

## **Performativity and Soundscape in a Ritual; A Schechner-Crawford Study of Mehfil e Milad's Performativity and Soundscape**

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### **Abstract:**

Mehfil e Milad un Nabi (P.B.U.H) is a concept very common in South Asia as the celebration of the birth of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him). It is celebrated all year round and specifically on 12<sup>th</sup> Rabi ul Awwal in Islamic calendar, the birthdate of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This research paper aims to analyze the soundscape of Mehfil e Milad ritual. The theoretical frameworks used for this purpose are Richard Schechner's concept of rituals as performances given in his book *Performance Studies- An Introduction*, and Kate Crawford's concept of lurkers and listeners from the anthology *The Sound Studies Reader*. The research has been conducted on selected videos from YouTube. The method used for this research is historiographical method, i.e. research and analysis through the documented records. Taking into account the existing research on space and visuals of Mehfil e Milad, this research paper aims to address the research gap of the contribution of sound to the performativity of Mehfil e Milad. The scope of this research is limited to the analysis of performativity and soundscape in Mehfil e Milad and has no concern about the theological or doctrinal interpretations of Mehfil e Milad.

**Keywords:** Mehfil e Milad, Performance, Performativity, Ritual, Soundscape.

### **Introduction**

Performance in the sense of the word means an act of doing something. In the words of Erika Fischer-Lichte "We can define a performance as any event in which all the participants find themselves in the same place at the same time, partaking in a circumscribed set of activities." (Fischer-Lichte 8). It means that a performance is such a shared event where participants are co-present physically and engage in a collective activity within particular space and time. For the participants of a performance, Lichte says that "The participants can be actors or spectators, and the roles of these actors and spectators may switch, so that the same person could fulfill the part of an actor for a given period of time and then turn into an observer." (Fischer-Lichte 8). If we keep this definition of performance in mind, we can very easily carve out a number of performances that happen around us in our daily lives because living in a society means being bodily co-present with the fellow human beings. Going to a job, making friends, giving class presentations, celebrating birthdays etc. are all performances due to the fact that these involve social interactions.

The concept of performativity, on the other hand, was first described by English philosopher of language John L. Austin who gave the idea of specific capacity to describe performativity. For Austin, specific capacity is the capacity of speech and communication to act or to consummate an action. It means that a speech, text or a symbol can not only convey a message instead it can bring something into existence as well. For example, saying the words, "I promise"

creates a commitment and signing a contract gives a legal existence to a piece of paper.

Now that we have established our basic understanding of the terms performance and performativity, we will move on to understand what a ritual is since the major aim of this paper is to analyse a ritual for its performance and performativity. Victor Turner, a British cultural anthropologist defines ritual as a stereotyped sequence of activities that employs gestures, words, and objects, performed in a designated place, and designed to influence spiritual or supernatural powers or forces in accordance with the actors' goals and interests. It means that a ritual is not spontaneous or arbitrary instead it involves a recurring pattern of behaviours that are performed by people in a space that is designated for that performance.

The ritual that is going to be analysed in this research paper is Mehfil e Milad un Nabi (Peace Be Upon Him). The word Mehfil e Milad un Nabi (PBUH) literally means the celebration of the birth of the messenger (PBUH). It is a festive and spiritual gathering of Muslims to celebrate the birth of prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him). It is usually celebrated in the third month, Rabi ul Awwal, of the Islamic calendar since it is the popular belief that prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was born on 12th of this month. However, such gatherings are not limited only to the month of Rabi ul Awwal.

Mehfil e Milad celebrations work on a very similar pattern all over South Asia, especially in Pakistan. The home or the place where Milad is supposed to be held is decorated with mostly white and green colours. In most cases a separate stage is set, a platform higher than the place where audience is supposed to sit. The stage is decorated with flowers and white sheets. The back of the stage usually has "Mehfil e Milad un Nabi (Peace Be Upon Him)" written in Urdu text on a huge banner. Incense is burned and perfumes are sprayed to create a sacred space. In case if Milad is being held in open air or to a large audience, microphones and speakers are set up. Naat khwans (the people who recite the praise of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)) are invited who usually wear white clothes and turbans. The audience dress up mostly in white or black colours. All women, and men in most cases, have their heads covered in respect.

