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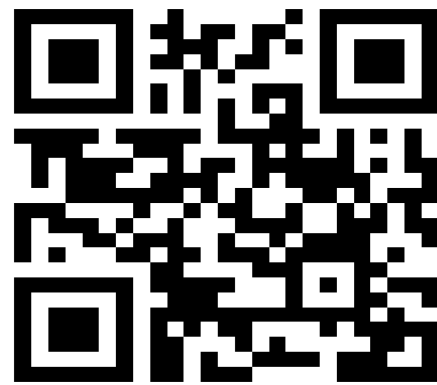
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The Impact of Social Phenomena on the Study of Religion: A Case Study of Sharar's *Masīh aur Masīhiyat*

Abstract

*This research paper explores how social conditions can shape the way religious stories are told, using Abdul Haleem Sharar's *Masīh aur Masīhiyat* as a case study. Sharar, a prominent Urdu writer in colonial India, narrates the story of Jesus not only to describe the origins of Christianity but also to reflect on the social challenges faced by Indian Muslims under British rule. Through his storytelling, Sharar depicts a fractured Jewish society under Roman control, divided, spiritually weakened, and socially oppressed, and then introduces Jesus as a moral reformer who calls people back to truth, justice, unity, and social renewal. This message subtly mirrors the struggles of Muslims in Sharar's own time.*

*The paper looks at how Sharar blends history, literature, and moral advice to speak to his readers without directly criticizing them. By presenting Jesus as a model of spiritual strength and honest leadership, Sharar offers a message of hope and renewal for a community that had lost its direction. He doesn't debate theology or attack other faiths. Instead, he uses a respectful and emotional tone to make the story real and socially relevant. This approach allowed him to share strong ideas safely in a colonial context, where open criticism could lead to trouble. Overall, the study shows that *Masīh aur Masīhiyat* is more than just a book about Christian history; it is a thoughtful response to the social crisis of the time. Sharar's work shows how religion can become a mirror for self-reflection and a guide for community and social reform when told through the right lens. His message remains relevant today as an example of how literature and faith can be used to understand and respond to social change.*

Key Words: *Abdul Haleem Sharar, Masīh aur Masīhiyat, Jesus in Urdu literature, Muslim reform in colonial India, Religious storytelling, Moral reflection, Historical analogy, Urdu narrative strategy.*

Literature Review

Abdul Haleem Sharar (1860–1926) is mostly known for writing historical novels in Urdu. Many scholars have studied his literary style and his interest in Islamic history. Writers like Saleem Akhtar and Shamim Ahmed have noted how he used history to guide and inspire his readers. However, most of this research focuses on his Islamic subjects. His book *Masīh aur Masīhiyat*, which tells the story of Jesus and early Christianity, has not been discussed in detail by scholars.

Some well-known historians like Francis Robinson (b. 1944) and Ayesha Jalal (b. 1956) have written about Muslim thinkers in British India. They show how Muslim writers tried to respond to the fall of Muslim social power by writing about history, ethics, and religion. Their work explains how people like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) and Shibli Nomani (1857–1914) encouraged education and reform. Sharar was part of the same period, but most researchers do not talk about how he

wrote about other religions, like Christianity. In recent years, some writers have looked at how Muslims have understood Jesus (*Isa*). Scholars like Tariq Ramadan (b. 1962), Mustafa Akyol (b. 1972), and David Thomas (b. 1955) have explained that Muslims respect Jesus as a prophet and a moral teacher. Their books focus on Islamic beliefs about Jesus and the differences between Islam and Christianity. But they mostly talk about classical Islamic texts or modern ideas. Sharar's work is different because he uses Jesus's story in a literary and emotional way to make Muslims think about their problems. Some scholars like Christian Troll (b. 1937) and Barbara Metcalf (b. 1941) have written about how Muslim writers in India sometimes used the stories of other religions to teach moral lessons. They explain that this method allowed Muslim writers to talk about serious topics without causing conflict. This idea helps us understand Sharar's style he does not argue about theology, but tells the story of Jesus with sympathy and care.

