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Tears and Blood of Love:

Gender and Lament in South Asian Shii Muharram Rituals

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Tears and Blood of Love:

Gender and Lament in South Asian Shii Muharram Rituals

by

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For Arline C. Weiss and Harry H. Weiss, with love

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Abstract

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This essay is a reflection on the obviously *physical* manifestations of lament in South Asian Shii Muharram rituals: weeping and *matam*, or self-mortification of the flesh. I examine weeping mainly as it is simultaneously actualized and depicted in poetry recited in the *majlis* ("mourning gathering") setting and consider *matam* in the context of majlises, as well as Muharram processions. While there are varying degrees and styles of *matam*, I concentrate on the *public* forms intended to draw blood, which are practiced solely by Shii men and boys. These practices constitute a gendered ritual "performance," often enacted in front of an audience of both men and women—but one that can only be fully understood when viewed in relation to the act of ritual weeping, in which gender is not primary.

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Zainab was simply left regarding her own arms[1]

This essay is a reflection on the obviously *physical* manifestations of lament in South Asian Shii Muharram rituals: weeping and *matam*, or self-mortification of the flesh. I examine weeping mainly as it is simultaneously actualized and depicted in poetry recited in the *majlis* ("mourning gathering") setting and consider *matam* in the context of majlises, as well as Muharram processions. While there are varying degrees and styles of *matam*, I concentrate on the *public* forms intended to draw blood, which are practiced solely by Shii men and boys. These practices constitute a gendered ritual "performance," often enacted in front of an audience of both men and women—but one that can only be fully understood when viewed in relation to the act of ritual weeping, in which gender is not primary.

To frame my analysis, and provide some background on Muharram traditions, I begin with the above excerpt of elegiac poetry, as translated by Amy Bard. As I said, this type of poetry is recited in South Asian Shii Muslim majlises, or "mourning assemblies."[2]

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[1] Recitation by Aminah Ja'far of Hyderabad, (Emphasis mine), From: Amy Bard, "'No Power of Speech Remains:' Tears and Transformation in South Asian *Majlis* Poetry," *Holy Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination*, Ed. Kimberley Christine Patton and John Stratton Hawley, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 153.

[2] *Majālis* is the actual plural form of *majlis*, but I use the anglicized "majlises" in this essay for the purpose of English-language coherence.

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Majlises are held during the month of Muharram,[3] which is the first month of the Islamic year, to commemorate the bloody seventh century Battle of Karbala and its aftermath. These gatherings bear witness to the tremendous faith and incomparable sacrifices of the Prophet Muhammad's family members and followers in Iraq. This "chain of tears of sorrow for Ḥusain," which is "never severed" is, as Bard points out, a concretely imagined way of understanding the function of collective grief in connecting a community across time and space.[4] The events that unfolded at Karbala in 680 CE form the core narrative of Shii Islam—past, present, and future.

In the wake of the murder of the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law 'Alī,[5] 'Alī's elder son Hasan was promptly removed from power by the Umayyad caliph, Mu'āwiya, a political leader not in the Prophet's bloodline. Soon afterward, upon receiving news of Hasan's subsequent death, supporters of Muhammad's descendants based in southern Iraq (Kūfah) petitioned Ali's younger son, the Imam Husain, to relocate from Medina.[6] These partisans of Ali called on him to raise an oppositional force against Yazīd, the reigning son of the caliph who had displaced (and ostensibly killed) Hasan.

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[3] Yet, they are not held solely during Muharram. The first two months of the Islamic calendar, Muharram and Safar, are known together as *ayyām-e 'azā*, meaning "days of mourning," and during these months the Karbala struggle in particular is commemorated. However, majlises, as an integral part of Shii life, are conducted throughout the year (even weekly for some families).

[4] Amy Bard, "No Power of Speech Remains," 153. Here Bard notes, importantly, that the word used for "chain" in this poem is *silsilah*, which, as a term used to describe Sufi spiritual lines of succession, for example, "has rich connotations related to the concepts of lineage or a system for the transmission of memory, spiritual power, or knowledge from person to person."

[5] Ali was married to Fatima, the Prophet's daughter. Muhammad had no surviving sons.

[6] The title "Imam" is prefixed to the names of the male members of *Ahl al-Bait* (also rendered in the Persian manner as *Ahl-e Bait,* and literally meaning "People of the House"). This phrase represents people from the Prophet Muhammad's family who are believed by Shias to be the true leaders of the Muslim community—whether or not they actually held political power in their lifetimes.

Hearing of this plan, Yazīd sent armed forces to overwhelm the Imam Husain's party en route to Kūfah, first cutting them off from the Euphrates River, which was the only available water source in that desert region. Then, after days of suffering from thirst and heat exhaustion, the caliph's army killed almost all of the men, as well as some of the women and children who were accompanying them on their journey. Husain, whose name appears in the first line of the epigraph, was the group's valiant and determined leader in this fight, a model for devotion and strength abiding even in the face of the greatest possible adversity.

Zainab, his sister, who took charge of the survivors after his death on the 10th of Muharram ('Āshūra), is also an exemplar of fortitude in the Shii tradition. Many of the poetic verses recited and chanted during Muharram rituals, which I will discuss in further detail throughout this essay, offer profuse and explicit praise of her strong, virtuous character. In this sense, she is truly held up, like Husain, as a "model" for righteous behavior among both men and women in a way that demonstrates the permeability of gendered barriers in the realm of spiritual practice. That being said, the two italicized lines in the epigraph above point to a clear difference between the roles of men and women present at the (trans)historic battle.

Though "the tents were uprooted from the Euphrates," and the clash ended in indelible tragedy, we are told that the "brow of 'Abbās remains raised in a scowl." The "battle" is thus, in a very real sense, *ongoing*. Given, then, that the Karbala struggle is continuous, as also intimated by the image of an eternal "chain of tears," what do we make of Zainab in this moment? She was, after all, "simply left regarding her own arms"

as Abbas was readying to "enter the battlefield." Bard addresses this mirrored image of Abbas and Zainab in a footnote: "In a type of poetic parallel *often* drawn between the male martyrs and female survivors, as ʿAbbās prepares to depart, Zainab gazes at her own arms, soon to be chafed by the enemies' bonds" (emphasis mine).[7] Abbas, Husain's half-brother and standard-bearer, eventually dies in a gallant attempt to secure some water for the family's children. One brutal aspect of his martyrdom-story is that his hands were first cut off in order to prevent him from carrying the waterskins back to camp. It seems that this particular mutilation is relevant in that it runs parallel (in a physical sense) to poetic foreshadowing of Sayyida Zainab's shackled arms, when she is held captive and transported, along with the rest of those who remain, to Yazid's court in Damascus. In fact it is there, in the enemy's palace, where Zainab (leader of the survivors) holds the first *majlis* and thus initiates the tradition of mourning for her brother.

This differentiation (historically and poetically) between martyrs (those who are killed and whose bodies are physically mangled) and survivors of Karbala (those who remained in the camp and were marched to Syria in chains) reflects an important, enduring relationship between gender and lament in the context of Shii commemorative rituals. However, as with other types of ritualized human phenomena, the gendered (masculinized, male / feminized, female) aspects of Muharram practice cannot, I think, be fully understood unless they are considered in concert with related *non-gendered* actions, or perhaps with moments when "gender" is simply *not* primary. "Gender" is of course a concept that has been defined and re-defined (especially in relation to its presumed

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[7] Amy Bard, "No Power of Speech Remains," Footnote 28, 163.

counterpoint, "sex"), delineated and "undone,"[8] in myriad ways and diverse cultural contexts. As theoretical planes have continued to re-intersect with human-historical ones, the complexity of people's life experiences has served as evidence to refute and revise essentialist claims.[9] Most significant in this study is the category's dynamically multiple and relational (lived) nature—its embodied, fluid variations, within and across societies, which continue to nuance gender's meaning and illuminate its explanatory power.

Employed as an investigative lens, gender-based analysis makes clearer the ways in which individuals relate to one another and understand themselves, both through and against the eternal/temporal visions of religious communities and in terms of local, regional, and/or transnational socio-cultural norms. Because identity formation and classification ("Turk," "Hindu," "Persian," "Indian," "Muslim," etc.) are really matters of *emphasis*, when talking about the practitioners of "Shii Islam" in "South Asia" we should begin by identifying some key themes constituting the tradition's historical development. The point in doing so is certainly not to settle on a single narrative, especially one that might be exploited for ideological objectives, but rather to provide a short, flexible outline focused on how and when Shii Islam came to the subcontinent and, additionally, to detail some ways in which Shias maintained relationships with other "homelands" while becoming increasingly established in South Asia.

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[8] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1: "Sometimes a normative conception of gender can undo one's personhood, undermining the capacity to persevere in a livable life. Other times, the experience of a normative restriction becoming undone can undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one that has greater livability as its aim."

[9] For example: the "essentialist" idea (ideology) that masculine = male and feminine = female; or, alternatively, that male versus female = a "natural" biological dichotomy, so that although gender is shaped by culture, *sex* (one of only two options) is bestowed by "nature" at birth.

The goal of my first section is to adequately background later discussion of the imperative relationship between mourning rituals and poetry recitation for Shias in contemporary Indian and Pakistani contexts, as well as the construction of "modern" perceptions and markers of Shii identity. In the second and third sections, I discuss commemorative texts (concentrating on marsiyas), as well as related aspects of mourning rituals and Muharram processions that have been documented in ethnographic reports.

1: Shii Muslims in South Asia: Migration, Influence, and Integration

> The traditions [of understanding the suffering of Imam Husayn that] we have been examining and others like them are presented in the Muharram memorial services (*majālis*) to heighten the emotions of the participants. It must be emphasized that those present at such services are not an audience or mere spectators, but active participants in the sacred drama. The significance of the services is not obscured by the legendary or fantastic details that fill the stories; those details constitute a living reality ever present in the lives of the pious, *a reality which grows more real with every succeeding generation*.[10]

This quotation is excerpted from "The House of Sorrows" (*Bayt al-Aḥzān*),[11] the first chapter in Mahmoud Ayoub's *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: a study of the devotional aspects of 'Āshūrā*.' The book details the theological and "legendary" underpinnings of popular Shii devotional practices, with special attention to the ways in which multiple narrative-historical traditions intersect in the realm of "belief." Noting the last sentence in this selection especially, we may bear in mind that *to be Shii* is, at least in part, to subscribe to a notion of religious identity that simultaneously makes a historical claim, grounded in events surrounding the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE (which was year 61 in the *hijri*),[12] and a *transhistorical* one, through its common vision of this battle as an ongoing "sacred drama."

Furthermore, because continuous re-imagining of 7th century Karbala as a "living reality" is at the heart of what it means to be "Shii" as opposed to "Sunni,"[13] when looking at the place of Islam in South Asian history I think it makes sense to juxtapose

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[10] Mahmoud Ayoub, "House of Sorrows," (Emphasis mine), *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Āshūrā' in Twelver Shī'ism*, (New York: Mouton Publishers, 1978), 47-8.

[11] Ibid, p. 25: "The House of Sorrows" denotes "this (human) world" of suffering, as well as the cosmos.

[12] According to this system, year 1 was 622 CE when Muhammad and his followers journeyed from Mecca to Medina (*hijra* = migration) as a community.

[13] Inasmuch as this moment epitomizes/symbolizes the disagreement between the two "sects" about caliphal succession and "rightful" leadership within Islam.

and balance the idea of "Dar al-Islam"[14] with: "The chain of tears of sorrow for Husain is never severed / Fātimah's handkerchief stays damp forever."[15] In other words, Shii doctrine and ritual clearly function as both eternal and "international" realities, as is evidenced by the community's ability to consistently create and re-define itself *as such*: there were "Shias" in the early days of Islam, and they are scattered throughout the world today. However, the perception of a greater "Islamic World," binding faithful Sunnis *and* Shias together across time and space, is either alluded to or more directly engaged in many different historiographical accounts of Islamic rule in South Asia.