A usual pattern of Milad is that it begins with recitation of verses of Holy Quran and then durood o salam i.e. the salutations upon the Prophet (PBUH). This is followed by naats or praises for the Prophet (PBUH). Some Milads also include a religious khutba or a speech with an aim to teach something to the audience or give them some knowledge. We can hear occasional slogans in between and it ends with more salutations and a dua or prayer. Many Mehfil e Milads have an arrangement of food for the participants and audience at the end but if there is no food, there is at least a distribution of something sweet among the audience.

### **Research Questions:**

This research paper employs several YouTube videos of Mehfil e Milad as primary study material. Some of the major research questions that this paper tries to find answers to are these:

1. How can Mehfil e Milad be considered a performative ritual, and by following its particular liturgical order, what kinds of philosophies does it portray?

2. What kind of sounds contribute to making the soundscape of Mehfil e Milad and how does that soundscape impact the listeners?
3. Why are the listeners in these Milads important and how do they contribute to the performance?

### **Literature Review:**

Mehfil e Milad un Nabi (PBUH) has been celebrated all over the world for centuries but its scope has grown significantly in the Sunni majority countries especially in South Asia due to a large population of Barelvi-Sunni people. Amen Jaffer and Hajra Cheema in their work *The Production of Muslim Space; Mohalla Life and Milad Celebrations in Lahore* have analyzed the space of Mehfil e Milad celebrations.

The celebration of Milads in Lahore's mohallas is not merely a religious event but is quite central to the production of space in the city. Through participation in this event, residents are not just expressing their love for the Prophet but are also actively making and giving meaning to their neighborhoods. They are engaged in the process of defining these spaces and enveloping them in a web of social relationships. Milad celebrations offer a unique opportunity for neighbors to work together and let their imagination transform the spaces they inhabit into realms of fantasy. By doing so, they are giving meaning to Islam and their relationship to it. (Jaffer and Cheema).

Since the celebrations of Milad include decorations of houses and streets, Jaffer and Cheema argue that these celebrations are not mere religious events instead the decorations create a particular space through which the residents give their own meaning to the place which they choose for Milad. This space then helps the residents to define their identities and their relationships with Islam.

Shah et al. offer a significant contribution to the study of religious visual culture in their paper "Visual Ideology of Sufi Islam: A Study of Themes in Eid Milad and 'Urs Ads in Pakistan." The authors examine how a range of visual schemes are employed in the design of banners and advertisements for religious events, with particular attention to the symbolic language through which devotional meaning and sponsor credibility are established.

Furthermore, Milad celebrations are frequently organized on a large scale and therefore rely on visible strategies of public invitation. Advertisements and banners announcing these events are circulated through digital platforms as well as displayed on billboards and public walls. Shah et al. argue that such promotional materials consistently draw upon recurring visual themes and symbols that signal religious legitimacy and devotional authority. Although their study addresses religious advertisements more broadly and is not limited exclusively to Milad posters, the authors note that Milad-related imagery exhibits a distinctive visual vocabulary. As they observe, "the colour green is predominantly used in these ads." Green functions as a symbolic marker of Islam, associated with the dome of the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) Roza at Masjid-e-Nabawi in Madina. Shah et al. further point out that while variations in colour and design are common, representations of the dome are intentionally symbolic rather than architecturally exact, serving devotional recognition rather than literal depiction (Shah et al.).

The posters, banners, and advertisements produced to invite audiences to Mehfil-e-Milad function as performative extensions of the ritual rather than as neutral publicity materials. Drawing on Richard Schechner's concept of

*restored behavior*, these visuals repeat and re-activate familiar devotional signs—such as the colour green, domes, crescents, and date trees—whose meanings are already culturally rehearsed and immediately recognizable. Their repetition across time and space allows the ritual to begin before its formal enactment, embedding it within everyday visual culture. From a sound–vision ecological perspective, following Crawford, these images operate in anticipation of sonic experience: they implicitly invoke *na‘at* recitation, collective chanting, and amplified devotional speech, thereby preparing the sensory field of the audience in advance. Methodologically, reading these advertisements as performance texts enables an analysis of how visual design frames ritual participation affectively and spatially. By occupying public walls, billboards, and digital platforms, the ads transform secular environments into preparatory zones of religious performance, extending the ritual’s sensory and symbolic reach beyond the event itself.

