A BRIDE OF ONE NIGHT, A WIDOW FOREVER:
GENDER AND VERNACULARIZATION IN THE CONSTRUCTION
OF SOUTH ASIAN SHI’I HAGIOGRAPHY

by
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ABSTRACT

KAREN G. RUFFLE: A Bride of One Night, A Widow Forever: Gender and Vernacularization in the Construction of South Asian Shi‘i Hagiography
(Under the direction of Carl W. Ernst)

“A Bride of One Night, a Widow Forever” is a multidisciplinary ethnographic study of Shi‘i hagiographical texts and performances in the South Indian city of Hyderabad where on 7 Muharram, the Shi‘a commemorate the marriage between eleven year-old Fatimah Kubra and thirteen year-old Qasem at the battle of Karbala, Iraq in 680 CE. Taking the wedding of Fatimah Kubra and Qasem as a paradigmatic example, this dissertation examines the pivotal function of hagiography or sacred biography as it mediates local social values and defines gendered action through public performance in the majlis mourning assembly. Employing a theoretical framework of complementary pairing that is influenced by structuralism, this project demonstrates that sainthood in Shi‘i Islam exists in two complementary pairs, which creates a space for both local culture and gendered practices to be articulated through the example of the members of the third Shi‘i Imam Husain’s family. “A Bride of One Night” engages both the archive to trace the transformation of the Qasem-Kubra wedding into a Deccani-Indian idiom, and ethnographic fieldwork focused on the mourning assemblies, thus drawing into relief a form of sainthood based upon the veneration of Imam Husain’s family or husainiyyat. Through the literature and performance of the majlis, the gendered dimension of this sainthood is expressed through the prominence of Imam Husain’s female relatives who are venerated by the Shi‘a as saints.
Judith Butler’s theory of gendered embodiment—through clothing, mannerisms and speech—integrated with a theory of complementary pairing, articulates a dynamically embodied form of Shi’i sainthood. In the context of the Hyderabadi majlis mourning assembly, Fatimah Kubra is re-presented in the form a structural dyad, that of the fortune-bearing bride and the inauspicious widow. Fatimah Kubra embodies the idealized bride—obedient and beautiful in her wedding finery, and she is the model widow—unadorned and detached from the world. In this model of hagiography, Kubra simultaneously embodies a dually gendered, idealized, Hyderabadi Indian Shi’i Muslim woman.
This dissertation is dedicated to

My mother Janet Haggarty Hood;

and,

For the Shi'a of Hyderabad, whose generosity
and hospitality made this project possible
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing a dissertation is a collaborative process. Whether it is conducting fieldwork in foreign locations, presenting one’s research at a conference, or consulting with scholars and colleagues, writing a dissertation is never a solitary process. Over the course of the past several years, many individuals and organizations have provided generous financial, administrative, academic and personal support. The abundance of support that I have received is a testament to the importance of this project, and I would like to express my gratitude to the many who have helped me to complete my dissertation.

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UNC has proven to be the ideal environment in which to pursue my fascination with Shi’i devotional literature and ritual. My research interests led me in many directions—women’s and gender studies, Persian and Urdu language and literature, and ethnography—and UNC has provided ample faculty and material resources for me to explore and develop competence in these areas. I must also express my gratitude to the Department of Religious Studies at UNC-Chapel Hill for the support that I have received over the past nine years. I appreciate that the department granted me the independence to conduct this research. I am especially grateful to Myra Quick and Hope Toscher for their unstinting generosity and encouragement. I would also like to thank the Graduate School for its generous support. A Royster Society of Fellows John Motley Morehead Dissertation Year fellowship (2006-2007) provided generous support to enable me to devote myself full-time to completing the write-up of this project.

Carl Ernst has been my advisor since I began graduate study at UNC nine years ago. He has been one of the greatest supporters of my fascination with Shi’ism, Muharram and
all matters related to the martyrdom of Qasem. I appreciate Carl for enduring so many semesters of slowly working through Persian and Arabic texts and grammar and sharing his deep knowledge of Islamic literary history. Carl has been kind, patient and a terrific advocate.

Beyond UNC, I have benefited from UNC’s proximity to Duke University and North Carolina State University, and the collective wealth of faculty, libraries and intellectual resources of these universities. The North Carolina Center for South Asia Studies (NCCSAS) has provided generous support for my studies in the form of Foreign Language Area Studies fellowships for Hindi-Urdu and Persian language study (2000-2002 and 2003-2004). I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with Bruce Lawrence, miriam cooke, and Tony Stewart who are all formidable scholars in their respective fields of scholarship. I have enjoyed the wide-ranging and intellectually engaging conversations that I have had with Tony over the past several years, many of which have helped me to answer the questions with which I was struggling. Anna Bigelow, Tony Stewart and miriam cooke have generously read and commented upon multiple drafts of dissertation chapters.

In Hyderabad, India I received a warm welcome from the Shi’i community whose generosity of spirit and time and abundant kindness is truly appreciated. The staff at the Henry Martyn Institute facilitated many aspects of this project. In particular, I would like to thank Andreas D’Souza for everything. The library staff, especially Jaweed allowed me to borrow excessive numbers of books from the library and he was great help in ordering books for my research. Taj and Salahuddin are deserving of special thanks for their willingness to help me with many time-consuming tasks. Salahuddin, who spent many days submitting paperwork at the Foreigners’ Registration Office on my behalf, facilitated the
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Despite her busy schedule during Muharram, Dr. Zakia Sultana, one of Hyderabad’s most prominent majlis orators or ḵākirahs, always kept me informed of the many mourning assemblies that were taking place each day. Zakia opened her house to me and I enjoyed many wonderful meals of traditional Hyderabadi home cooking. Zakia introduced me to many Shiʿas in the community and her patience in explaining the structure and themes of the majlis is appreciated.

The head librarians and staff and several of Hyderabad’s libraries and archives must be given thanks for assisting me in procuring manuscripts for my research. I would like to thank the Salar Jung Museum Library, the Oriental Manuscripts Library and Research Institute (OML&RI), and the State Central Library for granting me access to several rare and important manuscripts. Thank you to Dr. Alok Bhalla for helping me with several research questions.

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NOTES ON TRANSLITERATION

In this dissertation, I have translated Persian and Arabic technical terms according to the transliteration system used in the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. Deccani and Urdu words follow the conventions used to transliterate South Asian languages. In an effort to maintain consistency, all technical vocabulary is transliterated and marked with italics. I have not transliterated names, but they are spelled to reflect Persian or Urdu pronunciation. I have transliterated Persian and Deccani-Urdu technical terms according to how they are pronounced in Iran and South Asia. Thus, the word *marthiya* is transliterated as *marṣiya* to reflect how speakers of Persian and Urdu pronounce the letter ّ.

For the sake of simplicity and accuracy, I use Shi’a (plural Shi’as) as a noun and Shi’i as an adjective. Occasionally, I employ the term Shi’ite adjectivally. I have elected to transliterate the name Fatimah with a short i in order to reflect its pronunciation by speakers of Urdu, rather than Fatemeh, which is a transliteration of its pronunciation by speakers of Persian. All other names are similarly transliterated.

Appendix A provides an outline of the historical events of Karbala found in the authoritative histories of such scholars as al-Tabari and Shaykh al-Mufid. Parallel to the outline of historical events, the events observed by the Shi’a of Hyderabad is included.
Appendix B contains a list of the family members of the Prophet Muhammad who were present at the battle of Karbala or figure prominently in Shi'i devotional literature.

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*Izhā fats* are marked by –e or –ye. Aspirates in Deccani-Urdu words are indicated by the addition of –h to the consonant.

In order to preserve the privacy and/or safety of some individuals about whom I write in this dissertation, I have provided pseudonyms, which are indicated by a *.

All photographs used in this dissertation are my own.
INTRODUCTION

Love and Battle

On March 2, 2004 my grandfather passed away from lung cancer while I was writing my dissertation proposal. As I write these words his death anniversary (ʿurṣ) is soon approaching, a date that I await with a sadness that is countered by memories of a man whom I knew for 30 years—a person who was, in my grandmother’s heart, a superlative husband who completed her being, a kindhearted father and a grandfather who had a sweet-tooth and a gentility of spirit—around whose personality stories developed, and since his death and, for his family, perhaps even a hagiography of sorts. Aside from being a father and grandfather, Francis Haggarty was my grandmother’s husband for almost sixty years. They loved each other, they annoyed one another, and in my youth, I could never imagine one grandparent without the other. They, themselves, could not imagine life without their partner, the other half of the pair that made them who they are/were.

Although my grandfather is dead, my grandmother remains to tell the stories of the life that they built together and to keep alive the spirit of our family, which has been so deeply inspired by his charisma. To be honest, we continue to tell the stories but our familial identity grows less cohesive and distinct with each passing year. For my family, the stories have not been enough to keep my extended family together.

The story of my grandmother and grandfather’s long marriage (unusual nowadays) and their profound love for one another is always in my mind (see Figure I.1). Certainly,
there were times when they were an aggravation to each other, but there were so many other occasions when they could barely stand to even spend one night apart because of business travel or stays in the hospital. I do not envy my grandmother for being ‘left behind’ after my grandfather’s death, but she has a wealth of memories and experiences that continue to orient and give her a place in this world. My grandfather’s death came at the same time that I was divorcing my husband. At the time, marriage seemed only to mean death and departure to me, which drew me to the story of the battlefield wedding of Karbala.

![Figure 1.1](image)

**Figure 1.1** Francis and Joyce Haggarty, Lake Tahoe (1980)

When I defended my dissertation proposal in late-March 2004, my committee recommended that I focus on a single event in the Karbala tradition to be a paradigmatic example of how sainthood functions in Shi‘i devotional literature and ritual. At first, I resisted taking a singular event as being somehow representative of how the Karbala

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1The word *shi‘a* is derived from the Arabic term *shi‘at ‘Alī* or the “partisans of ‘Ali.” These *shi‘at ‘Alī* were a minority group who supported the succession of ‘Ali, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law to the leadership of the Muslim community following the Prophet’s death in 632 CE. Following Syed Akbar Hyder’s transliteration model, I use Shi‘a (plural Shi‘as) as a noun and Shi‘i as an adjective. See Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. xv.
hero(in)es are gendered and vernacularized or translated into locally meaningful idealized types. What event or which figures from the battle of Karbala would I choose? What was meaningful to me? The question that I did not consciously ask at the time was, “How does my own experience—my subjectivity—influence my scholarship and the questions that I will ask in my dissertation?”

Among the elaborate yearly rituals that commemorate the battle of Karbala, there was just one event that I continually returned to in both my field research and translation activities. This event was a wedding that many Shi’i Muslims believe happened during the ten days that Imam Husain and his entourage was under siege on the desert plain of Karbala. According to some textual traditions, Imam Husain’s ten year-old daughter Fatimah Kubra was married to her first cousin Qasem, the son of the second Imam Hasan. According to the narrative, they married on the eve of ‘āshūrā’ and Qasem was killed in battle on 10 Muharram before the marriage could be consummated, leaving behind Fatimah Kubra as a young widow. In the course of field research, I discovered that nowhere does this wedding resonate with Shi’as more than in the city of Hyderabad in South Central India. This project examines how the Shi’a of Hyderabad today construct this bride and groom as both social and religious role models: as saints.

Marriage continues to be nearly universal and arranged in South Asia, and it is understandable that Fatimah Kubra and Qasem’s tragic marriage resonates so deeply on both social and religious levels.

_Making a Shi’i Identity: The Battle of Karbala_
This study focuses on one of the two branches of Islam, that of the minority Shiʿa who comprise 15% of the world’s Muslims, who, following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, placed their allegiance with his son-in-law ʿAli and his descendants. Shiʿi communal identity was solidified with the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson the third Imam Husain at the battle of Karbala in the year 680 in Iraq. Simply put, this was a battle for power. The opposing ʿUmayyad khalīfa or ruler Yazid wanted Imam Husain to pledge his allegiance to him, which he, of course, refused to do. Under increasing political pressure, Imam Husain was compelled to leave the Arabian city of Makkah, and the Shiʿi community in the Iraqi city of Kufah had promised the Imam, his family and supporters safe refuge. This small entourage of 72 men and boys and many women and girls were intercepted at the desert locale Karbala, located along the Euphrates River in Iraq. The name Karbala in the Persian language is given an etymology made up of two words: “karb” meaning grief and “balā” meaning affliction. The Shiʿa assert that this name was given by God to this location before the Creation, for He had designated that this place of grief and affliction was to be the site of this cosmic battle between good and evil wrought on earth. After ten days under siege, Imam Husain and the men and boys of his small entourage were killed in battle. The memory and ritual commemoration of this event, which pitted Muslim against Muslim, is the single most visible manifestation of Shiʿi identity.

Inscribing Karbala in the Heart: Commemorating the Marriage of Fatimah Kubra in Devotional Literature and Ritual Performance in Hyderabad, India

“Kubra is going to be made a widow—rise, rise!
Rise from the burning earth, bridegroom—rise, rise!”

The widow of Karbala who has broken her bangles and removed her nose ring in grief, and the youthful groom whose hands and feet have been decorated with blood rather than the traditional bridal mehndī or henna—these are the images invoked repeatedly in devotional practices and literature of the Shi‘i Muslim community in the South Indian city of Hyderabad. The tragedy of this marriage at the battle of Karbala, Iraq in 680 CE, between eleven year-old Fatimah Kubra, the daughter of the third Shi‘i Imam Husain and Qasem the thirteen year-old son of the second Shi‘i Imam Hasan, is traditionally observed by Indian Shi‘as on the seventh day of the Muslim month of Muharram. On this day, in the majlis-e ‘azā’ or mourning assemblies held in Hyderabad’s Old City, the battlefield heroics of Qasem and the tragic fate of the young widow Fatimah Kubra are recounted in marşıyas or laments, and in the speeches of the orators or Ḿākirs. The performed remembrance of these events in the majlis depict scenes of joy, followed by the rending grief a woman feels in the transformation from wife to inauspicious widow—a particularly traumatizing change in status for Indian women where the Hindu taboo of widow remarriage has influenced the Muslim community. What is most striking about the descriptions of the Karbala wedding and its aftermath is that a distinctively Indian worldview is expressed.

This dissertation examines the pivotal function of hagiography as it mediates local social values and defines gendered action through public performance in the majlis mourning assembly. The text and the performance of the majlis amplify the actions and words of the protagonists of Karbala by transforming these figures into increasingly relevant idealizations that transform ideal Muslims into ideal men and women who in turn

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transform into ideal Indian Muslim men and women. In this progression, these idealized figures become saints and heroes, and their stories function as impromptu hagiographies or didactic sacred biographies that tell the life-story of a saint or religious exemplar whose actions serve as a guide to the listener. I argue that the power of the majlis lies in its ability to shape action and expectation through its hagiographic idealizations.

Because particular conversations or life-cycle moments are given special emphasis and are expressed in dramatic, emotion-inducing vignettes during the majlis performance, the poets or speakers’ own experience seems to affect their ability to imagine the scenes for their audiences. One of the most popular subjects for poets and majlis speakers is the battlefield wedding because in this society marriage is universal and usually arranged, and fraught with a certain risk for both men and women. Many women have told me that they understand their own commitment to marrying because of the model provided by Fatimah Kubra who made the ultimate sacrifice for her religion and for her husband. Here, we can see the formative, if not coercive, nature of the Urdu translations of Kashefi’s Rowżat al-Shohada’ and the performances of remembrance: to not marry is to turn one’s back on an Islamic ideal.

A Survey of Current Euro-American Scholarship on Karbala

Since the late-1980s, Muharram rituals and the Shi’i devotional literature dedicated to the battle of Karbala and the Ahl-e Bait has emerged as a popular subject of study for European and American scholars in disciplines such as South Asian literature and culture, women’s and gender studies, religious studies, drama studies, and anthropology. Much of
this contemporary scholarship has focused on Shi‘i devotional practices and literatures in South Asia. This is, in part, because of the difficulties Euro-American scholars encounter in trying to obtain visas for research in Iran since the 1979 Revolution.

The current scholarship contributes significantly to the further growth of the sub-field of Shi‘i studies in the larger field of Islamic studies, which tends to be dominated by research in the areas of Sufism and textual, historical and legal traditions. Much of the current research on Shi‘i devotional literature and ritual practice reflects ethnographic approaches. Certainly, it is the visibility of Shi‘i ritual practices (such as mātam or “grief,” which is expressed in a physical, sometimes gory fashion) commemorating the battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of Imam Husain that makes ethnography such an attractive or even compelling hermeneutic approach. Shi‘i commemorative rituals are dramatic, both in the sense of their performative and symbolically deep dimensions, which makes for fascinating field research opportunities.

For scholars of Shi‘i devotional literature, it is obvious that its “live” performance in the majlis mourning assembly has become more compelling than a dusty archive. At the risk of sounding flippant in the observation that I make about performance being more exciting than slogging through the bureaucracy of archives that test the sanity of even the most patient researchers, there is a transformation that has been taking place in the field of Shi‘i studies marking a movement away from focusing on purely textual analysis. In 1993—at the beginning of the burgeoning of the field of Shi‘i studies—Vernon Schubel asserted in Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam, that “popular piety and its ritual manifestations have been neglected in favor of ‘the high tradition’ of Shi‘ism as it is
manifested in law, theology, and philosophy.” I partially agree with Schubel’s observation, yet it has resulted in an “over correction” in the subjects of study and methodological approaches employed in Shi’i studies in the past two decades. The “high traditions” of law and especially theology seem to be outmoded in this current wave of ethnography of Shi’ism.

In *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam*, Schubel’s approach is from the perspective of ritual studies. Schubel’s research conducted in Karachi, Pakistan, “focuses explicitly on Muharram rituals commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Husayn at the battle of Karbala.” Schubel’s approach is predicated upon his belief that, “the study of ritual and performance is crucial to the understanding of Shi’i piety.” While I agree with Schubel about the importance of understanding Shi’i piety through the study of its rituals and performances, his emphatic approach is too reductive, ultimately minimizing the deep interrelationship of ritual and the devotional and theological textual traditions of Karbala.

Schubel’s theoretical approach is influenced by Victor Turner’s theories of ritual. Turner’s tripartite theory of the ritual process (separation, liminality and reaggregation) provides structure and meaning to Schubel’s analysis of Shi’i ritual. Schubel is interested in the entire ritual apparatus (‘azādārī) employed by Karachi’s Shi’i community. Schubel analyzes the ritual form and function of the various forms of mātam (self-flagellation), julūs (mourning processions), and activities of the majlis mourning assemblies with a Turnerian

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5Schubel, p. 1.

6Schubel, p. 1. 
approach. An example of Schubel’s interpretation of his fieldwork through Victor Turner’s ritual theory can be seen in the following passage:

The ritual of *majlis* allows people a chance to walk momentarily out of normal time into the realm of what Victor Turner has called the subjunctive mode—the realm of ‘what if’ and ‘what could have been’...For example, Husayn is represented in the *julus* following the *majlis* by a coffin—the burial he deserved but was denied by the Banu Umayyah. The hearers and mourners are allowed to experience Karbala and ask themselves the question: Had we been at Karbala would we have had the courage to stand with Husayn?...The structure of the *majlis* allows for this entrance into a subjunctive realm removed from the normal day-to-day reality by creating a liminal arena where one’s attention can be focused on the symbolic paradigms which transcend any particular historical moment by penetrating all of history.\(^7\)

This passage demonstrates Schubel’s theoretical focus in analyzing the meaning of the *julus* and *majlis* rituals as means by which the Shi’a of Karachi are able to enter into the imaginal realm of Karbala. Integrating historical fact with symbolism and spirituality with ritual action is one of the contributions of Schubel’s analysis of Muharram in a South Asian context.

Taking a similar ethnographic approach, David Pinault’s 1992 *The Shiites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* and his 2001 *Horse of Karbala*, focus on Muharram rituals in Hyderabad, Ladakh and Darjeeling, India.\(^8\) Pinault’s research focuses principally on the intercessory and salvific qualities of *mātam* or self-flagellation as the physical expression of

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\(^7\) Schubel, pp. 99-100.

grief for the suffering and martyrdom of Imam Husain. In *The Shiites*, Pinault focuses on the activities of six *mātamī gurūhān* or Muharram men’s associations.

The strength of Pinault’s research lies in how he explains the practice of *mātam*—which is often sensationalized by the Western media and outside observers as evidence of Shi‘i ‘fanaticism’ or predilection for violence—in a sensitive fashion. What Pinault tries to prove in his two books is that *mātam* and the *mātamī gurūhān* are an integral organizing element in South Asian Muharram rituals. While the men’s associations may be important in organizing Muharram ritual and performance, Pinault tends to overdetermine the role of *mātam*, particularly of the bloody type (*zanjīr kā mātam*, *qamar zanī*), as the source for Shi‘i intercession.9 In the course of almost two years of field research in Hyderabad where I attended countless mourning assemblies, *mātam* never seemed to be of such central importance in the ritual environment of the *majlis*. Certainly, men and women slapped their chests in grief, but aside from the orchestrated *mātam* performances in some of the larger *majlises* (such as the 7 Muharram *mehndī kī majlis* or the day-long mourning events on *‘āshūrā*), tears are more important than self-flagellation. Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq promises those who mourn Imam Husain: “Anyone who remembers us or if we are mentioned in his presence and a tear as small as a wing of a gnat falls from his eye, God would forgive all his sins even if they were as the foam of the sea.”10 The Imam never states that it is flagellation that will win the rewards of heaven—weeping true tears of grief are sufficient. The

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10Quoted in Schubel, p. 85. Schubel also quotes Ja‘far al-Sadiq making the same promise in slightly different words: “There is no servant whose eyes shed one drop of tears for us, but that God will grant him for it the reward of countless ages in Paradise.”
sufficiency of tears is reinforced by the Shi‘i belief that Fatimah Zahra attends every majlis and collects the tears shed for the sufferings of her family.

Pinault’s approach is purely descriptive and the analysis that he does of the Shi‘i rituals that he observes is through Catholic theological and doctrinal vocabulary. It is helpful to the generalist reader that Pinault tries to describe Shi‘i doctrine and practice through Catholic terminology, but he does so without ever explaining how he is taking this Christian framework and applying it to different Islamic concepts. Application of Catholic terminology demonstrates Pinault’s interest in the religious phenomena of South Asian Muharram rituals, which does make his work an important contribution to the field of Shi‘i studies from a religious studies perspective.

The most recent contribution to the field of South Asian Shi‘i religious studies is Toby Howarth’s The Twelver Shī‘a as a Muslim Minority in India: Pulpit of Tears, published in 2005.11 This book is a revised version of his dissertation “Pulpit of Tears,” which is a study of the form and content of majlis orations or “sermons” (to use Howarth’s terminology), performed in Hyderabad over the course of four years (1996-2000). The history of majlis preaching (rowżeh-khwānī) is the focus of Howarth’s study, which offers the field one of the most in-depth analyses of the interconnection between Shi‘i theology and the devotional practices of the majlis.

The development of the oratory tradition in the majlis is traced by Howarth from Karbala to Safavid Iran and onward into the Shi‘i kingdoms of the Deccan in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.12 Howarth traces the literary history of the Shi‘i oral narrative

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11 Toby Howarth, The Twelver Shi‘a as a Muslim Minority in India: Pulpit of Tears (London: Routledge, 2005).

12 For the history of the development of rowżeh-khwānī in Hyderabad, please see chapter one, “From Karbala to India: A History of Shi‘i Preaching,” pp. 3-30.
tradition of *majlis*, and he acknowledges the deep influence of Mulla Husain Va’ez Kashefi’s Karbala narrative, *Rowżat al-Shohadā’*, composed in Persian around 1501 CE. The influence of the literary style in which *Rowżat al-Shohadā’* was composed on the development of the oratory tradition of *rowżeh-khwānī* and its role in the development of preaching performance and structure in Hyderabad from the rise of the sixteenth-century Shi’i Qutb Shahi dynasty to the present is traced by Howarth.

*Pulpit of Tears* makes an especially significant contribution to the field of Shi’i religious studies for its focus on the role and meaning of the *majlis* orations performed by the *zākirs* and *zākirahs* in Hyderabad. In Parts II and III, Howarth offers transcriptions of several *majlis* orations. Part II outlines nine different “sermons” that are organized according to the gender of the orator and whether or not he is a member of the laity or an ‘ālim. Howarth begins each chapter with the title of the sermon and its occasion. A brief biography of the *zākir* or *zākirah* and a description of the *majlis* are presented by Howarth in a chapter introduction. The sermon with its exegesis completes each section of the chapters.

In Part III, Howarth takes the data from the sermons and analyzes it from the perspective of two questions he proposes at the beginning of the section: “These texts, however, raise a number of questions. How do they stand, for example, in relation to each other? How do they function rhetorically and in terms of the faith that they proclaim?”\(^\text{13}\) In addition to the role of the *majlis* orator to extol the virtues (*fażā’īl*) of the Ahl-e Bait and to describe their sufferings (*mašāʿīb*), Howarth notes the ways in which these speeches engage with contemporary political, social and religious issues. Themes such as “apologetic in

\(^{13}\)Howarth, p. 121.
relation to Sunni Islam,”¹⁴ “apologetic in relation to the West and Christianity,” and “apologetic in relation to Hinduism” are teased out of the majlis orations and analyzed by Howarth who then places the role of the orator as commentator and teacher guiding the community in understanding these complex issues through the perspective of the Ahl-e Bait as the models of proper religious and social conduct. While Howarth’s scholarship lacks theoretical specificity, his research on majlis oratory performance fills a lacuna in the study of South Asian Muharram rituals.

In the past ten years, a new generation of scholars is analyzing the Karbala literary tradition from the perspectives of literary criticism and history. Amy Bard and Syed Akbar Hyder’s studies of the genre of marṣiya highlight the depth and intertextuality inherent in South Asian, Shi’i Urdu devotional literature.¹⁵ This new generation of scholarship has returned to the textual tradition, filling in the lacunae left by the ethnographic approaches of previous scholars. Neither Bard nor Hyder abandon the ethnographic enterprise—Hyder’s identity as a native Hyderabadi who grew up participating in the city’s rich Muharram tradition connects him to the lived, performed dimensions of the textual tradition. Likewise, Bard’s fascination with Urdu literature, linguistics, folklore and ethnomusicology draws her from the archive to the live aesthetic, literary performance of the majlis.

Amy Bard’s dissertation, “Desolate Victory,” focuses on the marṣiya tradition in the North Indian city of Lucknow, although she does bolster her fieldwork with ethnographic research in Hyderabad and the Pakistani cities of Karachi and Lahore. Bard’s attention to

¹⁴Howarth, p. 125.

¹⁵Bard, “Desolate Victory,” and Syed Akbar Hyder, Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Because these two studies are not written from within the discipline of religious studies, I shall comment on these works only briefly.
the role of women as poets, orators (zākirahs), and participants in the mourning assemblies (majlis) is important for its attention to the literary history and centrality of the feminine voice in the Urdu maršiya tradition in South Asia. Bard does not examine the maršiya as an explicitly religious genre and so misses its multiplying effect on the force of the emotion, and the compelling, if not coercive, nature of the emotional constructs. Bard’s research, while it integrates the form and meaning of Shi‘i devotional literature with the aesthetics of the ritual performance context of the majlis, does not give sufficient attention to the religious nature of either.

Syed Akbar Hyder’s Reliving Karbala analyzes the distinctively Shi‘i imagery of the devotional literature of Karbala. In one chapter, the imagery of Karbala as it was used by Muhammad Iqbal and writers of the Progressive Writer’s Movement, to construct the state of Pakistan makes an important contribution to our understanding about how religious literature and imagery often has multiple meanings embedded. In another chapter, the multiplicity of the meaning of Karbala and the fluidity of Shi‘i identity is expressed with sensitivity and a frankness that is refreshing. At the very end of the chapter, Hyder observes, “The event of Karbala, like Islam itself, appears in a wide-ranging panorama of devotion, contradiction, conciliation, aesthetic maneuvering, and manipulation. Such is the scope of improvisation inhering within this seventh-century event on the banks of the Euphrates that its charted realms can matter-of-factly extend from the South Asian subcontinent to the United States.”\(^{16}\)

Kamran Scot Aghaie’s research on Karbala imagery in modern Iranian politics and practice marks a re-opening of a field of scholarship that has been inaccessible to American

\(^{16}\)Hyder, p. 71.
scholars since the 1979 Revolution. Like Hyder, Aghaie is primarily interested in the politics of Karbala and its imagery. Both The Martyrs of Karbala and The Women of Karbala express a strong gender studies focus. Discourses on gender during the pre-revolutionary period in Iran during the 1970s constitute a significant part of The Martyrs of Karbala. Aghaie observes that, “The process of construction of gendered ideals in Iranian society during this period was characterized by the use of a set of gender-coded symbols with an inherent multiplicity of interpretive possibilities.” Leading up to the Revolution, “many ideologues attempted to transform the potentially dynamic process of gender transformation into a static ideal or model that could then be legitimized using the Karbala narrative.”

Intellectuals like ‘Ali Shari’ati may have wanted to transform Iranian women into revolutionaries based upon the models of Fatimah and Zainab. According to Aghaie, however, despite the heightened consciousness of gender roles, the desire to create static models mimics earlier narratives like Rowżat al-Shohadā’ in which the heroines “have often been used as plot devices or as reflections of male characters rather than taking on the aspects of fully independent characters in their own right.”

Aghaie’s recent scholarship draws sorely needed attention to the role of women in the imagery and performance of Karbala, yet his interpretations do not adequately demonstrate the centrality of the feminine in Shi’ism.

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19Aghaie, p. 116.

20Aghaie, p. 116.
This survey of current scholarship in the fields of South Asian and Iranian Shi‘i studies is not intended to be comprehensive, rather the goal is to indicate several of the trends and directions that the field taken in recent decades. Each of the scholars surveyed here has made significant and needed contributions to the field, yet we can see where lacunae remain. Each of the studies surveyed here endeavor to articulate aspects of the religious nature of the texts and performances commemorating the battle of Karbala, yet none consider Imam Husain’s family to be saints.

This project makes three important contributions to the fields of Islamic studies and religious studies. My work contributes to the field of Islamic studies because it demonstrates that Shi‘i hagiography includes women saints as full human beings who are depicted in positively gendered terms. Second, hagiography or didactic sacred biography plays a central role in Shi‘i religious performance, not only teaching religious history, but also having an important function in defining gender roles. Third, the concept of hagiography is a useful hermeneutic tool for understanding the processes of vernacularization through which images of sainthood are transformed into local idioms.

What I am looking for in the archives, in my observation and participation in the majlis, and in my interviews with Shi‘a in Hyderabad is how they consider the members of Imam Husain’s family to be religious and social role models. I choose not to take a broad survey approach in the project, but follow the case study model of Dwight Reynolds’ Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes, focusing on the brief marriage of Fatimah Kubra and Qasem. This project follows the model of many that I have surveyed here, engaging with the observance of Muharram in Hyderabad, but I depart in taking one event from the Karbala cycle as my example. The aim of this sharply focused approach is to draw out several of the distinctive
features that contribute to a stipulative theory of how the category of ‘practical’ Shi’i sainthood is constructed and enacted in everyday religious life.

Performing Scholarship, Talking Theology, Learning about Myself

I begin this Introduction with the story of my grandfather’s death after almost sixty years of marriage to my grandmother—a woman who continues to lead an active life that is punctuated by the constant remembrance of her dead husband—and how that event perhaps unconsciously influenced my choosing to focus on the bride-widow Fatimah Kubra’s meaning and function as a saint in the Shi’i devotional literature and rituals commemorating the battle of Karbala in Hyderabad. I tell this story to convey a second purpose, which I to explain how my multiple identities as a woman, non-Muslim, non-formally trained ethnographer, and scholar of Islam, shape this project. There are aspects of my identity that heightened by prestige or status in Hyderabad’s Shi’i community, and there were yet other aspects of my being that limited my access to certain forms of knowledge or my being told about particular rituals. Before I elaborate further on where I situate myself vis-à-vis this project, a few words about what this project is not are necessary.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the postmodern turn in anthropology brought the genre of the “self-reflexive ‘fieldwork account’” into vogue in the American Academy. In these

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self-reflexive fieldwork accounts, the ethnographer assumes an important role as a character in the study. The insertion of the ethnographer into writing about different cultures and practices emerged because of the “historical predicament of ethnography, the fact that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation of cultures.” This resulted in the rejection of the anthropological ethos in which “The ethnographer’s personal experiences, especially those of participation and empathy are recognized as central to the research process, but they are firmly restrained by the impersonal standards of observation and ‘objective’ distance.”

Self-reflexive ethnography reduces the impersonality of the explanation and analysis of the practices and beliefs of the foreign culture being studied. The self-reflexive approach does acknowledge the power relations inherent in the ethnographic enterprise, yet in its application, the ethnographer must take special care not to lapse into autobiography, ‘go native’, or lose the critical distance that is necessary for interpretation of the data. One can be an empathetic observer and interpreter of cultural phenomena, acknowledge the fact of one’s presence and experiences—which do have effects, both on personal and community levels—and maintain a balance between the self-reflexive and scholarly critical dimensions.

I begin each chapter with an experience from my fieldwork in Iran and Hyderabad over the course of two years (2004-2006). These are accounts of conversations or events that I had with Shi’i men and women, which had some affect on my understanding or interpretation of how either gender roles or the vernacular context of Hyderabad


21 Clifford, pp. 2, 13.

24 For an example of self-reflexive ethnography that exhibits many of these qualities, please see Sarah Caldwell, Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship of the Goddess Kali (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).
construct the devotional literature and rituals of Karbala that are concrete articulations of Shi‘i practical sa`ihood. Sometimes these interactions left me befuddled, inspired, or so intrigued that I immediately would go off to ask my questions of another person so that I could learn more. Initially, I felt considerable trepidation about doing ethnography. In August 2003, I spent time in Hyderabad meeting with several prominent Shi‘i leaders and scholars introducing my project and myself. It was agonizing. I felt nervous and shy and I fretted every day about whether or not I had the necessary skills or personality to do this research.

When I returned to Hyderabad in January 2005, much of that shyness had been eroded by my experiences discoursing with religious scholars in Iran. I had to learn how to defend my project to people who were skeptical about my motivations for studying a text like Kashefi’s Rowżat al-Shohadā’ or the wedding of Fatimah Kubra and Qasem and their role as practical Shi‘i saints. My research tour in Iran paid unexpected dividends when I arrived in Hyderabad. Word spread amongst the Shi‘i community that I had spent four months in Iran. My time in Iran accorded me a degree of legitimacy and scholarly authenticity that I never anticipated. I was taken more seriously—especially by men—and I was often able to skip beyond the rudiments of Shi‘i doctrine and ask questions and talk about more complicated concepts and texts.

