraq and conducted four years of research using hadith and prophetic biographies. Despite these efforts, the film faced criticism from Al-Azhar, the Muslim World League, the Mufti of Saudi Arabia, and several Indian scholars.¹⁴ It depicted the Prophet's childhood and therefore did not cover controversial historical events on which Sunni and Shi'i perspectives differ, but the objections centered on its depiction of the Prophet – a topic to which we will return in the context of *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* – and associations with Shi'i Iran. It was positively reviewed by Sunni scholars in Russia, Turkey, and other countries.

While *MUHAMMAD: THE MESSENGER OF GOD* has garnered significant attention in Islamic countries and among Muslim audiences, it has not achieved the same level of international attention as *THE MESSAGE*. Its impact outside the Muslim world remains limited, though it has been shown at film festivals and appears in academic discussions on Islamic cinema. Both *THE MESSAGE* and *MUHAMMAD: THE MESSENGER OF GOD* present the Prophet Muhammad and Islam in a nuanced and positive light and may have been produced with a broader non-Muslim Euro-American audience in mind. Both Akkad and Majidi sought to minimize opposition from Muslim viewers by consulting Sunni and Shi'i scholars. Nevertheless, they were unable to prevent their films from being banned in several Muslim-majority countries. Some objections from Muslim audiences are rooted in the modern disapproval of any depiction of the Prophet Muhammad, while others reflect differences in cultural traditions.¹⁵

Sunni Representations of Early Islam

The TV series *OMAR / OMAR FAROUK* (MBC 1, SA/QA 2012) consists of 31 episodes filmed at various locations in Morocco and Syria, with technical staff from ten different countries. Produced by the Saudi MBC network and Qatar TV, written by Walid Saif, and directed by Hatem Ali, *OMAR* remains the largest – concerning the number of actors involved, the budget, etc. – TV

13 Linden 2015.

14 Yorulmaz 2021, 129.

15 Yorulmaz 2021, 130.

series produced in the Arab world.¹⁶ This series offers a significant portrayal of ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the second caliph and companion of the Prophet Muḥammad. It covers key aspects of ‘Umar’s life, including his early years, his conversion to Islam, and his tenure as caliph. The narrative is structured to provide a comprehensive view of his contributions to the early Islamic state and his role in shaping Islamic governance and law. The series was well-received in the Arab world and among Muslims globally, garnering significant viewership and praise for its production quality, historical accuracy, and performances. However, it also faced controversy and debate about its portrayal of historical figures and sensitive events. While adhering to the Islamic tradition of avoiding depictions of the Prophet Muḥammad, the series was criticized for portraying ‘Umar, Abū Bakr, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, and other significant figures in Islamic history. One newspaper report recorded that hundreds of people had joined a Facebook campaign demanding the show not be broadcast.¹⁷

Despite the sensitive nature of its subject and its focus on figures who are viewed differently in Shi‘i Islam and Sunni Islam, the series was broadcast in Iran, largely on account of its high production quality and its significance as a historical drama. The reception in Iran was mixed. While some viewers appreciated the historical and educational aspects of the show, others were concerned about the portrayal of figures such as ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, a controversial figure in Shi‘i Islam. For historical and theological reasons, ‘Umar is often viewed negatively in Shi‘i tradition, and the series contradicted Shi‘i perspectives on many historical events.

The Arab TV drama series *MUAWIYA, AL-HASAN WA AL-HUSAYN (AL HASAN AND AL HUSEIN, JO/SY 2011)* portrays early Islamic history by focusing on the figures of Mu‘āwīya and the Prophet Muḥammad’s grandsons, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī. This series is notable for its exploration of the political and religious conflicts that shaped the early years of the Islamic state. It recounts events in the early Muslim territories, including the rebellion against the third caliph, ‘Uthmān, and his subsequent assassination. ‘Uthmān’s death was followed by conflicts during the fourth caliphate under ‘Alī, including the Battle of the Camel, in which he fought the Prophet’s companions Ṭalḥa and Zubayr and one of Prophet’s wives, ‘Ā’isha, and the Battle of Siffin against Mu‘āwīya. Following ‘Alī’s assassination by the Khawārij,

