

**The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performances and
Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi`i Islam**

Kamran Scot Aghaie, ed.

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This beautifully produced work provides a gendered reading of the centrality of the Karbala commemorations among Shi`i communities. There is a strong Persian(ate) bias in the selections (only two papers really deal with practices in an Arab context). However, it represents the maturity of the state of Shi`i studies, having moved beyond the sensationalism of political obsessions following the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the textually based Orientalism of an earlier generation to considerations of actual practices, performances, understanding of texts, and enactments of doctrines.

The Women of Karbala is a significant contribution to the study of Shi'i Islam in practice. Most of the papers are based on anthropological fieldwork in majoritarian communities. The collection could have benefited from some more historical studies (there are two studies on the Qajar period), textual studies, and examinations of Arab communities, as well as the increasing significance of the Shi'i diasporic communities in Europe and North America (one paper does nod in that direction). Another feature that would have enhanced the collection would be to interpret Shi'i more widely. For example, there is one paper on Bohra practices but none on the Zaydis and recent developments in the Yemeni highlands that have made Shi'i commemorations critical junctures of conflict.

The introduction adequately presents the papers and their significance. However, it offers an odd reconciliation of a rather basic introduction to the Shi'ah and the significance Imam Hosayn's (I use Aghaie's Persian transliteration) martyrdom with a sophisticated articulation of several key gendered themes in the Muharram commemorations. The author's invocation of the Karbala narrative as a root metaphor (somewhat akin to Michael Fischer's earlier evocation of the Karbala paradigm) is an important methodological perspective that requires more discussion and exposition than a brief excursus in an endnote.

The centrality of gender is noted and stressed; however, two further aspects of gendered performance and ritual should have been addressed. First, women play a significant role not only in commemorative rituals but also within the key textual narratives, symbols, and artistic representations. It is often through women's rituals and ceremonies that both male and female believers encounter the Karbala narrative as children. Second, although the collection focuses on women, the performance and construction of masculinity within the same sets of performances would be a useful area of inquiry, especially if gender studies are to be more than women's studies. Finally, apart from fieldwork, textual sources lie at the center of the research upon which the collection is based. However, increasingly audio-visual and Internet resources have made the Karbala narrative and its commemorations available to wider audiences and participants, especially in isolated communities with few Shi'ahs. In particular, the Internet has engendered the notion of a "cyber-Majlis" and even a "cyber-*ta'zīyeh*" (passion play).

The papers are divided not by themes, but by the locus of investigation. The first part on Iran comprises five papers. Negar Mottahedeh studies the Qajar-era *ta'zīyeh* and the gendered dynamics of the Karbala narrative's ritual dramatization. Aghaie focuses on the same period and examines the

functions of women within the public and private spheres. Ingvild Flaskerud considers a case study of contemporary Shiraz and the iconography and symbolism of women's enactment of ritual. Faegheh Shirazi turns to the mobilizing role of the women of Karbala in revolutionary and political activity. Peter Chelkowski returns to the *ta'ziyeh* and the idealization of the women of Karbala as female exemplars. Although this is a rich bouquet, several different areas could have been developed, as indicated above, including films inspired by the Karbala narrative; and music, the arts, and women's role in their performance, commemoration, and within the text.

Part 2 considers non-Iranian contexts. Akbar Hyder examines the poetic representations of the women of Karbala by male and female poets in Urdu and focuses on the rhetoric of these women as "conquerors" of Damascus, referring to their role in defending the proto-Shi'i cause and the Prophet's family at the Umayyad court. One possible area of interest to develop this would have been the contemporary growth in pilgrimage from South Asia to the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab in Damascus, as well as the large number of women who undertake it and their responses and attitudes to the literary texts. Rehana Ghadially shifts the attention to the Bohra Isma'ilis of India and argues that the centrality of women in rituals bolsters the sense of their importance within the faith (one could no doubt find other contexts that may corroborate her argument).

Mary Hegland's study of immigrant communities in the United States is perhaps the most ambitious; however, it is also the most simplistic and a rather journalistic contribution. Elizabeth Fernea and Basima Bezirgan reinterpret that fluidity of the public sphere by examining Iraqi practices. This is another rather superficial piece based on research conducted some decades ago. Lara Deeb looks at recent developments in Lebanese Shi'i communities. Part 2 thus represents more of a mixed bag. This is unfortunate, given the significance (often overlooked) of non-Iranian Shi'i communities.

The Women of Karbala is a commendable collection of research and will no doubt find its rightful place in the libraries of those interested in Shi'i studies and gender studies in Islam. It should also become a mainstay on reading lists on the practice of Islam and Shi'ism in the contemporary world, complementing and moving beyond the existing studies of David Pinault, Vernon J. Schubel, and others.

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