This authority did on occasion land me in awkward situations with regard to the debates about the historical veracity of the Fatimah Kubra-Qasem wedding and with regard to the permissibility of observing the mehndī kī majlis. On several occasions I was told that I must write some sort of essay to be published in Hyderabad that ‘proves’ that Fatimah Kubra and Qasem were married during the battle of Karbala. Dr. M.M. Taqui Khan, a retired
chemistry professor from Osmania University who is also a well-known zākīr and the host of the annual 7 Muharram ʿAbbās šāhīb mehndī kī majlīs, asked me several times to present a definitive answer (a fatwa, perhaps) about the historical veracity of the Karbala wedding and the permissibility of its observance in the South Asian cultural context. Such encounters ascribed me with the role of Shi‘ī theologian, an impossibility considering the fact that I am neither Muslim nor trained to be an ʿālim or religious scholar.

While my training in Shi‘ī literature and theology in my doctoral training in religious studies granted endowed me with a certain degree of authority, and my time spent in Iran and Syria gave me prestige, my status as a foreigner, an outsider, did limit my access to observing and finding out about certain practices. ‘Aijaz, the professor photographer whom I hired to take photos of the ritual objects dedicated to Qasem in Hyderabad, told me about an event that none of my other Shi‘ī informants had ever mentioned to me. With hurt feelings, I went to Dr. Sadiq Naqvi, one of my primary teachers in Hyderabad, to find out more about this additional event dedicated to Qasem, which I realized is on 21 Muharram, the same day as the martyrdom of his young sister-in-law Sakinah. These notes from my meeting with Naqvi indicate the true power dynamic of the relationship between the ethnographer and her community:

On 21 Muharram at midnight opposite the ʿibādatkhāna, there is a fire-walking event. This is an old tradition, and approximately 500-600 people attend. Before the fire is lit on the road the ground is thoroughly washed for purification. Then before the fire walking begins, the ʿalam is taken out on a julūs and there is much mātam. Naqvi said that many women attend this event (meaning that they go out in the middle of the night to watch the mātam and fire-walking). I asked if any of the women participate in the mātam or fire walking and he said no. A man named Abul Qasem addresses the majlīs that is held on this evening. I am trying to find out what this event means. I kept probing, but not getting a satisfactory answer.
Naqvi said that this event simply is another opportunity to remember Qasem’s suffering.²⁵

Writing a dissertation or book is about the production of knowledge, but so much of what we can learn and see is complicated by our identities and subjectivities. I gravitated toward the story of Fatimah Kubra based upon the events that were happening in my life while I was preparing for my dissertation fieldwork. Time spent in the field and learning about the richness and depth of Fatimah Kubra’s role as a bride-widow saint has made me grateful for the ways that the constellations of my life aligned to approach this topic with a set of questions that I initially never considered in the earliest phases of this project.

Method and Approach

The methodology employed in this project is interdisciplinary, necessarily integrating gender theory (performance of gender and embodiment), anthropology (field methods, ethnology, performance), religious studies (Islamic history, ritual and social context), literary criticism (hagiography, poetics, intertextuality), Structuralist theories of pairing, and philology (Persian and Urdu translation). In focusing on the single event of the Karbala wedding, it is very important to note that I have taken the lead of Dwight Reynolds in *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes*, his study of the Egyptian Arabic *Bani Hilal* epic.²⁶ In that important study, he used a single performance as fundamentally illustrative of the various oral recitations of the poem he observed.

²⁵Interview with Dr. Sadiq Naqvi at his home, Darulshifa, Hyderabad (February 26, 2006).

I, too, have likewise focused on a single event in the Karbala narrative as representative of the intersection of gender and localization in the construction of Shi’i hagiography in South Asia. In the textual analyses carried out before going to the field, the marriage and subsequent widowing of Fatimah Kubra emerged as a truly singular moment. In the past year, my fieldwork has confirmed that it plays an even greater role than first imagined: it is clearly the defining moment in the experience of maršiya. The themes of marriage and the often-debilitating stigma of widow remarriage in South Asian culture are mediated for Deccani Shi’i women through the textual construction and public performance of Fatimah Kubra’s model experience.

Drawing upon archival and ethnographic research in Hyderabad, and applying an interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological framework one can articulate a theory of Shi’i practical sainthood. The first framework is centered on Judith Butler’s theory of gender as the performed stylization of the body—in clothing, decoration and mannerisms—that reflects local cultural values and mores. The second framework is centered on the vernacular context, that is, examining how Islam is practiced outside of the center of authority and power, which in the case of Shi’ism was Iran. By juxtaposing these two theoretical frameworks, I propose a dynamically gendered and vernacularized form of Shi’i sainthood.

Taking Fatimah Kubra and the mehndī kī majlis as a paradigmatic example that represents the ways in which gender and vernacular contexts intersect contributing to the construction of Shi’i practical sainthood, I have adapted Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity to explain the power of the bride-widow dyad in Hyderabadi Shi’i devotional literature and ritual. Judith Butler defines gender “as a shifting and contextual
phenomenon...[that] does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations,” which is “performatively produced” through the “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame.” Butler theorizes gender as a non-binary, performatively produced stylization of the body. This definition allows us to expand our understanding of how a Shi‘i theory of sainthood and its textual inscription in the form of hagiography are dependent upon vernacularized embodiments of the religious exemplar. In this project I shall problematize Butler’s Euro-American feminist critique of the very “binariness” of gender, although I find the concept of the binary (complementary) pair combined with her theory of gender performativity to be a useful hermeneutic strategy for understanding how Shi‘i sainthood functions and is gendered in localized contexts. It is not necessary to accept Butler’s interpretation of the absoluteness of binary theory, particularly with regard to gender in which male-female pairing is usually arranged in a relationship of inequality. Fatimah Kubra is portrayed in the majlis and Urdu-Deccani devotional literature as the structural dyad of bride and widow, two ontological states that exist upon a non-binary gender continuum.

My focus on the Fatimah Kubra-Qasem marriage faces an objection from many Shi‘i religious scholars who discredit the historical veracity of their battlefield wedding. One of the tasks that presents itself in this project is to understand why Kashefi has been so profoundly discredited and why the Qasem-Kubra marriage is viewed by many as the single most significant example of why Rowţat al-Shohadā’ is not an authentic Karbala history. Yet, Mulla Husain Va’ez Kashefi’s Rowţat al-Shohadā’, composed in Persian in Herat, Afghanistan

in 1502 became the most popular and authoritative Karbala narrative in the Shi’i Deccan, a popularity that continues today. In Hyderabad, tensions over vernacular\textsuperscript{28} Shi’i identity are manifested through debates about the authority of \textit{Rowžat al-Shohadā’} as a legitimizing source for the observance of the \textit{mehndī kī majlis}.

Why do I focus the textual dimension of my dissertation on this problematic text that has been discredited by the clerical elite in the Shi’i centers of power and authority in Iran and Iraq? Why did I focus on what at first glance appears to be a marginalized account of the battle of Karbala that in the estimation of its critics, introduces in a most unhistorical fashion, the battlefield wedding of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra for the very first time more than 800 years after the event? How could I select a historically unverifiable event that is popular in the vernacular context of India as the focus of my study? The answer is simple. \textit{Rowžat al-Shohadā’} is not history! It is discredited because it has been judged according to the features and forms that mark an Islamic text as belonging to the genre of history. \textit{Rowžat al-Shohadā’} does not possess the genre markers of an historical text. To make a bad analogy: you cannot force an apple to become an orange. Strictly defined, hagiography is not history in the positivist sense of it being an objective, factual linear narrative. The Bollandists in their study of European Catholic hagiographical traditions certainly have struggled with the perceived lack of historical factuality of sacred biography. Hippolyte Delehaye’s critique of the hagiographer is relevant to the critique leveled by the Iranian clerical class against Kashefi’s \textit{Rowžat al-Shohadā’} for not being \textit{true} history: “As a general rule, I should not class them as forgeries, or look on their authors as more blameworthy than those who innocently believed themselves entitled to make up for the silence of

\textsuperscript{28}Vernacular in the context of the project refers to the myriad expressions of Islam outside of the Central Muslim lands, which for the Shi’a is Iran.
tradition by means of narratives mainly produced from their own imagination...But we must readily admit that hagiographical writing has been disgraced by a number of forgers who could not plead simplicity of mind as an excuse.”

In this project, I do not consider Rowżat al-Shohadāʾ and its Deccani-Urdu translations to be forgeries or contrived accounts of what happened at the battle of Karbala. Instead, I approach the devotional literature of Karbala beginning with Kashefi’s Rowżat al-Shohadāʾ and its countless Deccani-Urdu translations and poetic forms, with a different set of genre identifications. This Shiʿi devotional literature is above all hagiography, and in its translation and vernacularization over the past five centuries, it has also adapted the prominence of the feminine voice and emotions of the heroines of the Indic epic tradition. This study explores how the Indic epic tradition and its influence on the further development and vernacularization of the dynamic epic heroine of Karbala, who, by virtue of surviving the battle and living to tell the story, articulates the values of Indian culture and society and the ideals of Islam through the filter of sainthood embodied in what I call ḥusainiyat-wilāyah.

The most basic question this dissertation asks is: How are the hero(in)es of Karbala constructed into meaningful and enduring role models for the Shiʿa of Hyderabad? Are they saints? How can a model of sainthood based upon the myriad ways in which the hero(in)es of Karbala serve as practical social and religious role models be identified and articulated? In conceptualizing these typological categories and also in defining select forms of sainthood as they are portrayed and embodied in Shiʿi thought and devotional practice, a framework based upon a modified form of Structuralist pairing is a useful

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hermeneutic device. Employing a framework of complementary pairing of concepts helps one to discern the full extent of sainthood in Shi‘ism. In my definition of Shi‘i sainthood, complementarity makes it possible to distinguish two correlated, mutually dependent aspects of sanctity.

Imāmah-walāyah and ḥusainiyya-wilāyah reflect the two complementary aspects of Shi‘i sanctity, one abstract and theological and based upon the pairing of the Imamate and walāyah, and the second, which is practical and devotional, centers around the family of Imam Husain and wilāyah. Wilāyah is the exoteric manifestation of one’s spiritual perfection and gnosis, and it is imitable. Through the doctrine of ḥusainiyya, the spiritual and moral perfection of Husain’s family is imitable by the average person. Shi‘i devotional life is dependent upon ḥusainiyya-wilāyah.

A saint in Shi‘i Islam refers to an exemplary individual, related by blood to the Prophet Muhammad and descended through his daughter Fatimah and son-in-law ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib. A limited number of the saints are Imams and therefore men, who by virtue of God’s selecting them through divine designation or naṣṣ, possess the quality of walāyah. A second class of saints are the family members of the Prophet Muhammad, and more specifically the family members of the third Imam Husain, who were present and sacrificed themselves at the battle of Karbala. These individuals, based upon their blood relationship to the Imam and their suffering at Karbala, possess the quality of ḥusainiyya, and people

30 The most obvious model for practical Shi‘i sainthood can be found in the Prophet Muhammad who was not only chosen by God to be a Prophet and Messenger, but he was also a social and ethical role model who was deeply engaged in family and in the affairs of the world. The Prophet was a source of practical emulation (note the importance of hadīth in guiding Muslims’ everyday actions). He may have been God’s chosen Prophet, but he was also a ‘real’ man with problems and concerns just like everyone else. The example of Muhammad ‘the man’ as a type of Muslim saint led to me the question: How then, can we understand Shi‘i figures like Fatimah Kubra and Qasem (direct blood relations of the Prophet) as saints or more simply, as religious and ethical role models? The most comprehensive study of Muhammad is Annemarie Schimmel’s And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).
recognize that they possess wilāyah. Because of the imperative of consanguinity, female members of the Ahl-e Bait are considered to be full human beings and capable of attaining the greatest of spiritual achievements.

The interdisciplinary approach taken in this project makes it possible to identify several of the features of a theory of practical Shiʿi sainthood. The approach taken here is neither exhaustive nor intended to speak for the myriad meanings and significations that figures such as Fatimah Kubra possess in all Shiʿi societies. The aim of this approach is to highlight the distinctively religious nature of the devotional literature and rituals commemorating the battle of Karbala and its hero(in)es in Hyderabad. The texts and practices are hagiographical and epic, and Imam Husain’s family are saints who, through their embodiment of husainiyat-wilāyah are recognized as such by the Shiʿa of Hyderabad.

**Structure of the Dissertation**

Chapter one is a structural analysis of Shiʿi sainthood. In this chapter, I propose a stipulative definition of Shiʿi sainthood based upon the identification of a second category of sanctity that structures everyday, lived religious life for the Shiʿa. Because Shiʿi identity is centered around the ritualized remembrance of the martyrdom of Imam Husain and his family at the battle of Karbala, and in the devotional literature and performance of the majlis mourning assembly, these hero(in)es are transformed into religious and social role models that teach people how to be in the world. Using a framework of Structural complementary pairing, this chapter examines the typologies of sainthood in Shiʿism, and traces the contours of a model of practical sainthood based upon the pair husainiyat-wilāyah. The doctrine of husainiyat-wilāyah combined with a framework of Structural
complementary pairing creates a distinctive space in which women are included as fully feminine human beings in Shi‘i sainthood.

Chapter two traces the role of the feminine voices and emotions of the women of the Ahl-e Bait in the Indic Karbala epic tradition. Using the example of Sita from the Ramāyaṇa epic, this chapter highlights the ways in which writers employ strategies of narrative engagement with the audience, and the ways in which female characters are dynamically constructed in Indic epic traditions. This chapter presents Mir 'Alam’s late-eighteenth-century Deccani-Urdu translation of Rowżat al-Shohadā’ as an example of how the Karbala epic tradition became Indianized. It shows how its emphatic use of feminine voices and emotions is based upon the fact that it was the women of the Ahl-e Bait who survived the battle of Karbala and lived to tell their story.

In chapter three, I take the paradigmatic example of Fatimah Kubra, the bride-widow of Karbala, to examine the ways in which the hero(in)es of Karbala teach proper gender roles to men and women through their hagiographical transformations into locally meaningful typologies (e.g., good wife, self-sacrificing widow). In this chapter, I suggest that it is Fatimah Kubra who teaches both men and women how to be good members of family and society by being self-sacrificing and doing one’s duty even if it means that one must endure hardship. Analyzing the preparations and performance of the 7 Muharram mehndī kī majlis and Hyderabadi marriage ceremonies, I suggest that Fatimah Kubra’s gendered performance as ideal bride and renouncing widow fulfill a crucial hagiographic, and thus social, function. The didactic nature of her performance teaches Hyderabadi men and women their proper gender roles that are life cycle specific that are culturally relevant
and made compulsory because of Fatimah Kubra’s sacralized embodiment of husainiyat-
wilāyah.

In chapter four I examine the current debates in India and Iran about the
authoritativeness of Rowżat al-Shohadā’, which is an important part of the tension between
forces that desire to homogenize Shi‘i devotional practices (assuming Iran as center of
cosmopolitan Shi‘ism) and those who resist abandoning local ritual traditions (affirming
vernacular Hyderabad, India). The act of translating Rowżat al-Shohadā’, which forms the
foundation for both the textual and ritual devotional tradition in India, from Persian to
Urdu, made the text linguistically understandable to the average Indian of the Deccan, who
may not have been fluent in the original language of composition. More specifically, the
translation of Rowżat al-Shohadā’ transformed the ecology of Karbala and its hero(in)es to
reflect an Indic worldview. In short, Rowżat al-Shohadā’ was vernacularized, constructing a
memory of Karbala that was refracted through the lens of India. In this chapter, I take the 7
Muharram mehndī kī majlis as an example of this vernacularizing impulse in Hyderabad. In
the cultural context of South Asia, the elaborate rules of marriage and the enduring power
of the taboo on widow remarriage makes the battlefield wedding of Fatimah Kubra to
Qasem resonate on deeply personal and societal levels. By vernacularizing the story Qasem
and Fatimah Kubra and transforming them into idealized Hyderabad Shi‘as, orients one’s
faith and allegiance to the husainiyat of the Ahl-e Bait, because they can imagine and feel
Karbala in their own Indic worlds.
CHAPTER ONE

Toward a New Definition of Shi'i Sainthood

Each month, a mourning assembly or majlis-e 'azā', is sponsored by the Shi'i students association at Osmania University in Hyderabad, India. A different majlis orator or zākir is invited to speak by the group, and in early June 2005 Dr. M.M. Taqui Khan was invited to invoke the memory of Karbala. A trained scientist, Dr. Khan had prepared a khutbah speech on another topic, but when he heard the theme for that day’s poems of remembrance—salāms and marziya—he spontaneously changed his topic to reflect the implicit theme of the majlis, the marriage and martyrdom of Hazrat Qasem, the son of the second Imam Hasan to Fatimah Kubra the daughter of Imam Husain. Most Hyderabadi Shi'a believe in the battlefield marriage of Qasem to Fatimah Kubra on the evening before the tenth day of Muharram known as shab-e 'Āshūrā.

The wedding is ritually re-membered on 7 Muharram in South Asia where in the majlis-e 'azā' mourning assemblies the marriage ceremony is symbolized by a tray of mehndī or henna that is carried aloft amongst the mourners. The event simultaneously invokes feelings of grief for the martyrdom of Qasem the thirteen year-old bridegroom warrior and the plight of Fatimah Kubra who became a widow after one brief night of (unconsummated) marriage. At the same time, there is a deep sense of play in the majlis, for in spite of this event’s tragic pathos, one also can discern a sense of optimism in the frenzied struggle of the male and female participants of all faiths to obtain a bit of the
mehndī to smear on the inside of the right palm, which will hopefully result in a successful marriage alliance in the coming year. The Shi’a of Hyderabad believe that the family of Imam Husain suffered and they, too, must remember the events of Karbala so that they might be able to celebrate the joyful moments of life: marriage, pregnancy, and the birth of children.

Hearing the maršīyas and salāms, Dr. Khan informed me that he felt that it was fortuitous that the organizers of the majlis had chosen Qasem and Kubra as the theme for that particular day. Changing the subject of his khutbah was not a problem for Dr. Khan. During Muharram, ṣākirs and ṣākirahs often will speak at several different majlisēs each day and it is expected that each of the discourses will be different.¹ The ṣākir must be able to read his or her audience and s/he must possess a broad range of speeches in his or her repertoire that are always fresh and ready to be used at a moment’s notice. Dr. Khan confessed that he felt excited to be speaking about Qasem and Kubra, yet he felt that he wanted to take a new approach in his ḥadīš or narration of the events.

Rather than focus his narration on Qasem, as is usually the case, he spoke about Fatimah Kubra almost exclusively. Dr. Khan and I had been meeting at his house in the Yaqutpura locality of Hyderabad’s Old City for the past couple of months, and he said that the series of questions that I had posed to him in these discussions had prompted him to begin representing the event of Qasem’s martyrdom and Fatimah Kubra’s widowhood in a different fashion. In this khutbah, Dr. Khan drew the majlis participants into Fatimah Kubra’s world and reflected on the sacrifice that she made allowing her new husband to die in battle. He spoke of how her willingness to let Qasem go to battle reflects her

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¹People will often go from one majlis to the next during the busy ayyām-e ‘azā or the mourning period stretching over two months and eight days from 1 Muharram until 8 Rabi’ al-Awwal.
commitment to justice and makes her anything but a passive female victim upon whom actions are inflicted. In Dr. Khan’s new estimation of Fatimah Kubra, she became a symbol of the Shi‘i notion of eschatological justice or ‘adālat.

This khutbah in which Dr. Khan re-presented Fatimah Kubra as a strong-willed warrior for the faith deeply affected the majlis participants. He marveled to me at how many of these young men approached him after the majlis expressing feelings of gratitude and astonishedness at what they perceived to be a new telling of the Qasem narrative that emphasized Fatimah Kubra’s role in Karbala. Dr. Khan revealed to me, much to my surprise, that our conversations had provoked him to re-evaluate the ways in which he narrates the events of Karbala in the majlis. This was very much a case of the ethnographer affecting her environment—my questions and conversations with this zākir and the host of one of Hyderabad’s most famous mehndī ki majlis commemorating Qasem’s marriage and martyrdom—altered his perception and re-presentation of the hero(in)es of Karbala.

I begin with this ethnographic anecdote because implicit within the structure and content of this event are several significant features of what it means to be a religious exemplar or saint in Shi‘i Islam. This experience was not unique—in numerous interactions with Hyderabadi Shi‘as, the individual and community conception, re-presentation and embodiment of the members of Imam Husain’s family who were present and sacrificed at Karbala, while often implicitly reified into certain distinguishable types, the characterization and symbolic function of these hero(in)es are remarkably fluid and subject to adaptation to fit new contexts.

What is remarkable about this story is that Dr. Khan has told this story hundreds of times in his life as a zākir, but it has always been presented from Qasem’s perspective. This
is not a case of ethnographic intervention, but rather Dr. Khan’s spontaneous validation of
the fragmentary or unarticulated half of a binary pair (or in this case, couple). Dr. Khan
perceived the unarticulated half of the Qasem-Fatimah Kubra pair, and in his khuṭbah, the
majlis participants instinctively recognized and appreciated the narration of the events
that befell Fatimah Kubra, because structurally she is the other half of the Qasem narrative.
In retrospect, it is not difficult to perceive why Dr. Khan instinctively spoke about Fatimah
Kubra in the majlis on the June day. Dr. Khan is the father of six daughters whom he loves
very much and he told me that he thinks of his daughters when he recounts the stories of
Sakinah and Fatimah Kubra who were young girls at the battle of Karbala. Imam Husain’s
daughters are like his own daughters.

The members of Imam Husain’s family are revered as consummate religious
exemplars and saints, although it is necessary for us to make clear what this means within
the context of Shi‘ism. There exists a considerable body of scholarship defining sainthood
in Sufi Muslim traditions as well as within Roman Catholicism, and while this scholarship is
significant for its contributions to our understanding of what it means to be a saint, there
are certain limitations to the frameworks therein presented, which require the
presentation of a stipulative definition of Shi‘i sainthood that will adequately make sense of
this story that Dr. Khan told to me on that June day.
Toward a Stipulative Definition of Shiʿi Sainthood

In contemporary Islamic studies scholarship, the English word saint is sometimes used uncritically, obscuring the typologies of friendship with God, which are ranked hierarchically and reflect the myriad ways one can be God’s friend. In terms of historical origin, the term saint refers to one who is holy, although often defined according to Christocentric criteria. At the most basic level, a saint becomes a saint because she or he has manifested miracles, exhibited exemplary faith in God and Jesus, and quite often suffers. These are not however, the criteria for all types of Islamic sainthood.

The family members who accompanied Imam Husain are clearly considered by the Shiʿa of Hyderabad to be religious exemplars and more importantly, saints who possess intercessory powers and work miracles. It is not only the Shiʿi Imams who are believed to be exemplary holy people, but figures like Fatimah Kubra and Qasem, too, the young teenagers, one a widow and the other a martyr, are revered as saints. The anecdote with which I begin this chapter, about Dr. Khan’s re-telling of Qasem’s martyrdom at the Osmania University majlis indicate several features of Shiʿi sainthood that have not been made explicit in current Islamic studies scholarship.

One of the greatest obstacles to formulating a working definition of Shiʿi sainthood resides within the Orientalist legacy that continues to influence the scope and orientation of Islamic studies research. According to Edward Said, with a dogged determination, Orientalist scholars maintained a “textual attitude” that privileged the written word as the source and basis of reality. Said observes that texts as our basis of knowledge about a

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civilization or religion manufacture realities that may ultimately disappoint when the lived or practical dimension is introduced. Max Müller, the great German philologist and scholar of Indian religions never visited India because he was afraid that the reality of the place might ruin the land and civilization that he had created in his mind. Scholars who tend to define religion textually give credence to neither the dynamic interactions that take place between text and performance/ritual nor the role of vernacular interpretations and reformulations of the text.

In formulating our stipulative definition of Shi‘i sainthood, both textual traditions and the lived, performed dimension of religious life must be given equal attention. Dr. Khan’s khutbahs draw upon a rich textual tradition of Shi‘i hagiographical martyrdom literature known as both maqta and shahadat-nāmeh. Like many of the zākirs who speak in Hyderabad’s countless majlises throughout the year, Dr. Khan’s khutbah was drawn from the foundational maqta text Rowżat al-Shohadā’ (The Garden of the Martyrs), which was composed in Persian by the religious scholar Mulla Husain Va‘ez Kashefi around 1502 CE in Herat. While the Iranian narrative imprint is discernible, the reformulation of the text in the majlis context transforms the characters and their world into the Indian Deccan. It is Kashefi’s Rowżat al-Shohadā’ that is the authoritative text about the battle of Karbala and its hero(in)es. This is the story that the Shi‘a of Hyderabad accepts. That Shi‘as in Iran and elsewhere do not accept the legitimacy of Rowżat al-Shohadā’ as an accurate, factual

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4Said, p. 94.

5This statement is a reflection of the experiences that I have had at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR). In 2006, I presented two papers, one for the Religion and the Social Sciences section, and the second for the Study of Islam section. Each paper focused on aspects of my dissertation, with particular attention to the interaction of texts in vernacular performance contexts. My paper was well received by audience members at the Religion and the Social Sciences section, yet my paper elicited negligible response in the Study of Islam section. Based upon the questions directed to other more textually oriented presentations, confirms that the privileging of the text continues to be the dominant paradigm for Islamic studies scholarship.
narration of the events of Karbala, is immaterial for Hyderabadis. For the Shi‘a of Hyderabad, Rowżat al-Shohadā‘ in its Deccani-Urdu iteration preserves the stories of the hero(in)es of Karbala, but it is in the performance that they are brought to life as idealized, yet imitable, Indian Shi‘i Muslim men and women whose model is to be emulated by the participants in the majlis.

A second dimension of our stipulative definition of Shi‘i sainthood is based upon the necessary inclusion of both male and female holy people who are equal to one another in their religious functions. Several issues contribute to this lacuna in the study of sainthood in Islam. First, the tendency to privilege the textual traditions virtually eliminates the presence of female sanctity from Islam. This bibliophilic predilection is exacerbated by the limitations imposed on male-female non-kin relationships by the system of purdah. Biographies of female Muslim saints have often been excluded from the textual tradition because of sexual segregation and the concomitant feelings of ambivalence about placing a woman in the public sphere by revering her in either text or practice.

In the Introduction to her translation of al-Sulami’s Memorial of Female Sufi Devotees (Dhikr an-niswa al-muta‘abbidāt as-ṣufiyāt), Rkia Cornell reveals the darker side of why Muslim female saints have been relegated to the margins of Islam, the primary reason being that Islam is a patriarchal religion whose arbiters of power maintain their superordinate status through the subordination of women. According to Cornell, al-Sulami believes in the spiritual equality of men and women (unlike other biographers such as al-Kalabadhi or ‘Attar), although they need to be remembered in a different fashion from men.⁶ Al-Sulami is unique in that he manages a hermeneutic turn in which he brackets the

⁶Rkia Cornell, Early Sufi Women (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1999), pp. 48-49.
perceived inferiority of the female Sufi saint because of her extreme practice of taʿabbud or “making oneself a slave,” thus making it possible for such women to attain the heights of spiritual knowledge (maʿrifā) and union (fanāʾ) with God.7 At first glance as-Sulami’s inclusive attitude and willingness to include women within the realm of Muslim sanctity appears admirable, although his approach little differs from that of medieval biographers of Catholic female saints who had to overcome the inferiority of their sex and become like a man striving toward Christ.8 I argue that, unlike Catholic and Sufi models of female sanctity, the Shiʿi conception of sainthood sees the feminine dimension as necessary and central.

The third issue that must be taken into account in the formulation of our stipulative definition of Shiʿi sainthood focuses on the ambiguity within Islamic studies scholarship about the meaning and function of the technical vocabulary (walāyah and wilāyah) employed in reference to saints. The study of wilāyah and walāyah has been approached from within a limited field of inquiry. The majority of scholarly works published on the notion of Islamic sanctity focus on Sufi traditions and theories, neglecting the centrality of wilāyah and walāyah in Shiʿi theology and devotional practices.

Shiʿi conceptions of wilāyah and walāyah, if the subject of inquiry, are usually analyzed through the lens of Sufi thought, which is anachronistic. The anachronism exists because of the myopic tendency of scholars to portray the development of Sufism as a sui generis mystical, saint-oriented movement, whereas in point of fact, much of the earliest Sufi theorization of sainthood was derived from Shiʿi thought. Despite the foundational

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7R. Cornell, pp. 54 and 58.

8For a more in-depth analysis of the gendered dimension of sainthood, in particular with regard to the Roman Catholic tradition, please see the following sections in this chapter.
influence of Shi‘i theories on the types of friendship with God, contemporary scholars continue to privilege Sufism—the mystical dimension of Islam—in discussions of Muslim sainthood/sanctity. This approach privileges hegemonic textual traditions and patriarchal metanarratives, and it neglects female perspectives and undervalues vernacular religious performance as significant corroborating sources of sanctity in Islam.

This epistemological tension in determining how we know what makes a saint and saint is one of the principal concerns in Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism. Vincent Cornell observes that Muslim and Euro-American scholars of Sufism typically use the terms wilāyah and walāyah interchangeably. This tendency to conflate wilāyah and walāyah is seen in Hermann Landolt’s lengthy article, “Walāyah,” published in the Encyclopedia of Religion. Cornell is not the only scholar troubled by the collapse of wilāyah and walāyah into a singular term—Henry Corbin, too, sees these two words residing within a broad semantic range. How walī and the related terms wilāyah and walāyah can signify saint and sainthood respectively poses a significant hermeneutic dilemma for scholars who cannot agree on specific theoretical and practical meanings of the words. Part of the problem lies in the fact that scholars usually translate walī as ‘saint’, and both wilāyah and walāyah as referring to some form of monolithic ‘sainthood’.

It is evident that there is a degree of imprecision in the usage of the terms wilāyah and walāyah, particularly in their translation to refer to sainthood in a generic sense. The final element that must be integrated into our speculative definition of Shi‘i sainthood is that such a definition requires typological specificity. Drawing inspiration from Catherine

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1I am invoking the title of Annemarie Schimmel’s Mystical Dimensions of Islam.

Mooney’s study of the depiction of female saints in medieval European Catholicism, she correctly observes that, “saints are not only presented as models to others for imitation, but also are often themselves described typologically…”\(^{11}\) Drawing from Roman Catholic and Sufi typologies of sainthood will bring into relief the contours of the types of saints who are most prominent in Shi’ism, particularly at the points of dislocation. The male metanarrative in hagiographical textual traditions, as we shall demonstrate in this and later chapters, does not predominate in Shi’i theories of sainthood. In conceptualizing these typological categories and also in defining select forms of sainthood as they are portrayed and embodied in Shi’i thought and devotional practice, a framework based upon a modified form of Structuralist binary theory is a useful hermeneutic device.

Employing a framework of complementary pairing to one another helps one to discern the full extent of sainthood in Shi’ism.\(^{12}\) In our definition of Shi’i sainthood, complementarity makes it possible to distinguish two correlated, mutually dependent aspects of sanctity. As Dr. Khan demonstrated in hiskhutbah, sometimes only one half of the binary pair is clearly identifiable. Despite the fact that in many scholarly circles Structuralist theory is considered passé, the human tendency to think in binary terms is aptly illustrated in the case of Shi’i sainthood. Although Qasem as a central character in the Karbala cycle does have a spouse, she is often not clearly articulated in the khutbahs of the majlis. Speaking structurally, Qasem does not have an obvious binary that is attached to him. Dr. Khan explicitly articulated the second half of the binary pair in hiskhutbah,


demonstrating that Qasem and Fatimah Kubra are part of the same discourse, and when he is talking about one, he is also talking about the other.

By adjusting Structuralist binary theory, the Imamate (imāmah) and its structural pair walāyah (sainthood bestowed by God without choice), the most often studied dimension of Shi'i sanctity because of its masculine and textual bases, enables one to see its concealed or implicit complementary structural pair ḥusainiyyat (devotion to Imam Husain and his family) and wilāyah (sainthood that is recognized by society). Whereas the first pair, imāmah-walāyah is abstract and theologically oriented, the second pair ḥusainiyyat-wilāyah is culturally specific and its meaning constantly shifts according to time and place. Just as imāmah-walāyah forms a complementary pair, so too, can we discern its unarticulated pair ḥusainiyyat-wilāyah.

Although the word “saint” possesses a long tradition of Christocentric meanings and significations, we will employ this term based upon a clear definition of what it means in the context of Shi’ism. A saint in Shi’i Islam refers to an exemplary individual, related by blood to the Prophet Muhammad and descended through his daughter Fatimah and son-in-law ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib. A limited number of the saints are Imams and therefore men, who by virtue of God’s selecting them through divine designation or naṣṣ, possess the quality of walāyah. A second class of saints are the family members of the Prophet Muhammad, and more specifically the family members of the third Imam Husain who were present and sacrificed themselves at the battle of Karbala. These individuals, based upon their blood relationship to the Imam and their suffering at Karbala, possess the quality of ḥusainiyyat, and people recognize that they possess wilāyah. Because of the imperative of consanguinity, female members of the Ahl-e Bait are considered to be full human beings
and capable of attaining the greatest of spiritual achievements. These female saints are to be sources of inspiration and devotion for both women and men. In brief, a Shi‘i saint is characterized by a consanguine relationship to the Prophet Muhammad and his daughter Fatimah, whose sanctity is either pre-eternal or based upon specific events, and is gender inclusive.

In this chapter, several typological categories of sainthood drawn from the Roman Catholic tradition and from Sufism will be analyzed in order to conceptualize the theoretical and theological complexity of Shi‘i thought and ritual practice. Drawing from the Catholic tradition, the example of the martyr will be presented as one of the most important types of Christian saints, a parallel that is obvious in the case of Shi‘ism after the battle of Karbala. I suggest that the martyr type is based upon an ethic of social engagement and commitment to justice. A second type of saint that occupies a position of popularity in Sufism is that of the warrior or ghāzī whose military exploits and piety make these individuals subjects of veneration. The warrior saint is a peculiar type whose occasional role as a mujāhid or one who strives in faith is exemplified in the model of Imam Husain and his family who fought against Yazid’s army at Karbala. A third type of saint, which is admittedly more difficult to analyze is that of the female spiritual exemplar. Although considerably more scholarship has been conducted in the field of Christian hagiography on the role of gender, and there is also a slowly expanding body of research being produced in the study of Sufism, this work reflects a much deeper ambivalence about the nature and possible fullness of femininity for these female saints. It will be demonstrated that the patriarchal metanarrative is undermined in Shi‘i sainthood and hagiographical traditions because of the centrality of the position of such women as the
Prophet Muhammad’s daughter Fatimah, from whom all of the Imams trace their descent, and her daughter Zainab, who spread the message of her brother Husain’s martyrdom after Karbala. These women are not only revered as spiritual exemplars, but they are also accorded the full extent of their womanliness. In highlighting the distinctive features of these typologies of sainthood, we shall be able to discern the qualities of and requirements for practical sainthood (husainiyat-wilayah) in Shi‘i devotional literature and practice.