This article fills an important gap by showing that *Masīh aur Masīhiyat* is not just a book about Christianity. It is a thoughtful and gentle way of asking Muslims to reflect on their condition under British rule. By comparing Jesus' time with the situation of Indian Muslims, Sharar invites readers to learn from the past and think about how to improve their future. His book is part of a larger tradition where Muslim writers used religious stories not to attack others, but to encourage their community to improve.

Research Questions

1. How does Sharar use the life of Jesus to reflect the spiritual and social condition of Indian Muslims?
2. How is Jewish disunity portrayed as a parallel to Muslim decline under British rule?
3. How does Sharar construct Jesus as a moral reformer rather than a theological figure?
4. How do Sharar's literary choices allow for indirect critique within a colonial context?

Problem of Statement

Abdul Haleem Sharar's *Maseeh aur Maseehiyat* is often viewed as a historical account of Christian beginnings, but its deeper purpose remains overlooked. The book does not aim to compare religions or engage in theology; instead, Sharar uses the story of Jesus to address the internal decline of Indian Muslims during British rule. Through a respectful portrayal of Jesus and a depiction of Jewish disunity, Sharar subtly encourages self-reflection and reform in his community. Despite its relevance, this text has received little attention in academic research. Most studies focus on Sharar's Islamic writings and ignore how he used non-Islamic histories as tools for Muslim renewal. This gap needs to be addressed to understand how Sharar employed religious history not for comparison, but for moral instruction. This study examines *Maseeh aur Maseehiyat* as a reformist work that uses indirect critique and religious analogy to inspire unity, ethical leadership, and spiritual revival among Muslims.

Introduction

Abdul Haleem Sharar (1860–1926) was a prominent Urdu writer and thinker during a time of great change for Muslims in British India. Like many intellectuals of the 19th century, he witnessed the decline of Muslim social power, especially after the fall of the Mughal Empire and the failed rebellion of 1857¹. In response, Muslim scholars and writers searched for new ways to guide their community. Some, like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, focused on science, modern education, and the reinterpretation of Islamic thought to help Muslims adapt to colonial realities². Others, such as the founders of Nadwatul Ulama, promoted a balance between traditional Islamic knowledge and modern reform³. Sharar, while not a traditional religious scholar, contributed to this reformist movement through his historical and literary writings. One of his most important and lesser-known works, *Maseeh aur Maseehiyat*, tells the story of Jesus (Isa) and the early history of Christianity⁴. While the book appears to be a history of another religion, it also contains a deeper purpose. Sharar uses the story of Jesus not to criticize or compare religions, but to highlight how faith, morality, and leadership shape the destiny of religious communities⁵. He describes how the Jewish people in the time of Jesus were facing foreign occupation, moral decay, and internal divisions. Jesus appears as a figure of spiritual reform and resistance⁶. Sharar does not treat Jesus with polemics or debate, but with admiration for his commitment to truth, humility, and sacrifice. This allows Muslim readers to engage with the story not as outsiders, but as observers of a meaningful and parallel experience.

This article argues that “*Maseeh aur Maseehiyat*” should be understood as a history of Christian beginnings and as a strategic and moral narrative intended to reflect on the Muslim condition under British rule⁷. Through indirect comparison, Sharar presents Jesus as a symbol of reform in a time of crisis. His writing encourages Muslims to look inward, learn from the failures and strengths of another community, and rediscover their spiritual purpose. This approach fits within a wider trend in Muslim reformist writing of the 19th century, where religious history was used not only for information, but for community renewal and moral awakening⁸. While previous research has examined Abdul Haleem Sharar’s historical writings, very little focused attention has been paid to *Maseeh aur Maseehiyat* as a serious contribution to Muslim reformist thought in colonial India. Most scholarship on Sharar centers on his literary style or his depictions of Islamic history, often overlooking how he engaged with non-Islamic religious narratives as tools for internal reform⁹. In particular, the figure of Jesus in Urdu historical writing remains an underexplored area, both in literary studies and in the broader field of South Asian Muslim intellectual history¹⁰. However, the author recently defended his MS thesis on this very topic. This article is intended to serve a wider academic and non-academic readership by summarizing, refining, and reframing key ideas from that thesis in a more focused and accessible format. By doing so, it highlights the continuing relevance of Sharar’s method for understanding how history can be used for spiritual and communal self-reflection. The article also aims to contribute to the growing body of scholarship that examines Muslim engagement with the histories of other religious traditions, especially under colonial conditions that demanded creative and indirect forms of self-criticism¹¹.