This unity, communicated by the term *ummah* (meaning "community" in Arabic and referring to Muslims generally), is captured in different places and ages throughout Marshall G. S. Hodgson's impressive three-part history, *The Venture of Islam*. For our purposes, I want to think critically about an assertion that he makes at the conclusion of the second volume. In reflecting on the state of Islam in India during the 15th century, Hodgson writes: "Precisely part of the Muslim strength was that Muslims could draw on the resources of a large and sophisticated cultural tradition beyond the borders of the Hindu sphere."[16] Bracketing the problematic "Hindu" category,[17] we may begin to assess his proposal of a thriving (i.e. "large and sophisticated") international ("beyond the borders") Islamic consciousness. The collective title of his work also alludes to the

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[14] Literally, "The Abode of Islam."

[15] Recitation by Aminah Ja'far of Hyderabad, From: Amy Bard, "No Power of Speech Remains," 153.

[16] Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, *V. 2: The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 556.

[17] "Hindu" is a term much critiqued for its use historically as a "catch-all" category broadly applied to indigenous "Indian religion," thereby obscuring a sizable portion of the subcontinent's religious diversity.

existence of specifically *Muslim* "resources" that have been made available to all Muslims, whenever and wherever they have ventured.

Interpreting "resources" in both its mental and material senses, as I believe Hodgson intends, I wish to consider issues of religious consciousness as these intersect with the many other aspects of social and political identities being constructed and re-fashioned in relation to each other. Historiographies that mention Shias, as Muslims but also as distinct from Sunnis, work at once to support and complicate this concept of "international consciousness" with questions of sectarian consciousness. Also, I want to show, if briefly, that any discussion of migration, which is essential to the story of Shias coming to South Asia, necessitates attention to the localization of "foreign" traditions and the prominent roles played by class and language-based differences in any such socio-cultural processes. Accordingly, I summarize several broadly defined phases of political development, concluding with a few important points about Awadh (Shii) state patronage of Muharram rites and literature in the 18th and 19th century.

Early Patterns of Migration and Influence:
The Delhi Sultanate and its Successor States

As the widely accepted narrative goes, Shias started coming to the subcontinent in numbers as early as the mid-13th century. Several factors spurred this mass movement, including their experiences of religious persecution under changing regimes, Mongol invasions persisting throughout Islamic territories, and the growing instability of the government in Baghdad. J. N. Hollister characterizes this India, which was soon to

coalesce politically under a series of powerful dynasties, as a land of asylum.[18] He explains, for example, that the government of Ghiyath al-din Balban, which lasted from 1266-1286 CE, was proud to shelter "fifteen princes," going on to surmise that the number of literary men in their company would have been "more considerable."[19]

After Balban's reign, however, the Delhi Sultanate's central authority was faltering, and this vulnerability resulted in the formation of a "Bahmani" state that was independent of Delhi leadership. Still, like the Sultanate, this new kingdom retained close ties with "the central Islamic lands," becoming itself a place of refuge and opportunity. In particular, the Bahmanis achieved this status by establishing, and over time prioritizing and strengthening, direct trade relations with the Persian Gulf.

In his incisive article entitled "Iranians Abroad: Intra-Asian Elite Migration and Early Modern State Formation," Sanjay Subrahmanyam observes:

> From an earlier dependence on the original colonists and their descendants and on indigenous (Hindu) intermediaries during the first half-century of Bahmani rule in the Deccan, the Bahmanis of the early fifteenth-century sought to import soldiers, administrators, traders, and artists from the Persian Gulf, and Firuz Shah is reported actually to have sent empty ships to Hurmuz and other ports to bring back this precious human cargo.[20]

Well-reputed and highly skilled individuals, with coveted occupational capabilities and education levels, were increasingly in demand from abroad. Men of letters and men of might were clearly "precious" to the creation of a state that would be viable economically

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[18] J. N. Hollister, *The Shi'a of India*, (London: Luzac & Co., 1953), 101

[19] Ibid: Amir Khusrau was born in India, the son of Turkic émigré.

[20] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Iranians Abroad: Intra-Asian Elite Migration and Early Modern State Formation," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (May, 1992), 342 and Richard Eaton also writes about these empty ships, with evidence lifted from Firishta's *Tarikh*, in *A Social History of the Deccan, 1300-1761: Eight Indian Lives, (*New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 61.

and competitive militarily and politically with its neighbors.[21] One of these neighbors,

Vijayanagara, was located to the south of the Bahmanis and has been held up in present

times as a triumphant "Hindu" state. Founded in 1346 CE, its multiple founding stories

and courtly traditions that included Islamicized dress, complicate this picture—along

with the notion that any identity or tradition was or is ever "pure" or monolithic.[22]

In her essay "Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu—Muslim Identities

in Pre-Colonial India," Cynthia Talbot lists some of the words used to designate

"foreigners" in ancient and medieval India. She mentions the expression *mleccha*,

translated as "barbarian," and also "Yavanas," a term for the Indo-Greeks and "Shakas,"

which referred to Central Asians.[23] Talbot goes on to remind us that by the 11th century,

"Hindu," a Persian word, was being used to mean "inhabitants of India." By this time,

Persian was entering the northern Indian cultural milieu as the language of *belles-lettres*

patronized by the Turko-Mongol leadership. Shias had a hand in this transition, as did

Sunnis, because migrant Muslims coming from the west, by land or sea, whether in the

13th century or later on, carried linguistic traditions with them.

Reflecting on the assertions of Hollister and Subrahmanyam regarding the

welcoming, and even soliciting, of "imported" populations, we realize that both "push"

and "pull" factors were at work driving these flows of people and "resources" (in the

Hodgsian sense) to the subcontinent. As new inhabitants gained footing, these resources

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[21] Access to northern India was stymied at this time, and the sea was the best route to other Muslims elites.

[22] Carla M. Sinopoli, "From the Lion Throne: Political and Social Dynamics of the Vijayanagara Empire," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (2000), 385: tunics and high conical caps.

[23] Cynthia Talbot, "Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu—Muslim Identities in Pre-colonial India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Oct, 1995), 698.

(e.g. the Persian language and Islamic religion) were incorporated into the elite sectors of South Asian society, where "Hindus" and "Muslims," or "Turks," as they were often called,[24] exchanged goods and ideas as often as they fought each other.

Recent scholarship that has focused primarily on illuminating the fluid nature of "ethnic"/"religious" identity categories ("Hindu," "Muslim," and "Turk") in premodern South Asia may be found in two helpful collections of essays: *India's Islamic Traditions, 711-1750*, edited by Richard Eaton, and *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, edited by David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence. The secularized or culture-focused categories of "Indic" and "Islamicate" are employed to suggest that there is not always a one-to-one relationship between "culture" and "religion." Yet even these more open-ended, less potentially dogmatic seeming categories are just that: categories. They are wholly dependent upon historical context and often overlap in ways that are perhaps unexpected to the modern eye, thereby exposing their own porous, constructed nature.

The problem of determining sectarian identities is equally complicated and persistent. Following a list of the Bahmani dynasty's kings, Hollister states that his purpose is to try to account for "sudden outcrops of undisputed Shiism."[25] What is interesting, however, is the great difficulty of this task, and the many surviving anecdotes in which sectarian distinctions and influences are both disputed *and* undisputed. More

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[24] *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, Eds. David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000).

[25] Hollister, in his chapter on "The Bahmani and Successor Kingdoms," notes that the first references are to *malahida*, a "collective term denoting sectarians" that was probably referring to "extremists" such as the Qarmatians (as opposed to the "more moderate Twelvers"). It is uncertain who came first, but it is likely that the Qarmatians fled persecution, as some harbored ambitions of starting their own government.

precisely, there seems to have been times when Shiism was salient in the lives of individuals, communities and kingdoms, and times when it was not; or, times when it could be visible and upheld publicly, according to the political climate, and times when it could not. As evinced by descriptions of Shii practice in India and Pakistan that I provide in the following analysis, this remains true for many Shias living as members of minority communities today.

One explanation given for this indeterminacy is the practice among Shias of *taqiyya*, which Hodgson defines as the "pious dissimulation of one's true opinions."[26] This doctrine was developed and implemented over centuries by different groups within the Shia fold (e.g. Twelvers, Isma'ilis, etc.) when they were living in Sunni majority areas and/or subjected to the laws prescribed by a government they did not, in their faith, believe to be legitimate. The cumulative result of such contextual masking is that sometimes it is challenging, or even impossible, to discern from historical sources whether or not an individual was a believing Shia. Not surprisingly, Sunni and Shii histories often give divergent accounts of prominent people's identities, and Syed Akbar Hyder offers a clear illustration of this phenomenon in his work:

> Once again, the Karbala narrations echo an alternative view of Islamic history. The majority of Sunnis do not believe that Abu Talib accepted Islam in his lifetime. A few of the Sunni traditions also relate that the Prophet, in spite of his love for Abu Talib, pointed out that Abu Talib would not be treated as a believing Muslim on the Day of Judgment, for he had not accepted his nephew as the Messenger of God. The Shias, however, believe that Abu Talib had embraced Islam, but had not declared it openly, in fear of his life. Rather he practiced *taqiyya* (dissimulation), a practice adopted by many Shias when their lives and livelihoods are threatened.[27]

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[26] Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam…Vol. 1, The Classical Age of Islam*, 381.

[27] Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 90.

Here Hyder is referring to a *zikr* ("recollection," or sermon) of Rashid Turabi (d. 1973), a renowned South Asian zākir (one who delivers the *zikr*) and leader of majlises.[28] In this particular majlis sermon, Turabi recounts the martyrdom of Ali Akbar, Husain's 18-year old son, relating the boy's willingness to fight to protect his father (Husain) to the piety of his great-grandfather Abu Talib (Ali's father) who protected the Prophet Muhammad.[29] It seems that "concealed" identity better enabled Abu Talib to defend his nephew, the Prophet, against the antagonistic elites of Mecca (e.g. Muawiya, Yazid's father, and his ilk).

Yet whether one is talking about 7th century Mecca or "medieval" India, when tracing the history of Shiism, glimpses of people and historical periods emerge most often in gradated shades of visibility, stretching across complicated interreligious (and intra-religious[30]) zones. Theological issues were contested, sometimes intersecting with political spheres of activity (like when the leader of a dynasty instituted Shiism as the state religion) but at other times remaining determinedly apart from them—if only by degrees of concealment. Thus, one must continuously weigh historians' perspectives on religious history against each other, and perhaps imagine that there were many Shias who did not, or could not, say they were Shias, as well as Shias for whom declaring their religious identity was important and possible. Additionally, there were many powerful,

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[28] He was born in Hyderabad in 1908 and re-located to Pakistan after Partition. Hyder, *Reliving Karbala*, 40: Because he is such a master of the tradition of sermonizing that emerged during the latter part of the 19th century, people call him *nasr ke Anis* (the "Anis of prose"). Some of his famous recollections, such as this one, can be viewed on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2c685gCYbc ("Yaqeen").

[29] Ali Akbar is also said to have borne a striking resemblance to the Prophet.

[30] For example, the debate within Shiism between Uṣūlīs (the so-called "rationalist" theologians, meaning they were influenced by Greek rationalism) and Akhbārīs (literalists: they followed only what the Imams said), which reaches as far back as the 10th/11th century under the Buyid dynasty (in the region of Iraq).

well-known Sunnis who attended majlises, expressing great love for the Prophet's family in their conduct and deeds.