Type One: The Martyr Saint in Roman Catholicism

In Christianity, the word saint is derived from the Greek word hagios meaning “holy.”\(^{13}\) The notion of saints and the institution of sainthood did not develop during the lifetime of Jesus Christ. During the period of intense persecution of Christian communities by the Byzantine emperor around the beginning of the fourth century CE, stories began circulating about exemplary men and women who sacrificed their lives for their faith in Jesus. The phenomenon of martyrrium (“witnessing”\(^{14}\)) and the willing relinquishing of life in order to preserve one’s faith in Jesus Christ established the foundation one of the earliest and most emotionally captivating type of Christian saints: the martyr.\(^{15}\)

The witnessing martyr willing to die a gruesome death became memorialized in the passio or stories about the sufferings of the individual in order to preserve his faith. In The Cult of the Saints, Peter Brown’s landmark socio-historical study of the rise of the cult of the

\(^{13}\)The Latin word sanctus also conveys the meaning “holy.”

\(^{14}\)Compare to the Arabic word shahādat, which is translated into English as “martyrdom.” In Arabic, the word shahādat, based upon the tri-literal root sh-h-d. possesses the literal meaning of “witnessing.”

saints in Late Antiquity and Early Medieval Europe, he observes that these saints were not only heroes but, more importantly, they were “friends of God” whose intercession might be sought through the saint’s *praesentia* or “living” presence in the grave.\(^\text{16}\) The martyrs were seen as the elected friends of God “to whom the gift of perseverance had been given and had been seen to be given.”\(^\text{17}\) By visiting the grave of a saint, one could not only vicariously experience a bit of heaven on earth, but devotees also petitioned the martyr to become her *patron* and intercede on her behalf with the Divine.

The martyr type is an active and socially engaged figure. The martyr differs from the ascetic type of saint in Catholic tradition, because in the fact of his opposition to the authority of the Church indicates social involvement.\(^\text{18}\) The act of being witness to martyrdom depends upon a certain degree of engagement with the world—or at least the rejection of the authority to which the martyr is opposed. With the example of the active martyr saint outlined above, it is clear that even within Christianity, the term *saint* is inadequate for indicating the individual’s source of sanctity. The typological classification of saints elucidates symbolic meanings and ritual, intercessory functions for devotees.

Brown asserts that the cult of saints emerged for several reasons. First was “the lurching forward of an increasing proportion of late-antique society toward radically new forms of reverence shown to new objects in new places, orchestrated by new leaders, and... new bonds of human dependence, new intimate hopes for protection and justice in a


\(^{17}\)Brown, p. 73.

\(^{18}\)This certainly does not mean that many of these martyr saints were not ascetics, but their very act of opposition against what they perceived to be the greed or faithlessness of their oppressors, forced a degree of social engagement that renunciation of the world does not allow.
changing world.”

Second, with the establishment of monastic communities by the fourth century, people came to see monks as idealized figures whose renunciation of social life indicated a greater closeness to God based upon and desire to replicate the life of Jesus as remembered or imagined. Rapid social change, the consolidation of Christian legitimacy, and the development of monastic movements generated within the laity a profound need to seek the succor and protection of these saints.

The needs that engendered the development of the cult of the saints were dependent upon the establishment of idealized social relations and models for imitation by a society that had become fractured in the course of urbanization and social change. According to Brown, “the cult of the saints...was a form of piety exquisitely adapted to enable late antique men to articulate and render manageable urgent, muffled debates on the nature of power in their own world and to examine in the searching light of ideal relationships with ideal figures, the relation between power, mercy and justice as practiced around them.” Through the enactment of an idealized relationship with the saint, a doubling effect occurs in which the devotee also establishes an idealized relationship with God, just as the saint did in his or her lifetime. The lifetime of the saint, his or her piety, sufferings, and intercessory powers reflect the ways in which human beings struggle to invent meaning for the unknown. Reading the vita or biography of the saint, visiting the

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19Brown, p. 21.

20Brown, p. 8.

21Brown, p. 63.

saint’s grave and celebrating the saint’s feast day are all means of entering into the
praesentia of the spiritual exemplar, ultimately connecting to God from here on earth.

The life of the saint is exemplary in its supreme success in living a life in imitation
of that of Jesus Christ (imitatio Christi). The devotee in imitating the model established by
the saint for how to live a pious life enters into yet another doubling: living the life of the
saint living a life in imitatio Christi. For the religious exemplar, “Imitatio Christi is the
consummation of a spiritual marriage entered into by all saints, regardless of their
gender.”

Imitation is not only interiorized through meditative practices and
remembrance of the saint’s life, but imitatio Christi via the saint is externalized through
socially defining bodily practices, what Pierre Bourdieu calls habitus. Imitating saints
imitating the life of Christ leads to the internalization of the values of the Church by
training the body to enact belief, to perform ideology. Thus, habitus as the “embodied set of
dispositions, learned and internalized through bodily practices” contributes to the notion
of the ‘living’ saint whose holiness changes with the fortunes and ideology of the Church
and society. Jesus Christ is the most vivid example of the martyr saint, and the bodily
practices that are ritually re-membered and practiced in such events as the Passion during
the Easter Holy Week demonstrates the enduring model of the martyr.

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23 Kitchen, p. 104.

and Their Interpreters, edited by Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999),
pp. 78, 90, 92.
**Type Two: The Warrior Sufi Warrior and Sainthood**

Some of the most revered saints in Sufi traditions are warriors (ghāzī or mujāhid).

The warrior saints are often depicted in hagiographical literature as deeply pious men who were also great, skilled warriors who fought on behalf of religion and/or king. In some hagiographies, such as in the case of the two Yusufs (discussed below), the saint is further depicted as a great ethical authority whose model is to be imitated by others.

In *Realm of the Saint*, Vincent Cornell identifies seven idealized typological categories of sainthood in Moroccan Sufism. For example, the ghawth (synonym quṭb) embodies what Cornell calls “generative authority” and he possesses the “most feminine type of sainthood” because the ghawth’s function is to provide succor and nurturance to his devotees.\(^{25}\) Cornell’s typological framework is useful because he takes great care to examine the manifestations and institutions of sainthood within a specifically Moroccan context. Cornell takes the tension between the sharīʿa-minded tendencies of the urban religious elite and the tribal culture of the rural outposts into careful consideration as he examines how sainthood is manifested and signified in different social contexts. Cornell inquires, “Unless one tests Sufi models of sainthood against the data at hand, how can one be sure that such models, created as they were by an educated mystical elite, have much bearing on the ‘popular’ interpretation of Moroccan sainthood?”\(^{26}\)

The most important type of religious exemplar in Moroccan Sufism is the ṣāliḥ who is the “ethical authority” who represented ṣalāḥ or social virtue. The ṣāliḥ is the most idealized type of saint because as the consummate exemplar of ṣalāḥ or social virtue he is

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\(^{26}\) Cornell, p. 102.
able to set a clear example of how to be a good Muslim in the world. Because the parameters of ṣalāḥ are “clearly known from Qur’an, hadīth, and treatises on Sufi practice,” the ṣāliḥ serves as a leitmotif of Moroccan Sufi sainthood.\textsuperscript{27} Salāḥ is the ethical responsibility, as it is outlined in scriptural texts and lived practice that Muslims have toward one another in the community, and ultimately to God. Therefore, the ṣāliḥ as the exemplary embodiment of ṣalāḥ, Cornell asserts that sainthood is a social phenomenon because “a wali Allah’s public image must conform to consensually validated standards before his or her holiness is acknowledged.”\textsuperscript{28} One might perform the most amazing miracles, but without social recognition of exemplary social virtue to be modeled by those with less spiritual achievement, such wonder-making is merely magic.

There is also a tendency to generate typological categories of Sufi saints in the context of South Asia. Following Cornell’s typological framework, Anna Suvorova similarly feels the impulse to categorize South Asian Sufi saints in her study \textit{Muslim Saints of South Asia}. Suvorova posits that the “changing socio-political situation every time calls for an urgently necessary type of saint: a stern warrior for faith or a pacifier-philanthropist; a conservative missionary or a mu‘āḥḥid indifferent to religious differences, a virtuous ascetic or a qalandar, indulging in all sorts of vices; an enlightened preceptor of the elite or an illiterate leader of the lower classes.”\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Muslim Saints of South Asia} is organized around the typologies of warrior, mendicant, hermit, peace-maker, and ascetic. For each chapter, Suvorova generally uses one Sufi as a model for the type being analyzed.

\textsuperscript{27}Cornell, p. 95.

\textsuperscript{28}Cornell, p. 94.

One of the most interesting types of saint in South Asian Sufism is the warrior or ghāzī. The warrior for God is an enduring and popular figure in South Asian Sufism who, despite the dominance of communal ideology amongst Muslim and Hindu religio-political leaders, appeals to people of various religions. Stories about warrior saints proliferate throughout India. In this section, we will examine two types of South Asian Sufi warrior saints, who, although Indians of all creeds and castes revere them, nevertheless illustrate two different sub-categories and functions of the ghāzī saint.

Hyderabad is home to the Yusufain Dargah or the shrine of the “two Yusufs.” According to popular stories, which continue to be told in the city today, two spiritual brothers (pīr bhā’ī) named Yusuf and Sharif were soldiers in the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb’s army during his siege of Golconda in 1687. Neither of these men was Indian: Yusuf was from Cairo and Sharif hailed from Kanan, Iraq. While on ḥajj in Mecca, the two men met one another and found their spiritual teacher Shaykh Shahjahanabadi Kalim Allah, a Chishti master from Delhi. They followed their teacher to Delhi, and after some years, he encouraged Yusuf and Sharif to join Aurangzeb’s army and go to the Deccan.

In his attempt to unseat Abu al-Hasan (r. 1672-1687), the last Shi’i Qutb Shahi king of Hyderabad, Aurangzeb laid siege to the great fort of Golconda for eight months while

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30 Simon Digby’s Sufis and Soldiers in Aurangzeb’s Deccan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001) is one of most significant studies of the role of Sufi warrior saints in the 17th-century Deccan region of South India. This book is proof of the central role of the warrior as a category of saint in South Asian culture, which is reinforced by the long tradition of Hindu ascetic or sādhū warriors in medieval India.

31 Although Yusuf and Sharif are sometimes referred to as blood brothers, the fact that they are referred to as pīr bhā’ī or spiritual brothers. In South Asian culture, fictive kin relationships are common and it is often necessary to find out what one means by such statements as, “Muhammad is my real uncle.” Typically, such fictive kinship terms as “real uncle” are meant to simplify or serve as a short hand for some far more complicated distant blood relationship.

trying to find a way to breach its impregnable walls. One night during the monsoon season, a terrible storm blew up and all of the tents in Aurangzeb’s massive encampment were destroyed, save one. Throughout the violent storm, the flames of two candles steadfastly burned. Afterward, Aurangzeb himself went to this tent to inquire about the remarkable sight that he saw. Sitting there were two men, the candles continuing to burn, reading the Qur’an. It was a miracle that these men and their tent remained unharmed in the storm, and Aurangzeb took these men to be wali Allah or saints. He beseeched them to pray for his victorious defeat of Golconda. Yusuf and Sharif told Aurangzeb to go visit a particular merchant near the massive gate (darwāza, later named the Fateh Darwaza after Aurangzeb’s victory). This man was provided information to Aurangzeb, allowing his army to enter into the fort without violence. Aurangzeb was victorious through the karāmāt or miracle work of the pir bhāī.34

Today, the Yusufain dargāh located behind the Nampally railway station in downtown Hyderabad is popular with people of all faiths. People throng the shrine on Thursday nights to listen to qawwālī, and countless others ask for intercession by these two saints. It is not exactly clear how to classify Yusuf and Sharif according to the typologies of South Asian Sufi sainthood outlined by Suvorova. According to our typological framework,

Khafi Khan, the historian of Aurangzeb’s reign writes in Muntakhāb al-Lubāb regarding the siege of Golconda that, “The period of the siege was prolonged. Owing to the large stock of gun-powder and material for the artillery, which the fort contained, cannon-balls, musket-balls, rockets and gunpowder-flasks were shot continuously day and night (on the besiegers) from the gates, walls, towers and ramparts of the fort...No day passed without a number of the besiegers being wounded or killed, but the emperor’s men showed great courage in the enterprise.” Khafi Khan, Muntakhāb al-Lubāb, translated by Anees Jahan Syed (Bombay and New Delhi: Somaiya Publications Pvt., Ltd., 1977), p. 346.

The narration of the story of Yusuf and Sharif is based upon numerous verbal accounts that I have heard (and that I have even told) from Hyderabadis. In the standard historical chronicles of Aurangzeb’s reign or of Deccani history, Yusuf and Sharif are never mentioned. For a published account of the story, see Hassett’s essay, “Open Sama’,” pp. 43-46.
the two Yusufs are a synthesis of both Cornell and Suvorova’s categories for Sufi sainthood. At first glance, Yusuf and Sharif seem to be more engaged in service to both God and ruler,\(^{35}\) although their tactical ingenuity make it possible for Aurangzeb to storm the gates of Golconda. Yusuf and Sharif also manifest the qualities of the šāliḥ or the ethical authority of a Sufi saint. Yusuf and Sharif are warriors, and it was their engagement in warfare that enabled them to work miracles because of their extraordinary piety.

Mirroring Qasem as a warrior and saint, a second type of Sufi warrior saint is far more difficult to categorize. For more than 800 years Hindus and Muslims in North India have venerated Ghazi Miyan (also known as Salar Ma’sud) as the bridegroom warrior.\(^{36}\) Ghazi Miyan’s tomb is located in Bahraich near the Hindu holy city of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh.\(^{37}\) He was a warrior (ghāzī) and a bridegroom (naushāh, lit. ‘new king’) who, according to some hagiographical traditions, was killed in battle at the age of 19 on June 15, 1034 while trying to build a mosque over the remains of a sun temple in Bahraich.\(^{38}\)

Ghazi Miyan is such a complex and ambiguous figure because he is portrayed in the hagiographical texts in astonishingly different ways. In hagiographies such as Shaykh ‘Abdur Rahman Chishti’s \textit{Mi‘rāt-e Maṣ‘ūdī} (The Mirror of Ma’sud), written during the reign of the Mughal emperor Jahangir (1014-1037/1605-1627), Ghazi Miyan is hailed as a brave

\(^{35}\) Yusuf and Sharif are most un-Chishti in their willingness to serve political authority. Unlike the Naqshbandiya \textit{silsila}, the Chishtis have long eschewed involvement in political matters and have tended to avoid patronage from political figures. That \textit{shaykh} Kali Mullah Shahjahanabad as a Chishti \textit{pir}, encouraged Yusuf and Sharif to join Aurangzeb’s military campaign in the Deccan is somewhat unusual, although their presence at Golconda was necessary for the specific manifestation of their \textit{kāramāt}.

\(^{36}\) According to Suvorova, Muslims have performed pilgrimage or \textit{ziyārat} to the tomb of Ghazi Miyan since the twelfth century, although it was not until at least the year 1250 CE that Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud commissioned the construction of the formal tomb complex. For more information on Ghazi Miyan see pp. 155-161.

\(^{37}\) Suvorova, p. 155.

\(^{38}\) Suvorova, p. 158.
warrior from his youth. ‘Abdur Rahman’s hagiography is largely synthetic, compiling the many biographical accounts of Ghazi Miyan that had been in circulation for the past 500 years. Interestingly, much of the *Mir’āt-e Maṣūdī* is based upon Mullah Muhammad Ghaznavi’s *Tārīkh-e Mullā Muḥammad Ghaznāvī*, which is no longer extant. Mir’āt-e Maṣūdī reports that Ghazi Miyan was the nephew of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna, and it was he who encouraged his uncle to destroy the temple at Somnath in the year 1026 CE. In such chronicles as *Mir’āt-e Maṣūdī*, Ghazi Miyan is the stereotypical warrior conquering the ‘infidels’ in the name of Islam. Romila Thapar observes, “His early exploits are enveloped in fantasy...the stories of his exploits as a warrior may well have surfaced at the time when Ghazi Miyan was acquiring popularity as a protector of the lowly. The biography may have been an attempt to give the pīr appropriate Islamic credentials.” In addition to such appropriate Islamic credentials, Ghazi Miyan is re-presented as friend of the Hindu and a tragic bridegroom.

Ghazi Miyan is called the warrior bridegroom because of the many stories in circulation about his marriage to Zahra Bibi. Ghazi Miyan “and his bride managed only to conclude the marriage-contract, but actually the marriage was not consummated: the bridegroom was killed before the nuptial night, and Zahra Bibi remained a virgin.” This story remarkably parallels the story of Qasem and Kubra’s battlefield marriage at Karbala. Although she does not make the connection between these two marriages, nor to the fact that Qasem’s wedding and martyrdom continues to be observed on a large scale in

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41Suvorova, p. 159.
many parts of North India, particularly in Bihar, such stories of marriage and death give expression to the fact that marriage is virtually universal in India and the Indic (particularly Hindu) stigma against widowhood is persistent. The story’s Hindu credentials are further solidified by the attendance of Yashoda (the mother of the god Krsna) at Ghazi Miyan’s wedding. Yashoda came beseeching Ghazi Miyan to save the Ahir cows and their cowherds from being slaughtered by an evil king. He went out into battle to save these cows, and was martyred. This story contradicts other accounts saying that he was martyred in the attack he led on the sun temple at Bahraich. Ghazi Miyan as protector of cows, and therefore a friend or patron of Hindus, and an eager bridegroom killed while in the bloom of youth minimizes the anti-Hindu martial aspect.

I emphasize these two typological examples of the warrior saint in order to demonstrate that the role of saint or wali Allah is indeed complex, and the saint in question often possesses a multitude of qualities that makes him or her exemplary. Most importantly, this section demonstrates the fluidity of the typological categories. In the case of Ghazi Miyan, he is much more than a mono-dimensional warrior-martyr—he is a hero for all members of the underclass, and his tragic wedding reflects anxieties that all South Asians have about widowhood. In fact, it is arguable that many of the Sufi figures who are revered as saints do not necessarily appear at first glance to be especially pious, a great teacher or miracle-maker. What, then, makes these individuals saints?

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42 For a more detailed description of the bridal aspects of the 'urs of Ghazi Miyan see, Garcin de Tassy, Muslim Festivals in India and Other Essays, translated and edited by M. Waseem (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 84-86.

43 Thapar, p. 156.

44 Muslims are beef-eaters and Hindus traditionally venerate the cow as a sacred animal, therefore making it taboo to consume its meat.
The Role of Wilāyah and Walāyah in Theorizing Muslim Sainthood

Developing out of early Shi‘i theories of Imamate and walāyah, much of the earliest Sufi conceptions of sainthood are indebted to the cryptic verses of the Qur‘an and hadīth traditions in which the Prophet Muhammad appointed his cousin and son-in-law ‘Ali as his mawla or guardian and friend. In this section, the scriptural foundations of sainthood and the theoretical conceptions of walāyah and wilāyah in the writings of al-Tirmidhi and Ibn al-‘Arabi will provide a framework for understanding how these notions are transformed in Shi‘i thought. In order to understand the pragmatics of husainiyat-wilāyah and how it structurally orders the practical-devotional life of the Shi‘a, we need to first understand the idealized discourse on Shi‘i sainthood.

Walī and its forms are derived from the Arabic tri-literal root w-l-y (waw-lam-ya) conveying the sense of being, “near, close, friend, patron, and legal protector.” The root possesses two distinct meanings, one of closeness and friendship, and the other conveying the sense of patronage and guardianship. Neither of these two categories means ‘saint’ in the strict sense of the word, although close analysis of the Qur‘an and hadīth illustrates the broad semantic range of the root and its derivations. Walī and its various forms appear with considerable regularity in the Qur‘an, appearing more than 227 times. One of God’s 99 names is al-Walī, and His role as friend and guardian, thus conveying both categorical senses of the word, “Allah is the Walī of those who believe; He causes them to come out of darkness into the light” (2:257).

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46Other references to God being the Friend of the believers can be found in 3:68, 42:9, and 42:28.
God is not only the Friend of the mu’min or believer, but He is also the Guardian who protects the believers and brings them into the light of knowing Him. The wali Allah is secure in his or her relationship with God. Such security is vouched in the following verse from which one can feel no fear for the coming Day of Judgment: “Verily, the Friends of God have nothing to fear, nor are they sad” (10:62). Just as in human relationships of friendship, the role of wali is reciprocal. One possessing exemplary faith in God and ethical authority (ṣalāh) can become a saint if others recognize those qualities as exceptional; God is a Friend to those who have faith.

Both Shi’i and Sunni commentators agree that some Qur’anic verses reveal that ‘Ali is a saint: “Your friends are God, His Messenger, and the Believers...As to those who turn in friendship to God, His Messenger, and the Believers, it is the party of God that must certainly triumph” (5:55-56). In some Shi’i hadith collections there is a hadith in which ‘Ali’s walāyah as a corollary to Muhammad’s prophethood (nubūwwa) and messengership (risāla) is extrapolated from the “Surah of the Star” (Sūrat al-Najm) in which the Angel Gabriel (and therefore God who has sent the revelation) approached the Prophet Muhammad to a distance of two bow’s lengths (53:9). In the hadith, Muhammad reveals to ‘Ali that he heard God tell him: “I wrote thy Name and his Name on my Throne before creating the creatures because of my love of you both. Whoever loves you and takes you as friends numbers among those drawn nigh to Me. Whoever rejects your walāyah and separates himself from you numbers among the impious transgressors against Me.”47 In other words, whoever rejects the role of guardian and the spiritual authority of not only the Prophet Muhammad, but also his cousin and son-in-law ‘Ali also rejects God. God has selected specific individuals

47Henry Corbin, p. 173.
to possess the quality of walāyah, and it is the responsibility of the individual to accept such an exteriorized (zāhīr) manifestation of spiritual leadership.

Although we see that the Qur’an and ḥadīth are important sources for a basic conception of what sainthood generically means within the concept of Islam, Sufi scholars produced some of the most significant theorization of walāyah and wilāyah. The theoretical development of the doctrine of walāyah is most clearly elaborated in the great Andalusian Sufi scholar Muḥi al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī’s Fiṣūṣ al-Ḥikām (The Bezels of Wisdom), although he was not the first scholar to introduce the term into Sufi thought.48 Preceding Ibn al-ʿArabī in the 9th century CE, al-Hakim al-Tirmidhī49 most likely born between the years 205 and 215/820 and 830 in Nishapur, Iran developed the first Sufi theory of walāyah. Al-Tirmidhī was born into a family of religious scholars—his father was a ḥadīth specialist—and he was trained as a fāqih or legal scholar. In his autobiography, al-Tirmidhī recounts that at the age of eight he began studying the religious sciences and so continued until he was twenty-seven and set off for Mecca to soak up the spiritual atmosphere of God’s city.50 Returning home, al-Tirmidhī endeavored to become a ḥāfīz or one who has memorized the Qur’an in its entirety. From this experience, he began reading widely, although apparently without a teacher to guide him. As a result, al-Tirmidhī was “now bewildered (muṭaḥayyīr) and I did not know what was required of me—except that I did begin to undertake fasting and ritual

48William Chittick translates Fiṣūṣ al-Ḥikām as “The Bezels of Wisdom,” although I find the word perception to better reflect the quality of ḥikma, that one must have enough self-understanding in order to realize walāyah as a form of God’s love for humanity. Perception is fundamentally more subtle than wisdom, for it requires the ability to look deep within oneself and to be keenly aware of the universe in which one lives.

49Al-Tirmidhī’s laqab or epithet was al-Ḥakīm or the wise one.

prayer [intensively].” Drawing ever more into seclusion (khalwah), al-Tirmidhi began to have a series of dreams in which he saw God, the Prophet Muhammad, and received knowledge of the meaning of walāyah. Not only al-Tirmidhi received these divinely inspired dreams, but his wife also received dreams explaining the theory of walāyah through visions of her husband. In fact, more than half of al-Tirmidhi’s brief autobiography is a catalogue of reports about his wife’s dreams in which they both encounter the Prophet Muhammad or God. It is curious that al-Tirmidhi’s wife is the conduit for so many instructive dreams about sainthood, yet it clear that her dreams profoundly influenced the development of his theory of walāyah.

Whereas al-Tirmidhi’s wife’s dreams influenced his theoretical conception of sainthood, it is obvious that his scholarship shaped the writings of Ibn al-ʿArabi on the same subject. In his Sīrat al-Awliyāʾ (Lives of the Friends of God), al-Tirmidhi expostulates a theory of walāyah in relation to the institutions of prophethood (nubūwwa) and messengership (risāla). A student asks al-Tirmidhi about the supreme individual that is the seal of the saints (khātim al-awliyāʾ). Al-Tirmidhi explains the meaning of khātim al-awliyāʾ vis-à-vis prophethood:

Know that God has chosen prophets and Friends from among His servants, and He has given preference to certain prophets over others. There is he whom God has favored with friendship (khulla) [Abraham] and he whom God has favored with direct speech (kalām) [Moses]. One He has allowed to praise Him and that refers to the Psalms [of David]. Another He has allowed to raise the dead [Jesus] and to another He has given life of the heart so that he does not commit a sin and does not even think of sin [Muhammad]. And in this manner he has favored certain Friends of God above others. Upon

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51 Al-Tirmidhi, p. 17.

Muhammad he has bestowed special honors such as He has not given anyone else amongst mankind. There are things from this special status, which are hidden from men at large, except God’s chosen few, and there are things, which everyone else necessarily knows.\textsuperscript{53}

There are special prophets whom God has given special favors, and there are saints who are also endowed with God’s graces. The Prophet Muhammad is a special figure in this divine hierarchy because he is the \textit{khatm al-nabī} or the Seal of the Prophets—“God gathered the whole of prophethood together in Muhammad. He made his heart into a vessel for perfected prophethood and put a seal on it...God did not conceal that proof [the seal] in the interior of the Messenger’s heart but actually caused it to be apparent.”\textsuperscript{54} On the Day of Judgment, the Prophet Muhammad will be the “intercessor for the prophets and the Friends of God and for those who are beneath them.”\textsuperscript{55}

The Prophet Muhammad is the Seal of the Prophets, and al-Tirmidhi postulates that a Seal of Sainthood also exists. There is also an eschatological tone in al-Tirmidhi’s theory of \textit{khātim al-awliyā’}. The \textit{khātim al-awliyā’} is the single individual who,

Possesses completely the seal of Friendship with God...he will be their intercessor as \textit{imām} of the Friends of God. He is their chief, being first among them as Muhammad is first among the prophets. The Station of Intercession (\textit{maqām al-shafāʾa}) will be set up for him and he will praise his Lord with such praise and commend Him with such commendations that the Friends of God will recognize his superiority over them with regard to knowledge of God... The Friend of God was what God

\textsuperscript{53}Al-Tirmidhi, pp. 101-102.

\textsuperscript{54}Al-Tirmidhi, p. 106.

\textsuperscript{55}Al-Tirmidhi, p. 105.
thought of first in the primal beginning, and he was the first in His thinking (dhikr) and the first in His knowledge (ʿilm).\textsuperscript{56}

Just as Muhammad was designated the seal of prophethood by God, the extraordinary qualities possessed by the \textit{khātim al-awliyā’} are made manifest to others. Unlike prophethood and messengership that end at the Day of Judgment, \textit{walāyah} is pre-eternal as indicated by al-Tirmidhi. God not only created the saint in pre-eternity, but the saint will also exist after the Resurrection. Therefore, God is neither \textit{nabī} nor \textit{rasūl}, but one of His 99 Divine Names is \textit{al-Walī} or the Friend.

According to the Prophet Muhammad, the saints are “those who when they are seen cause people to think of God.”\textsuperscript{57} The difference between the saints and the prophets and messengers is that the former receive and understand supernatural speech (ḥadīth) from God, whereas the latter receive God’s word (kalām). God’s word given to the prophets and messengers is in the form of revelation (wahy), whereas God’s supernatural speech is conveyed to the saint bringing about feelings of love (muḥabbat) and peace of mind in being close to God.\textsuperscript{58} Being a \textit{muḥaddith} or recipient of God’s supernatural speech is one of the most important qualities that the Shi‘i Imam possesses; an aspect of the Shi‘i notion of \textit{walāyah} that will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Although we know that Muhammad is the \textit{khātim al-nabī}, Al-Tirmidhi never identifies who is the Seal of the Saints. Ibn al-‘Arabi, on the other hand, names the \textit{khātim al-awliyā’} in \textit{Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikām} (The Bezels of Wisdom), his twelfth-century treatise on \textit{walāyah} and \textit{nubūwwa}. Ibn al-‘Arabi’s theorization of sainthood and prophecy is far more complex.

\textsuperscript{56}Al-Tirmidhi, pp. 109-110.

\textsuperscript{57}Al-Tirmidhi, p. 124.

\textsuperscript{58}Al-Tirmidhi, pp. 111-112.
than that of al-Tirmidhi, although the early scholar’s thought was clearly influential. Like al-Tirmidhi, the role of dreams in the formulation of his theory of walāyah is significant. In the preface to Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikām, Ibn al-ʿArabi reveals that in the year 627/1230, the Prophet Muhammad appeared in a dream holding the very book that he was about to write.59

Divided into twenty-seven chapters or “bezels of wisdom,” the Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikām makes reference to a prophet and associates a particular quality with his walāyah. The first bezel of wisdom is the “wisdom of divinity in the word of Adam,” and the final bezel of wisdom is “the wisdom of singularity in the word of Muhammad.” Although Adam is the first Muslim prophet and Muhammad is the last, the other prophets are not listed in chronological order. In the fashioning of the facets of the bezels of wisdom, Ibn al-ʿArabi etches his theory of sainthood. Ibn al-ʿArabi’s theory of walāyah is more developed than that of his predecessor, he demonstrates that prophethood (nubūwwa) and messengership (risāla), while integral offices for delivering God’s revelation to humanity, they are finite in function, subordinate and encompassed within walāyah.

Theorizing walāyah, the role of the Seal of the Saints is increasingly sophisticated in Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikām. In chapter fourteen, “the wisdom of destiny in the word of Ezra [ʿUzayr],” Ibn al-ʿArabi, like al-Tirmidhi, posits that “walāya is the sphere which encompasses all the other spheres, and for this reason has no end in time.”60 In chapter two, “the wisdom in expiration in the word of Seth,” it is explained that nubūwwa and risāla have come to an end on earth—the Prophet Muhammad is the Seal of the Prophets—although walāyah exists beyond eternity. Despite this fact, according to Ibn al-ʿArabi, there is a Seal of

60Chodkiewicz, p. 50.
Muhammadan Sainthood, who like the Seal of the Prophets (Muhammad) existed “when Adam was between the water and the clay.” Therefore, the existence of the Seal of the Saints is pre-eternal, “while other saints became saints only when they had acquired all the necessary divine qualities.” Whereas Ibn al-ʿArabi likens the Prophet Muhammad to the final clay brick needed to make a wall sturdy, the *khatm al-awliyāʾ* is like two bricks that are far more precious than the brick of the Seal of Prophethood:

The Seal of the Saints perceived that two bricks were missing. The bricks of the wall were of silver and gold. Since he saw himself as filling the gap, it is the Seal of Saints who is the two bricks and who completes the wall. The reason for his seeing two bricks is that, outwardly, he follows the Law of the Seal of Apostles [Muhammad the Messenger], represented by the silver brick. This is his outer aspect and the rules that he adheres to in it. Inwardly, however, he receives directly from God what he appears [outwardly] to follow, because he perceives the divine Command as it is [in its essence], represented by the golden brick.

This passage is remarkable for several reasons. First, the tension between the status of the Seal of the Prophets and the Seal of the Saints is clear. The role of prophet and messenger are like the earthen brick—utilitarian and necessary. One cannot build an entire house from bricks made of precious metals. The refraction of its divine effulgence (*nūr*) is distracting, far too precious, and beyond the scope of the understanding of the average person. The role of the prophet is to deliver God’s revelation, and that of the messenger is to implement His Law—theologically these are positions as functional and necessary as the earthen brick.

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62 ibn al-ʿArabi, p. 67.

63 ibn al-ʿArabi, p. 66.
The Seal of the Saints, on the other hand, perceives himself to be not just a single brick that completes the divine structure, but rather two: one of silver and the other of gold. The Seal of the Saints is who he is because he perceives his ontological and theological duality. The silver brick represents the žāhir or exoteric fulfillment of being a good Muslim who follows the Law brought by Muhammad, or what we might consider to be wilāyah. His exemplary ethical authority or šalāḥ is recognized an emulated by others—that is the silver brick—he is a model of being in the world. The more precious, subtle golden brick represents the interior or bāṭin aspect of the Seal’s sainthood or the walāyah. The Seal receives God’s supernatural speech or ḥadīth, and because of the supreme self-knowledge he possesses—for the Seal of the Saints is the consummate ‘ārif or knower—God’s Divine communication is perceived and understood. Perception of the self, God, and Law, is the foundation of walāyah. Perception is Ibn al-ʿArabi’s golden brick representing the saint’s ability to recognize and understand the remarkable closeness God has chosen for him. In the unfolding of the saint’s self-knowledge—that is, of the fundamental reality of God’s Unity of Being or waḥdat al-wujūd—the uniqueness of being chosen by God to be one of His earthly representatives is recognized and acknowledged.

In an act of what is most likely implicit intertextuality, Ibn al-ʿArabi seems to invoke the account of the Prophet laying the keystone of the Kaʿba. Ibn Ishaq narrates a fascinating story in the Sīrat Rasūl Allah (The Life of the Messenger of God), in which Quraysh decided to rebuild the Kaʿba in 605 CE (five years before the Prophet’s first revelation). In the process of rebuilding the Kaʿba, which was the center of pre-Islamic pilgrimage and the storehouse for the Arabs’ idols, a controversy erupted amongst the

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64I am grateful to Tony Stewart for reminding me of this story.
different tribes with regard to who would have the honor of laying the keystone. In the midst of the tribesmen bickering with one another, Muhammad arrived and was appointed the arbitrator for the dispute. Muhammad said, "'Give me a cloak,' and when it was brought to him he took the black stone and put it inside it and said that each tribe should take hold of an end of the cloak and they should lift it together. They did this so that when they got it into position he placed it with his own hand, and then building went on above it." Muhammad asks for the assistance of the other tribes in laying the keystone, but it is he who actually places it in its niche. It is Muhammad who will fulfill his role five years in the future by revealing the true nature of the Ka'ba as the house of God on earth.

Whether Ibn al-'Arabi had the Prophet Muhammad laying the keystone of the Ka'ba in mind when he conceptualized the gold and silver bricks, the parallelism is significant. Ibn al-'Arabi constructs a comprehensive theory of the qualities and features of the khātim al-walāyah al-muḥammadiyyah whom he, rather boldly claims himself to be. Ibn al-'Arabi connects himself to the Prophet Muhammad implicitly through an intertextual reference to Ibn Ishaq's account of Muhammad laying the keystone to the Ka'ba, thus making it plausible for him to define the Seal of Muhammadian Sainthood as:

An Arab, one of the noblest in lineage and power. He is alive in our time. I met him in 595. I saw the which is exclusive to him and which God has hidden away in him from the eyes of His servants, but which He revealed to in the town of Fez in order that I might perceive in him the presence of the Seal of Sainthood. He is thus the Seal of free [i.e. non-legislative] prophecy about which most men know nothing...As God has sealed legislative prophethood through Muhammad, through the Muhammadian Seal he has sealed the sainthood which comes from the Muhammadian heritage...The Seal of Muhammadian...
Sainthood is the most knowledgeable of created beings on the subject of God. There is not now, and after him there will not be, a being who knows more than him about God...  