Moreover, significant scholarship has examined the soundscape of traditional music and poetic performance within Islamic cultural contexts. Pouya Nekouei’s work on Pahlavi-era Iran is particularly instructive for understanding how sound functions as a historically situated and politically regulated sensory domain. In *Gender and Singing in Pahlavi Soundscape: Modern Feminine Culture and Masculine Politics in the Age of Popular Culture, Vision, and Rumors*, Nekouei analyzes how listening practices and vocal genres were gradually reorganized along gendered lines, such that *āvāz* became increasingly associated with male performers, while *tarāneh* and *tasnif* were coded as feminine forms (Nekouei). His study demonstrates that sonic expression in Islamic societies is not merely aesthetic but deeply embedded within social hierarchies, moral regulation, and ideological control.

This framework is particularly relevant when considering Islamic ritual soundscapes such as *na‘at*, *qasida*, *marsiya*, and *Milad* recitation, where vocal authority, amplification, and public audibility are often unevenly distributed along gendered lines. Much like the Iranian context Nekouei describes, South Asian devotional sound practices frequently privilege male voices in public ritual settings, while women’s participation is either spatially restricted, privatized, or rendered sonically invisible. *Mehfil-e-Milad*, in this sense, emerges as a distinctly gendered auditory space in which religious legitimacy and sonic authority are performed through controlled vocal presence.

A comparative reading of Nekouei’s Iranian case alongside South Asian Islamic performance traditions reveals broader transregional patterns in which sound operates as a site of negotiation between piety, modernity, and gender politics. While the historical and cultural specifics differ, both contexts demonstrate how Islamic soundscapes are shaped by state power, moral discourse, and visual-sonic mediation. Situating *Mehfil-e-Milad* within this comparative sensory history allows for a more nuanced understanding of how devotional sound not only expresses faith but also structures inclusion, exclusion, and visibility within religious performance.

Complementing these studies, Leonard Lewisohn, in *The Sacred Music of Islam: Samā’ in the Persian Sufi Tradition*, examines the religious and mystical significance of *samā’*, a structured form of Sufi worship that integrates prayer, litanies, music, singing, and sometimes movement. Lewisohn emphasizes that *samā’*, which literally means “audition,” entails listening with the “ear of the heart,” a reverent, attentive mode of engagement with music and

mystical poetry aimed at deepening understanding of the divine. In this context, sound becomes an ethical and spiritual medium, guiding the listener toward heightened awareness rather than mere aesthetic appreciation (Lewisohn).

Taken together, these studies illuminate the intertwined roles of visual and auditory modalities in Islamic ritual practice. While visual symbols such as green domes and date trees establish the sacredness and authority of an event, the carefully structured soundscapes of devotional singing and poetry shape collective emotional and spiritual experience. Both dimensions, visual and aural, demonstrate how the Mehfil e Milad operates as a multisensory, culturally codified practice, where perception itself becomes a site of engagement with the Prophet (P.B.U.H)

### **Research Gap:**

The reviewed literature highlights complementary but separate aspects of Mehfil e Milad. Amen Jaffer, Hajra Cheema, and Shah et al. focus primarily on the spatial arrangements and visual aesthetics of Mehfil e Milad, whereas Pouya Nekouei and Leonard Lewisohn explore the soundscapes of music and mystical poetry within broader Islamic traditions. However, there remains a significant gap regarding the intersection of performativity and sound in Mehfil e Milad. Specifically, few studies examine how the ritual's auditory and performative elements interact to shape the overall experience. The present research seeks to address this gap by investigating the factors that render Mehfil e Milad a performative ritual, with a particular focus on its soundscape and its contribution to the ritual's enactment and reception.

### **Research Methodology:**

This research employs close reading and a historiographical approach to analyze the performativity and soundscape of Mehfil e Milad. The historiographical method engages with existing documented records of the events to provide contextual and historical insight. The study applies two theoretical frameworks, one by Richard Schechner and the other by Kate Crawford, on selected Mehfil e Milad videos sourced from YouTube. Schechner's concept of rituals as performances is used to examine the performative dimensions of Mehfil e Milad, while Crawford's framework of lurkers and listeners informs the analysis of its soundscape, highlighting how auditory elements contribute to the ritual's overall performativity.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

This research employs two major theoretical frameworks. One of these is the concept of rituals as performances given by Richard Schechner. Richard Schechner is an American performance theorist, theatre director, and one of the founding figures of performance studies as an academic field. In his book *Performance Studies- An Introduction*, Schechner mentions that there is a broad spectrum of performances. These range "from stage acting and ballet dancing to arguing a case in court to displaying different emotions by smiling, weeping, frowning, or glaring in anger" (Schechner 76). According to Schechner, all the performances are codified behaviours. It means that they have an order within them that is there to clarify the meaning. This codified behaviour is not limited only to staged or scripted performances instead "even apparently freestyle performances include strips of behaviour that are already set" (Schechner 76).