16 Adway 2023, 69.

17 Al-Masry Al-Youm 2012.

Mu'āwiya assumed the caliphate. These ten years of civil war launched major Islamic political and doctrinal divergences that have been studied by historians and scholars. The screenwriters disregard much of the contentious historical account and present a simplified narrative, in which a Jewish man from Yemen, 'Abd Allāh ibn Sabā', is depicted as the orchestrator of the civil war.¹⁸ In anti-Shi'i literature, 'Abd Allāh ibn Sabā' is often portrayed as a founder or ideologue of Shi'ism and is held responsible for the wars and conflicts among the Prophet's Companions.

The series was well-received in many Arab countries. Its dramatic portrayal of significant historical and religious figures attracted a large audience, and it was praised for its production quality. However, Shi'i and some Sunni viewers were particularly opposed to its positive portrayal of Mu'āwiya and his son Yazīd. Indeed, the series polarized Sunni audiences, with modernists celebrating the portrayal of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn – a subject previously considered taboo – while Salafis were critical of the series but at least satisfied with the reproduction of a narrative that traces Shi'i denomination to the malign figure of 'Abd Allāh ibn Sabā'. This perspective represents a consumerist form of Salafism that has adopted a modernist façade and is marketed by some contemporary actors in the Arab world.¹⁹ In Egypt, the series was banned by Al-Azhar due to its depiction of the Prophet's family, specifically his grandsons. In Iraq, the ban was attributed to the series' anti-Shi'i narratives. Notably, the series presented endorsements from a list of Sunni scholars, including some Shi'i scholars, which, according to Sayyid Hazem al-Mayyali,²⁰ was intended to create an appearance of agreement between denominations on the historical content of the series. Al-Mayyali's critical analysis highlights distortions of historical facts, referring to Sunni and, primarily, Shi'i sources. His critiques include the propagation of the 'Abd Allāh ibn Sabā' narrative, the misleading portrayal of harmony between the Prophet's Family and their adversaries, the glorification of Companions who opposed the Prophet's Family, and the defamation of prominent Shi'i figures such as Mālik al-Ashtar.²¹

18 Al-Masry Al-Youm 2011.

19 Al-Masry Al-Youm 2011.

20 al-Mayyali 2021, 33.

21 See further al-Mayyali 2021.

Shi'i Representations of Early Islam

IMAM ALI / SHAHEED E KUFA (THE MARTYR OF KUFA, IRIB TV3, IR 1992) is an Iranian historical TV series produced in 1992 (the series has been broadcast as telefilm since 1997) and directed by Davood Mirbagheri. This series is one of the most significant portrayals of the life and times of Imam 'Alī, the first Imam in Shi'i Islam and the fourth caliph in Sunni tradition. It is highly regarded in the Shi'i Muslim world for its in-depth and respectful depiction of Imam 'Alī's life, character, and leadership. The series chronicles in 22 episodes the life of Imam 'Alī, focusing on key events from the time after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad to Imam 'Alī's assassination. The narrative begins with the final days of the Prophet Muḥammad and the controversy surrounding his succession – a critical moment in Islamic history that led to the division between Sunni and Shi'i Islam. Imam 'Alī is portrayed as a paragon of justice, wisdom, and piety who faces numerous challenges and political intrigues. The series was very well-received in Iran and other Shi'i-majority regions, where it is considered a significant cultural and religious work. It has been praised by Shi'i audiences for its strong performances and historical accuracy. However, the series was controversial in Sunni-majority countries, where some of the events and interpretations presented are viewed differently. Despite these differences, IMAM ALI remains a landmark in Islamic television, offering a detailed and dramatic portrayal of one of the most important figures in Islamic history. It continues to be broadcast and widely viewed, particularly during religious observances in the Muslim calendar, such as the holy month of Ramadan.