In *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah* (The Makkan Revelations), Ibn ‘Arabi makes unambiguously clear to whom he is referring in his description of the Seal of the Muhammadan Saints. Ibn ‘Arabi reveals, “I am the seal of the saintship, no doubt, (the seal of) the heritage of the Hashimite and the Messiah.”

More than the eschatological role of the Seal of Saints, Ibn al-ʿArabi prizes the status of the wālī Allah and the khātim al-walīyāh for their mastery of self-knowledge and annihilation of the self (nafs) in God. The wālī Allah’s identity as the supreme knower or ‘ārif is what makes these figures so extraordinary and worthy of their exalted cosmic status. Although Ibn al-ʿArabi states that the Seal of Muhammadan Sainthood is an Arab and a Hashemite, he does not indicate the necessity of a blood relationship with Muhammad. Consanguinity is not an ontological necessity for the Seal of the Saints, and the logic of this statement can be extended to indicate that in Ibn ‘Arabi’s theoretical framework, blood relationship to the Prophet Muhammad is not necessary for virtually all types of Muslim sainthood.

*Theoretical Conceptions of Sainthood in Shi‘ism*

At the foundational, structural level, Shi‘i theories of sainthood is situated within a cosmology of structural complementary pairs, creating a dynamic dimension of sanctity in

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which abstract theological thought (imāmah-walāyah) is balanced by practical ritual-devotional (husainiyyat-wilāyah) expressions of sanctity.

Second, the Catholic exaltation of the martyr or witnessing saint is a typology that is amplified in Shi‘i devotionalism. The martyr typology is one of the most important in the notion of a Shi‘i theory of sainthood, for Imam Husain is one of the most dramatic of all Muslim martyrs, in fact, he is the paradigm for the martyrdom trope in Islam.69 The Islamic genre of maqta‘, whether Sufi or Shi‘i, “derive their authority from the norms established by the Prophet and the Imams.”70 The doctrine of the Imamate and the role of martyr are linked together.

The third indexical feature of a theory of Shi‘i sainthood is blood relationship to the Ahl-e Bait. Whereas any qualified individual may be chosen by God (walāyah) or be publicly recognized (wilāyah) as being a wali Allah, blood relationship to the Ahl-e Bait is the primary qualification. It is in this third indexical feature that a tension with the typology of the shahīd or martyr wali Allah is discerned. While one may be revered as a witness to God that does not necessarily equate to being considered wali Allah.

Structural Complementarity: Imāmah-Walāyah and Ḥusainiyyat-Wilāyah

Imāmah-walāyah and Ḥusainiyyat-wilāyah reflect the two complementary aspects of Shi‘i sanctity, one abstract and theological and based upon the pairing of the Imamate and

69Syed Akbar Hyder’s doctoral dissertation, “To Die and Yet Live: Karbala & Martyrdom in Urdu Discursive Landscapes” (2000), is an important contribution to the study of the dual imagery of Imam Husain and Karbala in Urdu writing and thought.

walāyah, and the second, which is practical and devotional, centers around the family of Imam Husain and wilāyah. These two expressions are characterized by a complex interrelationship. In the case of Shi‘ism, the imāmah-walāyah pair often obscures what I call the practical, ethical expression of sanctity or ḥusainiyyat-wilāyah, yet these theological and practical expressions of sainthood are mutually dependent upon one another. Shi‘i devotion to the Ahl-e Bait or Family of the Prophet Muhammad, particularly to Imam Husain and his family cannot be explained by the doctrine of the Imamate, for it would otherwise be impossible to venerate figures such as Qasem, the son of Husain’s elder brother Hasan who was the second Imam.

Because structural complementarity is abundant within Islamic theology, a Structuralist approach is useful as a hermeneutic tool. Based upon a theory of complementary pairing, it is within the realm of logic that in order for the universe to function properly, all things must have a complement that provides contrast and balance. As Vincent Cornell notes with regard to the distinction between walāyah and wilāyah, these two aspects of sanctity must exist, just as within Taoism the yīn or femininity can only exist in correlation to the masculine principle of yáng. Masculinity without femininity results in severe disruption of the universe and will ultimately lead to destruction. In Hindu traditions, most masculine gods are portrayed with their female consorts. There are, of course, some notable instances of singularity of being such as the fierce goddess Kali (“the dark one”) who wreaks destruction.

It is perhaps within Isma‘ili Shi‘ism that the principle of cosmologic balance has been most clearly articulated. According to Wilferd Madelung Isma‘ili cosmology is based

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71V. Cornell, p. xix.
upon “the divine imperative kun, consisting of the letters kāf and nūn, through duplication formed the two original principles kūnī kadar. Kūnī was the female and kadar was the male principle.”

72 From God’s command, “Be!” (19:35), both male and female principles mutually and simultaneously came into being on earth. In the first revelation given to the Prophet Muhammad in Sūrat al-ʿAlaq or (“The Clot”), God proclaims that He “created humanity out of a clot [of blood]” (96:2). Conception produces a blastocyst or a clot that forms when an egg is fertilized in the uterus. The qur’anic creation of humanity in no way resembles the Biblical narratives of the masculine creation found in the book of Genesis. From the very first qur’anic revelation, masculine-feminine symmetry is stressed. Without male-female balance—animal, human and vegetal—the universe cannot perpetuate itself. Likewise, later in this chapter it will be demonstrated that sanctity in Isna ʿAshari Shi’ism requires both masculine and feminine spiritual and ethical exemplars.

Islamic theology abounds with other examples of complementary pairs, all of which indicate God’s pre-eternal ordering of the universe. At the most basic level, God possesses ninety-nine Names. Although to know God is supposed to be truly ineffable, the Names reflect aspects of His reflection in humanity’s imperfect ability to truly understand His Essence (ṣifā). For some, the designation of attributes by which to describe the ineffable God is in tension with the notion of wāḥdat al-wujūd or unity of being. How can God be conceptualized by His uniqueness (tawḥīd) if He is ascribed qualities that are distinctively human? In the Tao of Islam, Sachiko Murata takes the two fundamental aspects of God’s Being—al-Jalāl (the Majestic) and al-Jamāl (the Beautiful)—defining the former as

72 Wilferd Madelung, “Ismāʿiliyya,” EI², 4:203.
masculine-yang and the latter as feminine-yin. Thus God has forty-nine Names (al-asmā al-ḥusna) that denote His feminine qualities such as, al-Latīf (the Kindly One), al-Wadūd (the Loving One), and al-Ṣabūr (the Patient). Examples of His forty-nine masculine qualities are al-Qawwīyy (the Most Strong), al-Ḥāṣib (the Reckoner), and al-Muntāqīm (the Avenger). It may seem to be a theological incongruity that the ninety-nine Names of God are gendered, but this is in fact a cosmological necessity, for without the balancing principle inherent in God’s feminine-masculine qualities, the whole universe would be out of order.

As God possesses both jalāl and jamāl attributes reflecting His totality of being, so too, has He created that which is hidden or bāṭīn and that which is manifest or žāhir to humanity. God has chosen to make His revelation manifest (žāhir) to all of humanity to be understood and its Divine Command obeyed. Through the messengers (rasūl) and prophets (nabī) God has sent down books of Law and clear (žāhir) revelation to humanity. The messengers and prophets are the vehicles of the exoteric dimension of the Divine Command that is brought to the general public in the form of a revealed scripture. The most obvious example is the Qur’an revealed to the Prophet Muhammad for the Arabs. Complementing the exoteric Divine Command is a hidden (bāṭīn) Truth (al-ḥaqiq) of God and His creation. According to Shi’i theology, the Imam possesses the walāyah or closeness to God and ability to perceive and understand the hidden aspect of God’s revelation.

Prophet/Messenger and Imam form a related complementary pair with žāhir and bāṭīn, respectively. In a famous ḥadīth it is related that the Prophet Muhammad declared, “I

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am the City of Wisdom and ‘Ali is its threshold.’ “4 Muhammad is the prophet who received God’s revelation to the Arabs in the form of the Qur’an—that is, he is the giver of the žāhir Book and Law—and ‘Ali is the Imam possessed of walāyah and the ability to interpret (taʾwil) the hidden meaning of the scripture. Sūrat al-Raʾd ("The Thunder"), the thirteenth chapter of the Qur’an, explains God’s revelation to humanity and Muhammad’s role the messenger and prophet for the Arabs, and one verse indicates ‘Ali’s ability to interpret the hidden meaning of the Qur’an (taʾwil): “The Unbelievers say: ‘You are not a messenger.’ Say: ‘God is an adequate witness between you and me and the one who has knowledge of the book’” (13:43). In Shiʿi tafsīr, ‘Ali is the one who has the “knowledge of the book.” This verse can be further interpreted in concordance with the aforementioned hadīth in which Muhammad declared himself to be the “city of wisdom” and ‘Ali is the threshold. Endowed with both the position of Imam and walāyah in the sense of possessing profound spiritual knowledge and guardianship over the Muslim community. In a popular Shiʿi hadīth, the Prophet Muhammad declares, “For whomsoever I am his mawla, ‘Ali is his mawla.” 5 The meaning of mawla can be construed to refer to ‘Ali’s designation by God through Muhammad to be the patron or executor of the Divine Truth (al-ḥaqq). Mawla in this hadīth may also imply that whoever considers the Prophet Muhammad to be his friend must also take ‘Ali in friendship, as Prophet and Imam form a binary complement to one another.


5Quoted in Mortaza Motahhari, Wilayah: The Station of the Master, translated by Yahya Cooper (Tehran: World Organization for Islamic Services, 2001), p. 43.
The Imamate exists in a direct hierarchical relationship to Muhammad as the Seal of Prophecy (khātim al-nubūwwa), and both existed before Creation. According to another tradition attributed to the sixth Imam Ja’far al-Sadiq and related by Ibn-e Babawayh,

Two thousand years before creation, Muhammad and ‘Ali were one light before God..., light formed from one main trunk from which sprang a shining ray... And God said: “Here is a light [drawn] from my Light; its trunk is prophecy and its branch is the Imamate; prophecy belongs to Muhammad, my servant and messenger, and the Imamate belongs to ‘Ali, my Proof and my Friend. Without them I would have created none of my creation...” This is why ‘Ali always said: “I proceed from Muhammad [or from Ahmad] as one clarity proceeds from another...”

The Prophet Muhammad is the nāṭiq or the teacher of God’s revelation, and ‘Ali is the waṣī or executor authorized to carry out the prophet’s teachings. ‘Ali was the first Imam, the threshold of God’s revelation, the šāmit (silent one) who is initiated into the bātin or esoteric meaning of the Qur’an. The Imams are able to communicate with all of the prophets who have ever been sent by God (more than 122,000), and according to a ḥadīth, all revelatory scripture “was revealed to us before it was revealed to the people and we commented upon it before it was commented upon by others.” Ibn al-‘Arabi posited that the saint possesses walāyah in the sense of having attained gnosis. The sixth Imam Ja’far al-Sadiq’s statement “We are the ones who are deeply-rooted in knowledge and we know its explanation,” firmly establishes the connection between the Imamate and walāyah.

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76 Quoted in Amir-Moezzi, p. 30. Ja’far al-Sadiq’s exposition on the divine lights of prophecy and imamate existing in a vertical hierarchical relationship parallels Ibn al-‘Arabi’s theory that walāyah is always subordinate to nubūwwa and risāla.

The ability to discern and decipher God’s supernatural speech is one of the distinctive qualities of the Shi’i Imams. The Imam maintains a direct connection through the Prophet to God, therefore granting him the ability to perceive the esoteric or bātin meaning of the Qur’an, in addition to a deeper cosmic understanding of God and the order of the universe. As one endowed with superlative perceptive abilities, the Imam is the muḥaddith who can hear but not see the revealing angel. As what Amir-Moezzi has termed the imām-muḥaddith, it is not necessary for the Imam to see the angel because he is already initiated and has obtained the deepest spiritual knowledge (maʿrifā) of God.78

Why should the office of the Imamate be paired with walāyah to form a binary complement? As I have indicated in a previous section, many Islamic studies scholars resist acknowledging the difference in meaning and function between walāyah and wilāyah. Walāyah represents the esoteric (bātin) realm and it has a metaphysical connotation. Walāyah is a gift bestowed upon selected individuals by God through divine designation (naṣṣ). One does not choose to possess walāyah, nor can one designate himself to be the waṣīy or executor of the Prophet Muhammad’s received revelation and law. Only God chooses the Imam, and only a very few are given the ability to perform taʿwil and to receive and understand God’s supernatural speech. These are involuntary states that ontologically do not require recognition from other people.

God has made His choice, and it behooves humanity to give their loyalty to the Imams, for they are the Proofs (ḥujjat) of God’s totality of being. Muhammad ibn ʿAli ibn al-Husain ibn-e Babawayh al-Qummi, popularly called Shaykh al-Saduq (d. 381/991), a tenth-century Shi’i theologian writes in Iʿtiqādāt al-Imāmiyyah (The Beliefs of the Imamis), “their

78 Amir-Moezzi, p. 71.
command is the command of Allah, their prohibition is the prohibition of Allah, and disobedience to them is disobedience to Allah.”

(85). Muhammad declared to the nascent Muslim community (ummah), “He who denies ‘Ali his Imamate after me, verily denies my apostleship (nubūwwa). And he who denies my apostleship has denied Allah his divinity.”

For the Shi’a, a true Muslim is one who accepts ‘Ali as Imam and gives first loyalty to the Ahl-e Bait or the members of Muhammad’s family descending through the line of his daughter Fatimah.

Dedication to the Ahl-e Bait, and their exercise of spiritual power and ethical authority or wilāyah comprises the second of the binary complements that structure Shi’i theology and devotional life. For virtually all Isna’ Ashari or Twelver Shi’as, the martyrdom of the third Imam Husain at the battle against the army of the ‘Umayyad khalīfa Yazid in Karbala, Iraq in 61/680 constructs the foundation of ritual-devotional life. In the majlis-e ‘azā’ (mourning assemblies), the ritualized remembrance of Karbala centers on Imam Husain’s family and their fates. In his study of Pakistani Muharram rituals, Vernon Schubel observes that dedication to the Ahl-e Bait is the mainspring of Shi’i identity. While I agree with Schubel, I argue that what actually grounds Shi’i ritual and emotional life is a more specific aspect of venerating the Prophet Muhammad’s family: it is the doctrine of ḥusainiyyat, which provides a culturally specific ethical and social blueprint that articulates the ideals of Islam through the exemplary sacrifices of the hero(in)es of Karbala. The cultural specificity that ḥusainiyyat-wilāyah allows through its explicit ethical-practical

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80Shaykh al-Saduq, p. 94.
dimensions means that the Ahl-e Bait as they are portrayed in South India would not be relevant in Damascus where the specificities of Syrian culture construct these saints to embody a different, yet thoroughly Islamic, set of ideals.

Shi‘i Muslims recognize that their ontological status derives from the model man exemplified by Imam Husain, and his model family who sacrificed and suffered with him at Karbala. In the majlis-e ‘azā‘, the family of Imam Husain is portrayed, performed, and stereotyped (in a performative sense) as the embodiments of wilāyah. Ḥusainīyyat creates a space in both literature and the ritual context of the majlis in which the characters and experiences of Husain and his family are performed, brought to life, and given social relevance. Through Ḥusainīyyat, a public image of the Karbala heroes is constructed. They are recognized by the community for being the most sacrificing of the saints (awlīyā’ Allah), being the consummate martyrs (shahīdān, sing. shahīd), and through the manifestation of their wilāyah, they are the paradigms of what it means to be a good Shi‘i Muslim.

Husain’s family is recognized as the ultimate exemplars of submission to God’s will. Lallan Nazmi eloquently describes the kind of role model Imam Husain is for the Shi‘a:

His lessons on self control, courage, justice, cooperation and world unity are the guidelines for us. He displayed the value of self-respect and honour and established to act well in our life to gain honour and prestige. If we tread his path, the welfare of society and community and the world at large is guaranteed. Imam Husain displayed noble qualities of heart and mind. He offered water to his dying foes but never used it as a weapon of victory. His noble qualities brought more than a dozen (fourteen) of his deadly foes from the Yazidian forces to his ranks.82

Although he doesn’t use the word, Nazmi is outlining what the Shi’a recognize to be the socio-ethical manifestations of Husain’s wilāyah. He is a šāliḥ or ethical authority because he gave water to the enemy, even though his own family was denied access to the Euphrates River. He is committed to the notion of ʿadālat or justice, one of the foundational elements of Shi’i theology. Imam Husain is a model of courage. He traveled to Kufah despite knowing—this is a manifestation of his Imaamic knowledge of the hidden—the inevitability of his death.

In numerous conversations with Shi’as in Hyderabad, the question of whether Imam Husain knew before setting off for Kufah whether he would be martyred at Karbala and why he didn’t seek divine intervention, is a popular subject for debate. In one conversation with Dr. Sadiq Naqvi, a popular ẓākir or majlis orator, he said that, “the Imam’s ʿilm (knowledge) is not complete without having knowledge of all that has happened from before Creation until the Day of the Resurrection (yawm al-ḥashr). Therefore, if any Imam doesn’t know that something is about to happen, then he is no different from a human being.” Continuing, Naqvi provided several reasons why Imam Husain could not ask for God’s intervention at Karbala. First, the prophets and Imams do not seek God’s intercession. What challenges God puts before them must be encountered as tests to strength faith and resolve. Second, “When an Imam or nabī asks for help, then every creature in the world must reply.” Finally, speaking from a more hagiographical perspective, he said that when the jinn asked Husain whether he wanted God’s intervention, his baby son ʿAli Asghar fell down out of his cradle in readiness to do combat. Even a six-month-old baby was willing to sacrifice himself in the name of Islam.83 For a

83Interview with Dr. Sadiq Naqvi at his home in Darulshifa, Hyderabad (March 30, 2005).
minority community the doctrine of ḥusainiyat is appealing because the experience of alienation and persecution at Karbala often resonates with the minority Shi’i communities in South Asia.

In complement to the doctrine of ḥusainiyat, wilāyah functions as manifest spiritual closeness to God. ‘Ala al-Dawla al-Simnani (d. 736/1336), a late-thirteenth century Kubrawi Sufi of Iran argued that wilāyah is distinct from walāyah, which represents prophecy, and by extension the Imamate. Simnani’s theory of the divinity (ulūhiyyat) and its emanations (fayd) connects wilāyah to the earth and to humankind. Wilāyah is the exoteric manifestation of one’s spiritual perfection and gnosis, and it is imitable. Certainly, Husain as an Imam possesses both walāyah and wilāyah (see Table 1.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Imamate-Walāyah</th>
<th>Ḥusainiyat-Wilāyah</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>God chosen, involuntary (not dependent upon social recognition)</td>
<td>God-chosen, situational (social recognition central)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theological dimension</td>
<td>Ethical dimension (social dimension)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract, theological</td>
<td>Practical, social-ethical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esoteric (bāṭin)</td>
<td>Exoteric (ẓāhir)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status based upon naṣṣ (Divine designation). Consanguinity is inherent to doctrine of naṣṣ in Shi’i theory of Imamate.</td>
<td>Consanguinity through Fatimah Zahra (matrilineal aspect).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculine (feminine: Fatimah Zahra and Zainab)</td>
<td>Masculine :: Feminine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.1: Structural Complements of Imāmate-Walāyah and Ḥusainiyat-Wilāyah

Through the doctrine of ḥusainiyat, the spiritual and moral perfection of Husain’s family is imitable by the average person. Shi’i devotional life is dependent upon ḥusainiyat-wilāyah. Walāyah is bestowed by divine designation or naṣṣ to the Imams,

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84The population of Hyderabad is approaching 5 million, out of which approximately 150,000 are Shi’a Muslims. For the most recent scholarly discussion of the Shi’i population in Hyderabad, see Toby Howarth’s dissertation, “The Pulpit of Tears: Shi’i Muslim Preaching in India” (Amsterdam: Free University, 2001), pp. 65-66.

85Hussaini, p. 50.

86Hussaini, p. 51.
prophets and messengers, and is therefore involuntary and inimitable. Some will argue that the model set forth by the prophets and Imams is supposed to be imitated and a guide for proper religiosity, but I argue that it is not walāyah that is recognized, but rather the wilāyah or exoteric qualities of being a saint. I am not arguing that one is more important than the other rather, these pairs complement one another, and they are integral to one another. The family members of Imam Husain are real people because they were not designated to be Imams, but they did have the necessary consanguinity to mark them as special saints. In Shi’i collective memory, Imam Husain’s family members are simultaneously portrayed as very human people and as paragons of ethical and religious being in the world. In terms of the ideal types that each member of Imam Husain’s family exemplifies (bride, widow, warrior, sacrificing baby, loyal sister), these hero(in)es are constructed to embody values that are culturally relevant to the Shi’a of Hyderabad. One can identify with these people and their personalities and experiences remind the Shi’a of themselves and their families. They love, they feel anger, and they suffer as human beings, albeit of an extraordinary kind. The stories of the hero(in)es of Karbala shape people’s every day being. In other places such as Iran and Syria, the remembrance of the battle of Karbala does not infuse every aspect of a person’s life as it does in Hyderabad where Ja’far as-Sadiq’s injunction to act as though “Every day is ‘Āshūrā’ and every place is Karbala,” is brought to life.
Witnessing and Faith in God: The Role of Shahādat in Shi‘i Sainthood

As we have already observed, the martyr or witness in faith before God is one of the earliest and most significant types of sainthood in both Christian and Islamic traditions. Within fifty years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the battle of Karbala created a vividly dramatic and horrifying story that has exhausted the need for other martyr hero(in)es in the Shi‘i tradition. Virtually all of the martyrs who are venerated by Shi‘i Muslims are either the members of Imam Husain’s family or the Imams. As Omar Khalidi has observed, ḥusainiyyat is “the emotional mainspring of the Shi‘ah religious experience.”

Martyrdom is an important typological manifestation of wilāyah. One’s willingness to sacrifice life in submission to God and to the truth of His revelation sent down to Muhammad is exemplified in the imbalanced battle at Karbala. Husain and his family and their small band of supporters were besieged by the ‘Umayyad khalīfa Yazid’s considerably larger army. In Shi‘i hagiographical narratives and in the discourses of Hyderabadi ḵākirs the impossibility of Husain’s success against the tyranny (ẓulm) and degradation of Islam by Yazid is emphasized. Husain could never win such a battle, but he struggled nonetheless in order to shock the early Muslim community into recognizing how quickly the ideals of the Prophet Muhammad had been abandoned in the pursuit of wealth and power. For the Shi‘a, the battle of Karbala draws this degradation of religion into dramatic relief. Husain had to become a witness (shahīd) in order to preserve Islam and to protect his family.


88Reports of the size of Yazid’s army range from two thousand horsemen and foot soldiers to upwards of 100,000.
In the Shi'i context *shahādat* is an aspect of *wilāyah*. Laying down one’s life and suffering under the tyranny of a secular power, as the ‘Umayyads were considered by the *shī’at ʿAli* (the partisans of ʿAli) corresponds to Roman Catholic notions of the martyr as a saint. One who is willing to sacrifice life in faith of God is a ʿāliḥ or ethical authority of the highest order. This person is convinced by what it means to be a good person in the world and is unwilling to compromise his or her exalted ontological status in order to elude suffering or receive rewards. Unwavering faith in God that is recognized and admired by others constitutes spiritual authority to a certain extent.

*Shahādat* does not automatically make one a *walī Allah* in Shi‘i thought. Over the past 1400 years, countless Shi‘a have attained martyrdom and they may have the epithet *shahīd* attached to their names in death, but that does not mean that they are recognized as friends of God. The doctrine of Ḥusainiyat has established such an extraordinary standard for who can be recognized as a *shahīd* *walī Allah*.

*For the Love of the Family: Ḥusainiyat, Consanguinity and Sainthood*

Contemporary scholarship of the Shi‘i conception of *walāyah* devotes little attention to the centrality of blood relationship to the Prophet Muhammad as a fundamental criterion for sainthood. The textual evidence of the theological and devotional traditions indicates that consanguinity is the single most important requirement in the manifestation and recognition of sainthood or *wilāyah* in Shi‘i Islam. Kinship with Muhammad through his daughter Fatimah is the foundation of sanctity in both Shi‘i theology and devotional
practice.\textsuperscript{89} Who actually belongs to the Ahl-e Bait is a matter of debate. Most Sunni scholars and theologians include all of the Prophet’s wives and some other family members in the Ahl-e Bait. The Shi‘a on the other hand, usually refer to the hadith of the Ahl-e Kisa’ for identifying the members of the Ahl-e Bait. Some identify the Ahl-e Bait as the chārdah ma‘sūmīn or Fourteen Infallibles who are the Prophet Muhammad, Fatimah and the twelve Imams. Yet others are more inclusive with regard to who has membership in the Ahl-e Bait. When asked, many Shi‘a will identify many of the extended family members (siblings, children) of the Imams as having the status of being in the Ahl-e Bait. The literature and performances that invoke the memory of Karbala are dedicated to all of the members of the Prophet’s family descended through his daughter. This is possible because the daughters, wives, sons and other relatives of Imam Husain possess spiritual and ethical wilāyah.

In the thought of Mortaza Motahhari, an Iranian theologian, closely allied with Ayatollah Khomeini, one must feel wilā’ or fidelity of love (mahabbat) and closeness (qarāba) for the Family of the Prophet.\textsuperscript{90} It is the bond of love and affection that connects a family, and through the doctrine of ḥusainiyyat the Shi‘a become members of this special family. Several couplets from a nauha (short poem written in couplets, sung rhythmically to the percussive action of mātam or self-flagellation) written by Jenab Shah Nawaz demonstrates the wilā’-ye mahabbat for Imam Husain’s family:

\begin{center}
\textit{We are Shi‘as (Ḥaidarī) and will abide in every age}

\textit{In every era, Husain, we will celebrate your grief}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{89}This sentiment is similarly expressed by Vernon Schubel in Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam. He defines Shi‘ism as, “the school of thought in Islam which stresses personal allegiance and devotion to the Prophet and his family as the most crucial element and sign of one’s submission to the will of God,” p. 17.

\textsuperscript{90}See Motahhari, pp. 50–62.
It isn’t easy to cease in remembering Husain, o “Nawaz”

Nawaz, a Hyderabadi nauha-khwān or professional reciter of nauhas, declares his identity as a Shi’ā (Ḥaidarī, literally those of Haidar, a laqab for ‘Ali) in the first line of his poem, and his love for Imam Husain is expressed in the next lines. Nawaz cannot forget Imam Husain and his sacrifice at Karbala, and he promises that the Shi’ā will remember his grief always as a sign of their love for him and his family.

A discourse on maḥabbat-e Ahl-e Bait is a requisite topic in the Karbala prose narratives (maqtal) written in Urdu. A review of the contemporary Urdu prose narratives that I have collected in Hyderabad reveals that at least ten of these books contain chapters with the following titles: “The Eminence of the Ahl-e Bait of Muhammad,”92 “The Excellent Qualities of the Ahl-e Bait,”93 and “The Ahl-e Bait and Prophecy.”94 One can also purchase from the many religious bookstalls that abound in Hyderabad’s Old City a small pamphlet titled, Maḥabbat-e Ahl-e Bait-e Rasūl (Love of the People of the House of the Messenger).95 In this pamphlet, the author provides a lengthy explanation of who is included in the Ahl-e Bait—a question that has been long debated—with four potential groups of individuals who qualify, yet he ultimately follows one of the standard Shi’ī interpretations of the Qur’an to determine who belongs to the Prophet’s proper family. In Sūrat Āl-e 'İmran (“The People of

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93Maulana Iftikhar al-Hasan, Khāk-e Karbalā (Delhi: Adabi Duniya, 2005), pp. 5-12.
ʿImran”), the third chapter of the Qur’an, God reveals that the Family of ʿImran includes his wife and daughter Maryam the mother of Jesus. They comprise his household or āl.\textsuperscript{96}

Many of these chapters use a variety of textual sources of authority to prove the necessity for one’s wilā’-ye maḥabbat-e Ahl-e Bait. All quote extensively Qur’anic verses, ḥadīth, and the histories and tafsīr of scholars such as al-Tabari, Muslim, and Fakhr al-Din Razi. The authors, taking into account the fact that most of their Indian Shiʿi readers do not know Arabic, provide Urdu translation in parallel text. One can participate in the power and authority vested in the Arabic text while reading and understanding the Urdu translation. In hagiographical works such as these, the sacred proof-texts provided by the writers connects the devotee to the distant places of Karbala, Makkah and Madinah, while rendering the texts into local languages and idioms reinforces the emotional bond and fidelity that one feels for the Prophet Muhammad and his family.

\textbf{Figure 1.1:} Family Portrait of Muhammad, ʿAli, Fatimah, Hasan and Husain\textsuperscript{97}

\textsuperscript{96}Jilani, pp. 6-7.
The Ahl-e Bait serves as a form of short-hand for the Prophet Muhammad, his
daughter, all of the Imams and by broader extension, all of their progeny (see Figure 1).

Ḥusainiyat is an aspect or dimension of Ahl-e Bait, invoked in the collective memory of the
events of Karbala and dramatically brought to life through the ritualized embodiment of
the suffering of the members of Husain’s family, their wilāyah as a model of being in the
world is made real. In the *mehndi kī majlis* or wedding mourning assembly of 7 Muharram,
the binary pairing of *husainiyat-wilāyah* will be analyzed from within a particular
ethnographic context. What all of the textual evidence indicates is an extreme privileging
of consanguinity.

In comparison to the Sufi tradition, which is largely Sunni, and primarily because
the Shi’ a have always had their own sources of *wilāyah* and *walāyah* in the example of Imam
Husain, his family and in the Imamate, there are very few saints in the conventional sense
in the Shi’i tradition. One encounters very few tombs dedicated to Shi’i awliyā’ Allah who
are not somehow related to the Imams. In Iran, the most popular Shi’i shrines are all
dedicated to relatives of the Imams. The tomb of Bibi Shahrbano the Iranian Sassanian
princess married to Imam Husain is perched on a mountain slope outside of the city of
Rayy. Several of the siblings of the eighth Imam ’Ali Reza have massive tomb complexes in
Iran, which are second and third in importance after the Imam’s shrine in Mashhad. The
golden dome resting over the grave of his sister Fatimah Ma’sumeh’s shrine in the holy city

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Photograph taken at the Khilwat Ṭāshūrkhana near Charminar in Hyderabad’s Old City. Khilwat belonged to
the Nizam’s and has been closed to the public for several decades. Located near the Charminar bus stand, the
Khilwat Ṭāshūrkhanās—there are seven—are a haven in the midst of the chaos of the Old City’s main shopping
and transportation area. This is a photograph of a lithograph depicting the *panjetan-e pāk* or five holy ones
referring to the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatimah, ’Ali, Hasan and Husain. In the background, the
Angel Gabriel stands over this scene of family happiness. Note the expression on Gabriel’s face and his arms
crossed over his chest in supplication to the Five Holy Ones. He is protecting and venerating each family
member.
of Qom dominates the city skyline and is the second most important pilgrimage (ziyārat) site in Iran. The third most important tomb is that of Imam Reza’s brother Shah Abdul 'Azim also located in Rayy. The major Shi'i shrines throughout the Muslim world are all dedicated to the hero(ines) of Karbala, the Imams and their relatives. Blood matters.

The emphasis placed on blood relationship is brought into vivid relief in Mullah Husain Va'ez Kashefi’s sixteenth-century Persian maqtal Rowżat al-Shohadā’ (The Garden of the Martyrs). I recently became aware of a section in Rowżat al-Shohadā’ that remarkably parallels the account of Qasem, the son of the second Imam Hasan, who married his uncle Husain’s daughter Fatimah Kubra on the battlefield of Karbala and was martyred before he was able to consummate his vows.98 Perusing a list of the martyrs of Karbala, I encountered a brief notice about a youth named Wahab ibn-e ‘Abdallah al-Kalbi stating that he came from Iran, was accompanied by his new wife and mother and was martyred on the battlefield. Not only was Wahab martyred, but his wife was also the only female martyr at Karbala.99 This was the first time that I had heard of Wahab, his status as a bridegroom, and the martyrdom of himself and his wife at Karbala. Why is his story so obscure? Why do the zākirs in the majlis-e ‘azā’ never make any reference to his story that is a striking parallel to that of Qasem?

Wahab is inconsequential because he lacks blood relationship to Imam Husain. Wahab, despite being a martyr, is not encompassed within the realm of ḥusainiyyat because he does not possess the blood relationship, and more importantly, he, unlike Qasem, does

98 See chapter 3 for detailed discussion of the remembrance and portrayal of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra in Kashefi’s maqtal and in the mehndī ki majlis in Hyderabad during Muharram 2005 and 2006. See Appendix C for Kashefi’s “Account of the Martyrdom of Qasem ibn-e Hasan,” and please see Appendix D for a translation of the “Account of the Martyrdom of Wahab ibn-e ‘Abdallah al-Kalbi.”

not embody the spiritual and ethical authority of wilāyah. Recalling the story of Ghazi Miyan, the Sufi warrior-bridegroom popular in North India, Wahab’s lack of wilāyah is further demonstrated. Ghazi Miyan—a Sunni—is recognized by Muslims as a shahīd who was a warrior for his faith, and he is thus venerated as a saint. Wahab is Shi’a and although a shahīd, he is not a saint because he lacks the required blood relationship to the Prophet Muhammad and his descendants that is the fundamental requirement for possessing wilāyah in the Shi’i concept of sainthood.

Kashefi’s account of Wahab’s martyrdom demonstrates the rules determining who possesses wilāyah in the Shi’i tradition. Although Wahab certainly was a brave warrior and a martyr, according to the criteria for what it means to be a Shi’i saint, he cannot be considered a true wali Allah. Shi’i Muslims if they have ever heard of Wahab will acknowledge his status as a shahīd, but they will not venerate him and call him wali Allah. Wahab necessarily lacks the blood relationship that is such an essential quality of the Ahl-e Bait, and ultimately causes his to have doubts about his sacrifice.