Husain Waiz Kashifi (d. 1504 CE) famously wrote *Rawẓat al-Shuhadā*, *The Garden of the Martyrs*. A mixture of prose and poetry, this Persian text, more than any other, deeply affected popular understandings of Karbala in South Asia. Hyder notes: "That its author was possibly a Sunni never attenuated its importance within the Shii world, and the fealty of later narrators to Kashifi can hardly be exaggerated."[31] Yet Abbas Amanat strongly suggests that Kashifi was practicing *taqiyya* in order to "[negotiate] his identity in a cosmopolitan climate such as Herat."[32]

It is clear that *The Garden of the Martyrs*—to pick up on a theme previously suggested by Hyder (recall Rashid Turabi's account of the status of Abu Talib)—constructs an "alternative" history by means of the multi-storied text (oral and written) of Karbala. Amanat concludes this about the content of Kashifi's narrative:

> At the time of creation, by divine order, so does Kāshifī open his narrative, for 39 days the clouds arising from the sea of grief rained on the clay of Adam and only on the 40th day a few drops from the sea of happiness were sprinkled on that clay…The account of Muhammad's sufferings is particularly important, however, because Kāshifī aims to graft them into the sufferings of the holy family and especially to the tragedies of Karbalā'. This is a subtle strategy to blend Shi'i metahistory with the accepted Sufi narrative of the Prophet's life. Repeatedly, the reader is reminded of Archangel Gabriel's revealed prophecy to Muhammad that his beloved grandson, Ḥusain, will be wronged by the enemies of his House and eventually martyred.[33]

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[31] Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala*, 21: Hyder underscores the centrality of "ghazal universe" imagery in Kashifi's work, which of course we see reinvented in the marsiyas of 19th century Lucknow/Awadh.

[32] Abbas Amanat, "*Meadow of the Martyrs:* Kāshifī's Persianization of the Shi'i Martyrdom Narrative in the Late Tīmūrid Herat," From: *Culture and Memory in Medieval Islam, Essays in Honour of Wilferd Madelung*, Eds. Farhad Daftary and Josef W. Meri, (New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2003), 251.

[33] Ibid, 265.

The first idea presented here is that the magnitude of sorrow and empathy for the Prophet's family was (and is) so great that Creation *began* with rain from the clouds of "the sea of grief," which poured down upon "the clay of Adam" (the father of humanity). His body itself nurtured by this lamentation, Adam participates in the sorrow of the Prophet's family when, after being expelled from Paradise, he prays for Muhammad's family with the guidance of the angel Gabriel, praising each by name: Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Husain. As Adam utters the name of Husain, he feels pain in his heart, and tears flow from his eyes. He asks Gabriel why, and is told of Husain's suffering. Ayoub remarks that on hearing this "Adam wept bitterly like a mother grieving for her loved one."[34] A second important notion brought out by this interpretation of the text is its explication of Muhammad's sufferings, especially presciently on behalf of Husain. This vision supports the Shii telling of Muslim history following the Prophet's death in 632 CE. In summary, we should take note of the long-standing relationship established between the regions of Iran and South Asia, which, as we shall see, proved very significant for future religious and literary developments.

The Bahmani state (in south-west/central India) was closely connected, politically and economically, with Persia and Central Asia. So despite the decline of a unified Bahmani front toward the end of the 15th century, new polities were formed that retained this bond. Of chief importance for their size and political durability were Bijapur, Ahmadnagar, and Golconda. Shiism influenced each at different times and to varying degrees. In 16th century Bijapur (a southwestern kingdom), there were two periods

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[34] Mahmoud Ayoub, "The House of Sorrows: The participation of ancient prophets," 28.

during the 'Adil Shahi dynasty (the first in 1502) when Shiism was the state religion. The Qutb Shahs, who ruled over Golconda to the east, declared that Quli Qutb Shah, their founder who had fled Hamadan (in northwest Iran) for India in 1478, was descended from a nephew of Jahan Shah Qara Quyunlu.[35] Golconda endured longest of the Shii-ruled states in southern India, with the Qutb-Shahi dynasty in power from 1512-1687. Rulers in this line gave far-reaching patronage to Shii *'ulamā*, built mosques and *'āshūr-ḳhāna*, buildings for the commemoration of Imam Husain's martyrdom, as well as seminaries and Shii burial grounds. They held Friday prayer services in the name of both the Twelve Imams (specifically promulgating Twelver Usuli Shiism) and the Safavid kings (the ruling dynasty in Iran at the time, est. 1501).[36] Finally, in the case of Ahmadnagar, it is not in the blood of the ruler so much as in the blood of a majority of the government of Burhan Nizam Shah (r. 1508-53) where Iranian/Shii provenance is most notable. Similar to these other sultanates, the Nizam Shahs valued substantial contact with their Iranian contemporaries, the Safavids (1503-1722), and the fact that Iranians ("Westerners," as they were called) kept coming to the Deccan with the purpose of working for their state obviously facilitated this long-distance relationship.[37]

The Decline of the Mughal Empire and the Rise of Awadh:

> Twelver Shiism in northern India under the Mughals, sometimes barely tolerated
> and at others fiercely persecuted, has left far fewer traces in the chronicles than it
> did in the south. The importance of Iranian immigrants in spreading Safavid-

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[35] S. Subrahmanyam, "Iranians Abroad," 343.

[36] J. R. I. Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shī'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh, 1722-1859,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 22.

[37] There are hints from the correspondence of Iranian-born Deccani noble Shah Tahir Husaini of a "larger Safavid-Nizam Shahi diplomatic relationship." From: Subrahmanyam, "Iranians Abroad," 344.

style Twelver Shiism seems indisputable, although hard to trace except at the very top of the social hierarchy. Regions of northern India, particularly Kashmir, had more [Shias] than others. The popular classes developed creative ways of mourning the wronged family of the Prophet, although the Mughals sometimes suppressed such displays of proto-Shii piety.[38]

As this quotation from Juan Cole's work argues, the situation for Shias was quite different under Mughal rule. Babur (d. 1530) established the Mughal or Timurid dynasty in 1526, with his victory at the Battle of Panipat over the last of the Afghan Lodi rulers in northern India (Delhi region). By 1600, descendants of Babur controlled much of the northern territory of Hindustan, with the celebrated Emperor Akbar ruling from 1556-1605. In 1633, Shah Jahan (Akbar's grandson) forced the Nizam Shahs of Ahmadnagar to become part of the Mughal Empire, and although Shii rule and Iranian (Safavid) influence in south-central Hindustan grew consistently throughout the 16th century, by 1636 Shah Jahan had forbidden the Qutb-Shahis from doing Friday prayers in the Shii manner, also proscribing mention of the Safavids during this ritual. Finally, in 1687, the year after Aurangzeb (d. 1707) annexed Bijapur, Hyderabad (Golconda's capital city) "fell" to Sunni Mughals, who brought an end to that dynasty.

The seeds of Mughal decline were, however, being sown simultaneously as growing factionalism fractured the court and protracted, expensive wars raged across this region of India. As the 18th century wore on, contenders for regional successor states began, once again, to emerge. Shii governors in Bengal and Awadh saw opportunities to "make a bid for regional independence."[39] Awadh became a regional center for the powerful Nishapuri family, and this period saw the emergence of Lucknow and Banaras

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[38] J. R. I. Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shī'ism*, 24.
[39] Ibid, 27.

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as important cities for Shiism in northern India. Meanwhile, in the south/Deccan, Hyderabad became the autonomous dominion of the Nizam (a Mughal-appointed governor of the Asaf Jahi dynasty),[40] and the Hindu Maratha federation ruled much of the rest of the Deccan.

Halfway through the century, the increasingly powerful British East India Company (EIC) established its hegemony in the northeast by defeating the Nawab of Bengal and his French allies at the Battle of Plassey (1757). Awadh (1752-1858), with its ethnically Iranian rulers and associated nobles, relied on collaboration with local Sunni elites, as well as general cooperation among Muslims and Hindus in interdependent vicinities, to fortify itself against outsiders. The rulers of Awadh also made an alliance with the EIC after military defeat, which "led both to internal decentralization and to external dependence on the alliance with the British."[41]

Nonetheless, without trying to expand its borders, Awadh was internally stable, if decentralized, and wielded a lot of cultural clout. Talented individuals who had received patronage elsewhere (whether in Delhi or abroad under the Safavids) came to Awadh seeking resources, thereby forming and bolstering its artistic and literary milieu. Moreover, the capital, Lucknow, became a center for religious ritual, "a place where [Shias] from all over Awadh could meet at Muharram and thus overcome their sense of being isolated minority communities through congregation in the Realm of the Shi'ah."[42]

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[40] The Nizam of Hyderabad stayed in power until 1948 when his territory was invaded from the north and forcibly made to be part of post-Partition India.
[41] J. R. I. Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shī'ism*, 47.
[42] Ibid, 110.

At the same time, it should be emphasized that many ideas and customs were shared among regional religious groups/sects. Through adoption of language variations, vocabularies and literary tropes, for instance, and *styles* of devotional practice, much common ground could be seen and experienced (e.g. between Shias, local Sufi cults, and Hindu devotional sects). Muharram season, and especially participation in processional rites, certainly showcased then, as it does now, Hindustan's confluence of faith traditions. This was also an occasion when coreligionists coming from other parts of town or journeying from much further afield could share news and create social networks.

Aside from these essential socio-political/religious points, mention of Awadh is critical because two extraordinary Urdu marsiya poets, Mir Anis (d. 1874) and Mirza Dabir (d. 1875), were recipients of its patronage. Dabir hailed from Delhi and Anis from Faizabad (the first capital of Awadh), but they spent most of their lives composing in Lucknow. Through their work one sees how the marsiya developed and thrived in 19th century northern India. Various linguistic and devotional traditions (Persian, Sufi, *bhakti*, Hindustani, etc.) were melded to form key features of the genre. As Syed Akbar Hyder has said, quite summarily:

> The pliable marsiya narratives of nineteenth-century North India are by and large about topics to which all members of the city, Hindu or Muslim, can relate. Marsiyas were crafted to convey an aura of devotion that accommodates the human, as well as the superhuman, side of the martyrs of Karbala, much as Hindu devotional traditions (*bhakti*) include popularly crafted loving verses for Krishna, a manifestation of the Divine. It was for this reason, perhaps, that many Hindus, too, were drawn to marsiya writing. In fact, Mirza Dabir provided guidance in marsiya writing to several Hindu students of this art, and Dabir's contemporary and rival Mir Anis applauded two verses of a certain Hindu writer as equal to his entire poetic corpus.[43]

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[43] Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala*, 33.

We may get a sense from this quotation as well of the culture of poetic recitation flourishing in South Asia, where gatherings were/are often held for this purpose (*mushā'iras*) and devotional singing at festivals and during processions is central to ritual procedure, aesthetics, and participation. Beyond that, Hyder's comments make it clear that although Shias and lovers of *Ahl-e Bait* remained connected with other "homelands" and traditions, they were perpetually mixing with and innovating the rich possibilities surrounding them.

2: Rupture and Remembrance: Weeping for Karbala

> The first of all strangers was Adam, the forerunner of all those who grieve was Adam, the father of all the weepers was Adam. It was Adam who laid the foundation of love in the world and Adam who set down the custom of night vigils. He established the tradition of moaning in the pain of separation and crying the middle of the night….[44]

> Those who thought the companionship of truth
> To be a duty
> Were disposed on the path of the truth.
> And Zaynab was with them at every step…
> Time bore witness
> In the face of compulsion
> The lesson of patience, Zaynab
> The last page
> Of the book of martyrdom, Zaynab
> This pain which stands strong
> This too is a testimony
> This eye which is wet
> This too is a testimony
> This ground upon which lamenting exists
> This too is a testimony.[45]

In his essay "Weeping in Classical Sufism," William C. Chittick gives an overview of moments when weeping is discussed in the Quran and Hadith literature. He then proceeds to Sufi writings where there is more discourse on "phenomena associated specifically with religious practice."[46] In early Sufi works, the trend is to "classify" the *causes* of shedding tears, and then to connect these causes with stages of spiritual growth. Each case that Chittick considers in this frame is complex and polyvalent. He explains that there is a great deal of material to reflect on, especially if one brings in Sufi poetry.