Out of the broad spectrum of performances, Richard Schechner considers rituals as performances as well when he mentions that "Rituals in themselves are performances" (Schechner 122). In his book Schechner quotes

Émile Durkheim who recognized that rituals are closely akin to dramatic representations. Schechner gives us an excerpt from Durkheim's book to explain that rituals work like real drama, their effect is as such that it takes people out of their ordinary lives, just like theatrical performances do. They make people forget the real world even for a short period of time and make them enter a different space. The art in the rituals is not just a decoration to make that ritual look nice instead the ritual itself is artistic, its beauty is a part of its very purpose. This indicates that a ritual is as much a performance as any theatrical play is.

There are certain standards that Schechner suggests in his book *Performance Studies- An Introduction*, that can be used to evaluate a ritual as a performance. These include the codified liturgical order of a ritual, the presence of a ritualist as a performer, ritual presenting a rite of passage for the creation of liminal space, architectural details of the ritual, and the communitas of ritual that make it an anti-structure to the societal structures.

The codified liturgical order of a ritual and the presence of a ritualist are two very basic parameters that make ritual a performance, given that even the staged performances involve these two. Schechner in his book uses the definition given by Roy A. Rappaport that a liturgical order is an organized pattern of acts or utterances that only becomes real or alive when people perform it. This order is predetermined by someone else i.e. an authority and when performers follow it, they obey that authority (Schechner 99). In simple terms, all rituals follow a fixed sequence of their own. About the ritualists, Schechner says, "Ritualists follow prescribed actions, wear designated costumes, and in other ways enact highly codified behaviours" (Schechner 98), just like performers in proscenium theatres do.

Another common thing between a ritual and a performance is them providing a "rite of passage" and creating a "liminal space". In simple terms, a rite of passage is a particular stage or an event in a person's journey. Schechner uses Arnold van Gennep's theory of the "rites of passage," and mentions that "Gennep divided each rite of passage into three phases – the preliminal, liminal, and postliminal" (Schechner 145). Out of these three phases of the rite of passages, the most important one is the liminal phase. "A limen is a threshold or sill, neither inside nor outside a building or room linking one space to another, a passageway between places rather than a place in itself" (Schechner 145). In simple terms, a liminal space is an in-between phase where reality is suspended. The rituals create this liminal space where people enter, become nothing, are stripped off of their former social identities and positions, then they are given new identities and are then initiated into their new statuses. It means that rituals, like performances, provide such an in-between space to the audience where the audience enter, remain suspended as long as the performance is happening, and leave the space as "new" selves or, in other words, are "transformed".

The liminal space created by a ritual is not always abstract instead sometimes a material form is necessary to fulfil the conditions of the creation of a liminal space. This material form is the architectural details in a ritual. The architectural details are necessary for the creation of "ritual time and space", in Schechner's words, which has a considerable impact on the participants. Just like the design of many proscenium theatres which have a stage separated by a curtain from the audience, rituals too sometimes have a proper stage that

separate the performers from the spectators. This stage can be decorated in accordance with the performance and, according to Schechner, is a liminal space that is open to all possibilities. The decorations and the architectural details play an important role in creation of a liminal space in the staged performances as well as rituals.

The most important parameter of a ritual and a performance, that gives meaning to them are the “communitas” and “anti-structures” as Schechner, in his book, borrowed from Victor Turner. “While in a liminal state, people are liberated from the demands of daily life. Feeling at one with their comrades, people set aside personal and social differences. They are uplifted, swept away, taken over. Turner called this liberation from the constraints of ordinary life “anti-structure” and the experience of ritual camaraderie “communitas”” (Schechner 149). In other words, as societal structures hold people apart and define differences between them, rituals serve as anti-structures where people grow out of these differences. Staying together in this anti-structure as “one” is what communitas is. This doesn’t mean that communitas merge the identities of people instead it liberates them from conformity to general norms of society, though this is only a transient condition and people return to their ordinary structures after the ritual ends, as it is necessary for the normal operation of the society.