Wahab’s doubts about the battle and the deal-making that takes place between himself and his mother and new bride dramatically demonstrate his lack of wilāyah. Much of the narrative centers upon Wahab’s entreaties with his wife who is initially chagrined that her new husband is going to sacrifice himself to the Imam’s cause in order to reap the rewards of Paradise. Wahab’s story is remarkably similar to Qasem’s, but Kashefi treats the latter with the utmost respect and writes of his martyrdom with pathos and sensitivity, whereas the account of the former is more dispassionate and emphasizes the pettiness of fear and self-interest. Wahab can be nothing more than a shahīd.
A true walī Allah does not seek out martyrdom. There is little concern for the eschatological results of martyrdom. The single goal for a true martyr at Karbala is to protect the faith and the family of Imam Husain. Zainab, after granting her young sons ‘Aun and Muhammad permission to go into battle where she knew that they would most certainly be killed, found that the boys were filled with deep emotion and gratitude for their mother’s pragmatism and commitment to justice and faith. Thanking his mother, ‘Aun said, “Mother, we both feel so elated to know that we have your permission to fight in defense of our uncle and his family...We shall offer such fight tomorrow that, whenever you will remember us and mourn for us, your grief will be mingled with pride that we lived up to the reputation of our family.” More important to these young boys is protecting their uncle and his holy family. None of the mothers at Karbala wanted their young sons to enter into battle and die, but they all recognized its necessity to preserve the blood lineage of Fatimah Zahra (“the Shining One”) and their vision of a true Islam. Rather than looking forward to the rewards of Paradise, the members of Husain’s family who became shahīds looked forward only to preserving the holiness of the family and Muhammad’s original message of Islam.

Wahab’s lack of blood relationship to the household of Husain further diminishes his status as a Shi’i walī Allah. Wahab is an outsider from Bi‘r Jud in Iran without even Arab blood coursing through his veins. No shrine exists dedicated to Wahab. I have never come across any maršiyas, nauḥas, or salāms dedicated to Wahab in the hundred or so chapbooks that I have collected in India and Pakistan. This further indicates the extent to which Shi‘i devotional life is based upon the doctrine of ḥusainiyyat. In the realm of ḥusainiyyat, neither

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proximity to Husain and his family, nor participation and martyrdom in the battle of Karbala is sufficient for one to be publicly recognized as an embodiment of wilāyah.

**The Role of the Women of the Ahl-e Bait in Shi‘i Sainthood**

Unlike Christian female saints whose sanctity, according to the patriarchal metanarrative of the hagiographical tradition, “is expressed in terms of physical, male power; it is the attainment of a victory in a drawn-out contest in which the female participants assume the characteristics associated with male fighters,”\(^{101}\) and the female Sufi saint whose exemplary piety (according to Ibn al-‘Arabi) is articulated as proof of her having the soul of a man,\(^{102}\) and still relegated to the appendices of tažkīrat al-awliyā’ or biographical dictionaries of saints, the women of the Prophet’s family are spiritual and moral exemplars to be imitated by both Muslim men and women. These Shi‘i female saints’ gendered status is venerated and most importantly, maintained by their male hagiographers.\(^{103}\) Fatimah Zahra, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, wife of ʿAli the first Shi‘i Imam and the mother of two martyred Imams, Hasan and Husain, is revered as one of the most holy of Muslim women—sinless, spiritually perfected, the lady of sorrows and patience. Zainab, the sister of Hasan and Husain became the messenger of Karbala, spreading news of what happened on the banks of the Euphrates River; she, too, is a

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\(^{102}\)Email on the subject, “Sufi Women as Men,” from Kiki Kennedy Day to the Islamaar listserv (December 5, 2006).

\(^{103}\)Kashefi is one of the most important hagiographers of the women of Imam Husain’s family. In *Rowzat al-Shohāda‘*, more space is dedicated to the biography and spiritual attainments of Fatimah Zahra than to all of the Imams combined.
spiritual and moral exemplar whose bravery and willingness to sacrifice all for the sake of religion is admired by both men and women. Sakinah and Fatimah Kubra, daughters of Imam Husain, were just young girls at the battle of Karbala, but each made their own sacrifices to uphold the notion of justice (‘adālat), a central concept in Shi’i doctrine post-Karbala. Fatimah Ma’sumeh, the sister of the eighth Shi’i Imam Reza is revered as a woman of great learning and piety and hundreds of thousands of devotees go on pilgrimage (ziyārat, lit. “visitation”) each year to her lavish gold-domed shrine in Qom, Iran. The women of the Ahl-e Bait occupy a unique role as saints in the spiritual-devotional life of Shi’i Muslims. They are respected and portrayed in various hagiographic genres as female, feminine, pious, learned and brave figures.

Never are the women of the Ahl-e Bait relegated to an appendix of the biographies of saints, nor are they turned into quasi-men by virtue of their spiritual exertions. Females and the feminine are an integral aspect of Shi’i hagiographic traditions. In fact, one observes that there is a profound dependence upon the models of piety and behavior that the women of the Ahl-e Bait provide for Shi’i men and women, particularly Fatimah and Zainab who are models for ideal womanhood.104 Why are stories about the women of the Prophet’s family so frequently invoked in the ritual performance of the majlis mourning assembly, and why is the feminine voice, particularly of the young girl Sakinah or Zainab so popularly employed to great emotional effect in the lamentation poetry of the maršiya, nauḥa and salām?

At the most basic level, the reason why the women of the Ahl-e Bait are such enduring models is because they survived the battle and spent the remainder of their lives spreading the message of Imam Husain’s martyrdom at the battle of Karbala. These are the stories of women who suffered, survived and remained intensely dedicated to the preservation of Islam and attaining justice for the atrocities committed by the ʿUmayyad khalīfa Yazid’s army. This justice is meted out in the Shiʿi collective memory performed in the mourning majlises, documented in maqṭal or martyrdom narratives and poetry such as marṣiyas and nauḥas, and it is likewise materialized in the sacred architecture and objects in the ʿashūrkhana. Shamsul Hasan Shamsi asserts that Zainab “proved to be a second Husain, keeping alive the revolutionary movement of her brother...in keeping aloft the banner of Islamic values and in keeping alight the torch of the noble ideals lighted by her martyred brother.”105 Shamsi goes so far as to credit Zainab with being the “true founder of mass-media.”106 Through Zainab’s acts of memory-making, the events of Karbala are perpetually recreated in the collective memory of the Shiʿi community.

If there are Shiʿi male saints, then there must also be female saints. Recalling the opening story to this chapter, Dr. Khan recited the events of Qasem’s martyrdom through the experiences and actions of his wife Fatimah Kubra. He instinctively and implicitly validated Fatimah Kubra as the second half of a binary pairing: male saint : : female saint. At the lay level, the Shiʿa of Hyderabad accept the centrality of the women of the Ahl-e Bait as spiritual exemplars and moral role models, which is demonstrated by the dependence upon female voices and experiences in the ritual performance of the majlis and devotional

106Shamsi, p. 248.
poetry. Without the voices and dramatic articulation of the experiences of the women of the Ahl-e Bait in the majlis, Karbala could not be remembered. Although many Shi’a may not explicitly recognize that male and female saints must both exist, through their actions and emotions, they do intuitively reinforce the fundamental binary structure of Shi’i sainthood.

The Female Friends of God: The Women of the Ahl-e Bait, Walāyah and Wilāyah

Within the study of sainthood, the Shi’i hagiographical tradition exhibits three distinctive qualities that mark its difference from stories about the lives of saints and other exemplary figures in Christianity, Hinduism, and Sufism. Whereas the lives of saints tend to emphasize asceticism, Shi’i hagiography overwhelmingly lacks any such element. In the hagiographies of the Imams and the Ahl-e Bait, their biographers do not typically depict them as ascetics. Although deeply pious, the women of the Prophet’s family were very much involved in the affairs of the world. Second, kinship plays an important role in the construction of Shi’i female saints. Their blood relationship to the Ahl-e Bait is a prerequisite of sanctity. These are women chosen by God to be charismatic and spiritual exemplars, and they are likewise recognized by society as such. Their hagiographers portray the women of the Ahl-e Bait simultaneously as mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives, as well as being learned in the Qur’an and religious sciences. The third distinctive feature of a gendered notion of Shi’i sainthood is that the femininity of these women is embraced and appreciated by men and women alike. There is no gender hierarchy of Shi’i sainthood in which the female is a subordinate lesser version of the male religious exemplar. This gender parity is distinctive in Shi’i Islam.
It is not a part of the Shi'i hagiographical imperative that the women of the Ahl-e Bait be ascetic. The difference between poverty, which tends to be both an involuntary state and a consciously chosen ascetic life-style, is significant with regard to the hagiographical narratives about the women of the Ahl-e Bait. This stands in contrast with the stories of the sixteenth century Rajput princess Mirabai, who forsook wealth and comfort to live as a bhakta, and whose love for Krsna alienated her from family and society. In the Shi'i context, none of the women of the Ahl-e Bait abandoned either family or wealth to live a life of spiritual detachment. There was never any wealth to renounce, and their sanctity was dependent upon their kinship status as members of the Ahl-e Bait.

The Prophet Muhammad's daughter Fatimah is popularly portrayed as a selfless, giving woman despite the grinding poverty of her life. As with most prophets, years of persecution and marginalization had reduced Muhammad and his family to poverty. During Fatimah's wedding to 'Ali, “at the walīmah, the guests were served with dates, figs and hais (a mixture of dates and butter fat)”\textsuperscript{107}—a modest menu for a wedding feast, indeed. Fatimah’s biography is a chronicle of poverty and hardship in which she and her family often went hungry and she supplemented their income by grinding corn “until she had blisters on her hands.”\textsuperscript{108}

Fatimah did not endure her poverty with a smile on her face and willing acquiescence that this was God’s will. As the following story illustrates, a life of poverty


\textsuperscript{108}In the course of fieldwork in Hyderabad, I was informed that the chakkī ritual that takes place during the manjha ceremony in Shi'i weddings is a re-enactment of Fatimah's work grinding corn. Instead of corn, the married women of the bride grind turmeric (haldī) and sing joyful songs describing the happiness of Fatimah’s marriage to ‘Ali. The chakkī ritual symbolizes both the difficulties and sweetness of marriage.
and want was not Fatimah’s choice, and she often resented the hardships she endured.

Many of the hagiographies tell of how both Fatimah and ‘Ali were compelled to work extra jobs in order to supplement their meager incomes.

To relieve their extreme poverty, Ali worked as a drawer and carrier of water and she as a grinder of corn. One day she said to Ali: "I have ground until my hands are blistered."

"I have drawn water until I have pains in my chest," said Ali and went on to suggest to Fatimah: "God has given your father some captives of war, so go and ask him to give you a servant."

Reluctantly, she went to the Prophet who said: "What has brought you here, my little daughter?" "I came to give you greetings of peace," she said, for in awe of him she could not bring herself to ask what she had intended.

"What did you do?" asked Ali when she returned alone.

"I was ashamed to ask him," she said. So the two of them went together but the Prophet felt they were less in need than others.

"I will not give to you," he said, "and let the Ahl as-Suffah (poor Muslims who stayed in the mosque) be tormented with hunger. I have not enough for their keep..."

Ali and Fatimah returned home feeling somewhat dejected but that night, after they had gone to bed, they heard the voice of the Prophet asking permission to enter. Welcoming him, they both rose to their feet, but he told them:

"Stay where you are," and sat down beside them. "Shall I not tell you of something better than that which you asked of me?" he asked and when they said yes he said: "Words which Jibril taught me, that you should say "Subhaan Allah—Glory be to God" ten times after every Prayer, and ten times "Al-hamdu lillah—Praise be to God," and ten times "Allahu Akbar—God is Great." And that when you go to bed you should say them thirty-three times each."
Ali used to say in later years: "I have never once failed to say them since the Messenger of God taught them to us."[109]

This account of Fatimah and 'Ali’s desire for a servant to help ease their burden indicates that they did not choose to live in poverty. Fatimah endured her impoverished state but she did not accept it. Her poverty is not an indexical feature of her sainthood. Her status as the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter meant that she must endure hardships for the benefit of other Muslims. Muhammad denied her a servant lest other Muslims suffer or experience want. Fatimah is set up as the idealized Muslim who puts the needs of the ummah or community of Muslims before her own family. In a sense, it is the substitution of the larger family and its needs for that of the smaller nuclear unit.

Unlike the ascetic who has renounced the affairs of the world, both the historical and hagiographical sources about Fatimah Zahra document her active participation in public life. One particular event is recounted in all of the histories both Shi‘i and Sunni: the dispute over the land Fatimah received from her father at Fadak. Fatimah’s speech or khutbah is recounted in the Sunni ḥadīth collections of al-Bukhari and Muslim, as well as in Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal’s Muṣnad.

Three years prior to Muhammad’s death he had given her a parcel of land at Fadak. Following the battle of Khaybar in 629 CE, the Jews gave the Prophet Muhammad a piece of land who in turn gave it as a gift (ḥibā’) to Fatimah. After the Prophet’s death, Abu Bakr the first khalīfa and Muhammad’s successor seized the property from Fatimah. Abu Bakr argued that the progeny of prophets do not inherit[110] and Fatimah, therefore, has no legal claim to

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the gardens of Fadak. According to the Qur’an, a woman has the legal right to inherit from her parents: “From what is left by parents and those nearest related, there is a share for men, and a share for women” (4:7), and Fatimah invoked her right based upon this Qur’anic legislation. Fatimah brought her case to court for arbitration, and although she was ultimately unsuccessful, her knowledge of her legal rights and desire for justice indicates that she was a woman involved in the affairs of society.  

Even in death, Fatimah’s presence and participation in the spiritual affairs of the world is palpable. One of Fatimah’s epithets is sayyidah nisā’ al-‘ālamain or the “mistress of the women of the two worlds,” and she is considered by all Shi’a to be the patroness of the majlis-e ‘azā’. In the majlis assemblies, the Shi’a of Hyderabad believe that Fatimah is present and gathers up the tears of the mourners for the Ahl-e Bait. In one meeting, Dr. Taqui Khan explained to me that, “In majlis, we are offering condolences to Bibi Fatimah because she has suffered the most of anyone.” Despite Fatimah’s own life that was characterized by poverty and political intrigue, she listens to the condolences and grief of the Shi’a. Members of the Ahl-e Bait often appear to Shi’a in dreams and as apparitions, providing solace, advice and providing information about the future. Dr. Khan told me that one time Fatimah appeared in his dreams and praised him for continuing the tradition of mourning for her son Husain: “1400 years have passed and you are still crying for my son.” Dr. Khan explained that on the Day of Judgment, Fatimah will intercede on behalf of every single person who has genuinely wept for the sufferings of her family. As a leader, a role

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112 Interview, Dr. Taqui Khan at his residence in Yaqutpura, Hyderabad (May 31, 2005).

113 Interview, Dr. Taqui Khan (May 31, 2005).
model, and feminine, nurturing figure, Fatimah’s hagiographers portray her as anything but ascetic, and the Shi’a venerate her for her humanity and dedication to family and faith.

A.K. Ramanujan has observed with regard to Indian women religious exemplars (typically Hindu) that their spiritual achievements are gained at certain social expense. These women tend to forsake marriage and live on the margins of society, both qualities that are largely absent in the Shi’i hagiographical tradition. Shi’i hagiography is centered on networks of kinship. This marks the second distinctive feature of Shi’i hagiography.

In Hindu, Christian and Sufi traditions of sainthood, female religious exemplars such as the Sufi Rabi’a, and the Catholic anchorites, tend to exist at the margins of society because of their refusal to participate in patriarchal institutions such as marriage, is considered by most to be subversive and even going against the natural order. Without the kinship-defined identity of daughter, sister, wife or mother, a woman is transformed into an anti-woman, a rebel against her ascribed gender roles. Without a kin defined identity, a woman is a danger to both men and women in society. She is dangerous to men because she represents both subversion of the masculine order and a woman whose sexuality is not contained by marriage or the protection of the paternal household. The female renouncing saint (as almost all of them are) is dangerous to women because she represents an alternative to the patriarchal order.

The women of the Ahl-e Bait are portrayed with fullness of femininity because they do not subvert the patriarchal order. The women of the Ahl-e Bait marry, have children,


115 This argument has been made with regard to the status of widows in Indian society, and Ramanujan corroborates the discomfort that the female renouncing saint creates in the Hindu context. For a provocative analysis of Hindu women’s sexuality and the anxieties it engendered, see Charu Gupta’s Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).
and do not engage in any activities that might make them sexually suspect. With Fatimah Kubra, however, we encounter a paradox in the nature of her sacrificing her husband for the cause of religion. As we shall see in following chapters, Fatimah Kubra’s status as a widow in the devotional literature of Karbala in Hyderabad reflects the cultural specificity of India with its taboo on widow remarriage and anxiety about the sexual power and inauspiciousness of widowed women. Many of my Shi‘i informants in Hyderabad explained that this is one of the pragmatic reasons why Imam Husain had his daughter married to Qasem at the battle of Karbala. If Fatimah Kubra is a widow, then Yazid cannot force her into marriage. Marriage and widowhood save Fatimah Kubra from involuntarily destroying the purity and honor of the Ahl-e Bait, which in the context of India, reflects the extent of her wilāyah. Fatimah Kubra willingly sacrifices her husband and becomes a widow because it is the right thing to do for her family and faith.

As members of the Prophet Muhammad’s family, they more than any other Muslims, were required to be role-models and follow his sunnah or tradition. According to one ḥadīth found in the Sunān Ibn Majah, the Prophet declared, “Marriage is my sunnah. He who does not follow my sunnah does not follow me.” Corresponding to the requirement to follow the Prophet’s tradition and marry is the expectation that the married couple will procreate. In fact, lineal descent from Muhammad through Fatimah is the central criteria for belonging to the Ahl-e Bait. According to one ḥadīth it is reported that ‘Abdu al-Rahman ibn ‘Awf said: “I heard the Apostle of Allah say, ‘I am a tree, Fatimah is its trunk and ‘Ali is its pollen. Hasan and Husayn are its fruits, and our followers (Shi‘ah) are its leaves. The
roots of the tree are in the Garden of Eden, and its trunk, fruits and leaves are in Paradise.”

The third feature that I argue marks the uniqueness of Shi’i hagiography is its inclusion of women as full human beings whose spiritual attainments are expressed in positively gendered terms. The women of the Ahl-e Bait are ontologically complementary to their male relatives. In comparison to the Catholic and Sufi hagiographical traditions in which women are often portrayed as being almost like men in their spiritual attainments, the women of the Ahl-e Bait are described with explicitly feminine imagery and vocabulary. Zainab is never relegated to an appendix located at the back of a tāzkira (biographical dictionary of saints), nor is she ever described as being like a man in her spiritual attainment.

John Kitchen has observed with regard to the rhetorical strategies employed by male hagiographers of Merovingian women saints that their sanctity is expressed in explicitly masculine terms. For example, in Gregory of Tours’ Life of Saint Monegund, he notes that the inferiorum sexum (“the inferior sex”) can be exemplary combatants for the faith, who “imitating the previous models of holiness, are not weak opponents but fight like men (viriliter agonizantem), attaining the heavenly kingdom after ‘sweaty’ (desudantibus) exertions in battle.” The ideological dilemma for Gregory, however, is that “With the life of Christian warfare an imitatio Christi, the female saint, if she is to be genuinely Christ-like,

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118 Kitchen, p. 103.
must be shown as striving in the contest to attain eternal life.”\textsuperscript{119} The problem however, is that the female is the “inferior sex”, and therefore cannot fulfill such an idealization.

In the Shi‘i devotional literature and many Sunni histories, Zainab is described as brave and heroic, which are typically masculine qualities, her femininity is never subordinated. She is a brave woman whose spiritual and psycho-physical capabilities are never determined in comparison with that of a man. Zainab’s bravery and spirited temper is vividly portrayed by Kashefi in his account of her confrontation with the ‘Umayyad khalīfa Yazid and Ibn Ziyad the governor of Kufah:

The officials of the court made an attempt to kill Zayn al-‘Abidin, but Zainab stood up and turned towards Ibn Ziyad, and said, “Have you not had your fill of killing the Family of the Prophet of God? Was it not enough for you to unlawfully spill this blood? If you wish to kill him, then kill me first!”\textsuperscript{120} Zainab’s request to Ibn Ziyad to kill her first is intended as a shock-inducing tactic, compelling one to consider what sort of a tyrant willfully murders a woman. Radiating her wilāyah bestowed by God through her spiritual exemplariness and membership in the Ahl-e Bait, even Zainab’s enemies are forced to recognize her special status.

The women of the Ahl-e Bait are refractions of the divine Muhammadan light (\textit{nūr muḥammadī}), which when combined with the public recognition of their spiritual exemplariness elevates these figures beyond their typical subordinate status in patriarchal society as the \textit{inferiorum sexum}. Two female figures in particular occupy a unique space in the typology of Shi‘i sainthood: Fatimah Zahra and Zainab. Both of these women possess simultaneously the qualities of \textit{walāyah} and \textit{wilāyah}. Both Fatimah and Zainab were selected for God’s special friendship, and they have each been granted power, responsibility and

\textsuperscript{119}Kitchen, p. 104.

\textsuperscript{120}Husain Va‘ez Kashefi, \textit{Rowżat al-Shohada’}, p. 366.
knowledge that are homologous to that possessed by the Prophet Muhammad and the Imams. While occupying an exalted status as possessors of wałāyah and wilāyah, they are excluded from one aspect of the schemata of complementary pairing: neither Fatimah nor Zainab have direct positions in the Imamate (the complement to wałāyah). Upon superficial examination, it seems that Fatimah and Zainab are excluded from the patriarchal prerogative of the Imamate, which according to this typology of Shi’i sainthood makes it difficult, if not impossible, for these two women to be endowed with wałāyah.

If these women appear to occupy a subordinate status because of their gender, we must examine more deeply their roles vis-à-vis the Imamate in order to demonstrate that they actually do possess the quality of wałāyah-imāmah. Fatimah’s resplendence, hence her kunya Zahra (“the Shining/Radiant One”) is the manifestation of her participation in the nūr muḥammadī created pre-eternally by God. In the ’Uyūn al-Mujīzat (448/1056-57), the Shi’i historian Husain ’Abd al-Wahhab describes Fatimah’s heavenly radiance as a deliberate act of God: “By My power, My majesty, My generosity, My eminence, I will act.” God then created Fatimah’s celestial light (nūr), which lit up the heavens.121 Ibn Shahrashub further develops the cosmic-theological meaning of Fatimah’s radiance connecting it to wałāyah: “God created Paradise from the light of His countenance; He took this light, and threw it; with of a third of it He struck Muhammad, with another third Fatimah, and with the remaining third ’Ali and the People of the House.”122 In an Eliadian sense, Fatimah’s

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manifestation of walāyah is the terrestrial or worldly duplication of the celestial model. According to Ibn Shahrashub’s description of God’s bestowing of the nūr muḥammadī upon Muhammad and his descendants, Fatimah is designated a comparatively larger portion than either ‘Ali or the Imams who receive one-third of God’s light of walāyah, which must be shared amongst twelve individuals.

According to the previous texts, Nasr’s observation that Fatimah is endowed with a partial walāyat-e fāṭimiyah underestimates the pivotal and cosmologically important role God has bestowed upon her. Fatimah connects the Prophet Muhammad and the Imamate together. Without Fatimah the Imams would not be born and God-given walāyah cannot be transferred. Without Fatimah, the binary complement walāyah-imāmah is ontologically impossible. As the mistress of Paradise, Fatimah possesses the supreme power of intercession. It is Fatimah who will avenge those who were at the battle of Karbala, and she will intercede on behalf of all who support the Ahl-e Bait. Fatimah does possess complete walāyah, and although she is not an Imam, it is through her blood-line that the Imamate descends: she is the source of the Imamate. The extraordinary spiritual knowledge and charismatic authority that God bestowed upon Fatimah in the form of walāyah, in case of her male descendants is transformed into imāmah.


124 See Nasr, p. 104 for his interpretation of the meaning of the ḥadīth al-kisā’.

125 The transformation of Fatimah’s walāyah into walāyah-imāmah, which was passed through her male descendants is also given to her daughter Zainab bint ‘Ali. Zainab’s role as Imam Husain’s khalīfa or vice-regent following the battle of Karbala indicates at least a partial manifestation of walāyah-imāmah.
Toward a New Typology of Shi‘i Sainthood

In this chapter I have attempted to outline a stipulative theory of Shi‘i sainthood that puts into perspective the distinctive theological and devotional dimensions of the terms walāyah and wilāyah, particularly when paired with their complements, imāmah and ḥusainiyyat. The account of Dr. Taqui Khan’s quick response to the theme of Qasem’s martyrdom at the Osmania University majlis, and his instinctive telling Qasem’s story through his wife Fatimah Kubra created a practical framework through which we could identify the full extent of the theory of Shi‘i sainthood. Although the Shi‘i hagiographical tradition articulates itself in so many instances, whether in poetry, complex theoretical treatises, or in hagiographical stories, these texts and performances constitute a finite set that enables one to identify and ultimately define—through a framework of structural complementary pairing—what Shi‘i sainthood is.
Sometime in the 1860s, a man named Sayyid ʿAbbas Sahib came to the princely state of Hyderabad from Madras. He was a renowned maršīya-khwān or reciter of maršīya poems about Karbala, and he came to Hyderabad seeking the patronage of the fifth Asaf Jahi Nizam, Afzal Ad-Dawlah Bahadur (r. 1857–1869); there the observance of Muharram has flourished since the establishment of the Shiʿi Qutb Shahi dynasty in 1512 CE. The martyrdom of Qasem has been celebrated in Hyderabad with great pomp since the reign of ʿAbdullah Qutb Shah (r. 1626–1672) who commissioned the construction of the Alava-ye Hazrat Qasem in the Yaqutpura locality in Hyderabad’s Old City. ʿAbbas Sahib came from a place where the observance of Qasem’s marriage and subsequent martyrdom was also celebrated on a grand scale during each Muharram.

Initially, ʿAbbas Sahib’s house “ʿAbbas Manzil” was located in the present location of the ‘Azakhane-ye Zahra\(^1\) in Darulshifa’ in the Old City. In his large house sitting on the banks of the Musi River, ʿAbbas Sahib hosted an annual majlis mourning assembly on 7

\(^1\)The ‘Azakhane-ye Zahra was built by the seventh Nizam, Osman ʿAli Khan, after the death of his mother Amtul Zahra Begum in the first decade of the 20th century. The Nizam acquired ʿAbbas Sahib’s mansion and property along the banks of the Musi River from the Hyderabad City Improvement Board to be the site for an ʿāshūrkhana dedicated to the memory of his beloved mother. Mohammed Mazher ʿAli Khan, “The New Ashur Khanas of the City of Hyderabad,” *Hyderabad ki Azadari*, edited by Sayyid Taqi Hasan Wafa (Hyderabad: Idara-e Jaferia, 2000), pp. 64-66.
Muharram in which mehndī and an ʿalam dedicated to Qasem was brought out in procession or julūs. Very quickly, the “ʿAbbas Sahib kī mehndī kī majlis” became the most popular mourning assembly for Hyderabidis.

Following ʿAbbas Sahib’s death, the tradition of hosting the mehndī kī majlis was continued, even when the family home shifted around the year 1905 to a large plot of land in the Yaqutpura locality, just a few hundred meters from the Alava-ye Hazrat Qasem. It was Dr. M. M. Taqui Khan’s paternal grandmother and the daughter of ʿAbbas Sahib who asked, “Here is such a big house in this open space, why don’t we host the seventh of Muharram majlis here?” From that year, Dr. Taqui Khan’s family has hosted one of the largest and most important mehndī kī majlis in Hyderabad. Each year, several thousand men block the busy road outside the house and they crowd into the spacious courtyard that connects Dr. Khan’s house with their family ʿāshūrkhāna that is dedicated to Qasem.

Leading up to the beginning of the mardāne or men’s majlis, men and women crowd before the Hazrat Qasem kā ʿalam and wait to have a lāl nārā or red string band tied around their wrists by one of Dr. Khan’s six daughters and sons-in-law. Sitting in one corner of the ʿāshūrkhāna, Dr. Khan is lovingly rubbing fragrant amber oil into a blood-smeared kafan or burial shroud that will be placed over the ʿalam when its barāt or wedding procession transforms into a funereal procession on its return into the ʿāshūrkhāna. Dr. Khan’s majlis is

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3 Moosvi and Fatima, p. 128.
4 ʿĀshūrkhāna is a compound word derived from the words ʿāshūrā ("ten") and khāna ("house"), thus giving the literal meaning of “the house of ten [or the tenth].” The ʿāshūrkhāna is the ritually consecrated space in which the ʿalams and other commemorative objects dedicated to Imam Husain’s family are kept and displayed. The ʿāshūrkhāna is usually maintained separately from a masjid, although Hyderabad does have one ʿāshūrkhāna aur masjid-e Ahl-e Bait, which as the name of the building suggests performs two ritual functions, however such structures are highly unusual. This is the first hybrid building that I have encountered in my field research in India, Iran or Syria.
truly a family affair. His wife oversees the preparation of the *tabarruk* or blessed food served to the *majlis* participants, his daughter Kulsum sits near her father and assembles the trays of *mehndi*, and yet another daughter visiting from the United States is making sure that the women arriving for the *majlis* are comfortable. Because of the practice of *purdah*, the women and girls remain in the house and watch the men’s *majlis* through the living room windows. Being able to hear the *majlis* is never a problem, as it is broadcast over loudspeakers at deafening levels. As the men and boys arrive and take their places in the courtyard, the energy of anticipating an encounter with *husainiyat* is palpable.

The Shi’ā of Hyderabad have been completely absorbed in remembering and re-presenting the events of Karbala over the past six days. On the seventh, however, the remembrance of Karbala becomes entirely different. As Maulana Reza Agha, Hyderabad’s senior-most Shi’ī ‘ālim or religious scholar, declares at the beginning of his oration or *khutbah*, “Surely you have observed this very fact that in the whole world there are so many martyrs, but there are two figures whose martyrdom is observed in the *majlis* more than any others…Sakinah Bibi and the orphan (*yatīm*) of Hasan…” The intensity of remembering Karbala and its hero(in)es begins to build only on the seventh of Muharram. On the seventh, access to the waters of the Euphrates River was cut off from Imam Husain’s encampment, and the “[marriage] procession of the thirsty groom and thirsty bride has gone out,” and it is not a joyful event. In India, the *barāt* or wedding procession in which the bridegroom goes from his home to that of his bride on horseback, wearing a turban or

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5Sakinah was the four-year old daughter of Imam Husain who, the Shi‘a assert, died from her grief in Damascus following the battle of Karbala. Qasem is the *yatīm* or orphan whose father Hasan was the second Imam who was poisoned by one of his wives in 669 CE. Maulana Reza Agha, “‘Alī Bakhrūzī’s *Nabī* in 6th Century,” Yaqutpura (February 17, 2005).

6Reza Agha (February 17, 2005).


`imāma, fine clothing, and accompanied by a brass band (bājā), fireworks and frolicking boys, there is noise, merriment and the ribald knowledge that a young man is going to his bride.

In his khutbah, Reza Agha conjures dissonant memories in the minds of the majlis participants. The dissonance results from the actual auspiciousness and happiness that a wedding is supposed to generate, particularly because marriage continues to be nearly universal in South Asia. Every man, teenager and boy who sits in the majlis and weeps for Qasem and his bride Fatimah Kubra, not only weeps for the tragedies that befell these two, but also because they have learned that a bride should never become a widow virtually simultaneously—that is a binary pairing that ideally should exist along a broad continuum with motherhood and grandmotherhood bridging the gap.

The status of Fatimah Kubra as an auspicious bride and her rapid transformation into an inauspicious widow is an important theme in Reza Agha’s khutbah. At the midpoint of the maṣāʾib or recollection of the troubles of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra, Reza Agha implies that the marriage has taken place because suddenly, Qasem approaches his new bride and gives her a piece of his sleeve and assures her that this will be a sign of recognition for one another on the Last Day (qiyaamat). Drawing the moment of Karbala into the general present, Reza Agha continues his khutbah declaring, “When a wedding takes place, people say, ‘Pray to God that the bride retains her wifely status. Oh God! Let not separation come between groom and bride!’ What kind of a wedding is this? The bride is not a wife with a living husband (suhāgan)! She has become a widow...What has befallen

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1Platts defines suhāgan as, “a married woman whose husband is alive,” and “a fortunate woman,” p. 705. Suhāgan is an Urdu word that is laden with deep cultural meaning about the status of a woman as either auspicious or being a wife with a living husband, with the binary pair being expressed in such negative terms as rand, which means both widow and prostitute reflecting deep South Asian cultural anxieties about the
this Karbala wedding? The bride was imprisoned and the bridegroom, too, was made a prisoner...At weddings, *sharbat* is usually served, but here, the groom and the bride have taken out a procession of parchedness. The bridegroom has fallen down. The bride is a captive and the bridegroom’s head rests on the tip of a spear and the Karbala procession was taken out."

In the memories and imaginations of the *majlis* participants the joy of marriage and the deep despair of a woman’s widowhood is simultaneously conjured. While Qasem is an integral character in this moment of the story, the dramatic impulse and the feelings of grief that Reza Agha’s *khutbah* invoke actually are based upon the remembrance of his wife and widow Fatimah Kubra. According to the narrative, Qasem must die, but Kubra will be a widow for the remainder of her life. She is portrayed as a bride of one night and a widow forever. In Reza Agha’s *khutbah*, the fact that the marriage or *nikâh* did take place is not the point; rather he wants these men to remember Fatimah Kubra’s suffering. Implicit in this narration is the fact that she dually captive. Not only is she a prisoner of war and taken in the “Karbala procession” to Damascus to be paraded before the ‘Umayyad khalîfa Yazid’s court or *darbar*, but she, too, is held captive by her state of widowhood.

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feared rampant sexuality of the widowed woman, particularly one who is young. Charu Gupta’s *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community* is one of the few studies that examines the anxieties of 19th-century Hindus with regard to the existence of widows particularly with regard to their perceived dangerousness. Gupta observes that many Hindus considered young widows particularly susceptible to converting to Islam in order to circumvent the cultural restrictions on widow remarriage. In the popular pseudo-scientific literature of 19th-century North India, it was postulated that because women are naturally eight times more sexual than men, widows are especially dangerous because there is not any socially acceptable outlet for their rampant sexual urges, thus making conversion to a ‘foreign’ religion appealing. For further discussion of these anxieties, see Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), pp. 302-303.

8Maulana Reza Agha (February 17, 2005).
Sitting in the comfort of the zanāna with the female members of Dr. Khan’s family, I heard the keening cries of the women that mingled with the shouting and physical grief of the men seated outside in the courtyard. As a further expression of their grief, both the male and female majlis participants struck their chests or heads in mātam. Narrating Fatimah Kubra’s tragic dyadic embodiment of the binary pair bride-widow, Reza Agha brought the crowd to an emotional peak. Everyone in the majlis remembered not only Fatimah Kubra, but also other female relatives and acquaintances like her who have suffered and lost a spouse and become the inauspicious rand or bevāh.9

At about half past three in the afternoon, directly following the men’s majlis, the women of the Khan family sponsor the zanānī or women’s mehndī mourning assembly. In contrast to the thousands of men who attend the men’s majlis, the ladies’ event is much less popular owing to the fact that at 4pm a massive mehndī kī majlis takes place annually at Bait al-Qa’em, the major Khoja ’āshūrkhana located in the nearby locality of Purani Haveli. In 2005, I attended the Bait al-Qa’em mehndī mourning assembly where several thousand women crowded into the partially constructed ’āshūrkhana. This was the first major women’s majlis that I attended, and I observed that many of the women paid scant attention to the ritual events. They knew the order of events, the marāiyas, salāms, and nauhās that comprised a major portion of the majlis, and the women often came in large groups with small children and with fussing or active babies and toddlers.