1. Contextualizing the Time of Jesus

Abdul Haleem Sharar begins his book *Maseeh aur Maseehiyat* by painting a detailed and critical picture of the social and religious environment in which Jesus (Isa) was born. This environment, marked by foreign occupation, religious disillusionment, and moral crisis, serves as the historical and symbolic foundation for the themes Sharar wants to explore. In Sharar's view, the Roman Empire, though materially powerful, had contributed significantly to the destruction of religious life and spiritual clarity among the Jews¹². Their subjugation under Roman rule was not just a social loss, but a result of internal spiritual decline and disunity. In this way, Sharar merges historical description with moral interpretation, a method consistent throughout his writings. He describes how the Jewish community had become fragmented into various sects and groups, each claiming religious authority but none capable of moral leadership or national unity¹³. Religious scholars had become servants of social interests, and the idea of divine law had been replaced by ritualism and worldly gain. While some Jewish voices remained sincere, they were weak and isolated, unable to revive the soul of the community. At the same time, the Romans, despite their outward tolerance of Jewish religious practice, used local leaders to maintain control, further deepening the sense of helplessness among the people¹⁴. It is against this background that the Jewish longing for a Messiah intensified, a figure who would combine spiritual purity with social salvation, and who could guide the community out of both foreign domination and internal decay. He emphasizes that the emergence of Jesus during this moment of intense social and religious anxiety was not accidental but divinely purposeful¹⁵. In his view, prophets are sent to nations at times of deep crisis, not only to preach faith but to diagnose and cure moral sickness. The coming of Jesus, then, is a reflection of the spiritual collapse of the Jewish people, and at the same time, a sign of hope. This idea resonates deeply with Islamic thought, which sees prophets as reformers raised during times of decline. Sharar's narrative does not question the Jewish desire for a messiah; instead, he shows understanding for it, as he sees that same need mirrored in the state of Indian Muslims under British rule. Although Sharar does not openly declare the parallel, it becomes clear that his detailed description of Jewish society under Roman rule also serves as a quiet reflection of Muslim life in colonial India¹⁶. The disunity, loss of purpose, weak leadership, and moral drift he describes in first-century Palestine are conditions that many Muslim reformers identified in their communities during the 19th century. Sharar avoids direct comparison, but his readers, especially those familiar with the reformist ideas of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan or the Nadwatul Ulama, would have immediately recognized the analogy. His aim is not to judge the Jews but to use their history to inspire Muslims toward self-reflection and eventual reform. In this way, the context Sharar provides is more than historical background; it is part of a carefully crafted moral lesson. He wants the reader to understand that decline is not random, but the result of spiritual failure. Similarly, the arrival of a prophetic figure like Jesus represents a divine invitation to return to justice, unity, and faith¹⁷. By showing the moral breakdown of a once-chosen community, Sharar not only narrates the past but offers his readers a warning, delivered with empathy and intellectual care. This method of indirect critique, grounded in historical storytelling, allows him to connect with

Muslim readers without confrontation, and it prepares them for the deeper moral arguments developed in later chapters of the book.

2. Sharar's Jesus: A Reformist Ideal for a Colonial Muslim Audience

Abdul Haleem Sharar's treatment of Jesus in *Maseeh aur Maseehiyat* is markedly different from the tone often found in polemical or apologetic Muslim writings about Christianity. Instead of engaging in theological criticism, Sharar carefully reconstructs the life of Jesus as that of a morally elevated individual whose presence in history carries enduring relevance beyond doctrinal boundaries. In doing so, Sharar creates a figure who embodies purity, sacrifice, truthfulness, and a deep spiritual concern for the oppressed and the misled. His purpose is not to challenge Christian beliefs, but rather to present Jesus as a model of reformist leadership, one that Muslims under colonial rule might identify with and learn from¹⁸. His portrayal focuses not on miracles or metaphysical debates, but on the human and ethical dimension of Jesus's personality. In his telling, Jesus is not a theological enigma but a clear moral guide, an ascetic who stood apart from the corrupt priestly classes, the greedy social leaders, and the self-righteous scholars of his time¹⁹. He is described as a man who rejected materialism, challenged injustice, and called his people back to sincerity, humility, and compassion. Sharar repeatedly emphasizes that Jesus did not seek kingship or worldly authority; he refused to become a social figure in the conventional sense. Instead, he remained devoted to the service of truth and the spiritual healing of a broken community²⁰. In this regard, Jesus is presented less as a founder of a new religion and more as a restorer of divine ethics in a world that had forgotten them.