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[44] William C. Chittick, "Weeping in Classical Sufism," From: *Holy Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination*, Ed. Kimberley Christine Patton and John Stratton Hawley, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 141.

[45] Syed Akbar Hyder, "Sayyedeh Zaynab," In: *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi'i Islam*, Ed. Kamran Scot Aghaie, (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 2005), 171-172.

[46] William C. Chittick, "Weeping in Classical Sufism," 132.

Acknowledging this challenge, he concludes by providing "a few samples of typical discussions from one seminal work."[47]

Finished in 1126 CE, *Kashf al-asrār wa 'uddat al-abrār*, *The unveiling of the secrets and the provision of the pious*, by Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī is a commentary on the Quran in Persian. Maybudi organizes the verses he expounds on according to a concept of *three stages* of knowledge and discernment: "literal Persian translation, detailed exposition of the diverse opinions of the early authorities, and 'allusions' (*ishārāt*) to the inner meanings of the text."[48] Interpreting 2:238, the section instructing people to be vigilant about their daily prayers,[49] Maybudi says that the origin of each of the five prayers is tied to a particular prophet. The opening quotation in the epigraph of this chapter is excerpted from the segment where he attributes the first morning, or sunrise, prayer to Adam.

When the sunlight faded on earth, "Adam's heart became a mine of grief" because he had never experienced nightfall, separation, or suffering: "Suddenly he saw the darkness that reaches the whole world, and he was a stranger. . . ."[50] With our purpose in mind, we see that in this condition he wept and became "the father of all the weepers." This may remind us of the Shii tradition cited earlier in which Adam commences the weeping for Husain when Gabriel tells of the Imam's fated destruction: "He shall be killed thirsty, a stranger and one utterly abandoned. . . ."[51] The differences in the two

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[47] Ibid, 139: This text is "one of the longest and most popular commentaries on the Qur'ān in the Persian language."

[48] Ibid.

[49] The completion of five daily prayers (namāz) is one of the basic obligatory acts of Islam.

[50] Ibid, 141.

[51] Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering*, 27-8.

accounts of Adam's first tears seem, on the one hand, to reflect theological interests, but also, and perhaps very significantly, *both* put forth a belief in weeping's profound and primary humanness.

To complement these stories of Adam as the first human/man, I want to offer the idea that Creation itself was weeping in its own way, as in Kashifi's text (rain from the sea of grief), because this possibility foregrounds original human tears in an interesting way. The aforementioned master-poets, Anis and Dabir, have elegantly incorporated depictions of nature responding to and lamenting the trials of Bayt al-Aḥzān into their works. The poetic device they often utilize is a favorite in Persian and Urdu poetry known as *husn-e taʿlīl*, in which the poet attributes a fantastic cause to an ordinary, mundane happening. For example, Anis has written:

<div dir="rtl">

ڈر سے ہوا فرات کی موجوں کو اضطراب

اور آب میں سروں کو چھپانے لگے حباب

</div>

The waves of the Euphrates grew restless with fear,
And the bubbles began to hide their heads in the water

The Euphrates, as I noted in the introduction, was the river in Iraq nearest to the battlefield at Karbala, though Yazid's army blocked Husain's forces from accessing it. In Dabir's words:

<div dir="rtl">

چاروں طرف تھا بسکہ ہجومِ سپاہِ شام

گویا سیاہ پوش تھا آبِ رواں تمام

</div>

The mob of the Syrian army was everywhere,
As if flowing water covered entirely in black

24

In Karbala poetry, the environs also reflect the virtues of the Prophet's family in a positive manner. For example, in David Matthews' translation of a marsiya by Anis, *The Battle of Karbala*, one line reads: "Each bush was crowned by glittering diadems."[52] Thus, even the natural beauty of creation was in awe of those who fought with Husain. On the whole, there is a strong sense of the interconnectedness of life, which continuously suggests tears and love as foundational aspects of Creation.

The second quotation presented in the epigraph is from a modern Urdu poem called "Bear Witness, O Karbala" by the celebrated poet Iftiḵẖār 'Arif (b. 1943), and it also represents weeping as a natural and important phenomenon of human/this-worldly devotion: "This eye which is wet / This too is a testimony."[53] Language is not the only means by which human beings "testify." Tears bear witness to tragedy; so does the earth, as we have seen, which is the "ground" of our existence. And so does the heartrendingly visceral experience of pain "which stands strong." The Karbala story, rendered in numerous poetic forms, invokes pain and tears, the material experience of absence, and, at the same time, transcendent Divine presence.

The poem praises the extraordinary courage of Husain's sister Zainab, who was the leader of those who made the journey to Damascus in bondage. Although various poets and orators interpret nuances of her character differently, that Zainab was both the guide and protector of those who remained is undisputed. According to Arif, Zainab provides us with a "lesson of patience;" she is a fearless, *vocal*, and faithful witness to the

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[52] Mīr Anīs, *The Battle of Karbala: A Marsiya of Anis,* Trans. David Matthews, (Islamabad, Pakistan: Alhamra Printing, 2001), 60-1.
[53] Syed Akbar Hyder, "Sayyedeh Zaynab," 172.

events at Karbala: "The last page / Of the book of martyrdom."[54] She took charge of the survivors after Husain fell, beginning on "the dark night after the massacre," called Sham-e Ghariban (The Night of the Dispossessed).[55]

Zainab became *the* living spokesperson of/for the Prophet's family, and assuming this role, she confronted Yazid face-to-face upon arriving at his court. Hyder recounts that the caliph noticed a woman in the group whose comportment alone suggested "defiance," and cried out, "Who is this arrogant woman?"[56] She made her way towards him and spoke thus: "'Ask me. I'll tell you [who I am.] I am Mohammad's granddaughter. I am Fatemeh's daughter. Ask me, Yazid.'"[57] Sayyed 'Alī Naqī al-Naqvī, a respected South Asian Shii authority, is quoted in Syed Akbar Hyder's essay on representations of Zainab as remarking: "She is the voice of truth in the face of a tyrannical government and an oppressive sultanate – Can there be any doubt that each and every sentence of [Zaynab's] speech was more brutal for Yazid than the wounds wrought by thousands of swords and spears?"[58] She is characterized as Husain's female counterpart, and from this viewpoint (as "the voice of truth" that "was more brutal…."), she stands strong as his equal. In *The Battle of Karbala* marsiya, Anis imagines her as someone from whom Husain would seek counsel. The first line in the following stanza is Husain speaking, asking Zainab to choose who will be his standard-bearer in the battle.

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[54] Ibid, 171.
[55] Ibid, 172.
[56] Ibid, 165.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid, 169.

An exchange follows in which the sister at first demurs, but with encouragement from her brother, gives her judgment. A few stanzas later Husain proclaims it:

'The bearer of the standard is thy choice.'
'The King of Heaven must choose,' Zainab replied.
'Thou wert declared our mother with one voice',
Answered Husain, 'the day that Fatima died.
So now must thou decide; for thee to say
Which one will bear the standard to the fray.'[59]

The King who has no equal [Husain] found his voice,
As tears came to his eyes: 'To thee my thanks.
My sister [Zainab], thou hast uttered Ali's choice.
Go call Abbas, the terror of the ranks.'
Akbar [Husain's son] called his uncle reverently:
'The King awaits. My aunt has chosen thee.'[60]

In addition to highlighting the degree of mutual reverence between Husain and Zainab, we see an instance of Husain's love for his family and cause manifesting in tears: "The King who has no equal found his voice, As tears came to his eyes. . . ." More poetic vignettes from Anis' marsiya writing will show that the act of weeping itself, in the context of the Karbala battle, is not gendered. In this broader context of tragic suffering and spiritual duty, weeping, whatever its various causes, appears as neither a masculine nor a feminine thing to *do*. That being said, aspects of tear imagery *are* gendered in critical symbolic ways. Before demonstrating this, however, I want to highlight the fact that the poetry is *performed* during Muharram rituals and briefly discuss the marsiya as a form *in* its majlis setting.

The poetic form used for marsiya composition, since its cultivation at the height of Awadhi cultural production, is the *musaddas* genre. This mode of Urdu poetry

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[59] Anis, *The Battle of Karbala*, Trans. David Matthews, 120-121.
[60] Ibid, 122-123.

consists of six-line stanzas, often arranged on a page like this (rhyming scheme noted in parentheses), and reading, of course, from left-to-right:

2(a)   1(a)
4(a)   3(a)
        5(b)
        6(b)

In the marsiya stanzas I have cited thus far, which were translated by David Matthews, this scheme has been made apparent. In the stanzas I will examine momentarily, which are also lifted from a marsiya by Mir Anis, the English translation is obviously made as literal as possible. My focus is on content, admittedly privileging character-based action and imagery over attention to diction and meter. Yet I cannot stress enough how *imperative* the latter named aspects of the text are—both as salient features of the Urdu literary canon in general, and as poetic qualities that make *this piece* a beautiful, emotive one in its specific performance contexts. For this reason, I have paired my translation with the exquisite Urdu original, sections of which are recited at majlises, assemblies commemorating the martyrs of Karbala. Shii majlises held during the Muharram mourning season vary in length, content, and emphasis, depending upon both the social and cultural context one is considering (e.g. central India versus southern Lebanon, upper class versus working class, public versus private etc.). In terms of gender-based divisions, many majlises held at private homes are mixed, or have a more relaxed divide, whereas in public majlises the men and women are kept separate (though this does not

mean they cannot hear each other, etc.). The typical structure of a gathering in South

Asia includes (in this order): soz, salām, marsiya, zikr, and nauha.[61]

The two parts of the majlis that are most relevant to a closer examination of

weeping and *matam* are the marsiya and nauha. Most scholars who have addressed the

question of "gender" in their work on Muharram traditions (if only in a few words or

implicitly) have looked closely at the themes and imagery contained in these particular

poetic forms. The *marsiya* is typically longer than other constituent parts of the majlis.

Amy Bard has described it aesthetically, as an epic poem "characterized by variegated

poetic texture and content,"[62] while Syed Akbar Hyder explains that it "deals with a

specific topic, either the death of a particular character from the Imam's side or a specific

sorrowful event."[63] Also typical of the marsiya genre is for its verses to "speak" with the

voices of the heroes present at Karbala (e.g. Husain and Zainab, as we have seen) and so

to expand on certain subjects (e.g. who will bear the standard in battle) from their

imagined perspectives.

These next three stanzas are from a marsiya of Anis that begins "*jab nojawān

pisar shah-e dīn se judā huā*,"[64] or "When the young son was separated from the King of

Religion." The young son is Ali Akbar (the same Akbar who summoned his uncle,

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[61] Typical structure of South Asian majlis (in order of recitation): soz ("burning") is to get the audience in the right devotional state of mind/being and may be in several poetic forms, but always has a melodic flow; salām ("salutation"/benediction) is a string of couplets describing Karbala and offering thoughts on life/death, etc.; and zikr ("recollection") is a prose sermon—the only prose component of a majlis.

[62] Amy Bard, "No Power of Speech Remains," 146.

[63] Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala*, 26.

[64] جب نوجوان پسر شۂ دیں سے جدا ہوا

Abbas). He fought at Karbala and was martyred there, at age 18. The King of Religion is the Imam Husain.