In 2006, I remained at the Khan residence in Yaqutpura to observe the ladies’ mehndī kī majlis. Unlike the men’s majlis or the large ladies’ mehndī mourning assembly at Bait al-Qa’em, this was an intimate event attended by fewer than 150 women. The male

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9In Urdu, rand means both “prostitute” and “widow.” Bevāh (be- without, vivāh, marriage) has a more neutral connotation as its literal meaning is “without marriage.”
family members retreated into the house—in an instance of reverse *purdah*—and had lunch, while several women in turn recited selected stanzas from *marṣiyas* (this selection is called *marṣiya chhunna*). The female *majlis* participants sang the refrain to one of the most popular *salaams* sung in commemoration of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra’s wedding:

\[
\text{Ghar chalo bhā’ī, mehndī lagā’ūn}
\]

\[
\text{Hurry home, brother, so that I may apply the mehndī.}^{10}
\]

This *salām* is performed at every *majlis* on the seventh of Muharram, and I observed that it is always sung at some point in the brief mourning assembly that begins every Shi’a wedding event in Hyderabad. *Ghar Chalo Bhā’ī* is almost always sung just before the *zākir* or *zākirah* ascends the *minbar* to narrate the account of Qasem’s martyrdom. The four-year old girl Sakinah’s voice is employed in this *salām* to great dramatic effect, for she laments her lost opportunity to apply *mehndī* to hands and feet of her future brother-in-law. Nor can Sakinah ask for the *neg* or bribe that sisters-in-law demand of the bridegroom after they steal his shoes and torment him with bawdy jokes and songs. Sakinah laments that this is a most unnatural wedding, which pushes the *majlis* attendants to weep loudly and to be emotionally primed for the upcoming narration of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra by the *zākirah*.

Mounting the *minbar*, the *zākirah* Sayyidah Maryam Naqvi launched into her account of Qasem’s martyrdom with a mounting wail in her voice. As I sat in the crowd of women, I was astonished to discover just how different Maryam Naqvi’s remembrance of Qasem was from that of Reza Agha. Aside from the modulation of Naqvi’s voice as she spoke softly at one moment, then raising her voice into a crying wail the next in order to emphasize some particularly tragic or dramatic moment, the representation of Qasem’s

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10 This is an anonymously composed *salām*. 
martyrdom in her *khūṭbah* seemed far less *emotional* than Reza Agha’s. In fact, as her oration continued, I realized that she was simply telling the *historical* narrative of Qasem’s martyrdom. Her narrative sounded remarkably like something advocated by Morteza Motahhari, one of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s closest allies and the architect of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. In reference to the marriage of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra, Naqvi declares:

> Have you ever seen such a wedding where there wasn’t even *mehndī*? Indeed... these days we apply mehndī as a way of remembering, but at Karbala there wasn’t mehndī. According to the traditions, it is said that Husain by his very own hands prepared Qasem [for his wedding], and he tied the turban to Qasem’s head.\(^{11}\)

In her *khūṭbah*, Naqvi informs the female *majlis* attendants that the *mehndī* ritual never happened at Karbala. This passage is the only reference to Qasem and Fatimah Kubra’s marriage in Naqvi’s narrative. This *khūṭbah* is strictly about telling the history of the event, and although the *ẓākirah* weeps for Qasem’s martyrdom, it is clear that she wants these women to remember the *correct* aspects of this event.

In these two *mehndī kī majlis* events sponsored by Dr. Khan’s family, the martyrdom of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra’s sacrifice are remembered and re-presented by the *khūṭbah* orators in two different and I argue, gendered, ways. Upon initial consideration, it may seem counterintuitive that a man performs the *khūṭbah* that presents in the most dramatic detail the emotional contours of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra’s wedding and her subsequent widowhood. In patriarchal societies, particularly those that place a premium upon the institution of marriage, it is usually women who relish the details and rituals of weddings. Men relegate themselves to the background, participating only when necessary because

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\(^{11}\)Sayyidah Maryam Naqvi, *Zanānī mehndī kī majlis*, at the ʿāshūrkhana of Dr. Taqui Khan, Yaqutpura (February 7, 2006).
weddings are “women’s business.” In this case, the ritual, narrative remembrance of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra’s wedding undergoes a gender inversion. Here, Reza Agha recalls in great detail and generates feelings of grief in the male majlis participants, whereas Maryam Naqvi tells a story that minimizes the remembrance of the wedding and its rituals to the extent that it merely serves as a didactic, reformist gloss to her discourse. Why do men remember and mourn Qasem and Fatimah Kubra’s marriage with such fervor? Yet, why in the women’s majlis is the wedding and Fatimah Kubra’s widowhood de-emphasized?

I begin this chapter with a description of the men’s and women’s mehndī mourning assemblies and the content of the khutbahs delivered in each because each demonstrates that memory is gendered, although not always according to our expectations. In the course of ethnographic fieldwork and archival research in Hyderabad the gendered dimension of religious memory was repeatedly manifested through narrative performances in the majlis. In many instances, such as the men’s and women’s mourning assemblies at the ‘Abbas Sahib mehndī kī majlis, the gendered dimension of remembering Karbala often appears to subvert received understandings about how social memory functions differently for males and females. Memory is an integral element of sainthood, for the stories that are told about religious exemplars, the ritualized acts of imitation and commemoration, and the symbols that re-present them in gendered terms.

Working through the transcriptions of the khutbahs of the men’s and women’s mehndī kī majlis, I was puzzled by the narrative strategies employed by Reza Agha and Maryam Naqvi in their khutbahs. I felt immediately drawn into the anxiety, fear and sadness that Reza Agha invoked when he cried out, “Oh God! Do not let this bride become a widow!” As a participant-observer of the men’s majlis, I found myself saddened for the
widowed status of Fatimah Kubra and I sympathized with the tears and groans that were expressed by both the male and female participants. In the ladies’ majlis that directly followed the mardâne mourning assembly, I sat down and listened to Maryam Naqvi’s khutbah, expecting to hear a recitation of Fatimah Kubra’s widowhood that would be even more emotional and pathos-invoking than that of Reza Agha. My ethnographic assumptions about women being more concerned or even interested in retelling Fatimah Kubra’s sacrifice and subsequent widowhood were unfulfilled. What could this mean? Why wasn’t the ūdār’s maṣā‘īb or recollection of the troubles that befell Qasem and Fatimah Kubra as vividly emotional? I never expected a senior male religious scholar and leader of the Shi‘i community of Hyderabad to inhabit the feminine persona of Fatimah Kubra and bring the audience to such grief in remembrance of her.

The maṣā‘īb is the section of the khutbah in which the ūdār reaches the dramatic culmination in his or her narrative recitation of the heroic feats and ultimate sacrifice and/or martyrdom of the hero(in)es of Karbala. As many of my informants explained to me, a majlis performer, whether a marşıya-khwān or ūdār must be able to gauge the audience and engage with them accordingly. The goal of the majlis is for the participants to remember the battle of Karbala and to weep for the suffering of the Ahl-e Bait. The ūdār and the chanter of marşıyas are supposed to improvise and choose narratives that will bring the majlis participants into both the imagined physical and emotional worlds of Karbala and its protagonists. Generally, this is achieved through strategies of narrative engagement.

In her study of gender and sexualities in the construction of the Iranian modernity, Afsaneh Najmabadi interprets a 19th century casket lid painting attributed to Muhammad
ʿAli ibn Zaman, in which a small group of women are lounging in a garden. Najmabadi observes that all of the women in the painting, with the exception of an old woman are gazing out toward the viewer. There is one woman who in addition to gazing outward, also has her image refracted through a mirror that doubles her gaze upon the viewer of the painting. Najmabadi posits that the role of the woman gazing into a mirror while looking directly outward at her viewer is an “engaging strategy” that invites the viewer to participate in the scene and to (voyeuristically) take part in the action. The strategy to which Najmabadi refers is Robyn Warhol’s literary critical theory of narrative engagement in which it is the task of the narrator “to evoke sympathy and identification from an actual reader.”

I suggest that Reza Agha’s *khūṭbah* and particularly his *maṣāʿib* employs a strategy of narrative engagement. The narrative structure and the commentarial asides in the sections of Reza Agha’s *khūṭbah* that refer to Fatimah Kubra compel the ʿazādārs to step into and to participate in the drama of Karbala. At the least, the *majlis* participants feel sympathy, if not grief for the young bride/widow.

In this chapter, I will examine the role of the female voice and emotion in the Indic epic tradition. Exemplifying the role of the female voice and emotion in the Indic epic tradition is Sita, the wife of King Rama in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, who is much beloved by Indians of all castes and religions, and she is appreciated for the multiple roles and voices she

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13Najmabadi, pp. 30-31.

assumes in the regional, vernacular Rāmāyanas. Sita is every woman in the epic traditions: ideal wife (pativrata), fierce goddess, powerful yoginī, devoted mother, and accused adulteress. Using Sita as a paradigmatic example of how the epic heroine, in contrast to the epic hero, is almost exclusively the only character-type who is capable of expressing and occupying a range of emotions that are distinctively human and whose experiences the author uses to draw the audience into the epic arena through strategies of narrative engagement.

The centrality of feminine voices and emotions in Indic epic traditions as a strategy for maintaining audience interest and sympathy for the fates of the protagonists of the narrative, finds a close analog in the Karbala hagiographical tradition. In the course of textual and ethnographic research in Hyderabad, I realized that the Karbala narrative tradition is predicated upon the existence and survival of the women of Imam Husain’s family. All of the men, with the exception of Imam Husain’s son Zain al-‘Abidin, died in battle. It was incumbent upon the women to bear witness to what happened at Karbala. Thus, all subsequent Shi’i devotional literature about Karbala represents a female perspective, although it may not explicitly articulated by the usually male author. Most of the historical record of the events of the battle and its aftermath are based upon Zainab’s testimony. All writing is therefore a double remembrance refracted through a feminine voice and with the contours of her emotions.

As Reza Agha’s khutbah indicates, the feminine emotion and the female voice of the Karbala heroines draws the majlis participants into the scene of battle, while simultaneously the ways in which these voices and emotions are employed by the zākir transforms the women of Imam Husain’s family into ‘real’ people. In a sense, the hero(in)es
of the Indic epic traditions—both Hindu and Shi‘i—occupy two character ranges. Most broadly, epics tell grand stories about exceptional figures who are to be venerated for their high status, piety, good manners, and breeding. The second character range is subtler because some of the epic characters embody the dual role of larger-than-life and also profoundly human and someone with whom one can identify. As we shall see in the following sections of this chapter, it is the epic heroine who occupies both character ranges, whereas the epic hero tends to occupy a distanced, static role.

The Karbala epic tradition, with its many heroines and its ontological genre status based upon the survival of the women of Imam Husain’s family, readily adapted in form, idiom, and performance style to the already vital vernacular Indian epic tradition. Examining the portrayal of Zainab in Mohtasham Kashani’s mid-sixteenth century Persian maršiya the Karbalā-nāmeḥ, written in Iran during the Safavid period, we can trace the way in which the female voice became standardized in Karbala epic literature. Mohtasham clearly realized the dramatic potential of using Zainab’s feminine voice and emotions to intensify feelings of grief and to instill a vengeful remembrance of Karbala. The nearly instantaneous popularity of Mohtasham’s Karbalā-nāmeḥ solidified the utility of a strategy of narrative engagement through female voice and emotions, and in the successive generations of Karbala epic poetry composed in Iran in Persian and the Indian Deccan in Urdu and Deccani, Mohtasham’s feminine imaginaire remained consistent.

In the final section of this chapter, we will examine a unique example of a Shi‘i male writer’s portrayal of the bridegroom Qasem’s martyrdom through the voice and emotions of his young bride-widow Fatimah Kubra. Mir ‘Alam, a prime minister in the Asaf Jahi court, composed a Deccani translation of Rowżat al-Shohadā’ entitled Dah Majlis (The Ten
Assemblies) in the late-eighteenth century in Hyderabad. Only one manuscript of Mir ʿAlam’s Dah Majlis appears to be in existence, thus making it a unique manuscript, but more significantly, this is one of the few Deccani-Urdu Karbala narratives that while ostensibly providing the account of Qasem’s martyrdom, is, in fact, obsessively concerned with Fatimah Kubra’s marriage gone awry and her nearly simultaneous widowhood. In this textual example, we shall demonstrate how the Karbala epic tradition became Indianized, and how its emphatic use of feminine voices and emotions based upon the fact that it was virtually only the women of Imam Husain’s family who survived Karbala and told its story. In the process of vernacularizing the Karbala epic tradition, the heroines of the Ahl-e Bait were transformed into idealized Indian-Deccani, Shiʿi women. More so than the men, it is the women of the Ahl-e Bait who occupy two geographical ranges, too. At the macro-level of the epic, Imam Husain’s female relatives are remembered as the Arabs that they were, but they are made into ‘real’ women by becoming Indians in dress, custom, idiom and values—and thus an Indian can enter into the realm of Karbala and take their place in the scene of battle along with these exceptional women who are also so very similar to one’s wife, mother, sisters, and daughters.

**Indian Epic Women: Sita and Fatimah Kubra in the Masculine Imaginaire**

Sita, the ideal wife of the Lord-King Rama, is one of the most beloved heroines of the two great Indic epic traditions, the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata. Sita figures

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15 I include the Mahābhārata in this assessment of Sita’s lofty status in both of the major Indic epic traditions because it is most likely that the story of King Rama that appears in the Mahābhārata is a proto-Rāmāyaṇa. This proto-Rāmāyaṇa predates the later Rāmāyaṇa tradition in which this sub-narrative from the Mahābhārata was extracted and transformed into its own epic tradition.
prominently in the Indic epic imagination, particularly for their embodiment of wifely duty (pativratā), suffering, and often subversion of these male-centered ideals. For Indians who grow up hearing and seeing performances of these two epic traditions, one’s sympathy and identification with these women as dynamic and real characters marks a gendered dimension of this literary/performance genre.

Although much of the theoretical scholarship that has been written about epic traditions, particularly with regard to voice and emotion, has tended to focus on Classical Greek and European texts, some of the observations made by scholars such as George Lukács, Mikhail Bakhtin and Northrop Frye find a degree of applicability in the context of Indic-Karbala epic traditions. George Lukács posits in his study of epic and novel that, “The epic hero is, strictly speaking, never an individual.”16 He further theorizes that an individual cannot become a true individual in the epic; rather, that is a development of the novel. In the Indic-Karbala tradition, and as we will see in the case of Sita in the Rāmāyaṇa, not all epic characters are lacking in true individuality. Evidence from the Deccani-Urdu Karbala epic tradition contests Lukács and Frye’s theses regarding the lack of the epic hero’s individuality. In contrast, the Deccani-Urdu Shi‘i documentary evidence demonstrates genre contiguity with the Indic epic tradition, particularly with regard to the way in which the heroine as a character is individualized to the extent that the author may narratively engage with the audience. Lukács and other scholars such as Northrop Frye do not seriously consider the role of the female character in European epic traditions. Certainly, it is important that Northrop Frye did assess the role of the epic heroine in his

Secular Scripture, yet he reduces these women to stock types: sacrificial virgin, scheming trickster seductress, and good wife—these women hardly have any of what Lukács might consider to be true individuality. In the case of the Indic epic tradition, it is the female character that possesses greater individuality in her being because she occupies what I referred to in the previous section as a dual range of character, which the epic hero does not possess.

In the Indic-Karbala epic tradition, Imam Husain’s male family members who were martyred are considered heroes, but they are of the static type that Lukács theorizes. The roles of the male heroes of Karbala are set because they all die (with the exception of Zain al-ʿAbidin) in battle. Their individuality and character cannot develop because they, as male warriors, are confined to a specific plot outcome: martyrdom. The male heroes are not supposed to exhibit a novelistic expression of emotion. Instead, the men of Imam Husain’s family fulfill an ideal. If we recall Sayyidah Maryam Naqvi’s khvāt bah at the ladies’ mehndi kī majlis, she focused her narrative exclusively on Qasem’s battlefield exploits and his martyrdom. Although she dramatically wept and modulated her voice, Maryam Naqvi’s khvāt bah constructed Qasem as an idealized young warrior dedicated to his family and the ideals of Islam. She avoided discussing Qasem’s marriage to Fatimah Kubra, and in fact, she dismissed it, saying that it really didn’t happen. With the exception of feeling sadness for Qasem’s martyrdom, Maryam Naqvi’s khvāt bah was based upon a strategy of narrative distance and veneration of the idealized male epic hero. As I sat listening to Maryam Naqvi’s khvāt bah, I realized how profoundly Indic her narrative strategies are. Qasem

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reminded of King Rama—an idealized male hero with whom one cannot relate on emotional and personal terms.

Lukács’ assessment of the character stasis of the male figures of the Greek epic tradition translates to the portrayal of the heroes of the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata. By way of illustration, I will use the characters of Sita and Rama from the Rāmāyaṇa, which many Indians consider to be their national epic. Rama’s character in most of the vernacular recensions of the Rāmāyaṇa portrays him as a king bound to the obligations of ruling his kingdom and being a properly dharmic leader, despite the suffering that he inflicts on those around him, particularly his wife Sita. His wife, Sita, on the other hand, is a dynamic character who in the vernacular Rāmāyaṇa traditions, is a familiar and dynamic character. A brief overview of the general Rāmāyaṇa narrative highlights the events that befall Sita and Rama, their characters, and how they function within the narrative structure as either engaged (familiar) or distanced (static) figures.

The young prince Rama, the son of King Dasaratha was selected to be the heir to his father’s throne, yet through a series of palace intrigues, the title was given to a half-brother. Rama, his wife Sita and his brother Laksmana were banished from the kingdom of Ayodhya and sent into exile in the forest for fourteen years. In the forest, Rama, Sita, and Laksmana lived in relative happiness, although from afar the ten-headed demon Ravana spied the beautiful wife of Rama and desired her for his own. Dispatching a golden deer to lure Rama away from his wife, Ravana kidnapped Sita and carried her to his kingdom of Lanka. There she sat in Ravana’s garden in Lanka practicing austerities, waiting for her warrior-king husband to rescue her. Instead, Rama sends the monkey-god Hanuman to
rescue her, much to Sita’s chagrin. In Valmiki’s *Sundarakāṇḍa*, Sita addresses Hanuman, bidding him to return home in safety and summon her husband Rama to rescue her:

> If Rama kills Ravana, his family and his relatives,  
> Takes me in pride and returns home, that’s an action that befits him.

...  
> So bring him here and make me happy  
> With his army, his commanders and his powerful brother.  
> I grieve without him, alone in this island.  
> Great monkey, do this for me.\(^\text{18}\)

Rama who is ever focused on adhering to his *dharmic* responsibilities, sends a substitute to rescue his wife, who feels keenly insulted. Sita goads Rama into rescuing her when she addresses him alluding to his duty to rescue her since she is his wife, and he should care for her:

> You know your weapons; they are the best.  
> You are strong and truthful, for certain, but  
> Why not use these weapons on this demon,  
> If you really care for me?\(^\text{19}\)

Rama does come to Lanka to rescue his wife Sita, who through her ascetic practices, generates enough yogic heat (*tapasyā*) to repel Ravana, her amorous kidnapper. Rama lays waste to Lanka, kills Ravana and takes his wife back to India. The drama might seem to be over, but Rama doubts the chastity of his wife and asks her to undergo *agniparīkṣā*, the trial by fire, which will prove either her guilt-infidelity or innocence-chastity. In the

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\(^{19}\)Rao, p. 222.
performance context of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, both men and women feel sorry for Sita, whom they know resisted Ravana’s advances, was humiliated by Rama’s sending an unrelated male proxy to rescue her, thus compromising her honor, and now asking her to prove *her* fidelity. Of course, Sita enters the fire and is unscathed, yet we know that her trial is not yet over.

After returning to the capital of Ayodhya and Rama is restored to the throne, a period of Ramrajya is established and all appears well and cosmically balanced in the kingdom. As the years pass, seemingly small events take place that ultimately disrupts the *dharmic* balance of the kingdom, for Rama kills a Śūdra who was practicing austerities, which is forbidden to him because of his caste status. This event is considered by many to be an act of unthinking cruelty, for Rama does not even speak with the Śūdra Sambuka and instruct and correct his *adharmic* action. Spread throughout the kingdom are spies who report to King Rama, and one day he hears about a washerman (*dhobī*) who was questioning Sita’s chastity. At this point, the narrator reminds the audience that Sita has already successfully submitted to and passed one *agniparīkṣa*. Rama is horrified to hear that people still question Sita’s honor, and more than anything else, he fears that this will diminish his authority over his subjects.

Rama asks Sita to undergo a second trial by fire, which he promises her will be the last and will decisively prove her chastity. This event is narrated in the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, a sort

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20A variation of Sita’s second punishment occurs in the *Lavakuśakāṇḍa* in the popular 16th-century North Indian version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* composed by Tulsidas. In this narrative, Sita is banished while pregnant with twin sons Lava and Kusa. Rama sends Sita off with his loyal brother Laksmana who is instructed to leave the pregnant queen in the custody of a forest hermit (the sage Valmiki who is the original narrator/composer of this epic).
of epilogue to the Rāmāyaṇa. Sita acquiesces to her husband’s request. Approaching him, she proclaims:

I have never set my mind on any man other than Rama, so may the goddess of the earth open up for me. I have served only Rama in thought, word and deed, so may the goddess of the earth open up for me. If all that I have spoken is true, and if I do not know any man other than Rama, may the goddess of the earth open up for me.21

Rather than submit yet again to the humiliation of the trial by fire, Sita creates her own test, asking mother earth to swallow her up if she has, indeed, remained virtuous to her husband Rama. The narrator composes a scene that intentionally causes discomfort because Rama is so mono-dimensional in his epic character that he cannot refuse to repeatedly test his wife’s honor, whereas Sita steps outside of the limits of the epic character and leaves her husband rather than be humiliated one more time.

From this outline of the significant events of the Rāmāyaṇa, we can discern certain narratological elements and strategies that possess certain gendered qualities. If we recall Lukács observation that the epic hero is a figure who can never be an individual—it is impossible for him to step outside of the character that has been constructed for him. Here, I state specifically that this narratological rigidity of characterization is limited to the male hero of the epic. Rama’s character or voice can never be used in the construction of emotion, so it is incumbent for male narrators and writers to assume a ‘transvestic’ role and imagine and ultimately become the active female agent of the epic.22 C.M. Naim asserts in his study of rekhtī poetry in which men imagine themselves and speak as women, that

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21Quoted in Rao, p. 226.

this is a specifically Indic genre in which the “poet/lover adopted a feminine voice for himself.” The transvestic quality of rekhtī creates a space in which a man, speaking and constructing emotion as though a woman, is ultimately freeing because in patriarchal societies the performance of emotion continues to be considered a feminine practice. Vulnerability as an emotion is expressed through Sita and her various trials, and in the case of Karbala, through the female members of Imam Husain’s family who survive the battle and are taken as prisoners to Damascus.

It is neither accurate nor fair to state that men lack emotion, because just as women are socialized to perform certain types of feminine emotion (tears) that are sanctioned by society, men, too, are conditioned to be reasonably passionate. At first glance this line of reasoning appears to make sense, yet in the case of the khuṭbahs from the men’s and women’s majlis that I described at the beginning of this chapter, a sort of gendered inversion of emotion is in evidence. Reza Agha wept and cried as he took on the voice of female family members following Fatimah Kubra’s wedding to Qasem, crying out: “Oh God! Don’t let this bride become a widow!” Sayyidah Maryam Naqvi appealed to the masculine emotion of “passion in the service of reason,” weeping over Qasem’s martyrdom, yet still instructing the female majlis participants in what she considers to be the true historical events of Karbala.

How can these two majlis performances exhibit such a profound inversion of gendered emotion? As an ethnographer, I was disappointed in the khuṭbah from the women’s majlis. I had expected the women’s majlis to focus on Fatimah Kubra, and I

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23Naim, p. 45.

assumed that since this was a gathering of women, anxieties about marriage and widowhood would figure as a central theme in the poems of mourning and in the ẓākirah’s discourse. Instead, my ethnographic assumptions about what would happen in the women’s majlis were dashed, yet I did not understand why the emotional contours of this event differed so remarkably from the men’s majlis. Two possible explanations for why these two khutbahs exhibit gendered inversion of emotion can be found in the strategies of narrative engagement and distancing employed by the majlis speakers, and also with the ways in which the khutbah is a hagiographic form, narratives recollecting the exploits of the hero(in)es of Karbala instruct Hyderabadi men and women in their appropriate roles and also serves to educate them with regard to their responsibilities in family, society and religion.

The Indic imaginal inhabitation of the contours of female emotion is based upon a strategy of narrative engagement, of drawing the audience into the story where they identify and feel sympathy with the protagonist. Afsaneh Najmabadi makes the analogy of a painting in which the principal figure looks out and engages the viewer who is able to enter into the tableau. In the Rāmāyaṇa and Karbala narratives, the audience connects with the female characters who speak directly to the other players in the story, and they also draw the reader in through a range narratological devices employed by the author that accomplish a variety of goals. In the case of the Karbala cycle, both in text and performance, devotees are drawn into the action of several settings, most notably Karbala and Damascus. Zainab and Fatimah Kubra and the other heroines of Karbala draw the majlis participant into the action and elicit appropriate expressions of emotions from them through the ways in which they compel one to enter into the tableau. Qasem as a character
is narratologically distant from the audience because as a male epic character, his role is fixed and determined. Qasem's role is to die and become a martyr, whereas his wife Fatimah Kubra survives and it is her experience and feminine emotion that ultimately structures the practical dimension of Shi'i sainthood.

In the context of South Asia, the events of Karbala are expressed in a feminine idiom and the emotional contours of the event are truly female-centered. The image-memory of Karbala is refracted through a women's universe because it was they who survived the battle of Karbala, and it was Imam Husain's sister Zainab, in particular, who was the messenger of martyrdom and is a role-model for men and women, alike. In the following section, the narrative strategy employed by the sixteenth-century Persian marşıya writer Mohtasham Kashani is one of hagiographical transvestism. At the climax of the Karbalā-nāmeḥ, Mohtasham assumes the voice of Zainab as she cries out in apostrophic form first to her grandfather, the Prophet Muhammad, and then to her mother Fatimah. In recollecting the tragic events of this battle to her deceased relatives, a moment of emotional grief and familial intimacy is created by Mohtasham—a strategy of narrative engagement that draws the listener into the moment. Everyone, male and female alike, can participate in and weep for Zainab's vulnerable position, yet the strategy of narrative engagement also compels one to follow her example and remain steadfast in faith and persevere in even the most trying of circumstances. Thus, Zainab occupies a hagiographic function as both a social and religious role model for Shi'i Muslims, and more importantly, her voice and emotion in the Karbalā-nāmeḥ taught Iranians how to be properly Shi'a.

Unlike the male heroes of Karbala who, because they had to die, remain static epic
characters, Zainab is dynamic, her emotion and modes of speech teach Shiʿas how to properly remember and mourn Imam Husain.

Thus far in this chapter, I have examined the Karbala narrative tradition as being epic in quality. Can hagiography be epic? I suggest that hagiography and epic, at least in the case of the Karbala narratives, are complementary genres because both employ a range of characterization shifting from hero(in)es who are idealized types and often simultaneously made into accessible human beings with whom one can identify on a familiar level.

Setting the World Aflame: Mohtasham’s Zainab, and the Message of Karbala

In the tenth chapter of Rowżat al-Shohadāʾ, the sixteenth-century Persian martyrdom narrative of Karbala, Mullah Husain Vaʿez Kashefi repeatedly exhorts the Shiʿa to remember the events of Karbala. At this moment in Kashefi’s hagiography of the Ahl-e Bait, the penultimate battle has taken place, Imam Husain and the men in his entourage have been martyred, and the women and children have been marched to Damascus to be paraded by the ’Umayyad khalīfa Yazid. The surviving women captives go neither meekly nor silently. Imam Husain’s sister Zainab narrates what happened to her brother, family and supporters at Karbala. Brought into the Kufan governor Ibn Ziyad’s court, Zainab strode past him and took her seat giving neither her oath of allegiance (bayʿah) nor greeting. When confronted by Ibn Ziyad for her insolent behavior she warns,

“You’ve done a good deed. You have done something important, on account of which you are hoping for freshness, enjoyment and peace of mind. From this baseless wisdom, and from the spine of deception, you have become drunk.
Through pride and vainglory, the transient has escaped your hand. ‘Prepare for the hangover tomorrow; you are drunk today.’ Do you not know that you have killed the best of the Family of Prophecy? You have cut off the root and the branch of the tree in the orchard of prophecy. If this message is the remedy of your heart, then it will soon become your daily repentance. Its imprint will remain on the page of time. You will attain the compensation for your own unacceptable behavior:

*The oppressor thought that he had oppressed us,*  
*It remained on his neck and passed us by.*²⁵

Zainab’s public and constant account of what happened at Karbala makes it impossible for anyone to *forget* about the bloodshed.

Because of this experiential dimension that is expressed in Shi‘i devotional mourning literature, such poetic forms as the *maršiya*, *nauḥa*, and *salām*, as well as the more expansive prose narratives, serve a dual function: First, this literature compels one to remember the battle of Karbala. Second, and most important, the *majlis* participants remember the events of Karbala through the perspective of Imam Husain’s sister Zainab.²⁶ Zainab’s statement that Karbala’s “imprint will remain on the page of time,” dramatically amplifies the meaning of social memory for the Shi‘i community. Composing the first *maršiya*, or the first account of the events of Karbala, Zainab instantiates the Shi‘i tradition of remembrance and mourning that keeps alive this calamitous moment. Zainab is the *ẓākirah* (rememberer) for this community of remembrance.

The origin of the *maršiya* resides in an oral tradition in which the rhymed and rhythmic laments celebrate the merits (*rithā*) of the deceased. Traditionally, in pre-Islamic


Arabia, it was the female relatives who commemorated the activities and good qualities of their deceased male relative. The Arabic marṣiya tradition has tended to be cultivated and transmitted within a woman’s world, as this genre always was. Women composers and performers of the marṣiya have found an abiding place in this deeply religious history, a place which became further solidified after the martyrdom of Imam Husain because of the large number of marṣiyas about the tribulations of the Ahl-e Bait that are openly acknowledged to have been composed by women, particularly Zainab.

The earliest examples of Arabic marṣiyas written to mourn the martyrdom of Imam Husain are attributed to his wives and daughters. Lynda Clarke notes the marṣiya of Imam Husain’s wife Rabab as an example of women’s participation in the performance and composition of lamentation poetry:

“O Husayn! Never shall I forget Husayn!
Pierced by the spears of his enemies,

He whom they abandoned in Karbala’.
May God now never water the plain of Karbala’!”

Clarke correctly asserts that the continuation of female marṣiya composers in the Shi‘i literary tradition provides a ritual context for the women of the slain Imam Husain to adequately mourn the loss of their beloved spiritual leader, father, husband and brother. Clarke explains in her essay, “Some Examples of Elegy on the Imam Husayn” that in “many of the later elegies on Husayn, the lament is put into the mouths of females of his family—Fatima, for instance, or Zaynab—;” and, what is most significant about these marṣiyas

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(regardless of their authenticity) is their “beauty and deep feeling…[that] has something of the force of memory” for the intended audience.  

Furthermore, Clarke maintains that the highly conventionalized style, which emerges from the maršiya compositions of these pre-Islamic professional female mourners, becomes an important element of the Shi‘i maršiya tradition, which develops in Persian and other Islamicate languages. The maršiya not only provided women with a socially acceptable means for mourning deceased family and tribe members, but a conventionalized and highly stylized poetic genre emerged, as well. As with the pre-Islamic Arabic maršiya, the revival of the commemorative Persian religious maršiya of Mohtasham Kashani that he dedicated to the hero(in)es of Karbala, dwells on the shortness of life, and the role of fate is commented upon in a distinctively context-specific form. Clarke notes that these “reflections on mortality only serve to frame a threnodic tribute to a specified personality.”

With the spread of Islam into Iran, the artistic, literary, religious and other cultural traditions of Arabia evolved in their Persian milieu. In Persian literature, the genre of the maršiya was transformed into a thematic category, developing a highly stylized form and content for each type. William Hanaway has identified the themes of the Persian maršiya as: 1) the political maršiya written in honor of kings and other secular figures; 2) the familial maršiya written in remembrance of family members and close friends; and 3) the religious maršiya, which in the Persian language is synonymous with lamentation poems

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28Clarke, p. 16.

written in commemoration of the Imam Husain. Of the three themes of the Persian maršiya, the religious maršiya is the most fluid, as it can incorporate elements of the political and familial themes.

One of the best examples of how Karbala is remembered from a feminine perspective, in both voice and emotion, is to be found in the mid-sixteenth century Persian poet Mohtasham Kashani’s twelve-stanza maršiya the Karbalā-nāmeh. When the Safavid dynasty was inaugurated with the ascension of Shah Isma’il I to power in 1501, he declared Shi’ism to be the religion of state, yet it took almost a century for Shi’ism to become institutionalized or standardized in Iran. It was necessary to educate people about what it means to be a Shi’a, and the maršiya that Mohtasham Kashani composed under the patronage of Shah Tahmasp I served as a model for the newly converted Safavid Shahs.

Mohtasham cleverly translated the genre of the Arabic maršiya into both Persian language and idiom. Although it is not certain whether or not Mohtasham was familiar with Kashefi’s Rowżat al-Shohadā’, it is reasonable to assume that he was, especially since the ritual remembrance of Karbala was a primary means of solidifying the Shi’i credentials of the Safavids, as well as establishing a new Shi‘i (and not Sunni) Iranian identity amongst the polity. Even if Mohtasham was not familiar with Rowżat al-Shohadā’, he would have been familiar with the extensive body of sacred biographies of the Imams that was composed in

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31Mohtasham’s maršiya is most popularly known as the Haft Band, although in my M.A. thesis, “Verses Dripping Blood: A Study of the Religious Elements of Muhtasham Kashani’s Karbala-nāmeh,” I gave the poem a title that is indicative of its function rather than its form. In Persian the word “nāmeh” refers to a written chronicle or account of something. Haft Band refers to the maršiya’s stanzaic structure and is a title bestowed by literary historians, whereas the alternate title Karbala-nāmeh indicates to the reader or listener what the poem is about.
Persian.\textsuperscript{32} The \textit{Karbalā-nāme} played a crucial role in the development of Shi‘i ritual and devotional life, and Mohtasham’s \textit{maršīya} quickly became a source of emulation in both Iran and in the Deccan region of India.