TANHATARIN SARDAR (LONELIEST LEADER, Sima Film, IR 1997) is a historical TV drama series written and directed by Mehdi Fakhimzadeh. The series centers on the life of Imam Ḥasan ibn 'Alī, the eldest grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad and the second Imam in Twelver Shi'i Islam.

The narrative delves into Imam Ḥasan's life, particularly during the turbulent period following the assassination of his father, Imam 'Alī. After 'Alī's death, Ḥasan is recognized as the rightful leader by many in the Muslim community, but his leadership is immediately challenged by Mu'āwiya, the governor of Syria and a powerful political figure. The series explores Imam Ḥasan's efforts to consolidate his leadership and maintain peace within the Muslim community despite facing immense pressure from Mu'āwiya's forces. Ḥasan is portrayed as a compassionate and wise leader, deeply committed to the well-being of the Muslim community and striving to avoid unnecessary bloodshed.

TANHATARIN SARDAR is deeply rooted in themes of sacrifice, justice, and the moral complexities of leadership. The series presents Imam Ḥasan as a tragic figure, forced to make difficult decisions in the face of overwhelming opposition. His story is held to be one of immense personal and spiritual significance, especially within the Shi'i tradition, where his actions are seen as a continuation of the principles established by his father, Imam 'Alī. The series was well-received in Iran and among Shi'i audiences, where it is considered an important portrayal of a pivotal figure in Islamic history. However, like other religious and historical dramas from Iran, TANHATARIN SARDAR was less well received outside Shi'i-majority regions because of its interpretation of historical events, particularly the depiction of figures like Mu'āwiya, who is viewed differently in Sunni traditions.

MOKHTARNAMEH (THE BOOK OF MOKHTAR, Sima Film, IR 2010–2011) is an Iranian TV miniseries directed by Davood Mirbagheri. This historical drama portrays the life and revolt of Mukhtār al-Thaqafi, a notable figure in early Islamic history renowned for his role in avenging the martyrdom of Imam Ḥusayn and his followers. The series begins by exploring Mukhtār's early life in Ṭā'if and his initial encounters with Islamic teachings and figures. It proposes this background as explanation of his personal motivations and his early political and social activism. The series highlights Mukhtār's profound sorrow and his determination to seek justice following the tragic events of the Battle of Karbālā, where Imam Ḥusayn and his followers were martyred. The narrative focuses on Mukhtār's rebellion against the Umayyād Caliphate and his quest for retribution. He is eventually defeated and executed. The series underscores his legacy and the impact of his actions on Islamic history, particularly in avenging Karbālā and challenging oppressive rule.

MOKHTARNAMEH is notable for its exploration of themes such as justice, resistance against tyranny, and the moral and spiritual dimensions of leadership. The series portrays Mukhtār as a heroic figure deeply committed to the principles of justice and retribution, reflecting broader Shi'i values associated with the aftermath of Karbālā. It was well-received in Iran and among Shi'i Muslim audiences, praised for its historical accuracy, production quality, and strong performances. However, it has been the subject of scrutiny and debate on account of its portrayal of political and religious conflicts. Its depiction of historical events from a Shi'i perspective is not always well received in Sunni-majority contexts, but it remains influential and widely discussed within the Shi'i Muslim world.

The cases of IMAM ALI, TANHATARIN SARDAR, and MOKHTARNAMEH illustrate how Iranian filmmakers actively explore Islamic history through films and TV series, positioning themselves as major contributors to the representation of Shi'i perspectives on Islamic history within the cinema industry. The Iranian government and various religious organizations provide substantial support for films that highlight Shi'i Islamic history. The perception of Iranian religious films outside Iran is multifaceted and influenced by religious, cultural, and political contexts. In Shi'i-majority countries and regions, such as Iraq, Lebanon, and parts of Pakistan and India, these films are often applauded for their detailed and respectful portrayal of Shi'i religious figures and historical events. They resonate with audiences familiar with these narratives and contribute positively to religious and cultural identity. Conversely, in Sunni-majority countries, their reception may be less welcoming, in particular when they depict figures like Imam 'Alī or events such as the Battle of Karbālā, which are viewed differently in Sunni traditions. In such locations they can face criticism or censorship.