All in all, rituals have efficacy-entertainment dyed. “Whether one calls a specific performance “ritual” or “theatre” depends mostly on context and function. A performance is called one or the other because of where it is performed, by whom, in what circumstances, and for what purpose. The purpose is the most important factor determining whether a performance is ritual or not. If the performance’s purpose is to effect change, then the other qualities under the heading “efficacy” will also be present, and the performance is a ritual” (Schechner 159). It means that rituals being performances goes the other way round as well i.e. performances being rituals.

The second theoretical framework that is being employed in this research paper to study the soundscape is the Kate Crawford’s concept of lurkers and listeners. This framework is significant to explore the effect of ritual on the audience in the Mehfil e Milad performances. Kate Crawford is a researcher, writer, composer, producer and academic, who in the anthology *The Sound Studies Reader* has given her essay *Following You: Disciplines of Listening in Social Media*. Crawford’s essay majorly deals within the context of social media to “engage with a set of emerging modes of paying attention online, and to propose that they be considered practices of listening” (Crawford 79), however, here it will be applied to the spectators of Mehfil e Milad because just like social media, Milads work on a call and response theory. She argues that listening is not a common term associated with online activity instead online participation is generally associated with having a “voice”.

It is a common conception, among those who are not familiar with theatre studies, that participants of a performance and the spectators of a performance are considered different people and only those people are considered participants of a performance who speak up in it, the rest only spectators. However, Crawford in her essay is trying to prove that the listeners, usually called as the “lurkers” in pejorative terms, too are the participants of a performance as the participants with a voice are. For clarification, according to

Crawford, “‘Lurking’ is a common pejorative term for those who are present in public online spaces but do not prominently speak up” (Crawford 80).

Crawford argues that although lurkers have been identified as “non-participants online”, they still contribute to almost 90% of online community. “Rather than freeloading, lurkers are actively logging in and tracking the contributions of others; they contribute a mode of receptiveness that encourages others to make public contributions.” (Crawford 81). In other words, it is due to lurkers being present and listening, that those having a voice have existence and in the absence of lurkers, there will be no existence of the speakers.

Out of different types of listening by Crawford in her essay, one is background listening “where commentary and conversations continue as a backdrop throughout the day, with only a few moments requiring concentrated attention” (Crawford 82). It means that there are some sounds or voices which play in the background and do not attract much attention and hence have been categorized as background listening. Another one of these types of listening is reciprocal listening for which Crawford says, “which I define as hearing and responding to comments” (Crawford 84). This concept by Kate Crawford is also a kind of auto-poietic feedback loop, a concept notably used by performance theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte, where a performance becomes a self-generating system through mutual interactions in which the spectators get influenced by the performers and in turn influence the performers through their reactions. The performers not adopting reciprocal listening have a danger that Crawford mentions that “If they fail to respond actively, they will lose followers and run the risk of alienating the very people they are seeking to reach.” (Crawford 85).

### **Analysis and Discussions:**

To examine the performativity and soundscape of *Mehfil e Milad un Nabi* (PBUH), five YouTube videos were selected, accessible via links provided in this research paper. These include *Mehfil e Zikar o Naat Tehreek Minhaj Ul Quran Landhi Town Khi* and *Istaqbali e Rabi Ul Awwal Mehfil e Milad e MUSTAFA SAW MWL Khi. 2/2*, both by Asad Ahmad, which capture complete *Mehfil e Milad* rituals. The remaining three, *Mustafa Janey Rehmat Pey Lakho Sallam Owais Raza Qadri Exclusive* and *Yeh Kehti Thi Ghar Ghar Ja Kar Haleema Owais Raza Qadri New 2021* by Tayyiba Production, and *Dhoom Macha Do Amad Ki - Owais Raza Qadri & Hafiz Tahir Qadri - Mehfil e Subh e Baharan 2005* by Owais Raza Qadri Official Network, feature excerpts from full *Mehfil* rituals. These videos are first analyzed using Schechner’s framework to explore their performativity and then through Crawford’s framework to examine the soundscape and auditory participation within the ritual.