Mohtasham’s \textit{maršīya} served as a model for the newly shi’itized Iranians, narrating the historical events of Karbala through vivid words and imagery, and guiding the Shi’a to experience the emotions of \textit{gham} (grief), \textit{mātam} (lamentation), and \textit{gīrān} (weeping). Following the established conventions in Arabic literature and ritual practice of women remembering the dead, Mohtasham utilizes the voice of Imam Husain’s sister Zainab to great emotional effect as she speaks to the Prophet Muhammad and her mother Fatimah in their graves. Zainab’s voice is important because she was endowed with the responsibility of spreading the message of Husain’s martyrdom, but also because as a woman, Zainab “being a wife and a mother, could have chosen to stay with her household, but decided to accompany Imam Hussein [sic] from Medina onward to wherever fate would take her... It was her duty to accept the sacrifice and bear the difficulties. She went along with her brother to fulfill a mission, and give an example that would remain alive for the rest of history.”\textsuperscript{33} In this hagiographical account, Zainab along with her brother must fulfill the events of Karbala and its aftermath—they each have a divine duty, of which Zainab’s is to


“give an example that would remain alive for the rest of history... for the sake of the survival of Islam.”

Because the experiential dimension is so significant, we can identify the marşıya and all other types of Karbala literature as a form of hagiography or didactic sacred biography. As such, Mohtasham Kashani’s Karbalā-nāme ā serves several didactic functions; particularly, the marşıya compels active remembering of the battle of Karbala, and it instructs the devotees in proper emotional behavior, such as mātam (lamentation), and soz (grief). In its performance context, the marşıya eliminates both time and place; every place is Karbala and every moment is Karbala. In this sense, the marşıya is experiential because it is predicated on Zainab’s act of remembrance. As hagiography, the marşıya constructs the women of the Ahl-e Bait, particularly Imam Husain’s sister Zainab bint ‘Ali, as saints or awliyā Allah who are embodiments of ḥusainiyyat-wilāyah. The women of Karbala “exemplify ideals to which all may aspire.”

Since hagiographies chronicle the lives or experiences of saints who exemplify particular religious ideals, it is necessary for the genre to be both didactic and experiential. Although the marşıya as hagiography tells the universalized story of Karbala, its vocabulary, themes and highlighted characters must be constantly changing in order to “chronicle the ways in which followers experienced the saint as a saint.”

35I am not making a pointless digression in the following paragraphs, but rather, I hope to show that hagiography and epic are complementary genres.
38Rinehart, p. 12.
are sacred biographies that tell the life-story of a saint. In this regard, the *maršiya* does correspond in part to Hippolyte Delehaye’s classic definition of hagiography as, “writings inspired by religious devotion to the saints and intended to increase that devotion.”\(^{39}\) We must, however, take care not to strive too much to determine the actual or true historical life of the saint. John Kitchen in his fine study of the role of gender in Merovingian hagiography notes one glaring weakness in contemporary scholarship on hagiography. Kitchen observes that, “the most striking feature of modern research in general is how little it actually engages the religious thought and theological outlook presupposed and expressed in the hagiographic texts.”\(^{40}\) Therefore, as Delehaye notes, hagiography is not necessarily to be read as a historical work, but rather as literary works that embody the saint. Through this literature, as Robin Rinehart explains in her study of the Indian saint Swami Ram Tirath, hagiography is at its most basic level, “the history of how the saint’s followers have chosen to remember him or her” and that hagiographers “serve as mediators, creating a bridge between the saint and his followers through their texts,” which means that “hagiography...must chronicle the ways in which followers experienced the saint as a saint.”\(^{41}\)

Thus, hagiography, like epic, is experiential because it is an interactive genre that is based upon dynamic processes of remembrance. In the case of newly shi’itizing\(^{42}\) sixteenth-

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\(^{41}\)Rinehart, pp. 8, 11-12.

century Safavid Iran, the poet Mohtasham Kashani’s *Karbalā-nāmeh* serves as a perfect example of the experiential and didactic functions of the maršīya expressed through the persona of Zainab bint ʿAli. The *Karbalā-nāmeh* served an important didactic function in helping the newly converted Iranians remember the events of Karbala through vivid vocabulary and imagery. In Mohtasham’s *Karbalā-nāmeh*, Zainab’s memorializing function called both women and men to remember Karbala according to how their genders construct the salient features of that remembrance. In particular, men might emulate Zainab’s willingness to die in order to protect Islam from injustice, and women might emulate Zainab’s fierce dedication to family and faith.

In the following translation of Zainab’s apostrophic speech to Muhammad and Fatimah in their graves, we can see the two characterizations of Imam Husain’s sister being employed by Mohtasham. Zainab is the heroine who survived the battle, and she understands that she shares the responsibility for Karbala with her brother Husain. It was Husain’s role to die for the dual causes of familial justice and religion, and it was Zainab’s responsibility to spread the message of his martyrdom and to preserve the Imamate. This aspect of Zainab’s characterization reflects her role as an epic heroine, yet it is the grief and anger that she expresses over the carnage and death that she has witnessed that makes the average person identify with her and understand her feelings of anguish:

> All at once, among the dead, the eyes of Zainab
> Fell upon the noble face of the Imam of the Age.

> Impulsively, the cry of “This is Husain!”43 burst from her,
> So hot that with it she set the world on fire with this cry!

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43*Haqā Husain!*
With the tongue of reproach, that young virgin
Turned her face to Madinah, saying, “O Prophet!”

The Ninth Band
“This one slain and fallen on the desert— this is Husain!
“This prey that is covered from head to foot in blood— this is Husain!

“This well-watered palm,\footnote{The image of the tall or well-watered palm refers to Imam Husain.} that sent the smoke of the life-burning fire of thirst,

“Climbing from the earth to heaven— this is Husain!

“This fish, fallen in a sea of blood, on whose body,
“The wounds are more numerous than the stars— this is Husain!

“This man drowned in the ocean of martyrdom, the waves of whose blood

“Have stained the face of the desert— this is Husain!

“This man with parched lips, fallen far from the banks of the Euphrates,
“Whose blood flows across the earth like a river— this is Husain!

“The king of a small army, whose troops of tears and sighs
“Decamped from this world— this is Husain!

“This quivering body that was left like this on the earth,
“The martyr king left unburied— this is Husain!”

When she (Zainab) turned to address Fatimah in the Everlasting Cemetery

\footnote{Zainab’s speech continues in the ninth and tenth bands.}
She roasted the beasts of the earth and the birds of the air:

*The Tenth Band*
“Intimate friend of the brokenhearted, behold our state!
“Behold us, forlorn and friendless and without companion!

“Behold, your children who are intercessors at the Resurrection,
“Fallen into the abyss of the tyrant’s torment!

“In eternity, beyond the veil of both worlds, open your arms wide!
“And in the world, behold our misfortune out in the open.

“No, no! Come to Karbala like a weeping rain cloud.
“Behold the roaring floods of chaos and the waves of suffering!

“See the bodies of the slain covered in dust and blood.
“Behold, the heads of leaders all set on spears!

“The head that always rested on the Prophet’s shoulder—
“Behold it raised on a spear above the enemies’ shoulders!

“That body that was nurtured in your embrace—
“Behold it wallowing in the dust of the battlefield of Karbala!

“Oh! Offspring of the Prophet, I call for justice against Ibn Ziyad!
“For he cast the dust of the People of the Prophet’s House to the wind.”

Zainab’s presence in the *Karbalā-nāmeh* is deliberate on the part of Mohtasham Kashani. Mohtasham employs the familiar female voice of the Arabic maršiya tradition, and the use of Zainab’s voice and emotion in his lament is multivalent. First, Mohtasham is establishing a connection with the Arabic maršiya tradition by employing a female voice for
the emotional climax of the poem. Second, and most important, by adopting Zainab’s voice, Mohtasham’s Karbalā-nāmeḥ fulfills a dual function. First, the Karbala narratives convey the political-historical dimension of Shi’ism, particularly that Zainab was endowed with the political legacy of her brother Husain, and also to safeguard the survival of the Ahl-e Bait. This is her role as the epic heroine who is a religious exemplar. Second, by using Zainab’s voice and emotions, Mohtasham’s marṣīya is didactic in function, instructing people how to remember Karbala.

David Pinault observes with regard to the Urdu marṣīya that it is “a favorite technique, having one of the women of Karbala function as a speaker and visualizing the episode from her perspective. The heightens the effect of immediacy and pathetic intensity.” Pinault goes on to assert that Zainab’s “behavior, precisely because of her assertiveness and high visibility, as atypical and non-normative, as an index of the disturbed conditions of Islamic society in her lifetime,” which is an incomplete assessment or explanation for why Imam Husain’s sister occupies such an important role in Shi’i devotional thought and practice. In his recent study of the role of Karbala symbols in the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Kamran Scot Aghaie has similarly underestimated the action and roles of the women of the Ahl-e Bait in hagiographical texts such as Kashefi’s Rowżat al-Shohadā’. Aghaie’s analysis of the heroines of Karbala is fascinating, but he focuses almost exclusively on how these figures are gender-coded in the narrative traditions. By tapping into the tradition in Islamic culture of women being the primary eulogizers and

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47Pinault, p. 94.

memorializers of their deceased male relatives, and by utilizing Zainab’s voice in the *Karbala-nāmeh*, Mohtasham was able to create the dramatic climax in his Karbala narrative, but he also achieved much more, which resulted in a transformation of the genre into a distinct form of epic-hagiography.

**Karbala’s Deccani Idiom: The Ahl-e Bait Becomes Indian**

In this section, I shall outline the development of Karbala texts and performances in the Deccan. Just as texts and performances commemorating the battle of Karbala were translated into an Iranian idiom by sixteenth century Persian writers, most notably Kashefi and Mohtasham, so, too, were these texts brought to the Deccan where they acquired distinctive Southern Indian cultural, ecological and linguistic forms. In the following section, I include a translation of one of the most remarkable martyrdom narratives that I encountered in archival research, the title of which aims to tell the story of Qasem’s martyrdom, but actually focuses almost exclusively on Fatimah Kubra, narrating the events through her emotional world.

As early as the eighth/fourteenth century, Iranians began to immigrate to the Deccan in large numbers to serve in the court (*darbar*) of the king of the Bahmani dynasty Muhammad II (780-799/1378-1397). S.A.A. Rizvi notes that, “They practiced *taqiyya* [dissimulation] although they did not miss any opportunity to prepare the ground for the growth of Shi‘ism in the Deccan.”*49* The ‘Adil Shahis of Bijapur were enthusiastic patrons of

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*Rizvi, A Socio-Intellectual History of the Isna ‘Ashari Shi‘is in India, vol. 1, p. 248.*
the āfāqī or “foreign” scholars and writers who filled their courts. 50 Most significant for the development of Shi’i devotionalism in the Deccan was the appointment of the Iranian āfāqī Mir Muhammad Mu’min Astarabadi to the court of Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah in 1585 CE.

According to Rizvi, Mir Mu’min endeavored to introduce and propagate Shi’ism in the Deccan:

As if the construction of Hyderabad itself was not enough, Mir Muhammad Mu’min founded many villages as centers of Shi’i and Islamic life. In them he constructed reservoirs, mosques, caravanserais, ‘Ashur-khanas and planted gardens. The mosques and ‘Ashur-khanas brought the Hindu villagers into contact with the Islamic and Shi’i way of life. The ‘alams and other symbols of the tragedy of Karbala were introduced by Mir Mu’min into these villages where they aroused Hindu curiosity and helped to convert them to Shi’ism. 51

Mir Mu’m in was Iranian and he successfully introduced Iranian Shi’i devotional elements into Deccani religious life, thus contributing to the creation of a complex multicultural environment in which Hindu, Shi’a, Persian, Telugu, and Deccani were brought into contact.

With the movement of scholars, poets and merchants between Iran and India, by the end of the sixteenth century, both Mohtasham’s Karbalā-nāmeh and Mulla Husain Va’ez Kashefi’s Rowżat al-Shohadā’ were being read in majlis-e ‘azā’ at Golconda and Bijapur. 52 Mohtasham’s Karbalā-nāmeh was recited in the majlis mourning assemblies, particularly under the patronage of ‘Ali ‘Adil Shah of Bijapur and Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah of Golconda. In order to make the recitation of the Karbala narrative understandable to those

50 In the medieval Deccan, āfāqī referred to the foreigners who flocked to the courts of the ‘Adil Shahi, Bahmani and later Qutb Shahi dynasties. The word most generally refers to the Iranians who assumed many positions of power and influence in the Deccani kingdoms.

51 Rizvi, vol. 1, pp. 311-312.

52 Sadiq Naqvi, Qutb Shahi Ashur Khanas of Hyderabad City (Hyderabad: Bab-ul-Ilm Society, 1982), p. 62.
who only knew the local languages of Deccani and Telugu, the Persian writings of Mohtasham and Kashefi were simultaneously translated and rendered to reflect the tragedy of Karbala through a distinctively Indic idiom and worldview. This does not mean that these writings experienced a brief moment of popularity and then faded into obscurity. In fact, quite the opposite occurred. Just as in Iran, Mohtasham’s Karbalā-nāmeḥ “became a source of elegy emulation for...Indian poets of ensuing generations.”53 The repeated imitation and translation of the Karbalā-nāmeḥ and Rowżat al-Shohadāʾ attests to the fact that these two styles of Shiʿi devotional literature created a literary and imaginal link for Shiʿas to remember the events of Karbala.

Kashefi’s Rowżat al-Shohadāʾ appeared in the Deccan sometime in the mid-seventeenth century, and within a couple of decades countless writers were translating the narrative account of Karbala into Deccani Urdu. One of the Deccan’s earliest composers of Shiʿi hagiographical literature was a Hindu. Rama Rao, whose pen name (takhallus) was ‘Śaiva’, was the first Hindu writer of maršíya in the Deccan. He received the patronage of Ἄli ᾄdil Shah of Bijapur. In addition to writing maršíya, Rama Rao completed one of the first Deccani translations of Rowżat al-Shohadāʾ in 1681.54 With even Hindus participating in the composition of Shiʿi devotional literature, the remembrance of Karbala in the Deccani was bound to reflect an Indian worldview and its social, aesthetic, and gender values.

Shiʿi devotional literature continued to flourish in all parts of the Deccan. With the collapse of the Qutb Shahi dynasty following the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb’s lengthy


siege of Golconda Fort in 1687, the succeeding Asaf Jahi dynasty was Sunni, although in both leadership and aesthetics, they exhibited a definite predilection for Shi‘ism. In the struggles for power that ensued in the three decades after the end of the Qutb Shahi dynasty, a new Sunni dynasty was established in 1724 by Nizam al-Mulk, who was the grandson of Chin Qilich Khan, one of the generals in Aurangzeb’s army. Under the reign of Asaf Jah II, Nizam ‘Ali Khan and Asaf Jah III, Sikandar Jah, Shi‘i institutions, religious practice, and literature experienced a period of revival. Many of the ‘āshūrkānas or majlis assembly halls were renovated or commissioned by the Asaf Jahs and senior members of the government.

If Hyderabad’s archives can serve as a barometer of what sort of Shi‘i hagiographical literature was being commissioned and composed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Deccan, it is a fair assessment that Kashefi’s Rowżat al-Shohadā’ was one of the most popular Shi‘i devotional texts of the period. Writers in Deccani and later Urdu found Rowżat al-Shohadā’ to be a malleable text in which the narrative framework remained the same, yet the entire world of Karbala was transformed from seventh-century Arab Iraq to early modern Hyderabad and the surrounding countryside. Some authors chose to retain the Persianate title of Kashefi’s work, yet many others in the process of vernacularizing the hagiographic text (and related performance traditions) also adorned their work with a new title. One of the most popular titles given by authors for their translations of Rowżat al-Shohadā’ is Dah Majlis (The Ten Assemblies), referring to the number of chapters in the text as well as highlighting its ritual utility in providing topics for the majlis-e ‘azā’—one for each day of Muharram leading up to Imam Husain’s martyrdom on ‘āshūrā’.
One of the challenges to conducting both archival and field research that is text-centered research is obsessed with the issue of how texts are classified. Often, even speaking with Shi’i scholars of Urdu literature, I found that I often obtained little success when I referred to Rowżat al-Shohadā’ as a maqtal (martyrdom narrative) or even as a historical work. One day, I was sitting in Dr. Sadiq Naqvi’s tiny salon where he frequently entertains his large cadre of male friends and the small but steady stream of scholars who visit Hyderabad for research, and I observed how he introduced me to someone who had dropped in for a brief visit and cup of tea: “This is Karen Ruffle and she is from Carolina in the United States. She is studying maršiya in Hyderabad.”\(^5\) I would sometimes want to correct Dr. Naqvi and explain to him that, yes, when I first came to Hyderabad in 2003, I wanted to study maršiya, but now there is so much more to my project. Of course, I refrained from such corrections and listened to how this native Hyderabadi explained my research to others. In many other conversations with Dr. Naqvi, he invariably referred to Rowżat al-Shohadā’ as a maršiya. S.H. Askari has observed that the tendency in India is to label this text as a maršiya, when in his estimation it is “a history of the family of the Messenger’s (rasūl) battle and martyrdom.”\(^6\) For many Shi’as in Hyderabad, maršiya has become a shorthand term to refer to all types of devotional literature dedicated to the battle of Karbala. In fact, most of these translations of Rowżat al-Shohadā’ are not written in prose narrative form, but in the style of the qaṣīda or narrative, epic poem. Because of the imaginative dimension and explicitly hagiographical function of Rowżat al-Shohadā’ and its

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\(^5\) Such an introduction was made too many times in my presence to footnote the occurrences, but this is typical of the style and manner in which Dr. Naqvi spoke.

Deccani-Urdu translations, Askari’s assessment of the texts as works of history is inaccurate because the preponderance of the devotional literature is written in verse form, although it may be narrative in function, which is one of the qualities of the *maršiya*.

Most vernacularizations of *Rowzat al-Shohadā’* were composed in verse form. Vali of Vellore composed one of the most famous versions of the text around 1130/1717-1718, to which he gave the title *Dah Majlis*. Vali Vellore maintained the contents of Kashefi’s chronicle of Karbala, but he appealed to local aesthetics by composing the text in rhythmic metrical form that facilitated its recitation in the mourning assemblies. Composition of Shi’i devotional literature continued to be a popular pastime of the governing elite during the Asaf Jahi dynasty. Two significant manuscripts were produced during this period. The first, *Dah Majlis*, was written by Mir ‘Alam, the Prime Minister to Asaf Jah III Sikandar Jah in Muharram 1196/1781. The second, *Riyāż al-Ţāhirīn*[^2] (The Gardens of the Chaste), is a prose narrative of Karbala written by Mir Vali Khan Munis in Hyderabad in the same year as Mir ‘Alam wrote his *Dah Majlis*. In both of these hagiographies, Karbala and its hero(in)es have been thoroughly Indianized particularly through the integration of Indic customary practices, clothing, forms of speech, and descriptions of the physical landscape.

“Karbala” or “*maršiya*,” as a genre of Shi’i literature maintained its distinctively Islamic tone despite its otherwise thorough vernacularization and absorption of Indic epic forms. By the end of the nineteenth century, Karbala hagiographies had become another type of Indic epic literature in which the male heroes conformed to rigid roles that precluded them from emotional development or engagement with the audience. The

[^2]: *Riyāż al-Ţāhirīn* is also known as *Hadisāt-e Karbalā’.* Mir Vali Khan Munis, *Riyāż al-Ţāhirīn* (Hyderabad: Salar Jung Museum, 1138) Urdu MS, Ta. 42, 1138
female characters figure prominently in the imaginaire of the Karbala hagiographers—in fact, they become the heroines of the Ahl-e Bait in their literary compositions.

**Men Mourning Widows: Fatimah Kubra in Mir ‘Alam’s Masculine Imaginaire**

So far, we have traced the broad contours of the development of Shi‘i devotional literature about Karbala as it was transformed into a genre of its own in sixteenth-century Safavid Iran and then brought to the Deccan where it was transformed yet again. Through the processes of vernacularization, the hero(in)es of Karbala became remembered as idealized Indian men and women. As Shi‘ism firmly adapted itself in the Deccan, the literature and *majlis* events invoked a memory of Karbala that reflected the social, cultural and domestic worlds of the Deccani Shi‘as. In the discourses of the *majlis*, the *maršiya* and *nauha* poems, and in the Deccani prose narratives based upon *Rowzat al-Shohadā‘*, Fatimah Kubra and Qasem especially, are explicitly remembered as the idealized Indian Muslim couple who do what is culturally mandated, even in the most trying circumstances.

In his *mehndī kī majlis* discourse, Maulana Reza Agha expressed true grief over Fatimah Kubra’s widowhood so soon after her battlefield marriage. Weeping and raising his voice to a crescendo, Reza Agha cries out, “Oh God! Do not let this bride become a widow!” In the two *khūṭbahs* that I heard Reza Agha deliver at the men’s *‘Abbās Sahīb mehndī kī majlis* in 2005 and 2006, Fatimah Kubra is remembered as a bride whose wedding is anything but *shādī*, the popular Urdu word for weddings that literally means joyfulness, but more importantly she is a widow that these men are supposed to remember and mourn. As I
listened to this majlis, I wondered whether or not Reza Agha’s emotional remembrance of this young woman is unusual.

As a hagiographer, himself, Reza Agha was drawing upon the complex, vernacular Karbala textual traditions of the Deccan. Speaking as a woman, crying and beating his breast to express his sympathy for and shared grief for Fatimah Kubra, Reza Agha was simply employing a sophisticated strategy of gendered narrative engagement drawing the participants and him into the feminine world and emotions of the wedding chamber. In the Indian epic traditions of Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata (as well as many other local narrative-performances contexts), we have already seen how the heroine of the story is the one with whom the audience sees as both an extraordinary individual and as a role-model in some fashion. Sita is a good wife, yet she also is a subversive example for women of how to resist systems of oppression. Imam Husain’s sister Zainab is a similar dynamic epic heroine who is a dedicated mother-wife-sister that also steps in to uphold the Imamate and spread the message of Karbala in the aftermath of the battle. For many hagiographers who depict the hero(in)es of Karbala in text and performance, the female survivors are easier to transform into pragmatic saints. For Reza Agha, Fatimah Kubra is special and real because although she was a young girl, she willingly sacrificed her husband Qasem for the political and spiritual cause of Islam.

Reza Agha’s dramatic portrayal of Fatimah Kubra as both a strong and pathetic bride-widow is not unique. The widowing of Fatimah Kubra is a popular theme for writers of Karbala literature in the Deccan. Usually, however, Fatimah Kubra’s experience is a sub-plot in the chapter of texts such as Rowżat al-Shohadā’, and the various recensions of Dah Majlis. In the course of archival research I encountered one text that upon initial reading
seemed to be similar to the twenty other manuscript sections that I had gathered from Deccani-Urdu Karbala manuscripts, yet upon closer examination, I discovered that this narrative was unique.\textsuperscript{58} I had requested the chapter, “"]\textsuperscript{e Sha}h\textsuperscript{e}d\textsuperscript{e}t\textsuperscript{e}e} Hz\textsuperscript{e}rat\textsuperscript{e}e Q\textsuperscript{e}sem,”\textsuperscript{59} from the Oriental Manuscript Library in Hyderabad, from a manuscript of Dah Majlis composed by Mir ‘Alam in Muharram 1196/1781. Scanning the hand-written manuscript catalog, I realized that the author was Mir ‘Alam who was the Prime Minister during the reign of the Nizam Sikandar Jah from 1804-1808.

Abu al-Qasem Sayyid Mir ‘Alam was the son of Sayyid Reza who immigrated to the Deccan from Iran. In his youth, Mir ‘Alam studied Persian literature and the fundamentals of Shi‘i thought and belief.\textsuperscript{60} This early education instilled in Mir ‘Alam a deep knowledge of Shi‘ism and love for the Ahl-e Bait. During his tenure as Prime Minister, he increased state sponsorship and encouraged the observance of Muharram rituals in Hyderabad. In addition to sponsoring Muharram majlis activities and poets, Mir ‘Alam also composed the Dah Majlis in the form of a qašida. It is not clear whether or not Mir ‘Alam wrote any other Karbala hagiographies, although it would not be surprising.

Mir ‘Alam was a prominent supporter of Hyderabad’s Shi‘i community, and he also wrote one of the most significantly vernacularized, and Indianized of the Deccani-Urdu Karbala narratives composed since the seventeenth century. Mir ‘Alam’s account of

\textsuperscript{58}Here, I use the word unique because OML&RI appears to possess the only copy of this manuscript. I have not found a duplicate version of Mir ‘Alam’s manuscript in other archives in Hyderabad. I also consider this manuscript to be unique because Mir ‘Alam’s narratological approach to Qasem’s martyrdom is unlike any that I have encountered in manuscript form. Mir ‘Alam’s account of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra is strikingly similar to Reza Agha’s khutbah in its expression of emotion through extensive use of feminine voices. Mir ‘Alam, Dah Majlis (Hyderabad: Oriental Manuscripts Library and Research Institute, 1196/1781), Urdu MS, no. Ta. 437.

\textsuperscript{59}“The Account of the Martyrdom of Hazrat Qasem.”

\textsuperscript{60}Rasheed Moosvi, Ḥaɪdarābād mei̱n Marṣiya aur ʿAzādārī (New Delhi: Urdu Taraqqi Bureau, 1989), p. 87.
Qasem’s martyrdom has little to do with Qasem, but focuses almost exclusively on the rituals of an Indian wedding, Indic anxieties about widowhood, and instructions on how to be a good daughter-in-law. Qasem is a peripheral character to the narrative whose only real role is to be martyred as is, according to Mir ʿAlam, commanded by his fate. Fatimah Kubra’s emotional world and status as a bride/widow is what Mir ʿAlam imagines. It is Fatimah Kubra, through her speech and actions who engages the audience to share in her experience, to weep for her sacrifice and Islam, and to connect with her as though she is something more than a religious role model—Mir ʿAlam and Reza Agha transform Fatimah Kubra through their narrative strategies into a woman who is as real and intimate as one’s sister, mother or aunt.

The “Account of the Martyrdom of Qasem Ibn-e Hasan” conforms to the maqtal style popular in the Deccan. The scene is introduced by Mir ʿAlam with a dramatic statement in which he proclaims that he is about to tell of a wedding unlike any other:

_in this manner, the majlis of the seventh day has been written, in which,
_from this grievous event, the rituals of the wedding were changed.
in the place of gaiety, there is bloodshed._

The first fifteen lines of the chapter (written in verse form) continue to set the scene for the majlis participants. The Ahl-e Bait is invoked and their suffering is brought into focus when the audience is asked,

_How can I describe the effulgence of the Holy Five,._
_How can I describe the effulgence of the Holy Five,._
_Whose wedding garments are like a shroud._
_Lovers (of the Ahl-e Bait), here is the account of the death;_  
_Now, Listen! This is the moment of the bridegroom Qasem’s shahādat!_

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61 The _Panjetan-e Pāk_ refers to the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatimah, her husband the first Shiʿi Imam ʿAli, and their two sons Hasan and Husain. For a pictorial representation of the Holy Five, see chapter one.
The lament is for the martyrdom of this newly fledged bridegroom,
Just as it is for Fatimah Kubra, the new bride.

The Shi‘a, who are the lovers of the Ahl-e Bait are called upon by the narrator to enter into the scene of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra’s wedding. The narrator sets up a metalepsis or invocation drawing the majlis attendants to participate in the wedding. Through narrative metalepsis, the majlis is transformed into Karbala and each man and woman is able to imagine his or her participation in that tragic wedding where Fatimah Kubra’s crimson sārī that is customarily worn by most Indian brides is transformed into a bloody widow’s shroud after it is drenched in her dying husband’s blood.

In the following section, the narrator extols Qasem and Fatimah Kubra as superior human beings. Qasem is called, “the best of humanity” and Fatimah Kubra is referred to as her father Husain’s beloved daughter. These two youth are superlative in their qualities and it is necessary that the will and testament (waṣiyat) of Qasem’s father Imam Hasan be fulfilled. Qasem and Fatimah Kubra are described as ma‘ṣūm or innocent children who have been forced into a situation that requires maturity far beyond their years. The narrator creates a dramatic tension between the youth of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra that is juxtaposed with their willingness to make such harsh sacrifices for their family and their faith:

At that moment, the son of Shabbar62 dismounted from the horse,
and fell at the feet of that lord (sarvar) Husain.
He said, “Oh King, will everyone achieve martyrdom?

62Ibn-e Shabbar refers to Qasem, the son of Imam Hasan whose laqab (epithet) was Shabbar. For a detailed explanation of the meaning and derivation of the epithets Shabbar and Shabbir, please see Appendix B “Genealogy of the Ahl-e Bait, Including the Epithets Typically Used in Urdu Devotional Literature on Karbala.”
I am an orphan (yatīm), so please grant me permission to go to battle.”

Qasem’s statement “I am an orphan” serves as a transition in the narrative that simultaneously emphasizes his fatherless status and the father-like role that Husain has assumed. Imam Husain’s loyalty to the wishes of his brother and his desire to protect this fatherless nephew elevates the pathos of this moment:

“How can I give my approval, alas!
By God when I remember my brother.”
If you populate the battlefield with your corpse,
How will I hold myself accountable to Hasan?”
Hearing the King’s words, Qasem was disheartened,
He said, “Uncle, this is my lament,”
“May it be possible for me, you majesty,
That I might see your martyrdom with my own eyes.”
“How can I not lose my neck in this fashion?
Oh King, my fate has been written on my head!”
“This affliction became such an example
That my head does not appear to bear any burden at all.”
If you go before me into battle,
How can I show this face of mine to Hasan?”

Imam Husain is rendered powerless by this impossible situation. How can he allow his nephew to go into battle and face certain martyrdom? How will Husain be able to face his brother Hasan on the Day of Judgment? These questions torment Imam Husain, yet he feels worse seeing his beloved nephew yearning to go into battle and fight for the dual cause of religion and family. At this juncture in drama, Imam Husain is released from the responsibility of having to solve this unsolvable dilemma.
Imam Husain summons his sister Zainab to take control of this situation with Qasem. The narrator effects another transition in the action by introducing Hasan and Husain’s sister Zainab who is portrayed as a far more practical and action-oriented character. Imam Husain is incapacitated by his grief and he summons his sister who enters into the scene. She heaves a sigh, speaks and moves Qasem along his fated path of matrimony and martyrdom:

When Imam Husain (sarvar) summoned that sister Zainab,

In that manner she filled up with sighs and began to say,

“Now, Hasan’s house is destroyed,
Qasem has gone to battle so that he may be beheaded.”

“I had one wish for this marriage,
That I could see the garlanding (sehrā bandhāna) of the bride and groom.”

“Now, go and take him to the encampment
Make my Qasem into a bridegroom.”

“ Quickly make the wedding preparations for the bride,
The rider on the battlefield who has a bloody shroud.”

“This bridegroom is a guest for but a moment;
I shall see him again when he is in the grave.”

Imam Husain is effectively removed from the action at this point in the narrative, but Zainab’s voice is more poignant because she speaks of her own wishes and aspirations for the marriage between her niece and nephew. The manner in which Zainab speaks of her only wish being able to see the bride and groom garlanded (sehrā bandhāna), which is customarily performed in Muslim marriage following the completion of the nikāḥ or

63 This bloody shroud is the color of a traditional wedding sari—crimson red. In this case, the wedding is once again being attached to its binary pair of a funeral and death. We have already seen the wedding procession (barāt) transformed into its binary opposite of funeral procession in Reza Agha’s khutbah that I describe at the beginning of the chapter.
marriage contract. The bride and groom are brought together for the first time after the *nikāḥ* and they sit together for the *ʿarsī mushhāf* or the revealing of the wife in a mirror’s reflection. As the bride and groom sit side-by-side, women from both families approach the couple and place heavy, fragrant garlands of flowers around their necks. Often, it is difficult to see the bride and groom’s faces for the profusion of rose and jasmine garlands.

![Figure 2.1: Sehrā bandhāna ceremony.](image)

Figure 2.1 above, shows a *sehrā bandhāna* ceremony in which the bride and groom are seated together being adorned with garlands, and receiving sweets and the best wishes from family members and friends. While a joyous, laughter-filled event for onlookers, it is a somber occasion for the new couple as this marks the final event in the lengthy marriage ceremony. It is this very event that Zainab laments not being able to witness that is certain to provoke the grief of the *majlis* participants.

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64Photograph of *sehrā bandhāna* that followed a Shiʿi *nikāḥ* ceremony held at the Bait al-Qāʾem ʿĀshūrkhana in the Purani Haveli locality in Hyderabad’s Old City on December 15, 2005.
Zainab’s words establish another inversion in which this wedding is not the joining together of a man and woman in a permanent relationship, but rather one that is fleeting and tragic. Zainab’s speech exaggerates the temporality of this marriage because the “bridegroom is a guest for but a moment/ I shall see him again when he is in the grave.” Despite the fact that this is a most unusual marriage that is being held under duress and without any of the ceremonies and rituals that are customary in a South Asian Muslim wedding, it must take place nonetheless.

Now the mother’s offspring was snatched away, to whom she came in order to make into a groom. “Now, make the daughter, too, a bride Bring her quickly to the place of the bridegroom Qasem!” Bano⁶⁶ said, “How can I bring Kubra? Woe! How can I make her a bride?” She groaned, “What kind of a marriage is this about to be? He has gone and is about to be beheaded!” Saying this, she went to Kubra. She said, “All of my hopes for my daughter are dashed.” “I have come in order to tie the kaṅnā to your wrist, I have come to make you a bride, my dear,” Kubra said, “Now, I desire nothing else. The marriage contract ceremony is enough for me.”

This vignette reflects a tension between the wish of the mothers of Qasem and Kubra to provide them with all of the customary Indian rituals of Muslim marriage. Fatimah Kubra understands the direness of the situation and implores the women to perform the minimum requirements for the marriage, which is the ‘aqd. The narrator is speaking almost

⁶⁶Bano is the diminutive of Shahrbano who was Imam Husain’s first wife and the daughter of the last Sassanian Shah Yazdigird III. Shahrbano was the mother of the fourth Imam ‘Ali Zain al-ʿAbidin.
exclusively through female voices and the emotions that are expressed are feminine, almost to the exclusion of all men with the exception of the bridegroom Qasem. In India, it is usually the women of the family who arrange the marriage and organize and plan the variety of customary events. Similar to weddings in the United States, men are often peripheral to the planning and organizing of a wedding. Imam Husain, in order to conform to his idealized role as epic hero of the Ahl-e Bait. He is removed from this vignette by the narrator, and one might assume that he is tending to more pressing matters of strategy and battle.