But here Husain is talking with his young daughter Sakina, the baby of the family whom he loves dearly. Husain is ruminating on his imminent martyrdom, which popular theological writings claim he knew of in advance, thus rendering him a "voluntary" martyr.[65] So with these heavy thoughts, he gazes upon his beloved child for perhaps the last time:

<div dir="rtl">

جانا ہے دور شب کو جو آنا نہ ہو ادھر

ضد کر کے رویو نہ ہمیں چاہتی ہو گر

پہلے پہل سے آج شبِ فرقتِ پدر

سو رہیو ماں کی چھاتی پہ غربت سے رکھ کے سر

راحت کے دن گذر گئے یہ فصل اور ہے

اب یوں بسر کرو جو یتیموں کا طور ہے

</div>

> I have to go far away, [so] if I don't come [back] here at night,
> [Then] if you love me, after being insistent, don't cry /
> Today begins the first night of separation from [your] father,
> Lay your head meekly/quietly on [your] mother's breast and sleep /
> The days of comfort have passed; the season has changed /
> Now adopt this state, which is that of an orphan.

<div dir="rtl">

ننھے سے ہاتھ جوڑ کے بولی وہ تشنہ کام

بتلایے مجھے کہ یتیمی ہے کس کا نام

آنکھوں سے خوں بہا کے یہ کہنے لگے امام

کھل جائے گا یہ درد و المؑ تم پہ تابہ شام

بی بی نہ پوچھو کچھ یہ مصیبت عظیم ہے

مر جائے جس کا باپ وہ بچہّ یتیم ہے

</div>

> Thirsty, her small hands clasped, she said:
> Tell me, what is an orphan? /
> Shedding tears of blood, the Imam began to say:

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[65]David Pinault, "Shia Lamentation Rituals and Reinterpretations of the Doctrine of Intercession: Two Cases From Modern India," *History of Religions*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Feb, 1999), 287-290.

By evening this pain and agony will be laid bare before you /
Don't ask, little one, for this is a great affliction/tragedy /
One whose father has died: that child is an orphan.

بندے اتارو طوق بڑھاؤ پدرنثار
چھپنا کہیں جو لوٹنے آئیں ستم شعار
چلایؤ نہ ایْنَ اَبی کہہ کے بار بار
دشمن ہمارے نام کا ہے شمرِ نابکار
لو الوداع جاتے ہیں اب قتل گاہ میں
سونپا تمہیں خدا و نبی کی پناہ میں

Tear off the earrings; take off the necklace, for the sacrificed father,
Hide them somewhere if/when the tyrants come to plunder/rob,
Don't scream, "Where's my father?" again and again,
Wicked Shimr is the name of our enemy /
Take my farewell, now I go to the place of execution, /
You are entrusted to the protection of God and the Prophet.

In these lines we are shown a male/paternal perspective on the familial love bound up in this torrent of great communal loss. About to go forth into a fatal battle, Husain is pausing to look around him, to give tender parental attention. Sakina asks innocently, "What is an orphan?" This is exactly the sort of poetic-narrative moment intended to evoke tears from the audience. It is overflowing with pathos, especially in its use of the ubiquitous Muharram motifs of ultimate sacrifice, "thirst," and "tears of blood." "Don't ask, little one," says the father, "for this is a great tragedy."

The pain or problem of "thirst" comes up again and again to recall for listeners the life-threatening thirst that ravaged Husain and his party when they were cut off from the Euphrates, as well as the martyrdom of Abbas, the Imam's half-brother, who, as I said in the introduction, was shot down while attempting to bring water back to the women and children. "Tears of blood" are tears from the crumbling heart, or, as a Pakistani-

American Shii practitioner recently told me, "When you cry so much that you have no tears left to give, only blood from your heart.**"[66]** In the words of Amy Bard, they are a "stock image," tears wept "by the distraught, the dying, and the forsaken;" they signal "passion and despair" in the marsiya, but in "almost every genre of Urdū poetry" as well.[67] The marriage of bleeding and weeping in this mode of poetic expression also extends to the interrelatedness of other vital fluids, such as water and milk. In this tradition, all are intimately human, profoundly interdependent, and either life-giving or taking depending on whether they are lost or gained.

In order, then, to point out the gendered aspects of some of this "fluid" imagery, I want to juxtapose the small literary portrait of Husain and Sakina with one of a mother and son, Bano (Husain's wife) and Akbar, who (as I said) was martyred in battle as a teenager. Bano cries out, "Oh, my lion . . . Not a drop of liquid, except for the shedding of tears, did you get / You were raised drinking milk to your heart's content, and then denied water / You died without even bringing me a bride, my son / All Bāno reaped is ground to dust."[68] Of course Akbar is no longer physically present; yet through his mother's memory, *connected with her own body and being*, he lives on despite this tragic *rupture*, which is represented as an unnatural (premature, reversed) separation and loss of lineage ("All Bāno reaped is ground to dust"). Bano weeps because the one she nursed with her milk was "denied water" (subjected to thirst), killed in the fight, and now tears are all that can be offered. It is too late for (drinking) water.

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[66] Conversation with female Shii student (age 20) at the University of Texas, Austin, December 2009.

[67] Amy Bard, "No Power of Speech Remains," 151.

[68] Ibid, 150.

In regard to the coexistence and mingling of "milk, blood, and the tears of surviving mourners," Bard also mentions that "the expenditure" of these liquids is sometimes associated with the "debt of milk" (*dūdh kā qarz*), a phrase which reflects a certain cultural understanding of what children owe their mothers.[69] The meaning of this idiom could also perhaps be broadened to encompass individuals' responsibilities to their communities. In cases of untimely death, of course, this "debt" cannot be repaid in the expected way. The natural balance—the give-and-take, the mutual nurturing, between mothers and children, individuals and communities—is upset. In situations of extreme violence and deprivation, such as Karbala, hopes for the future are reduced to "dust."

Again, from a marsiya of Anis ("Jab nojawān pisar shah-e dīn se judā huā"), we see Husain weeping with his child. In this instance, however, his son has just been killed in the fray. This stanza is from the beginning of an elegy and refers to the death of Ali Akbar, Husain's 18-year old son, who was said to resemble the Prophet:

برچھی سے ٹکڑے ہو گیا لختِ جگر کا دل
خود باپ نے چھدا ہوا دیکھا پسر کا دل
ہوتا ہے آبگینہ سے نازک بشر کا دل
پتھر کا دل نہیں ہے، یہ دل ہے پدر کا دل
ایوب بھی اگر ہوں تو دم بھر نہ کل پڑے
آنسو تھمیں تو منہ سے کلیجہ نکل پڑے

With a small spear, the heart of his son was shattered to pieces,
The father himself saw the heart of the son pierced /
The human heart is fragile as glass/a mirror,
This heart is not a heart of stone, but the heart of a father /
If even Job [the model of forbearance] could not, for some time, feel at ease /
If the tears stopped, then the heart would be pulled out from the mouth.

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[69] Ibid.

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The heart of the son "was shattered to pieces," and the father, unable to protect his child, is himself broken in bearing witness to the wreckage of this violence. Central to the stanza is the fragility and mirror-like quality of the human heart. Because "the human heart is fragile as glass/a mirror," the spear was able to "shatter" two hearts at once: the heart of the son, draining his lifeblood, and the heart of the father, which reflected the son's love and pain. Even Job would have found this hard to swallow, and it seems that tears must flow or the heart will bleed out of the body. The same moment is described in the marsiya of Anis that Matthews translated: "The name of Ali Akbar reached his [Husain's] ears; / His heart was pierced; he pulled his horse's rein. / And as he stopped, his eyes were filled with tears."[70]

Then, Husain must tell the women in his party of Ali Akbar's death. Based on even the previous stanza alone, one may imagine his emotions upon seeing his family and having to break the news to them. Anis paints a striking picture of his agony: he is weeping, pale, cold, thirsty, and saturated with the blood of his son. As before, we have the simultaneous mingling and exhaustion of vital fluids and an emphasis on the closeness between Zainab and Husain:

روتے ہوئے حرم میں گئے قبلۂ انام
تر تھی لہو سے لختِ جگر کے قبا تمام
رخ زردً دل میں دردً بدن سردً تشنہ کام
طاقت نہ قلب میںّ نہ بدن میں لہو کا نام
یہ درد تھا بکا میں کہ دل ٹکڑے ہوتے تھے
یہ حال تھا کہ رونے پہ دشمن بھی روتے تھے

The holy Kaaba of humankind [Husain] was weeping as he went to the harem,

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[70] Anis, *The Battle of Karbala*, Trans. David Matthews, 208-9.

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His whole tunic/jacket was moist with the blood of his son /
Pale face, pained heart, cold body, thirsty,
Neither strength in the heart/soul/mind, nor an ounce of blood in the body /
The pain was such that wailing had broken hearts to pieces /
The condition was such that even the enemy cried because of the crying.

پیارے نہ تھے حسین علیہ اسلام کے
لائ حرم سرا میںً بہن ہاتھ تھام کے
تھرا رہے تھے پاؤںً شۂ تشنہ کام کے
سر دوش پر تھاً زینبِ عالی مقام کے
فرماتےتھے بہں علی اکبر گذر گئے
ہم ایسے سخت جان ہیں کہ اب تک نہ مر گئے

The beloved of Husain was no more, peace be upon him,
His sister brought him into the harem, holding his hand, /
The legs of the thirsty king were shaking,
His head was on the shoulder of Zainab, whose station is exalted /
He said, "Sister, Ali Akbar has passed away," /
"We are so tough that we have not died yet."

پرسا تمہیں شہیدوں کا دینے کو آئے ہیں
کس کس کے داغ آج جگر پر اٹھائے ہیں
پیٹے ہیں خاک اڑاف ہے آنسو بہائے ہیں
یہ ہم تمہارے لال کے خون میں نہائے ہیں
سر تھا حسین بے کس وتنہا کی گود میں
بیٹے کی جان نکلی ہے بابا کی گود میں

I have come to you to offer condolences for the martyrs,
Who all's scars have been lifted onto our heart-soul today? /
We have beaten/hit, tossed up dirt, spilled tears,
I have washed in this, the blood of your beloveds /
The head/beginning was in the lap of the lonely/forlorn Husain, /
In the lap of the father, the soul of the son has departed.

Weeping and martyrdom are intimately related as the battle unfolds. Actually the portrayal of Husain is so intense in these verses that it is almost as if he is already dying from grief. His legs are shaking, and we may notice that he needs the support (literally) of Zainab. In fact, Ali Akbar was, in large part, raised by Zainab, which seems to

amplify the significance of her strength in this moment—though she also weeps. Ali Akbar died in his father's lap, in an embrace that nurtured him when he was young, and, all the more striking in the absence of water, Husain washed in his blood.

Though under different circumstances and from distinct perspectives, *both parents*, Husain and Bano, shed tears for their children: tears of blood for Sakina, weeping and washing in his son's blood, and tears remembering thirst that was once quenched with mother's milk for Akbar. Similarly, in contemporary Muharram rituals, *both men and women* weep for Husain and Bano, Sakina and Akbar, and for the rest of the Prophet's family and those who suffered. As the "chain of tears" metaphor illustrates, ritualized weeping in the majlis context creates a transhistorical space in which proximity to the Prophet's family may be achieved, hence the popular devotional concept of "intercession," which is bound up in this notion of a chain that is "never severed." Many of the faithful who participate in these mourning rituals believe that their tears constitute meritorious actions, which will increase their chances of redemption and inspire members of the Prophet's family to "intercede" on their behalf before God on Judgment Day.

However, because "intercession" is also used to defend some of the self-mortification practices that I will be looking at in comparison to weeping, David Pinault and others have cited an increasingly common silence on the issue by "educated Shias."[71] This indicates intra-communal differences based on other aspects of identity, such as class, which I will touch on later. Still, the belief that by shedding tears for the martyrs during the majlis one has the power to transcend ordinary time and space is crucial to my

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[71] David Pinault, "Reinterpretations of the Doctrine of Intercession" 295-296.

assertion that the act of weeping in Muharram rituals is non-gendered, despite the prevalence of gendered imagery in the poetry that provokes tears, as well as the common separation of women's and men's majlises (though some are public and mixed also).