Drawing on Richard Schechner’s framework as a theoretical point of departure, the primary parameter of a ritual as a performance is its liturgical order, defined as a predetermined and organized pattern of acts. The typical sequence of a Milad includes the recitation of the Holy Quran, salutations upon the Prophet (PBUH), naats (poetic praises of the Prophet), a khutba or bayan (a speaker delivering religious and ethical teachings), the final durood o salam (during which attendees stand in respect), and concluding dua or prayer. While some elements may occasionally be omitted, the overall sequence and structure remain consistent, maintaining the ritual’s codified order. This structured sequence not only organizes the ritual but also shapes the audience’s

experience, guiding their attention, responses, and emotional engagement, thereby enhancing the performativity of Mehfil e Milad.

When analyzing the selected Milad YouTube videos, it is observed that *Mehfil e Zikar o Naat* and *Istaqbal e Rabi Ul Awwal*, both uploaded by Asad Ahmad, depict complete Mehfil e Milad rituals and generally follow the standard liturgical pattern, although there are minor differences between the two. *Mehfil e Zikar o Naat* begins with a speaker, positioned at the microphone, inviting a reciter to the stage to perform the recitation of the Holy Quran. This is followed by a khutba, during which the khateeb delivers religious teachings to the audience. Subsequently, all participants on stage and in the audience stand for the final durood o salam, and the Mehfil concludes with a prayer. Notably, this video omits the performance of naats. In contrast, *Istaqbal e Rabi Ul Awwal* begins directly with durood o salam, followed by naats, then the khutba, the final durood with the audience standing in respect, and concludes with the prayer. While the former video excludes naats and the latter omits the recitation of Holy verses, the liturgical order of all other elements remains consistent across both rituals.

*Yeh Kehti Thi* by Tayyiba Production and *Dhoom Macha Do Amad Ki* by Owais Raza Qadri Official Network are only the naats (praises) aspect of Mehfil and *Mustafa Janey Rehmat* by Tayyiba Production is only the final, standing-durood part of the Mehfil.

Regarding the presence of ritualists, who are equivalent to performers, all the selected videos feature not just a single individual but several persons directing and managing the Mehfilis. These individuals, who give instructions and guide the flow of the ritual, can be identified as the performers or ritualists. In *Mehfil e Zikar o Naat* and *Istaqbal e Rabi Ul Awwal*, the hosts invite guests onto the stage to recite the Holy Quran, perform naats, or deliver khutbas. While on stage, these individuals function as ritualists because they actively control the proceedings of the Mehfilis. When one person exits the audience's focus and another assumes the spotlight, the role of ritualist shifts accordingly. As Schechner notes, ritualists wear designated costumes; in these videos, their attire aligns with the ceremonial context, men wear caps or turbans, and women wear headscarves, reflecting their Muslim identity and establishing credibility with the attendees. Furthermore, Schechner emphasizes that ritualists enact highly codified behaviors, which is evident in how the host performers formally invite guest performers onto the stage and manage the ritual's progression.

These ritualists not only perform their own roles but also elicit responses from the audience, creating what Erika Fischer-Lichte terms an *autopoietic feedback loop*. This dynamic renders a ritual or performance self-sustaining, as the actions of spectators influence the performers and, in turn, performers shape the spectators' experience. For instance, in *Ye Kehti Thi Ghar Ghar* (0:03), the audience appears highly engaged, smiling and waving their hands in response to the ritualist on the microphone. Reacting to this, the ritualist pauses the naat he is reciting at 0:09 to share the personal history of when he first performed it. Later, at 0:46, he repeats the same lines, acknowledging the audience's enjoyment and desire to hear them again. Additionally, during pauses, the audience's exclamations of *wah wah* serve as audible appreciation, further reinforcing the reciprocal relationship between performer and spectators.

Similarly, in *Dhoom Macha Do Amad Ki* (1:01), the ritualist pauses while reciting a naat and raises his hand, aware that the spectators are silently reciting along with him, even though their voices are not captured by the microphone. At 1:30, he raises a slogan to encourage audience participation in the ritual. By 4:09, the spectators' responses, raising their hands and swaying their heads, demonstrate the depth of their engagement with the performance. These instances illustrate that ritualists act as performers directing the ritual, yet their guidance is shaped by the audience's reactions, exemplifying the autopoietic feedback loop.