I turn now to the unique case of *THE LADY OF HEAVEN*, which according to its creators presents a Shi'i perspective on early Islamic history and yet was banned in Iran and criticized by Shi'i scholars.

The Case of *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* (UK 2011)

The film opens with a contemporary narrative set in war-torn Iraq, where a young boy named Laith witnesses the death of his mother during a violent attack by ISIS. Traumatized and orphaned, Laith is taken in by a compassionate woman who begins to tell him the story of Lady Fāṭima, the daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad. This historical tale is intended to offer Laith spiritual guidance and strength amidst his harrowing circumstances.

The narrative then shifts to a historical setting over 1,400 years earlier, during the early days of Islam. The story centers on the life of Fāṭima, focusing on her childhood as the cherished daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad. It highlights her close relationship with her father and her eventual marriage to 'Alī, who is both the Prophet's cousin and the first Imam in Shi'i Islam. Following the death of the Prophet, the Muslim community is thrown into political turmoil regarding the leadership succession. The film presents these events from a Shi'i perspective, depicting the conflicts and betrayals that lead to the division between Sunni and Shi'i Islam. Lady Fāṭima emerges as a central figure in these events, particularly

in her opposition to perceived injustices against her family, especially her husband, 'Alī.

As the narrative unfolds, the film portrays the suffering and oppression faced by Fāṭima, particularly following the Prophet's death. Her home is attacked, and she sustains severe injuries that lead eventually to her death. Despite these trials, she remains a symbol of unwavering faith, resistance, and piety, embodying the spiritual and moral virtues central to Shi'i beliefs. The film then returns to the present-day narrative, where Fāṭima's story inspires young Laith to find courage and resilience in the face of his own suffering. The film concludes by emphasizing the enduring legacy of Fāṭima and her significance in the spiritual and moral lives of Muslims, particularly within the Shi'i tradition.

The film weaves together two narratives: one set in the present day and the other in the early Islamic period. This dual narrative structure, blending past and present, underscores the timeless relevance of Fāṭima's story and its impact on contemporary issues of faith, identity, and resistance against oppression.

Controversies

THE LADY OF HEAVEN (fig. 1), produced by Enlightened Kingdom and written by Yasser Al-Habib, is the first film to focus on the life of the historical figure Fāṭima during the early Muslim era. The narrative is told from a Shi'i perspective, which significantly differs from that of Sunni Muslims. Originally scheduled for release in 2020, the film was postponed by industry uncertainties related to the COVID-19 pandemic and eventually premiered in 2021.²² THE LADY OF HEAVEN had generated considerable controversy even before its production began. Initially titled "Yawm al-'Adhab" ("The Day of Punishment/Doomsday"), the film was later renamed "The Lady of Heaven".

The controversy surrounding the film intensified when followers of Grand Ayatollah Hussein Nouri Hamedani sought a Sharia ruling regarding the support, promotion, and viewing of the film. They expressed concern that a British-based Arab television channel had raised millions of pounds from Shi'i Muslims worldwide to produce a film that would, for the first time, depict the first caliph, Abū Bakr, and his companions attacking Lady Fāṭima's house and violating her sanctity. The film's purpose was purportedly to narrate the

22 Rúa 2024, 463.

life of Fāṭima. In response, Ayatollah Hamedani condemned the project, declaring “any assistance and attention to the process of making and watching this movie as haram (forbidden) and against the Sharia”.²³ A similar response was expressed by other prominent Shi’i scholars. Grand Ayatollah Makarim Shirazi issued a statement declaring, “Without doubt, those who help to produce and release this film, as well as those who watch it, have committed a mortal sin.” Ja’far Subhani described the making of the film as fulfilling the demands of the enemies of Islam and as being far from reason and piety. He also prohibited its production and any financial support for it. Additionally, Safi Golpaygani forbade Shi’i Muslims from engaging in activities that would lead to insults and disrespect for Islam and the Shi’i community.²⁴