Because it is so often recitation of poetry that elicits these transcendent tears, I find Julia Kristeva's psycho-linguistic theory about the relationship between the "semiotic" (in general, what is "extra-linguistic") and the "symbolic" (what is categorically determined or confined) to be helpful. For Kristeva, the "semiotic" is the phase of linguistic formation and expression that exists prior to subject/object distinctions. These distinctions occur at a moment that she calls the "thetic rupture," which signifies the event of enunciation.[72] In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva expounds on the de-stabilizing potential of "the flow of the semiotic into the symbolic."[73] She argues that the practical function of poetic language—like a marsiya verse—lies in our experiencing and knowing that distinctions produced by the thetic rupture are neither final nor absolute. The implication is that we can use this awareness to continuously "remodel" the symbolic order.[74]

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[72] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, selections in: *The Kristeva Reader*, Ed. Toril Moi, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 98. Despite their interrelatedness in practice, on a theoretical plane there must be some type of boundary conceptualized between the ordered flux of the semiotic and the formalized structure of the symbolic; Kristeva calls this stage or phase, which is the moment of enunciation (subject/object distinction), the 'thetic' rupture.

[73] Ibid, 110.

[74] Ibid, 113. I should note here that in *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler critiques the gendered / "hetero"-sexualized aspect of Kristeva's theory and its political implications. She argues, based on Kristeva's further explication of the semiotic in *Desire in Language* (1977), that there are problems with suggesting the essential, original Maternal as a challenge to the Symbolic order (paternal law that structures signification → masculine cultural identity) posited by Lacan (and Lévi-Strauss via structuralism). On p. 109, Butler writes: "Her naturalistic descriptions of the maternal body effectively reify motherhood and preclude an analysis of its cultural construction and variability." While I agree completely with Butler (that this aspect of the theory, especially as it evolved later, is problematic), I am working only with *Revolution in Poetic Language* in this essay and feel that Kristeva still has something important to say about the power of poetry / poetic language, especially in *ritualized contexts* (whether these are "religious" or "secular").

In reaching beyond (or before) language, and *into the realm of tears*, Shii devotional poetry holds the potential to expose and de-stabilize not only what distinguishes "self" from "other," but "individual" from "community," and, importantly, "male"/"man" from "female"/"woman." This is not to say that crying during these rituals *never* assumes any gendered tinge. What I am suggesting instead is that because of its "extra-linguistic," (trans)historically spiritual character and its enactment by both men *and* women, in private *and* public, the practice of ritual weeping is, on the whole, non-gendered. This becomes even clearer, I think, when weeping is seen in relation to practices of *matam*.

A final excerpt from *The Battle of Karbala* marsiya illustrates another instance in which Husain effectively says, "Don't cry" (recall his conversation with Sakina: "If you love me, then…don't cry"). In preparation for the battlefield, he needs "the holy relics," which he requests from none other than Zainab:

> Drawing near, the Lord of Heaven spoke:
> 'Be not thou troubled. All thy prayers are heard.
> Our cursed foe all faith and pledges broke,
> And now they will learn justice at my word.
> This is no time, my sister, for thy tears.
> Bring forth the holy relics. Cease thy fears.'
>
> Zainab brought the clothes the Prophet wore
> When he went to Heaven on that night.
> Husain put on his turban, and once more
> He donned the cloak to which he had the right.
> Those holy garments fitted perfectly;
> The scarf of Fatima, his legacy.[75]

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[75] Anis, *The Battle of Karbala*, Trans. David Matthews.

Zainab, the loyal sister who left her husband behind in Medina to accompany Husain to Kufah,[76] is appropriately the one who outfits him for the final battle. Here we see how the articles of clothing (the garments worn by the Prophet Muhammad on the night of *meraj*) connect the Prophet's family symbolically across time and space. In a way, this mirrors the connections believers forge with Ahl-e Bait through the passing on of relics in families and communities, and the symbolic construction and care of tombs and other holy objects annually during Muharram.

Keeping an image of Husain readying for battle in mind ("This is no time, my sister, for thy tears"), I want to move to a discussion of *matam* and masculinity. Physical and "concrete" connections to the martyrs of Karbala are maintained through weeping—but also, in a different way, through practices of *matam*. These practices, in turn, have different gendered meanings and consequences.

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[76] Syed Akbar Hyder, "Sayyedeh Zaynab," 164.

3: The Public Practice of *Matam* and the Construction of Masculinity

> From time to time the procession halted, sometimes as often as every five minutes. Then the notables listened to the elegies being chanted, or mourners flagellated themselves to the accompaniment of drums. Although the laboring-class mourners could not compete with the splendid pageants of the notables, they could nevertheless gain divine rewards through extreme breast-beating. In north Indian cities at this time, tens of thousands of people assembled in the streets. The processions often arrived after nightfall at their Karbalas, four or five miles distant, where mourners ritually interred the cenotaphs and performed the whole ceremony of a funeral. Tempers ran high on this day of collective grief, and Sunni-Shia riots sometimes broke out among Awadh's habitually armed men.[77]

There are many details in this description of Shii-led processions during the time of Awadhi rule in Lucknow that are pertinent to our discussion. Class differences among mourners are noted, as well as the practice of processing with cenotaphs. These are monuments suggestive of tombs (in general, constructed in memory of deceased persons whose bodies are elsewhere) that were carried to Karbalas, or places just beyond the city limits designated for ritual burials in Muharram. We see that chanting and self-flagellation were part of each procession (*julūs*), as was rhythmic accompaniment (drum-beating), intensifying the atmosphere of communal sorrow and unity. Lastly, we may notice that the account references possible Sunni-Shia "riots."

Though I have tried to show thus far that there have always been many ways in which Shias, Sunnis, and Hindus, etc. have peacefully mingled, worshipped and paid homage together during Muharram, violent conflicts have also arisen in the course of these events. One instigating factor is the practice among Shias of denouncing enemies of the Prophet's family by name (and in public). This is known as *tabarrā* and is

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[77] J. R. I. Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shī'ism*, 113.

considered one of the ten duties of committed Shias. In his remarks on the place of Shiism in 16ᵗʰ century Bijapur, J. R. I. Cole has written: "Shī'ī ulama and notables often came into violent conflict with Sunnīs, including local Sufi leaders, and Sunnī-Shī'ī riots became endemic during the month of Muḥarram when Shī'īs cursed the caliphs."[78] The issue is mainly that the caliphs who are "cursed" are the same ones who are respected (for the most part) by Sunnis and seen as leaders who ensured stability and the practice of Islam in their respective times. Not surprisingly, Sunnis engage in a counter-practice:

> These actions [of cursing the caliphs] are loudly condemned by many community leaders; they are seen as triggers for Shii-Sunni sectarian violence. Shii-Sunni controversies in the subcontinent have raged for years, largely over the issue of tabarra and effigy-burning. Sunnis have reacted to Shii vilification by praising the companions (madh-e sahāba), this in turn infuriates Shias who see this as tantamount to calling the Karbala tragedy an aberration in the history of Islam. In particular contexts of Shii-Sunni tension, such as Lucknow during the late 1960s—when Shias felt targeted not only by Sunnis but by extension by the ruling Congress party that was courting Sunni votes—Shias have sought assistance from right-wing Hindu parties like the Jan Sangh.[79]

The political implications cited by Hyder remind us of the fundamental issues of representation and access to resources that are at stake for minority communities in India. After all, 20ᵗʰ century Shii-Sunni conflicts in Lucknow have their origins, at least partially, in many socio-political/cultural shifts that began during the latter part of the 19ᵗʰ century when the British took over governance of Awadh (starting in 1858).

After the events of 1857 (the year of the "Mutiny"/"Rebellion"), consolidation of British rule in India resulted in the dismantling of traditional social and economic structures. Witnessing this breakdown, along with the hardened reality of colonialism,

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[78] Ibid, 23.

[79] Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala*, 83. "Jan Sangh" is the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), founded in 1951 and later succeeded by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the "Indian People's Party," which is associated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a militant Hindu organization.

re-configured many individuals' relationships to poetry (decline of the marsiya tradition due to lack of patronage), language ("standardization" policies and the institutionalization of the Hindu/Urdu divide), politics (vis-à-vis the Raj), and history (as the British claimed India did not have any). Due to technological shifts, the 19th century was also one in which the amount of written (printed) material available in Urdu, and other South Asian vernaculars, increased exponentially.

Among the innumerable newspapers, magazines, and books now obtainable in Urdu were, as Francis Robinson has noted, translations of Islamic "classics" and educational materials.[80] These texts influenced, in key ways, the sorts of re-formulations of community identity that were affecting, and often increasing, "sectarian" tensions. Calls for Islamic revival and reform were in the air.[81] In this milieu, there was much at stake, in terms of power and legitimacy, in debates over "orthodoxy" and what could be considered acceptable "Islam." As a minority within a minority community, if a powerful and visible one, Shias were under pressure from all sides, and this remains true in many cases today.[82]

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[80] Francis Robinson, "Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1, (Feb., 1993), 232-3.

[81] The politicized poetry (and poeticized history) of "Hali" Altaf Husain (d. 1914), formerly a protégé of the incomparable Ghalib in Delhi, and his relationship with Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) and the Aligarh movement, serves as a good example of what sorts of changes in Urdu literature and language politics occurred in these decades of reform, amid mounting resistance to imperialism.

[82] In Pakistan today, in contrast, Shias are a minority only vis-à-vis Sunni Muslims (the country is about 75% Sunni and 20% Shia, with the smaller minority groups being mostly Hindus and Christians). Issues of orthopraxy, from the view of Sunni elites, are often painted as "Islam" versus "not Islam" (rather than Sunni/Shia). In general, after the Iranian Revolution (1979), Shii activism and militancy in Pakistan (funded by neighboring Iran) increased, and this was in the context of the Islamization policies and programs of Zia ul-Haq (1977-88), who specifically empowered the institution of the (Sunni) ulama and madrasas – with the strategic aid of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and the U.S. (recall Afghan wars of the 1980s). The growth of smaller-scale militant organizations, both Shii and Sunni, was partly a response to the actions of government-supported ulama – and the desire of lay leaders for autonomy, etc. A case of violence in 2009: Assoc. Press, "Suicide bomber kills 30 on Shia procession in Karachi: Extremists

As David Pinault has observed in his 1989 and 1991 interviews:

> Shiites with whom I spoke said they wish to avoid drawing attention to themselves politically or antagonizing the city's Hindu majority. All this is happening at a time when…Hindu militants in Hyderabad have become more aggressive in asserting Hindu communal identity, in part by promoting new religious festivals such as the Bonalu and Ganesh processions. The potential for confrontation is obvious. In the face of communal tension, and given their status as a small minority, the Shiites look to the municipal government for protection, an attitude which apparently has its roots in the benevolent interest once demonstrated by the nizam, Mir Osman Ali Khan [r. 1911-1948], with regard to the Shiites of Hyderabad and their Muharram liturgies.[83]

The nizam who is mentioned here was the last nizam of Hyderabad and a member of the Asaf Jahi dynasty (the one installed by the Mughals that later became autonomous). In its reference to the threat posed by the Hindu majority, this example is helpful to pair with Hyder's comments on the Shii-Sunni strife in Lucknow. Political alliances are strategic and impermanent, and as with power relations in general, inherently unstable. In these contexts, doctrinal disagreements can be part of the problem, but many other factors and variables must be accounted for in historical-comparative treatments.[84]

Similar to tabarra, *matam* is both a highly central ritual practice and a very controversial one. The poetic element of the majlis that is closely associated with matam is called the *nauha*. The nauha is a dirge expressed by a range of possible "poetic structures,"[85] typically accompanied by *hath ka matam*, or "bare-handed chest-slapping."[86] *Hath ka matam* is practiced publicly by both men and women; however, there are several

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accused of trying to start sectarian war as deaths spark violence," *The Guardian*, 28 December 2009, Available online: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/dec/28/pakistan-suicide-attack-kills-30

[83] David Pinault, *The Shiites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 164.