Turning to the creation of a liminal space in *Mehfil e Milad*, we understand that a liminal space is an in-between phase where reality is suspended, and participants are temporarily stripped of their former identities, emerging transformed at the conclusion. While these videos cannot conclusively demonstrate that participants acquire new identities after the performance, their reactions during the ritual offer insights into whether their realities are temporarily suspended, indicating the effectiveness of the liminal space. In *Yeh Kehti Thi Ghar Ghar* (4:08 and 8:46), spectators raise their arms, sometimes both, and wave them sideways, fully absorbed in the performance. Similarly, in *Dhoom Macha Do Amad Ki* (2:47), some spectators raise both arms and sway, and at 3:16 and 4:23, several sway their heads in rhythm. In *Istaqbali Rabi Ul Awwal* (2:30–2:37), spectators initially remain still, but begin swaying as soon as the performer commences, showing engagement and immersion in the ritual.

These reactions from the spectators demonstrate that, once the performance begins, their bodies respond instinctively, raising arms, swaying heads, actions they would not typically perform in everyday life. This indicates that *Mehfil e Milad* rituals are successful in creating a liminal space for participants, temporarily suspending their ordinary realities and allowing them to inhabit a different state of being than they do in their daily lives..

Adding to the discussion on *Mehfil e Milad*'s liminal space, Schechner emphasizes that architectural details are crucial for establishing "ritual time and space." In the videos under analysis, stages are created for the performers to separate them from the spectators, analogous to proscenium theatres. These stages are elevated, providing a clear distinction between performers and audience. In most videos, the stages are white, a color symbolizing sacredness. Two of the videos feature large banners with Urdu text at the back of the stage, while *Mehfil e Zikar o Naat* is recorded within a mosque, inherently a sacred space. Additionally, all stages include floral decorations, evoking purity. These deliberate choices by the organizers contribute significantly to the creation of a space that embodies spirituality, sanctity, and divine grace. Without such structural attention, it is likely that the *Mehfils* would not have effectively produced the desired liminal space for the spectators.

Now that it has been established that *Mehfil e Milad* performances can create a liminal space for participants, it is important to note that this space allows the performances to function as anti-structures within society, where individuals experience *communitas*. As highlighted in Schechner's framework, serving as an anti-structure entails liberating people from the constraints of societal hierarchies, with the resulting sense of camaraderie constituting *communitas*. In *Mehfil e Zikar o Naat*, a clear diversity among the audience is visible, ranging from boys as young as ten to men as old as sixty. Similarly,

*Istaqbal e Rabi Ul Awwal* includes women aged from early teens to late forties. Comparable variations can be observed in the other videos as well. Beyond these visible differences, it can be inferred that participants come from varied social backgrounds. Nevertheless, all individuals engage in the ritual as equals, participating as fellow devotees without hierarchy. They experience *communitas* as religious comrades, demonstrating that *Mehfil e Milad* rituals act as anti-structures by temporarily dissolving social distinctions among participants.

So far, the research paper has discussed the performance aspect of *Mehfil e Milads*. Regarding their performativity, *Milad* performances are performative because of their capacity to actively produce religious devotion rather than merely describe it. The performers' utterances do not simply convey words; they bring faith into existence. Audience responses, such as *Allah hu Akbar* (God is the greatest) and *Subhan Allah* (God is perfect), affirm the authority of God, while bodily movements like swaying of heads and raising of arms embody the acknowledgment of a higher power. Similarly, the recitation of *naats* does not merely recall the praises of the Prophet (PBUH); it situates him in the present moment with his devotees.

Hence, drawing on Richard Schechner's concept of rituals as performances, it can be argued that *Mehfil e Milad un Nabi* (PBUH) functions as performative rituals that enact and express core Islamic philosophies: the existence of one God, the recognition of His final messenger (PBUH), the practice of religious devotion, the pursuit of divine grace, and the affirmation of communal Muslim identities. *Mehfil e Milad* operates as a multisensory, culturally codified practice, where perception itself becomes a site of engagement with the Prophet (P.B.U.H). The autopoietic feedback loop helps in not only connecting with the audience but through the verbal and embodied acknowledgement of the birth of the final messenger, it also helps connecting with the Prophet for whom the *Milad* has been organized.