Yasser Al-Habib, the creator of the film, is a controversial figure, criticized by both Sunni and some Shi’i Muslims. In his home country of Kuwait, he was sentenced to imprisonment for insulting the Companions of the Prophet Muḥammad; he fled to the United Kingdom, where he founded the Al-Muhassin Mosque. The mosque is named after the unborn son of ‘Alī and Fāṭima, who, according to certain narratives, was killed during an attack on Fāṭima’s house by ‘Umar. Al-Habib’s primary activities take place, however, in the digital space, where he maintains an official website (<https://alhabib.org/en/>), social media profiles, and the Fadak TV channel (fadak.co.uk). The name of the TV channel references a significant event in early Shi’ism – the dispute between Fāṭima and Abū Bakr over the ownership of the Fadak land.²⁵ Al-Habib’s activities are largely characterized by the intolerance of Sunni perspectives that is evident in his representation of early Shi’i Islam.



Fig. 1: Official Poster – Canada. Retrieved from the film’s official website, <https://www.ladyofheaven.com/> [accessed 22 August 2024].

23 Hawzah News Agency 2022.

24 Waqar 2020.

25 Tahiiev/Lukianov 2022, 64.

Many Shi'i scholars disapprove of his actions. In 2010, in response to Al-Habib's public insults directed at 'Ā'isha, the wife of the Prophet Muḥammad, Ayatollah Khamenei issued a decree prohibiting insults against 'Ā'isha and other figures or symbols revered by Sunni Muslims.²⁶

As a result, the Iranian government banned *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* from being released, stating that the film was intended to divide Muslims. Ahead of the protests in the United Kingdom, eight Shi'i scholars in the country criticized the film, expressing concerns that it would exacerbate sectarian tensions among Muslims. In the United Kingdom, hundreds of people in cities such as Bradford, Bolton, Birmingham, and Sheffield protested against the film's release. The film was accused of being blasphemous by some Sunni groups, with much of the criticism focusing on the negative depictions of several supporting characters, including the Prophet Muḥammad's Companions, Abū Bakr, and 'Umar.²⁷ The movie suggests that Fāṭima Al-Zahrā' was the first victim of terrorism and portrays ISIS as a continuation of Wahhabi thought, which it links to the three caliphs revered by Sunni Muslims.²⁸ This connection is highlighted through the analogy with the death of Laith's mother, who is killed by an ISIS terrorist in a manner reminiscent of 'Umar's attack on Fāṭima (a door is forced and she is assaulted). Consequently, Pakistan, Egypt, and Morocco have all banned the film.²⁹

Another point of criticism was the portrayal of sacred figures from early Islamic history. While Fāṭima is never shown directly and is always completely covered in a black or white veil, the negative depiction of Abū Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Ā'isha drew significant censure. The filmmakers cast dark-skinned actors in these roles (fig. 2), leading to accusations of racism, as some claimed the movie used black actors to portray negative characters. The filmmakers responded by noting that there were also light-skinned negative characters and positive dark-skinned characters, and they referenced certain historical narrations that describe Abū Bakr and 'Umar as having dark skin. Moreover, the film depicted the faces of figures sacred to Shi'i Islam, namely the Prophet Muḥammad (see fig. 3) and Imam 'Alī. A disclaimer at the beginning and end of the film states that "the performances of Holy Personalities were achieved through a unique synthesis of actors, in-camera effects, lighting, and visual ef-

26 Khamenei 2016.

27 Stolworthy 2022.

28 Waqar 2020.

29 Ruaa 2024, 463.



Fig. 2: The portrayal of Abū Bakr in *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* (Eli King, UK 2011). Retrieved from the film's official Facebook account, <https://www.facebook.com/theladyofheaven/photos/> [accessed 22 August 2024].