[84] My point being *not* that these are not sincere or paramount, but that they are not inherently violent.

[85] Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala*, 45.

[86] David Pinault, *Horse of Karbala: Muslim Devotional Life in India*, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 6.

more "bloody" forms of matam that are also tied to nauha poetry. In his book *Horse of Karbala: Muslim Devotional Life in India*, David Pinault has studied the nauha of various men's guilds, *matami guruhan*, in Hyderabad, India. One Hyderabadi *matami guruhan* is known as the "Moths of Husain."   When Pinault spoke with their "chief poet and chanter" about the meaning behind the guild's name, he was told: "The moths love the light; we love Imam Husain."[87] The idea is as follows: just as moths are undeterred by the danger of a burning flame, the Shii "Moths" of Hyderabad would never let fear of harm prevent them from expressing their deep love for the Prophet's grandson, Husain.[88] This metaphor, which is woven into the broader South Asian literary landscape, is also employed in the *Battle of Karbala* marsiya:

<blockquote>
The Celestial King gave orders from his place,
When arrows suddenly began to fall.
Towards the evil foe he turned his face.
Weighing his sword Abbas obeyed his call.
Like moths around the torch of the Imam,
They rallied to protect Husain from harm.[89]
</blockquote>

In general, as must now be evident, Shia Muslims pride themselves in the force and depth of their love for the Prophet's family; but it is mainly all-male groups such as these that continue to "perform" this love, in sync with the pulse-like nauha, through *zanjir ka matam*. These practitioners draw blood by repeatedly striking their backs and chests with chains, knives, or razors.[90]

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[87] Ibid, 8.

[88] Ibid, 39: The refrain of one of their nauhas is, "We are his lovers, the moths of Husain."

[89] Anis, *The Battle of Karbala*, Trans. David Matthews, 84-5.

[90] Many homemade, multi-part videos of this in India, accompanied by the chanting of nauhas, are available on YouTube.

A representative example of a nauha meant to encourage *zanjir ka matam* is included in Pinault's chapter on "Blood Rationality, and Ritual in the Shia Tradition." Taken from a collection of nauhas gathered in the chapbook used by the Moths of Husain, its title is "Karbala: Come to the Best of Deeds."[91] The chant begins, "Karbala achieved the preservation of Muhammad's religion. / Karbala is where the prophets prostrated themselves in prayer."[92] Karbala is the spiritual link to the Prophet's family; again, it is the origin of the "chain of tears," binding Ahl-e Bait to modern-day Shias, and community members to their coreligionists. It is where the "prophets" became martyrs, "prostrating" themselves before God when they died for "Muhammad's religion."[93] As Pinault notes in his analysis of the poem, one important feature of the nauha genre, and these verses in particular, is the prominence of what I have called, in relation to the marsiya, "vital fluid" imagery. Tropes of blood, thirst, and tears have deep communal resonance given the ritualized collapse of boundaries separating "present" and "past" that they direct through the intersection of Kristeva's "semiotic" and "symbolic"—or, through the meeting of our world of words with the "eternal" value of tears.

Another fundamental characteristic of the nauha poetry is its reliance on devotees' thorough prior knowledge of Karbala's essential events and personages. For example, the next two lines of the poem cited above are: "In the dust storm of tyranny is the search for

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[91] David Pinault, *The Shiites*, 86: The language of nauhas vary, and this can be a factor in determining membership; "older guilds" chant in Persian or Arabic, while "newer guilds" will use vernacular Urdu.

[92] David Pinault, *Horse of Karbala*, 44.

[93] Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala*, 41-2: *Sajda*, or prostration, implies "annihilation" of the human-self in God (No god but God) – complete faith. Associating *sajda* with the Karbala context suggests its connection with martyrdom (prostration under the sword – Husain dies with God's name on his lips).

truth. / Thirst performs with its wounds the ablution for prayer."[94] After the Prophet's

death, Shia Muslims split from Sunnis over the issue of succession, Shias locating

rightful political and spiritual authority only in the Prophet's direct bloodline. With the

murders of Ali and Hasan leading up to the Battle of Karbala, the "dust storm of tyranny"

ensued. But most jarring here is that wounds incurred in "thirst" for truth (battle wounds

at Karbala, the gashes of *matam*), perform "the ablution for prayer."[95] Like the original

martyrs for Islam, their followers are "thirsty" (in a spiritual sense) and give blood in

(response to) this condition. Just as these past and present thirsts are paralleled, so is the

blood shed. Moreover, the blood so shed is compared with the water used for ritual

washing before prayers in order to underline its *purifying* nature. Interestingly, though

consensus on "the status" of blood in Shia *fiqh*, or jurisprudence, agrees that it is impure

in ritual contexts, Pinault points out that in "popular" faith and practice, especially during

Muharram, a division is clearly constructed between the blood of martyrs and other types

or instances of bleeding.[96]

Alongside *zanjir ka matam*, the theme of thirst is acted out through literal

representation during public processions on Ashura. Ashura, which means "ten" in

Arabic, is the 10th day in the month of Muharram: this is the actual day in 680 CE when

Husain was martyred. During these processions, water is distributed to those who are

scourging their bodies out of love for Husain—and to other mourners, too.[97] A procession

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[94] Ibid.

[95] Recall also Husain washing in Ali Akbar's blood in the marsiya of Anis (Jab nojawān....).

[96] Ibid, 34-35: Discussion of the influence of Sunni legal schools on Shiism via Sufi "vocabulary" of martyrdom.

[97] Mentioned in almost all ethnographic accounts, as well as a documentary on Muharram in Banaras: *Banaras Muharram and the coals of Karbala*, DVD, produced by Marc J. Katz, (Madison, WI: Center for

typically follows the majlises on the morning of Ashura, and Pinault describes one that begins in a courtyard adjacent to the building where a majlis has just wrapped up. The group proceeds from there out into the streets:

> From the rooftops the women leaned forward to see. One figure . . . stretched out her arms as if beseeching someone. The bearers lifted the *alam* until its tip was level with the roof, then dipped it so that it faced the woman. From about her neck she freed a garland . . . and she draped it around the crest. Then the *alam* bobbed along the row of rooftop women. It swayed, paused, was garlanded again. Finally, still held aloft, it receded from the courtyard.[98]

When reading accounts such as this one, and another by Mary Elaine Hegland that I will look at shortly, one is struck by the significance of the female/feminine gaze. Women attending the same *majlis* as men remain at a distance; yet each sex/gender is always conscious of the other's presence. The "row of rooftop women" have been watching the men prepare for the procession: listening as they chant a nauha and watching as they engage in *zanjir ka matam* in the open space carved out below.

Once in the streets: "All around . . . young men waved knives overhead and shouted 'Abbas ya Abbas' or 'Husain Husain!' Urgently they pushed their way to the *alam* . . . Reaching his goal, each man raised a knife to the pole, touched the blade to the relic in a kind of consecration, then gashed his forehead with the weapon."[99] Matam that targets the forehead, as depicted above, is extremely sanguinary.[100] In this case, each man, while yelling out the names of the Karbala warriors, is positioning himself for a chance to

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South Asia, 2004).

[98] Ibid, 25.

[99] Ibid, 25-26.

[100] Vernon James Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam: Shi'i Devotional Rituals in South Asia*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 151: "In this practice the participant delivers a quick solid blow to the top of his head with a sword which produces a great deal of blood."

touch his weapon to the *alam*, a standard representing one of the martyrs. As if to say, it would seem, "I am doing this for you."

In the South Asian context, these public processions are *multi-religious*, with both Hindus from different sects and Sunni Muslims taking part in the remembrance of Husain and his family's suffering. Clothing aside (Shias wear black garb for mourning, or white cloth to highlight the blood produced by *zanjir ka matam*), matam is what marks Shias *as Shias*. Since the creation of Pakistan, tensions surrounding the minority within a minority status of Shias in India have been exacerbated many times over. In "The Politics of Passions: Growing Up Shia," Mohammed K. Fazel recalls, "Growing up Shia you recognized yourself as a member of the opposition party; being a perpetual underdog, which has existed since the first years of Islam, continues to influence Shia behavior vis-à-vis the Sunnis and indeed the rest of the world."[101] As a result, public professions and communal actions that represent purported defeat of the Shia cause in the company of both putative Sunni victors and super-majority Hindus can serve to inflame feelings about the status of Shii identity.

Transcending Language, Performing Gender:

To speak about the *performance* of gender in a form of ritual lament (*matam*) that arguably transcends language in its spiritual import may seem somewhat paradoxical at first, especially considering my arguments about weeping. In addition, in so many scholarly contexts we are accustomed to thinking of gender in terms of discursive

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[101] Mohammed K. Fazel, "The Politics of Passions: Growing Up Shia," *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3/4 (1988), 42.

practice. As with ritualized weeping, there is a sense that, via the transportive mood engendered by the poetry, and through palpable communal sorrow, the body is elevated to a spiritual plain on which it experiences identification, loss, and connection that is beyond articulation. Yet, as I have tried to show thus far, the "bloody" forms of public matam clearly occupy a domain, albeit within the broader context of Muharram rituals, that is controlled by, and *exclusive to*, men.

In a chapter entitled "Subversive Bodily Acts," from her pivotal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler asks us to question our assumptions about the "substantial" nature of gender—that is, its grounding in something truly *primary* or fundamental in the composition of human bodies/beings. She analyzes various theoretical perspectives on gender and power, such as Irigaray and Foucault, taking them point by point in order to show that "gender" as a category of identity is dependent upon its supposed expression of one "biology" in opposition to another: male in opposition to female. Butler writes: "Consider gender, for instance, as *a corporeal style*, an 'act,' as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where '*performative*' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning."[102] Elaborating on this understanding, she explains that, like with "other ritual social dramas," this gender-performance must be repeated.[103] After all, is not repetition what gives structure and coherence to so many behaviors, permitting us to continually *re-internalize* even as we ritualize?

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[102] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 177.
[103] Ibid, 178.

Much has been written about women (and women's bodies) as the symbolic *containers* of tradition, particularly in relation to the development of 20th century nationalisms, both political and religious. In her 1991 ethnographic study of mourning gatherings in Peshawar (NW Pakistan), Mary Elaine Hegland argues that Shii women in that context are at once "workers" and "symbols."[104] They are expected to be active in strengthening and consolidating communal ties, while at the same time being the perfect, idealized "container" for all socio-cultural values. It seems to me, then, that one application of Butler's gender theory to Muharram rituals would be to also view men, in this context, as workers *and symbols*. The question quickly follows: what sort of "symbols," or symbols of what?

First of all, matam is plainly performed and depicted as a feat of strength. In a second article on the topic of Pakistani female mourning rituals, Hegland includes a section called "Bloodshed: Male Martyrs—Female Filth and Frailty." Recounting her view of a procession in which self-flagellants marched she notes: "Mothers did not express concern about their flagellant sons but were heartened by their manly courage."[105] Contrary to expectations that may have developed out of familiarity with some Western traditions of mortifying the flesh, many people who defend *zanjir ka matam* claim that they do not feel pain. They say that their cuts heal well and their scars disappear.

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[104] Mary Elaine Hegland, "The Power Paradox in Muslim Women's Majales: North-West Pakistani Mourning Rituals as Sites of Contestation over Religious Politics, Ethnicity, and Gender," *Signs*, Vol. 23, No. 2, (Winter 1998).

[105] Mary Elaine Hegland, "Flagellation and Fundamentalism: (Trans)Forming Meaning, Identity, and Gender Through Pakistani Women's Rituals of Mourning," *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 25, No. 2, (May 1998), 248.