What stands out in Sharar's approach is his admiration for Jesus's simplicity. He highlights his wandering life, his reliance on prayer, his interaction with the poor and marginalized, and his rejection of prideful religious scholars. These features are described with such tenderness and depth that it becomes evident Sharar sees in Jesus a figure of immense spiritual beauty, not as a rival prophet to Muhammad (PBUH), but as a part of the same divine chain of reformers²¹. This is in keeping with the Islamic view of Jesus as a noble prophet, but Sharar's treatment goes further; he uses Jesus's moral strength as a mirror to reflect the weaknesses of contemporary society. By doing this, he indirectly calls his Muslim readers to rediscover these same values within their tradition. The figure of Jesus in *Maseeh aur Maseehiyat* is, therefore, constructed to carry a reformist message. Sharar's narrative suggests that true leadership is not based on control or social success, but on moral clarity and the courage to speak against widespread corruption²². This concept had deep resonance for Muslims in colonial India, many of whom were disillusioned with both religious authority figures and those who had aligned themselves too closely with colonial power. While Sharar avoids making direct comments about such personalities, the moral lesson is implicit: communities that forget the purpose of religion, that use it for social gain or personal pride, are doomed to lose both dignity and divine support. His literary choice to highlight Jesus's internal struggle, his silent resistance, and his unwavering commitment to spiritual truth is also significant. It contrasts sharply with the dominant images of power, control, and conquest often associated with leadership in both religious and social circles²³. Jesus, in this version, leads by example, not through force or wealth,

but through moral courage and personal sacrifice. This representation serves as a powerful counter-narrative, especially in a time when Muslims were searching for new models of leadership during the crisis of colonial rule.

Moreover, the emotional tone of Sharar's writing in these sections is very deliberate. He builds not just admiration but sympathy for Jesus. The text is marked by a quiet reverence, a deep respect for his struggle, and a recognition of the tragedy surrounding his rejection by his people. Sharar does not treat Jesus as a figure belonging to 'the other,' but as someone deeply connected to the shared prophetic mission that Islam also affirms²⁴. This spiritual and ethical kinship is used to encourage Muslim readers to reflect not on theological superiority but on the lived ethics of prophetic reform. Thus, through his portrayal of Jesus, Sharar offers his readers a figure of reform, moral vision, and religious integrity. He does so not by denying theological differences, but by stepping beyond them to focus on what he considers the essence of prophetic guidance: truth, sacrifice, and spiritual renewal. This strategy allows him to speak to Muslim readers about their time without entering into social confrontation or religious polemic. In Jesus, Sharar finds a voice of timeless reform, a voice he wants Muslims to hear again, perhaps as a reminder of their forgotten responsibilities.

3. Sharar's Use of Jewish Disunity to Reflect on Muslim Decline under British Rule

In *Maseeh aur Maseehiyat*, Abdul Haleem Sharar explains that the problems faced by the Jewish people during the time of Jesus were not only because of the Roman Empire's harsh rule. He believes their real weakness came from inside their community. According to Sharar, the Jews had lost their unity, their religious values had weakened, and their leaders had become selfish or corrupt²⁵. Because of these internal issues, they were unable to face the pressures of Roman rule. In this way, Sharar connects social loss with moral decline, which is an important theme in his book. He describes how the Jewish community was divided into different religious groups, like the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. Each group claimed to be right, and they often fought among themselves²⁶. Instead of helping their people, the leaders of these groups cared more about their power. This situation made it easier for the Romans to control the Jewish people. Sharar does not directly criticize these groups, but his message is clear: when a community becomes divided and forgets its values, it becomes weak. At the same time, Sharar talks about the Roman Empire not just as a social power, but as a system that damaged religious life²⁷. The Romans allowed the Jews to follow their religion, but in reality, they supported leaders who were loyal to them, not to the faith. This kind of rule, Sharar suggests, is confusing. People followed rituals but forgot the real spirit of religion. They were afraid of the rulers, unsure about their faith, and disconnected from their traditions. In this difficult time, many Jews began to hope for a messiah, someone who could bring change, justice, and religious renewal. Even though Sharar does not mention Muslims or the British Empire in this part of the book, it is clear that he is making a quiet comparison²⁸. Just like the Jews were divided and morally weak under Roman rule, Sharar believed Muslims in India were facing similar problems under British rule. He uses the Jewish story as a way to help Muslims think about their situation. His message is not harsh, but it is serious. He wants his readers to