To analyze the soundscape of *Mehfil e Milad* performances, this research employs Kate Crawford's concept of listeners and lurkers, as discussed in her essay in *The Sound Studies Reader*. Crawford emphasizes that while listeners are often labeled as "lurkers" in a pejorative sense, implying that they are passive and non-contributory, this characterization is misleading. In fact, listeners play a crucial role in a performance, equivalent in significance to that of the speakers. It is the attentiveness and receptiveness of these listeners that validate and sustain the contributions of the speakers; their engagement provides the very existence and efficacy of the performative act.

Applying Crawford's framework to the *Mehfil e Milad* videos under study, it becomes evident that the audience contributes to the performances as significantly as those on stage. For instance, in *Yeh Kehti Thi Ghar Ghar*, the speaker pauses his *naat* multiple times to provide context or repeat verses, responding to the perceived engagement of the listeners. Although these listeners remain mostly quiet, their attentive presence encourages the speaker to repeat lines, interpreting their focus as enjoyment and desire for further recitation. Similarly, in *Mehfil e Zikar o Naat* and *Istaqbal e Rabi Ul Awwal*, the content of *khutbas*, religious teachings, is shaped by the listeners. The societal conditions, concerns, and expectations of the audience influence the *khateeb*s to address subjects that resonate with the daily lives of the participants, ensuring that the teachings are applicable and meaningful. Thus,

the role of listeners in these performances is indispensable, as it is through their attentive listening that both the content and direction of the Mehfil e Milad are continuously co-constructed.

Crawford's concepts of background listening and reciprocal listening are also evident in Mehfil e Milad performances. As previously noted, background listening refers to commentary or sounds in the backdrop that do not demand focused attention, whereas reciprocal listening involves hearing and responding to comments. Examples of background listening in these videos include the Daf instrument in *Istaqbal e Rabi Ul Awwal*, the secondary speaker repeatedly saying "Allah Allah" to create rhythms while the primary speaker recites a naat in *Dhoom Macha Do Amad Ki*, and occasional audible utterances from spectators in all the videos. The Daf and the continuous recitation of "Allah Allah" constitute a secondary layer of sound that establishes rhythm. While spectators primarily focus on the first layer of sound, the main ritualist, this secondary rhythmic layer plays a crucial role: when it aligns with the spectators' bodily movements, it fosters a sense of unity with the space. Consequently, spectators begin to sway their heads and arms in synchrony with the rhythms, much like audiences at musical concerts. This rhythmic engagement is significant for facilitating entry into a liminal phase, where participants' everyday realities are suspended, enabling the formation of new identities and the attribution of new meanings to their surroundings, as outlined in Schechner's preceding analysis.

Crawford's concept of reciprocal listening closely aligns with Erika Fischer-Lichte's notion of the auto-poietic feedback loop, as previously discussed in this paper. Reciprocal listening is primarily enacted by the ritualists, who observe and respond to the reactions of the audience. This dynamic of hearing and responding is particularly evident in *Yeh Kehti Thi Ghar Ghar*, where the video demonstrates a continuous pattern of interaction between the speaker and the listeners. Such conversational engagement not only enhances the audience's understanding of the performance but also allows the listeners to co-construct meaning through their interaction with the performers on stage.

In conclusion, Kate Crawford's ideas regarding the significance of listeners are clearly evident in Mehfil e Milad rituals. In these performances, the listeners actively influence the performers, guiding the selection of khutba topics and determining which verses of naat are repeated based on audience reactions. Simply put, the existence of the speakers and the meanings conveyed through their performances rely on the listeners' engagement. Furthermore, both background and reciprocal listening can be observed in Mehfil e Milad, each playing a crucial role in shaping the soundscape and generating meaning within the performance.

### Conclusion:

In essence, Mehfil e Milad un Nabi (PBUH) is not merely a celebration of the birth of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him); rather, it is a performative ritual underpinned by philosophies of religious devotion and communal Muslim identity. Drawing on Richard Schechner's concepts of rituals as performances, it becomes evident that these rituals adhere to a fixed liturgical order, feature ritualists as performers, create liminal spaces for participants, and function as anti-structures within society, all of which align with the defining parameters of a performance and contribute to their

performativity. Furthermore, through Kate Crawford's ideas on listeners and modes of listening, it is clear that the role of the audience is as significant as that of the speakers and that the soundscape, shaped through background and reciprocal listening, is crucial to the performative impact of Mehfil e Milad rituals.

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