Fig. 3: The portrayal of the Prophet Muḥammad in *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* (Eli King, UK 2011). Retrieved from the film's official Facebook account, <https://www.facebook.com/theladyofheaven/photos/> [accessed 22 August 2024].

fects". No single actor is credited with portraying these holy figures; instead, their faces, often shown as dazzling sunbursts, were computer-generated.³⁰ This approach was unusual, not least as it marked the first time a movie produced by Muslims depicted the Prophet's face in any form. In films analyzed earlier in this article, other strategies were employed. In *THE MESSAGE*, Moustapha Akkad avoided showing the Prophet Muḥammad's body entirely, using camera movements to provide his point of view and having companions voice the Prophet's sentiments by saying, "The Prophet said that..."³¹ In *MUHAMMAD: THE MESSENGER OF GOD*, Majid Majidi showed the Prophet's entire body, including his feet, legs, hands, arms, chest, and turban, but kept his face covered with a gold or white veil or illuminated by a flaming halo. Throughout the film, Majidi employed these techniques to obscure the Prophet's direct image, subtly concealing his face with veils, lights, and hands.³²

Interestingly, the historical narratives depicted in the movie were not the primary focus of criticism from Shi'i scholars; the main criticisms were directed instead at the filmmakers and their perceived "bad intentions". This

³⁰ Hoad 2022.

³¹ Yorulmaz 2021, 130.

³² Yorulmaz 2021, 131.

response is largely due to the fact that most of the history depicted in the film is recognized by Shi'i Muslims, although some aspects remain open to historical debate (such as the alleged poisoning of the Prophet and the purported involvement of specific individuals, the authenticity of narration(s) about the attack on Fāṭima's house, the depiction of Abū Bakr and 'Umar as dark-skinned). In one of his lectures, Sayed Ammar Nakshawani discusses the authenticity of some of these historical narratives.³³

Some points of criticism centered around the portrayal of Fāṭima as a faceless character who, more importantly, never seems to be the central focus, with the Prophet Muḥammad and 'Alī emerging as more significant personalities. Therefore, Loayza concludes, "the film is hardly about Fāṭima".³⁴ Also, the filmmakers' repeated message of peace and their attempt to represent Islam as a peaceful religion suggest that it was primarily intended for a non-Muslim audience. In this regard, however, the movie may be challenging for viewers unfamiliar with Islamic history and its key figures, as it does not provide an introduction to many historical figures, and their identities only become clear when they are explicitly named.

The movie serves as a reminder of the sensitivities involved in portraying religious figures and the potential impact of such portrayals on contemporary religious and cultural dynamics. Following protests, screenings of *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* at a Bolton movie theater were canceled, to ensure the safety of employees and customers. The UK cinema's decision to revoke permission to screen was criticized as dangerous for free speech and detrimental to the arts. *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* raised numerous questions and sparked discussions on the limits of free speech and on ideological bias in media coverage of the film.³⁵

Conclusion

Representations of early Shi'i Islamic history in films and TV series often focus on historical events, figures, and themes central to Shi'i identity. These portrayals aim to capture the spiritual, political, and emotional dimensions of the formative period of Shi'i Islam, particularly the events surrounding the succession to the Prophet Muḥammad.

33 Nakshawani 2020.

34 Loayza 2021.

35 Ruaa 2024, 463. Ruaa studied linguistic bias in reports about the film *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* in the *Tehran Times*, *Kuwait Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Al-Estiklal*.

These representations often face the challenge of balancing historical accuracy with artistic interpretation. The result may be controversial, especially when the portrayal of sacred figures and events does not align with the religious views of certain audiences. In some regions, the depiction of Shi'i Islamic history can be subject to censorship owing to political and sectarian sensitivities. On this count the production and distribution of Shi'i-oriented films and series have been limited in some countries, as was the case for *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* and most Iranian-made films and series.

The representation of early Shi'i Islamic history in films and TV series plays a crucial role in preserving and propagating the Shi'i narrative of Islamic history. These portrayals help keep alive the memory of foundational events that are important symbols of justice and resistance in Shi'i Islam. The sensitive nature of this history means that these representations are often approached with reverence and care, acknowledging their deep religious significance.

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