As Syed Akbar Hyder has observed, it is this "denial of pain" that "lends authority to the performer's body."[106] There is no fear in that body; like the Moths of Husain, there is only love. Mohammed K. Fazel, mentioned above, describes his own experience of the performance thus: "The heavier my flagellation, the louder the wail. I was both grieving and the object of grief."[107] It is women watching the *zanjir ka matam* at a distance who unleash the "wail" that Fazel refers to here. As the intensity of the ritual heightens, they respond to it with their own bloodless matam. They grieve the martyrs, of course, along with the men; but it would seem that they also react to the purely *present* reality of witnessing self-inflicted violence.

Whatever these Shii flagellants can be said to symbolize, it is clear that they are self-consciously d*ominant* symbols and that this dominance is expressed through their ability to publicly display their bodies and to "perform" their masculinity in this way. Women are not allowed to reveal their flesh in public, whether for "spiritual" purposes or not, nor are they generally considered "strong" enough for this type of matam since they lose "enough" blood already during monthly menstruation.[108] Perhaps we could infer, then, from this evidence that women are considered strong enough to *embody* tradition, bearing the weight and pain of motherhood in relation to their own families as well as the community at large (the work that results in the so-called "milk debt"), but not strong enough to *defend* it.

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106 Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala*, 54.
107 Mohammed K. Fazel, "The Politics of Passions: Growing Up Shia," 46.
108 Mary Elaine Hegland, "Flagellation and Fundamentalism," 249.

Based on his research in Karachi, Pakistan, Vernon James Schubel analyzes not only flagellation but also fire-walking, another "manly" matam in which men walk bare-footed across burning coals.[109] He acknowledges that these kinds of behaviors are seen by most outsiders as "bizarre and irrational aberrations rather than as coherent activities with an important place in the realm of Shi'i devotion."[110] Schubel's work investigates the brutally physical nature of the suffering that is remembered through ritualized *actions* during Muharram, not by women and *not even by the majority of men*. He finds that for those who *do* view these actions as imperative, they become a means of entering into the Prophet's family: "The *matamdar* thus enters *physically* into the Karbala paradigm. He becomes a warrior."[111] More than that, his actions "show" himself and others the *true* authority (strong, undaunted, and legitimate) of the Imams.

As other hermeneutical approaches and emphases demonstrate, this militaristic lens is only one way to view the Battle of Karbala and the rituals that commemorate it. We may recall the marsiya excerpts depicting aspects of the story such as the mutual respect between Zainab and Husain, Husain and Bano's parental tears and grief, and of course Husain's emotional conversation with Sakina, in order to see intricate, layered, and sometimes-divergent conceptions of "martyrdom" manifest. As Kamran Scot Aghaie has discussed at length in the context of Iran, women have a relationship to martyrdom, as the family and educators of martyrs, but are not the *battlefield* martyrs.[112] They support

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[109] This type of *matam* is known as *ag ka matam*.

[110] Vernon James Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam*, 145.

[111] Ibid, 149.

[112] Kamran Scot Aghaie, "The Gender Dynamics of Moharram Symbols and Rituals in the Latter Years of Qajar Rule," From: *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi'i Islam*, Ed. Kamran Scot Aghaie, (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2005), 50-51.

and defend their tradition in countless ways, when "support" and "defend" do not involve actually taking up arms. Yet we may remember the tradition of Zainab confronting Yazid in Damascus and Sayyid Ali Naqi al-Naqvi's thoughts on the reverberating power of that historical moment. His words, as rendered by Hyder, are worth repeating: "Can there be any doubt that each and every sentence of [Zaynab's] speech was more brutal for Yazid than the wounds wrought by thousands of swords and spears?"[113] Husain and Zainab are certainly two of the foremost Shii models for strength and faith, each with more and less (and maybe some not-so) gendered characteristics and feats attached to their name.

As ideals, however, the capabilities and experiences of heroes do not map comfortably onto the lives of ordinary human beings. That does not preclude the possibility of ordinary human beings finding inspiration in heroic life stories, of course, or through acts of faith, dedication, and love (such as ritual weeping). It *does* mean that although Zainab's deeds show cracks in a historically situated gender code (of rights to forceful public speech), others might not want to, or feel able to, break-through or eschew this convention. When we consider this, then we must realize simultaneously the existence of men/masculine individuals who either do not want to or cannot be battlefield warriors.

In their essay "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," Connell and Messerschmidt advocate a complex and adaptable model of gender hierarchy: one that pays attention to the agency of women while emphasizing the "geographies" of multiple masculinities (locally, regionally, and globally oriented varieties) that structure gendered

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[113] Syed Akbar Hyder, "Sayyedeh Zaynab," 169.

relations. They also argue for the importance of developing "a more specific treatment of embodiment in contexts of privilege and power."[114] The following synopsis is relevant, I think, to this question of bodies and battlefields:

> Recognizing the nondiscursive and unreflective dimensions of gender gives us some sense of the limits to discursive flexibility. That there are such limits is a point powerfully made in Rubin's (2003) study of female-to-male transsexual men. One is not free to adopt any gender position in interaction simply as a discursive or reflexive move. The possibilities are constrained massively by embodiment, by institutional histories, by economic forces, and by personal and family relationships.[115]

This reality, to my mind, makes the concept of hegemonic masculinity very applicable to contexts in which there are specific, idealized models for (gendered) behavior, and also spaces designated for the performance of said behavior—or, a "localized" interpretation of its symbolic dimensions. Connell and Messerschmidt assert that: "At the local level, hegemonic patterns of masculinity are embedded in specific social environments, such as formal organizations."[116] Here we may recall Pinault's research on the Hyderabadi *matami guruhan* (men's guilds) and the participation of these groups in public majlises and processions.

For a perspective on looking for parallel/intersecting instances of women's agency/space, we may return to Hegland's essay on "The Power Paradox in Muslim Women's *Majāles*," where she analyzes degrees of agency exercised by female practitioners in the context of the "authorized *majles*."[117] "Authorized" refers to the notion that public and private majlises (with gender separation) are appropriate and

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[114] R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 6 (Dec., 2005), 829.

[115] Ibid, 842-3.

[116] Ibid, 839.

[117] Mary Elaine Hegland, "The Power Paradox," 402.

approved contexts for women's organizing and leadership, despite the fact that "a primary

symbol of Shi'a fundamentalist identity is the seclusion and restriction of women."[118]

This "power paradox" (women exercising subjective agency in

orthodox/"fundamentalist" settings, collectively defined as such by their regulation of

women) is a predictable result of deep-seated tensions that exist within patriarchal social

structures and a testament to the value of *assuming* human / "subaltern" agency. Lara

Deeb has made comparable observations of Shii Muslim women in southern Beirut, and

both she and Hegland stress that it is not only men (striving towards a masculine ideal)

who enforce "rigid" gender norms and expectations through their words and actions. In

many contexts, women's mores of behavior create an alternative hierarchy (often one

based on socio-economic factors like class or education). Yet individuals may push up

against gender norms through their actions, even if not in their words. As poetic

representations of mothers *expand* understandings of "maternity" by emphasizing

women's responsibilities to their wider communities and traditions, real women's actions

in ritual contexts may expand *possibilities* for "women's work" and begin to challenge

and resist some of the more limiting gender norms.[119]

In the Karbala paradigm, and in many others, the bleeding warrior body is the

masculine/male body. This battle, with its profound soteriological dimensions, has been

painted (literally) in blood as a struggle between "good" and "evil," and bloody forms of

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[118] Ibid, 421.

[119] Mary Elaine Hegland, "Shi'a Women's Rituals in Northwest Pakistan: The Shortcomings and Significance of Resistance," *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (Summer, 2003), 428: "Even when it is not possible to immediately apply resistance-honed skills and subjectivities to producing new realities, resistance is still significant. In resisting, people sustain their spirits, agency, self-confidence, and self-esteem. The practice of resistance, however low-key and subtle, preserves the potential for change...it is the power in the hands of the less powerful."

matam continue to serve as the gendered performance of this battle in present times. Those who criticize the behavior make theological as well as practical arguments against it, worrying about how outsiders view this "fundamentalist" activity. Its persistence, I would suggest, is evidence that a militantly gendered understanding of men's "symbolic"-hegemonic responsibilities in regard to preserving and *defending* tradition abides, despite both popular and theological critiques. As Butler's theory reminds us, there is a pressing need to *perform* these understandings in public/visible manners so that what is "masculine" to this rationale can be made and re-made in concert with what is "Shia," and so that this version of "manhood," with its own claims to courage, resilience, and love, may be known and re-known.

Conclusion:

And here amid the thorns the Prophet's flowers
Imparted fragrance to the desert lands;
The house of Fatima faced its last hours
In the garden planted by Muhammad's hands
This garden cut down in those ten sad days,
By traitors wasted, cruelly set ablaze.[120]

Shared grief, with its roots in the tears of Adam and branches stretching from 7th century Karbala into the present-day, forms the heart of Shii collective memory, connecting the community across space and time. Though "the Prophet's flowers," so holy and beautiful, brought "fragrance to the desert lands," this did not spare their lives when "traitors" came to cut them down. The garden imagery here exhibits the Persian influence on Urdu poetry and, in a different way, also connects communities across centuries and land masses by preserving shared cultural and literary heritage. In this historical and cultural memory, the garden is the abode of the beloved, the place where flowers grow. It is contrasted with the wilderness of the desert lands and, implicitly, the savagery of Yazid's forces "in those ten sad days."

The Prophet Muhammad's particular connection to Husain, who led the community on those ten days, is explained in the lines of prose below, an early tradition describing the way that Muhammad spoke about his grandson Husain:

> As for Husayn, he is flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood; he is my son, my child, and the best of creatures after his brother. He is the *Imām* of the Muslims, the master of the faithful and representative (*khalīfah*) of the Lord of the worlds. He is helper of them that call for help, the cave [refuge] for those who seek refuge, and the Proof of God for all His creatures . . . He who obeys him is of my people and he who disobeys him is not . . . I shall announce to him his

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[120] Anis, *The Battle of Karbala*, Trans. David Matthews, 66-7.

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> martyrdom in the land of sorrow (*karb*) and calamity (*balā'*) and of death and annihilation. A small number of the faithful will come to his aid; these are the masters of the martyrs of my community on the Day of Resurrection.[121]

Muhammad claims that Husain is the "flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood," a different way of saying that he is "the garden planted by [my] hands." Regarding his martyrdom "in the land of sorrow and calamity" (*karb-o-balā*), Muhammad says that only a small group of "the faithful" will come to help him; those people will be "the masters of the martyrs" and will hold great power on Judgment Day.

If bleeding issuing from the warrior's body is, in the context of the bloody *matam* practiced by men's guilds, a symbolic way of connecting to an ideal or hegemonic masculinity, then what do we say about its relationship to weeping (universalized, even possibly anti-Symbolic)? Both are acts central to Muharram's history and to the eternal injunction to love the Prophet's family, and to express that love in remembrance of Karbala. Various practitioners of each form of ritualized lamentation hold their own spiritual self-understandings—many of which take common themes, such as love and fidelity. My own answer is really more an offered perspective because I feel that there are myriad layers of tension when one analyzes religious practices with gender-minded categories, and I think this layering speaks to the gendered ordering of historical realities. What I mean is: one gains insights (learns and makes changes), bit by bit, *not* by a single resolution.

Operating as an analytical lens, gender exposes (or covers up) pervasive ways in which societies are divided, emotions are understood, norms of behavior/morality are

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[121] Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering,* 41.

regulated, and "nations," as well as nationalisms, are constructed and mobilized. For a minority community constantly (re)defining itself, while more single-minded elite discourses continue to push nation-thinking, the need to *protect* as well as project identity is a tough task of considerable urgency, requiring the full array of textual and performative resources. Partition, one of the bloodiest forced migrations in world history, is, like the Battle of Karbala, *ongoing*. And so is the embodied suffering and love of human beings.

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