understand that the fall of a community does not happen only because of outsiders; it also happens when people forget their beliefs, lose their unity, and stop caring about truth and justice²⁹. What makes Sharar's style so effective is that he writes with sympathy. He does not attack anyone. Instead, he wants to show how communities fall apart when they lose their spiritual purpose³⁰. He invites his Muslim readers to think deeply about their condition without directly blaming them. His goal is to create awareness and self-reflection through the example of another community.

In the end, this part of *Maseeh aur Maseehiyat* is not just about Jewish history. It is a way of teaching a lesson. Sharar shows how internal divisions and weak leadership opened the door for Roman oppression. Through this, he quietly tells Muslims that the solution to their problems is not only social, it is also moral and spiritual³¹. He hopes that by understanding the past, his readers will be inspired to build a better future for themselves.

4. Literary Style and Rhetorical Choices

One of the most powerful features of *Maseeh aur Maseehiyat* is Abdul Haleem Sharar's writing style. His language is not dry or purely factual like modern historical writing. Instead, he writes in an emotional and engaging tone, using storytelling to connect with his readers³². His Urdu is classical but clear, filled with rhythm and imagery. It often sounds like an Islamic sermon or a moral tale rather than a formal history. This gives the book a spiritual feel and helps readers think not just about facts, but about the meaning behind those facts. He does not simply list events. He builds scenes, describes characters with emotion, and gives moral lessons through the lives of those characters. For example, when he writes about Jesus's walking among the poor, avoiding wealth, or rejecting power, he uses soft and respectful language³³. He shows Jesus not just as a historical figure but as a human being full of compassion, patience, and wisdom. These descriptions help the reader feel close to Jesus's mission and understand why his message was important. Sharar also avoids hard criticism. Even when he describes the Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus, he does so in a sorrowful tone rather than an angry one³⁴.

This style helps Sharar speak to many types of readers. Educated Muslims might see the reformist ideas behind the story, while common Urdu-speaking readers can understand the simple moral messages. His writing is emotional, but not sentimental. It makes people reflect on faith, unity, and leadership without directly blaming anyone. This approach matches the style of many Muslim reformers at the time, who used gentle advice and historical examples to avoid direct social confrontation³⁵. In colonial India, where freedom of expression was limited and religious discussion could be risky, this method allowed writers like Sharar to express serious concerns respectfully and safely. Another reason Sharar's style is effective is that it brings religious history to life. He does not write as an outsider looking at another religion. Instead, he shows empathy and respect. He admires Jesus and shows sorrow for the decline of the Jewish people. This balanced tone helps build trust with the reader³⁶. He wants Muslims to learn from history, not feel proud or superior. This is what makes his message feel sincere. His writing is not just about telling a story; it is about creating a mood, building understanding, and inviting reflection. His literary choices help turn the life of Jesus into a model for

moral and spiritual renewal. Through his careful language, indirect comparisons, and emotional storytelling, Sharar speaks to the heart of a community that was struggling to find its way in a difficult time³⁷.

5. Sharar's Message to Muslims through the Story of Jesus

In *Maseeh aur Maseehiyat*, Abdul Haleem Sharar crafts a powerful narrative that goes beyond simply recounting the life of Jesus. While the text presents key historical and spiritual events from Jesus's life, it is clear that Sharar's primary aim is to indirectly address the social, moral, and social conditions of Indian Muslims during British colonial rule. By retelling the story of Jewish decline and the rise of Jesus as a moral and spiritual figure, Sharar uses historical analogy to encourage reflection among Muslims, without resorting to direct critique. This method allows him to navigate the sensitive social environment of the late 19th century while still offering urgent moral instruction. Sharar paints the Jewish community of Jesus's time as a deeply fractured and spiritually weakened nation. He explains how once-unified religious authority had disintegrated into multiple sects, such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes, each more concerned with its survival and influence than with the collective good of the community³⁸. Religious leaders had become aligned with imperial power, compromising their principles in exchange for safety and recognition from the Roman state. The Jewish masses, meanwhile, had fallen into ritualism, losing sight of the ethical core of their faith. This internal disunity and spiritual decline made them vulnerable to foreign domination³⁹. For Sharar, this is not simply a story about another religion's history; it is a symbolic warning.

Though Sharar never openly says so, it becomes clear that he is asking his Muslim readers to see their reflection in this account. After the fall of the Mughal Empire and the traumatic aftermath of the 1857 revolt, Indian Muslims were facing similar conditions, social disempowerment, social fragmentation, and spiritual confusion⁴⁰. Many religious institutions were preoccupied with defending their traditions rather than working for unity, and some Muslim leaders were seen as having become too comfortable under British patronage. Like the Jews of Jesus's time, Muslims in India were living under a foreign regime while struggling to maintain a coherent religious identity. Sharar's indirect comparison is meant to highlight this crisis without turning his message into an open attack. It allows him to speak from a place of empathy and shared human experience rather than from a position of superiority or condemnation. Central to this message is Sharar's portrayal of Jesus as a reformer, not as a founder of a separate religion, but as a prophetic voice calling his community back to the values it had lost⁴¹. Sharar presents Jesus as someone who stood apart from the religious and social elite. He lived humbly, served the poor, and openly challenged those who had distorted the faith for personal gain. Importantly, Sharar does not dwell on theological debates between Islam and Christianity. Instead, he uses Jesus as a model of moral leadership, a figure who, despite being rejected by his people, continued to speak the truth with courage and compassion⁴². This image of Jesus, deeply resonant with Islamic respect for him as a prophet (Isa), allows Sharar to frame spiritual leadership in a form that his Muslim readers can both admire and emulate. Moreover, Sharar's writing avoids harshness or polemics. He treats the Jewish experience with sorrow, not judgment. The

decline of the Jewish people is not presented as evidence of failure unique to them, but as a universal lesson about what happens when religious communities lose their ethical direction⁴³. This humanizing treatment gives Sharar's narrative depth and moral seriousness. He does not use the fall of one community to elevate another; rather, he suggests that any community, no matter how divinely favored, can face destruction if it forgets its responsibilities. In doing so, Sharar invites Muslims to consider their weaknesses and begin the process of self-renewal before it is too late. Sharar's indirect approach is not just a literary choice; it is a social necessity. In the colonial context, direct criticism of Muslim leadership, institutions, or British rule could result in censorship or backlash. Using history as a mirror offers a safer and more persuasive way to promote reform⁴⁴. It also respects the reader's intelligence. Rather than giving commands or issuing fatwas, Sharar presents a story with deep moral resonance and lets the reader draw his or her conclusions. This narrative strategy reflects the broader method used by reformist thinkers of the time, who believed that lasting change would come not from top-down control but from internal moral awakening.

Conclusion

In the book of *Maseeh aur Maseehiyat*, Abdul Haleem Sharar uses the story of Jesus not just to describe the past, but to speak gently to the Muslim community of his own time. Without directly naming them, he draws a quiet comparison between the divided, weakened Jewish society under Roman rule and the condition of Muslims under British colonialism. His aim is not to argue or blame, but to guide, by showing how internal decline can lead to external defeat. Sharar's message is that real reform begins from within: through unity, sincere leadership, and a return to moral values. By presenting Jesus as a symbol of truth and renewal, he invites Muslims to think about their responsibilities. His respectful, thoughtful tone allows readers to reflect without feeling accused. In this way, Sharar turns religious history into a tool for awakening, making *Maseeh aur Maseehiyat* a quiet but powerful voice for moral reform.

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