The women busy themselves with wedding preparations. Despite this being a battlefield wedding in which the many rituals and customs of marriage cannot be performed, the women of the Ahl-e Bait do their best to make this wedding conform to the idealized South Asian Muslim wedding. The clothing of the bride and groom and the wedding rituals performed have been completely vernacularized in this narrative, which makes this upside down wedding so much more poignant to the Deccani majlis participants. One can vividly imagine such a tragic wedding in culturally relevant terms. The greatest wish that the wedding participants express is an impossibility considering Qasem’s imminent martyrdom:

*The moment at which the bride approached her groom,*

*Their love was sacrificed.*

*Every one began to pray, “Oh God!*  

*Do not bring widowhood upon the bride!”*

*May not the home of the bride become ruined!*

*Nor should the groom sleep in the place of death!”*

It is now the moment of marriage and Imam Husain returns to the scene in order to perform the *nikāh* of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra. Imam Husain remains just long enough to
perform the marriage ceremony and then before he can express much sadness, he flees to the battlefield. His daughter is about to become a bride-widow and the nephew to whom he has been entrusted and whom Husain loves as a son is about to die. Imam Husain cannot fully express his grief or stress at being in such a dire situation. When Imam Husain does feel overcome with grief, he cries out to God, which is an act on the part of the narrative distancing. Imam Husain invokes God, reinforcing his role as epic-hagiographical hero whose deepest connection is with God:

Going to the naushāh, Shahrbano cried out,
“The bride Kubra has come; look at your bride!”
“Come into the tent šāhib, and listen,
Please consent to this.”
Hearing these words, Husain then came to the tent.
He looked at the bride and groom and said,
Consider, at that very moment the Shah Husain was overcome,
And he cried out an appeal to the Prophet of God (yā nabī Allah).
Having given her away to Qasem, Imam Husain said,
“Now, bridegroom, this bride is yours, take her.”
“Either leave her here or take her and go, beloved.
This is your trust, for which you are responsible.”
Saying this, he left Qasem in the ḥaram.
He was stood his ground, thirsty-lipped among the people of oppression.

In the scene following the marriage, Qasem asks for leave from his wife to go into battle. Fatimah Kubra is saddened and she asks him how can he abandon her so soon after their marriage. She tells Qasem that she knows that he will be martyred and she proclaims that she is willing to sacrifice herself for him. Qasem lies to Fatimah Kubra, telling her that
he is not going to die and that he will be returning shortly. We can sense Fatimah Kubra’s frustration and fear in her response to her bridegroom when she asks him:

“Today you are going to battle and claim that you will not be killed, so
Why are you giving me such a bridewealth?”

“If there is no matter of separation in the heart,
then why has my mother given my hand [to you in marriage]?”

Qasem is unable to handle his wife’s feelings and he summons his mother to reason with Fatimah Kubra. Just as Imam Husain is removed from the narrative at emotional moments in the narrative, so too, does Mir ‘Alam distances Qasem’s participation in handling his aggrieved wife by introducing his mother Umm Farwa. The problem is that Qasem’s mother reacts similarly to Fatimah Kubra. Umm Farwa promises to sacrifice her life for her son, and her fear of losing her son is palpable. She declares, “Any blow that will befall you/I will first take it upon myself.”

Qasem tries to reason that martyrdom is his fate and he seems to at least reconcile his mother to this inevitability. Umm Farwa and Fatimah Kubra stand lamenting the loss of their son and husband, and at this moment another female is introduced into the scene. Four year-old Sakinah, the youngest daughter of Imam Husain comes running into the vignette in a state of grief for not being able to fulfill the responsibilities and receive the privileges entitled to a sister-in-law. Again, the narrator is further situating Karbala in a profoundly Indian cultural environment.

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66This discussion about Fatimah Kubra’s bridewealth (mahr) is in reference to the common explanation given in Hyderabad for why this marriage between Qasem and Imam Husain’s daughter was compulsory at the battle of Karbala. According to the stories that I heard from many of my informants, Fatimah Kubra was married to Qasem at Karbala because she was old enough (10) to be of marriageable age and might be forced into marriage—which is in contradiction to the rights accorded women in sharī‘a—by Yazid or any other person in his court. Thus, as a widow, Fatimah Kubra would be legally free to refuse any marriage alliance that is not agreeable to her. This discussion of her bridewealth is in reference to the status of widow that will save Fatimah Kubra from any greater suffering inflicted by a forced marriage to Yazid.
Then in a state of grief the sister-in-law [sālī] Sakinah approached.

She grabbed his sleeve she cried weeping and wailing,

“Hey brother, give me my neg!”

“Oh, you brother, what kind of a wedding is this today?

That your sister-in-law is standing around in need of her neg.”

Sakinah is sorely disturbed that she cannot play the role of the younger sister-in-law. Traditionally on the day of the mehndī ceremony in which the bride’s family visits the groom’s household, the younger sister-in-law (sālī) stands next to the groom and makes fun of him and makes jokes about his appearance. Sakinah is particularly upset that she will not be able to participate in the fun of jūtā chhupāī or the hiding of his slippers. This is a pre-wedding ritual in which the sisters-in-law steal the groom’s slippers, which they refuse to return until he gives them their neg or payment of sweets and money. Much hilarity and mischief ensue until the bridegroom makes his future sisters-in-law and offer that they cannot refuse. They then return his slippers to him. Jūtā chhupāī is a way for the tension that is inherent in any marriage and particularly an arranged marriage, to be broken.

Sakinah’s sadness at being denied jūtā chhupāī and receiving her neg is another way in which feminine emotions are used by the narrator to heighten the drama and to emphasize the tragedy of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra’s wedding. No woman is unscathed by this event.

Qasem’s departure for the battlefield results in his martyrdom. The narrator devotes minimal attention to Qasem’s martyrdom because it is inevitable and the focus of this narrative is being told through the voices and experiences of the women of Imam Husain’s family. Mir ‘Alam devotes approximately ten couplets to Qasem’s actual

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67 Jaffur Shurreef, Qanoon-e Islam or the Customs of the Mussulmans of India, Comprising a Full and Exact Account of Their Various Rites and Ceremonies from the Moment of Birth Till the Hour of Death, translated by G.A. Herklots, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1991), p. 69.
participation in battle and death. Imam Husain rushes onto the battlefield to gather up his	nephew’s body and he cries out,

“How can I bring you back to the encampment?  
How can I show your corpse to your bride?”

“How can I go crying in the tent?  
When your mother will ask me a question as soon as I arrive?”

Imam Husain’s exclamations indicate the deep anxiety he feels about the news of Qasem’s
martyrdom that he must now deliver. The women will surely know that the *naushāh-yé Karbala* has died when Imam Husain returns to the encampment. Imam Husain surely
grieves for his nephew, although his emotional role continues to be passive in comparison
to that of the women of the encampment.

Qasem’s mother sees her son’s corpse approaching the tents on horseback and she
cries out in anguish. She curses fate and wonders what she could have done wrong as a
mother and a human being to deserve such pain and suffering. Although the women of
Imam Husain’s family know that their male relatives must die in order to save their
womenfolk and the lineage of the Prophet Muhammad, they express their gendered roles
that are somewhat irrational and emotionally overwrought. The women know that the
battle must happen in order for Islam to be preserved yet in reality they cannot accept the
slaughter that is taking place before them. Umm Farwa laments her fate and her son’s
corporeal silence:

*She lamented over her son’s corpse,*

*Wringing the hands, she lamented “Alas, Fate!”*

*“What is my crime? Oh Darling! Alas!  
Woe to me that you are not about to speak!”*  
*Why are you angry with your mother?*
This night in which you are sleeping has now passed."

She cried out, “Grant justice to the oppressed!”

My grown son has been ruined, what can I do?

“Alas, how this hour of my son’s death afflicts me!”

Now, Fatimah Kubra has become a widow and the women of Imam Husain’s family must address this unfortunate girl. Just as Reza Agha cried out in his khitbah, the worst thing that can happen is that a woman becomes bevāh or “without marriage”—that is, a widow—particularly so soon after the ’aqd-e nikāh was performed yet the marriage remained un consummated. As Dr. Taqui Khan explained to me, this was Fatimah Kubra’s sacrifice. Fatimah’s marriage to Qasem accorded her widow’s status protecting her from the predations of men who might have forced her to marry against her will while imprisoned in Damascus. According to Dr. Khan, it was not necessary for her marriage to be consummated because the nikāh brought her into the presence of her husband and that was sufficient for her to be considered a widow.⁶⁸

Fatimah Kubra is not easily consoled by her widowhood and the protections it is intended to give her following the battle of Karbala. Reflecting the status of widows in South Asian cultures in which the wife becomes socially ‘dead’ following her husband’s death, Fatimah Kubra’s mother realizes that along with Qasem her daughter has died, too.⁶⁹ Fatimah Kubra affirms her social death when she says to her mother, “I am joining now with his corpse.”

The successive scenes in this chapter focus exclusively on the sufferings of the bride-widow Fatimah Kubra and the lamentations of the women of Imam Husain’s family

⁶⁸Interview with Dr. M.M. Taqui Khan at his home in Yaqutpura, Hyderabad (April 15, 2005).

⁶⁹Fatimah Kubra’s gendering as a widow will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 3.
over this joyless and tragic wedding. The remainder of the chapter is virtually devoid of the presence of the male epic hero Imam Husain. Qasem is present only in martyrdom and he has fulfilled his role as epic hero idealized as a bridegroom who sacrificed himself for the preservation of the honor of his wife Fatimah Kubra. He is also an idealized male warrior of the Ahl-e Bait who unhesitatingly gave himself to the cause of Islam. For Qasem, martyrdom was “sweeter than honey.”\(^7\) Mir ‘Alam’s use of the female epic heroine as a dynamic character who is not limited by a narrowly defined idealized role has been amply demonstrated in this narrative analysis of Qasem’s martyrdom. In fact, this chapter is ostensibly an account of Qasem and his martyrdom, but in fact his role as the epic warrior hero is established by the narrator through the voices and emotions of the women in Qasem’s family.

**Epic-Hagiography and Its Feminine Voices and Emotions**

In this chapter I highlight the ways in which feminine voices and emotions construct the heroine—exemplified in this study by the bride-widow Fatimah Kubra—in the Karbala epic-hagiographical tradition as it has developed in Hyderabad. This chapter weaves together the Indic epic tradition and its influence on the further development and vernacularization of the dynamic epic heroine of Karbala who, by virtue of surviving the battle and living to tell the story, articulates the values of Indian culture and society and the ideals of Islam through the filter of sainthood embodied in ḥusainiyyat-wilāyah.

Mir ‘Alam’s account of Qasem’s martyrdom reflects the centrality of feminine voices and emotions in the construction of the genre of Karbala epic-hagiography. Mir ‘Alam’s

account is supposed to be about Qasem, but he focuses with terrific emotional intensity and sympathy on Fatimah Kubra’s extraordinary battlefield wedding and immediate widowhood. Each time there is a moment in the narrative that involves the expression of emotion and the imparting of vernacular values, the male protagonists exit the scene, leaving the women to speak and to act. Thus, it is the women who teach the men and women of Hyderabad how to be in the world. Just as Sita teaches Indian women how to be the ideal wife (pativratā), so too, does Fatimah Kubra. The function of Indic epic-hagiography is, at its most basic level, ethical. One learns her/his duty (dharma) through the exploits of the hero(in)es of Indic epic-hagiographies. What makes the women of Karbala such compelling ethical and religious role-models for Hyderabadis is that their story is never finished: so long as their voices continue to be spoken in the devotional literature and ritual performance of the majlis, they are powerful, living models for how to properly be in the world.
CHAPTER THREE

The Bride of Karbala: The Drama of Bibi Fatimah Kubra and Qasem Ibn-e Hasan in the Mehndī kī Majlis of 7 Muharram

We've seen the secret things revealed by God
And we heard what the angels had to say
Should you go first, or if you follow me
Will you meet me in Heaven someday?
—Johnny Cash

In the locality of Yaqutpura in the Old City of Hyderabad, Dr. Taqui Khan’s family has been hosting the mehndī kī majlis (the mehndī mourning assembly) for the past fifty years.② In the early 1950s, this area was comparatively sparsely populated, and Dr. Habeeullah Khan’s house (Dr. Taqui Khan’s father) was located near the gate of Nawab Shaukat Jang’s palace. One year, Taqui Khan’s grandmother remarked, “We have such a big house in this open space. Why don’t we host the seventh of Muharram majlis here?”③ Around the year 1955, Taqui Khan’s family at Yaqutpura sponsored the first mehndī kī majlis. That first ʿāshūrkhana was a simple structure built of canvas tents and bamboo screens.

In the fifty years that have passed, the Khan family has replaced those modest canvas tents with a permanent ʿāshūrkhana attached to their large house located on the main road leading through the Yaqutpura locality. From within the ʿāshūrkhana, the blaring

③Moosvi and Fatima, p. 128.
of horns, the buzz of traffic, and the shouts of vendors and children is diminished. Stately palm trees, reminding one of the nakl (palm tree) simultaneously symbolizing the funeral bier of Imam Husain and the strength of the youths of Karbala, blow in the breeze, their fronds rustling their accompaniment to the chanting of maršiya and nauḥas in the majlis-e ʿazā (mourning assembly). The present ʿāshūrkhāna is comprised of a large hall where the ʿalams are displayed during Muharram, and it is here that the action of the majlis is performed: the recitation of remembrance poetry, the ṣākirah narrates the events of Karbala, and women slap their chests in time to the chanted poems of mourning. Behind the main hall, several rooms are curtained off for women to observe purdah (literally, curtain, referring to the practice of sexual segregation amongst Indian Muslims), yet still be able to participate in mardāne majlis (men’s mourning assembly). The final room houses the ʿalam dedicated to Qasem during the year, and it is the location of the dastarkhwān ritual that is performed on special occasions. During the men’s mehnī kī majlis of 7 Muharram, it is common for more than 1,000 men and boys to be gathered in the hall of the ʿāshūrkhāna


5Because of the practice of purdah, men and women who are not of the same family are not allowed to be in company with one another. This necessitates that separate mourning assemblies be held for men and women. Often, women will attend men’s majlis, but will sit behind a curtain, within the hosts’ home, or on a rooftop, where they are unseen by men. Of course, curiosity and a desire to see what is happening, particularly when the ʿalam is brought out for procession, the regulations of purdah are relaxed, and women will stand in doorways or move the curtain to get a better look at the action. I have been told of many instances in which men sit in purdah so that they may attend a zanānī majlis (women’s mourning assembly) where a particularly well-known ṣākirah is speaking.

6Dastarkhwān has a specific gendered dimension as a women’s devotional practice, but in the context of the room where Qasem’s ʿalam is kept during the year, another form of dastarkhwān ritual takes place. Once a month, food is placed in the room and the Imams and members of the Ahl-e Bait are invited to partake of it. The room is then locked overnight and the evening is spent in prayer and other devotional activities. In the morning, the custodian of the ʿalam opens the room and examines whether there has been a blessed visitation. The Imam and other members of the Prophet’s family always partake of the devotee’s hospitality, and the leftover blessed food is distributed as tabarrūk (like the Hindu prasād). For a good description of the dastarkhwān ritual performed by Shiʿi women in Hyderabad, see Diane D’Souza, “Devotional Practices among Shiʿa Women in South India,” Lived Islam in South Asia: Adaptation, Accommodation and Conflict, edited by Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld (Delhi: Social Science Press, 2004), pp. 195-199.
and seated tightly together in the spacious courtyard. Thousands more men stand in the street outside of the Khan residence, participating in the performance.

During Muharram 2005, I met Dr. Taqui Khan and his two sons-in-law following the majlis sponsored by Dr. Sadiq Naqvi at his home in Darulshifa. I hadn’t yet met Dr. Khan, and I was summoned to make his acquaintance and join him as he returned home to prepare for the mehndī kī majlis that was to take place that afternoon. Dr. Khan, a retired professor of chemistry at Osmania University, has also been a zā kir (majlis orator) for several decades. This is not unusual in the Hyderabadi Shi’a community: several men and women have doctorates in various fields, have been professors and acclaimed zā kirs and zā kirahs, speaking at countless majlises during the two month-eight day mourning period (known in Urdu as ayyām-e ‘azā or “the days of mourning”). Dr. Khan enthusiastically responded to my inquiries about Hyderabadi observance of Fatimah Kubra and Qasem’s wedding. He invited me to return to his house and observe the family’s preparations for the mehndī kī majlis to be held later in the day. We packed into the car and were driven through the crowded, confusing streets of the Old City to his house. The family, two of Dr. Khan’s daughters, their husbands and various servants were bustling about the ‘ā shūrkāna, preparing the sacred objects to be used in the majlis.

A steady stream of devotees approached the ‘alam installed along the center of the back wall of the ‘ā shūrkāna. The central and largest ‘alam is dedicated to Qasem. Tied to the pole supporting the ‘alam is a red cloth or Ḍhāti over which multiple garlands of roses

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7 The official Shi’i mourning period extends far beyond the first ten days of Muharram, into the eighth day of the third month of the lunar Islamic calendar Rabi’ al-Awwal. During this period, mourning assemblies are held on a regular basis, observing the martyrdom anniversaries of the various Imams and other members of the Ahl-e Bait. One notable exception during this period is the jashn (celebration) in honor of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday (milād-e nabi) on 12 Rabi’ al-Awwal. On this day, somber mourning clothing is exchanged for brightly colored party clothes and happiness.
and jasmine have been placed. In front of the ‘alam, a silver tray is placed on the ground—later devotees will leave offerings of fruit, which others will take as consecrated food (prasād). Devotees light incense, and its smoke rises and mingles with the heady sweetness of the jasmine and rose garlands. The smell of the smoke is pleasing and it brings to mind the purity of the Ahl-e Bait. Men, women, and children approach the ‘alam, making their offerings of fruit, lighting incense; they bend and kiss the ‘alam and the flower garlands. Each person cups the barakā emanating from the ‘alam in the right hand and wipes it over his or her face. Mothers apply the ‘alam’s power to the babies slung over their hips. Dr. Khan’s daughter and son-in-law stand on either side of the ‘alam tying red nārās (strings that protect one against the evil eye) around the wrists of the devotees. Even the lines observe a form of purdah in mixed company—Dr. Khan’s daughter ties strings on the wrists of the women, and her husband does likewise for the men.

After an hour or so, some of the garlands were removed from the principal ‘alam⁸, so that it could be ‘dressed’ in its wedding attire. As this is the ‘alam of Qasem, it will later be taken out for its barāt (the procession of the groom to the bride’s house, usually on horseback and with the accompaniment of great fanfare). I was invited by Kulsum, Dr. Khan’s twenty-seven-year-old daughter (the only one of his six daughters who continues to live in Hyderabad, the others have all emigrated to the United States) to observe the preparation of the mehndī trays. Dr. Khan and Kulsum were busy with their preparations, yet they took great care to explain each element of the mehndī tray and its meaning both in

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⁸The ‘alam symbolizes the Ahl-e Bait and Karbala for the Shi’a of Hyderabad. The ‘alams that are installed in Hyderabadi ‘ashūrkhanās are copies of the battle standards that were carried by Imam Husain and his entourage in the battle of Karbala. Sadiq Naqvi has written extensively on the form and symbolism of the ‘alam. Sadiq Naqvi, The ‘Ashūrkhanās of Hyderabad City (Hyderabad: Bab-ul-Ilm Society, [1982] 2006), pp. 10-12, 20-21. See also, Diane D’Souza, “In the Presence of the Martyrs: The ‘Alam in Popular Shi’i Piety,” The Muslim World 83 (January 1998), pp. 273-293.
the context of the *majlis* and in contemporary Hyderabadi Shi‘i marriage rituals. Two large wooden trays were assembled, each of which was lined with shiny, gold colored paper by Kulsum. After the trays were gaily decorated, one of the household servants was summoned to deliver the plates of *mehndi*. *Mehndi* is the “custom of putting henna on the hands and feet of the bride groom [sic]. The bride’s sisters take the henna to the groom’s house and apply it on his hands and feet. On the 7th of Moharrum the people take out the *Mehndi* in a tray symbolically to express their sorrow that the Bridegroom of Kerbala was martyred even when the *mehndi* on his hands and feet was fresh.”

For the *majlis*, a large plate heaped with *mehndi* paste was placed in the center of one of the trays.

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9 Henna or *hina* is the Arabic word for the leaves of the *lawsonia spinosa* or the Broad Egyptian Privet bush. In South Asia, this bush is known as *mehndi* (derived from the Sanskrit word *mehndika*). For a more detailed description of *mehndi*, see John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi and English* (Delhi: Urdu Academy, 2000), pp. 1108–1109.

The ritual of mehndī is a central ceremony in South Asian wedding rituals—it is the final pre-wedding event to take place before the ceremonial signing of the marriage contract (‘aqd-e nikāḥ) joins the couple as husband and wife. Although the custom of applying henna to the arms and feet of the bride is an Islamicate wedding ritual—Muslims in Arab countries, Iran, and throughout South Asia perform it, the decoration of the bridegroom with mehndī is a distinctively Indic innovation. The local cultural and religious environment has influenced many of the wedding rituals performed by Muslims in South Asia. The influence of Hinduism is palpable, and most Muslims with whom I have spoken about such rituals as mehndī, sāchaq and manjha candidly acknowledge the influence of their Hindu neighbors.

In December 2005, I helped decorate and prepare mehndī trays for Dr. Riaz Fatima’s son ‘Abbas’s sāchaq ceremony. I spent a delightful evening with fifteen women of all ages gossiping, decorating and learning about the requisite number of trays of mehndī and outfits that are customarily given by the groom’s family to the bride. We worked for more than two hours preparing fourteen trays to take to the bride Shafath’s house for the sāchaq ceremony that was to take place late in the night following the manjha or turmeric grinding ceremony.11 The process for preparing these trays is time-consuming. At the height of preparations, there are approximately 15 women and girls working on the trays and fruit bowls. I first helped with the fruit bowls. Two or three bowls of fruit are prepared and then wrapped in cellophane and tied with ribbon. The bottoms of the wooden trays are covered with gaily-printed mylar wrapping paper and the gift items are arrayed for

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11For a complete description of the manjha and mehndī ceremonies in nineteenth-century South India, see Jaffur Shurreef, Qanoon-e Islam or the Customs of the Mussulmans of India, Comprising a Full and Exact Account of Their Various Rites and Ceremonies from the Moment of Birth Till the Hour of Death, translated by G.A. Herklots, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1991), pp. 64-69.
maximum display value. After carefully covering the wooden trays (kīštī) with shiny mylar, deliberations over the arrangement of the contents of each tray produced lively discussion and much joking. One tray contains a plate of turmeric (haldī), which I decorated in confetti with “A S,” the initials of the bride and groom, ’Abbas and Shafath. Twenty-two betel nuts, mīṣrī or sugar cubes symbolizing a sweet marriage, shredded coconut, a container of sandalwood powder, a plate of mehndī bearing the initials “A S,” and a sweet pān comprised another tray. Ten trays contain outfits for the bride. Each of these trays contains either a sārī or suit piece, a pair of fancy sandals, matching bangles, and chocolates. The outfit is arrayed to show the embroidery or sequin work and, a matching pair of high-heeled shoes and a handbag complements the sārī or suit piece. Looking at the brands of shoes and handbags being given, it is clear that tens of thousands of rupees in clothing is given to the bride by the groom’s family. Jewelry is also gifted to the bride separately at the sāchaq ceremony. After the trays have been completed, they are each wrapped in clear cellophane and tied with a big ribbon.

Figure 3.2: Sāchaq tray with betel, coconut, Figure 3.3: My contribution to the sāchaq
The women work at a leisurely pace, many stop in to survey the action and give their greetings to the more senior women in the group. Riaz is busy and has left me on my own to chat with the women and to help out with the preparations. Everyone makes me feel welcome. Although the women are working slowly, there is a palpable energy in the room and the voices rise up in gossip. Riaz’s eldest sister (she lives in Irani Galli across from Naqshe-ye Karbala ʿāshūrkāna) has been assigned to the task of preparing the mehndī tray. As the most senior woman, she is the defacto in-charge of the preparations. A substantial woman, she seated herself on the bed and arrayed the items for the preparation of the mehndī tray around herself. The younger women defer to her, and virtually every woman who arrives comes to give their respect and greetings to her.

Two ceremonies involving the decoration of the bride and the groom with mehndī take place before the wedding ceremony. Approximately two days before the wedding, the bridegroom’s family comes to the bride’s home bearing gifts and trays of mehndī. One day before the wedding, the mehndī ceremony is held. The bride’s family goes to the home of the groom bearing trays of gifts and a plate of mehndī. The mehndī ceremony is often bigger and characterized by more pomp and circumstance than the sāchaq ceremony held at the bride’s home. Along with the tray of mehndī, all of the articles of the bride’s dowry (dahej\(^{12}\))

\(^{12}\)The practice of dahej (or jihāz) is another Islamicate wedding practice adapted by South Asian Muslims from their Indic cultural environment. According to the rules of marriage set forth in the Qur’an, it is the responsibility of men to provide a marriage portion (mahr) as part of the marriage contract: “And give the women (on marriage) their dower as a free gift” (Ṣūrat al-Nisāʾ [The Women], 4:4). The purpose of mahr is to demonstrate that the husband trusts that “Allah will grant him the power and ability to shower his wife, in future, with sufficient sustenance through the Baraka (blessing) of the sacred Aqd,” and it is also required to be given to a woman, according to sharīʿa, “in exchange of having [sexual] relations with her.” For a more in-depth discussion of mahr, see Sheikh Adburraghiem Sallie, Kitāb un-Nikah, The Book of Muslim Marriage (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 2001), pp. 124ff. Although Islamic law stipulates that husbands must provide mahr to their bride, the practice of the bride’s parents providing a dowry to the husband’s family is permissible
is carried to the groom’s home—this is a public display of what material wealth the bride is bringing into her new home.

The ritual preparation of the bridal *mehndī* trays that I describe above is replicated in Kulsum and Dr. Khan’s pre-*majlis* activities. While Kulsum prepares the *mehndī* tray, Dr. Khan dug through a wooden trunk and removed the bridal cloth, which was a brilliant red with gold threads woven through. This *dhātī*, he explained, symbolizes Qasem’s wedding outfit. Dr. Khan sits chatting with his daughter and me, lovingly applying amber oil to the entire cloth. For approximately half-an-hour he applies the amber essence to his hands and then slowly and reverently rubs the rich smelling oil into the cloth’s fibers. Essence of amber is traditionally worn by the bride and groom on the wedding day. After he finished scenting the cloth, he folded it and placed it next to the tray of *mehndī*. The final element to be included on the *mehndī* trays was the floral garland (*sehra*) worn by the bridegroom—a floral veil that covers his face. Dr. Khan’s two sons-in-law had gone out and purchased a lovely *sehra* garland. This was taken from its basket and unfurled. Roses and jasmine were accentuated by the shininess of tinsel and foil medallions. Once the trays were ready, they were wrapped in a dark red cloth and tied very tightly in a bundle. This was done assiduously—the men took great care to make sure that the trays were wrapped well—they knew that the trays would be ripped apart in the frenzy of emotion during the bridal-funeral procession (*julās*) during the *majlis*.

At the midpoint of the *majlis*, when the trays go out, there is a rush for the *mehndī*. People scramble to get just a little bit of this mixture. Single men and women take a small

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amount of the paste and apply it to their right palm (mehndī lagāna). Devotees believe that the application of this mehndī imbued with Qasem’s spiritual power (baraḵā) will result in a good marriage alliance. The practice of smearing the hand with mehndī from this majlis reinforces the fact that marriage, and making a good marriage alliance is of the greatest importance. Because marriage is culturally compulsory, and the sunnah of the Prophet strongly encourages marriage for Muslims, my maid’s wry observation about marriage and making a good match is significant: “Everyone marries here, it is not a question of if we marry, but of how good [or bad, in her case and in the case of her daughters] the alliance can be.”

Asking for the intervention of the bridegroom of Karbala in assuring a good marital alliance is one of the most important events in the Muharram cycle for unmarried men and women. On the seventh of Muharram, I saw countless women and girls with small circles of mehndī drying on their right palms. Kulsum explained that once one applies mehndī to the palm, a garland of flowers must be tied to the Qasem ʿalam. I asked Kulsum how often marriages result from this mehndī kī mannat (making a vow with mehndī during Muharram), and she enthusiastically confided that prior to her own marriage, she performed the mehndī kī mannat to ensure a good marital alliance. Kulsum confided that it is easy to get a husband, but the real challenge lies in finding a ‘good’ husband. She said that there are countless examples of weddings that were arranged because of influence of the mehndī kī mannat ritual. Her own marriage took place immediately following her own performance of

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13This comment was made by my former maid Lizzie who, herself, had experienced a difficult marriage and was widowed while still relatively young and with four daughters and a son. We used to talk about her youngest daughter’s wedding and how relieved she felt at making a ‘good’ match for her, although worry about procuring sufficient dowry was a consuming stress for her.

14Interview with Fatimah, 7 Muharram ʿAbbās sāhiba kī mehndī kī majlis, Yaqutpura, Hyderabad (February 17, 2005).
mehndī kī mannat. I asked her if she thought she had a ‘good’ husband, and she said that she was so grateful to have had a good marriage alliance. She is convinced that a miracle (mu‘jiza) had taken place—a manifestation of the power of Qasem.

The final preparation of the props for the mehndī kī majlis is the removal of the shroud (kafn) from the trunk. Dr. Khan explained that when the ‘alam is taken out on procession following the zākir’s speech or khutbah, it leaves the āshūrkhana in a vertical position and returns in a horizontal position. The outgoing process of the ‘alam possesses a dual symbolic meaning: foremost, it represents the barāt or procession of the groom to the home of his bride, and I was told that it also represents Qasem’s departure to the battlefield of Karbala. In this dual symbolism, the two aspects of Qasem’s hagiographical persona are enacted: Qasem as bridegroom (naushāh) and warrior (mujāhid). In Hyderabad, his persona as tragic bridegroom is more popular—countless poems have been written about Qasem and his ill-fated bride Fatimah Kubra. One particularly popular salaam that I heard recited at a number of the 7 Muharram majlis, as well as in the preliminary mourning activities preceding joyous wedding events, is sung in Sakinah’s voice telling Qasem to come home for the mehndī ceremony:

Coming to the field of battle, Sakinah calls out: “Come home, brother, so that I may apply the mehndī,”

O, Bridegroom Qasem, your sister is devoted to you: “Come home,

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15One of the most popular epithets for Qasem is naushāh-ye Karbalā, the “bridegroom of Karbala.”

16Regular Burkhardt Qureshi defines the salām as, “a salutation or eulogy, often reflective or didactic in character, consisting of couplets with refrain.” It is similar to the soz in that it is brief in length and often focuses on a particular emotion and event. Qureshi, “Islamic Music in an Indian Environment: The Shi‘a Majlis,” Ethnomusicology 25:1 (January 1981): 45.

17See chapter two, “The Saddest Story Ever Told,” for analysis of Sakinah’s role as the sister-in-law (sālī) in heightening the dramatic tragedy of this battlefield wedding.
The bride and groom are separated, what an extraordinary marriage this is!

I wasn’t able to extract the groom’s ransom (neg¹⁸), “Come home, brother, so that I may apply the mehndi.”

Brother, how quickly you have departed this house—and we haven’t yet completed the customs [of marriage]

The wedding guests are waiting for you: “Come home, brother, so that I may apply the mehndi.”

Brother, you have departed this house and we haven’t yet completed the customs [of marriage]

The wedding guests are waiting for you: “Come home, brother, so that I may apply the mehndi.”

The bride wears the garment of widowhood, and crying she has removed her bangles and nose pin.

In grief, I am weeping here: “Come home, brother, so that I may apply the mehndi.”

On that body you wear a colorful wedding gown, upon that head is a garland of flowers (sehrā)

Over that moon-like face, blood flows: “Come home, brother, so that I may apply the mehndi.”

Someone has buried you in the dust; someone has removed the marital bonds,

“Come home, brother, so that I may apply the mehndi.”⁹

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¹⁸During the mehndi ceremony, the bride’s sisters steal the groom’s shoes (jūtā chhupāti) and refuse to return them without a bribe. Majda Asad describes this interaction in the following manner: “The sisters-in-law of the groom, seat him on a stool, place cash amount on his hand, apply the henna and claim from him their customary fee. Jokingly at first they are given a rupee but after haggling the amount is increased.” Quite often the sisters-in-law hold the groom’s shoes as a ransom until they are adequately paid for their ‘services’. This is a joyful event that draws the two families together, although in the case of the Shi’a community in South Asia, the families are already intimately known to one another, as cross-cousin marriage has traditionally been the preferred form. The fact that the participants already know one another through blood relationship further adds to the joyousness of the occasion—there is less anxiety for the bride about leaving the family unit to live with a complete stranger.
This salām is justifiably popular. When the chorus chants the refrain, “Ghar chalo bha‘i mehndī lagā‘un,” the emotional effect is profound. In a ladies’ majlis the recitation of this salaam is particularly moving as the chorus is sung at a high pitch imitating the sound of a young girl’s voice, that is, the voice of Sakinah, the young sister of the bride Fatimah Kubra. Sakinah, just a little girl of three or four years has already internalized the rituals of a proper (South Asian) Muslim marriage. She is calling to her soon-to-be brother-in-law Qasem to return from the battlefield so that she can decorate his hands with mehndī. She is disappointed that she hasn’t been able to ask for her due in the playful ritual of neg. Even in her youthful inexperience, she knows that it is certainly difficult to have a joyful event such as a wedding in the unfolding catastrophe of Karbala. Here the double meaning of the Urdu word “shādī” is particularly poignant: shādī means joyfulness and it means wedding. This line can be understood in two ways: “How can there be joy in such distress;” or, “How can there be a wedding in such distress?” Just as in the barāt of the Qasem ‘alam, we can discern that in the rituals of remembering the wedding of Karbala, joy and grief are inextricably intermingled, one does not exist without the other. The joy of a wedding cannot be celebrated without first mourning the suffering of the Ahl-e Bait.

I begin this chapter by interweaving the story of Dr. Khan and Kulsum’s preparations for the wedding of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra, which parallels the preparations for ‘Abbas and Shafath’s wedding. With each event, there is joy in the preparation and a keen sense of anticipation for the future, which is tinged with anxiety and sadness in encountering the unknown future as husband and wife. The sacrifices and

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29This anonymously composed salām is one of the most popular in Hyderabad. This salām is included in several inexpensive collections of Muharram poetry. It is always sung in the 7 Muharram majlisees and it is a standard poem of mourning recited before all wedding rituals. The selection presented here is from a recording of the salām as recited by Zamin ‘Ali at the 7 Muharram men’s mehndī kī majlis hosted by Dr. Taqui Khan on February 7, 2006.
exemplary faith embodied by the hero(in)es of Karbala through the doctrine of *husainiyat* infuses and shapes the everyday practices of the Shi’i men and women of Hyderabad. The story of Fatimah Kubra and Qasem is so popular in Hyderabad because marriage is nearly universal and arranged, their sacrifice and suffering resonates deeply for young men and women and their parents. Fatimah Kubra, whose experience marrying at a young age and being almost simultaneously widowed constructs her into a practical role model for the women (and men) of Hyderabad.

Using Fatimah Kubra, the bride-widow of Karbala, as a paradigmatic example, we shall examine how this young heroine teach men and women proper gender roles through their hagiographical transformations into locally meaningful typologies. Although the events of 7 Muharram appear at first glance to focus on Qasem’s martyrdom, we have learned in chapter two that the hagiographic impetus of the remembrance of Karbala is predicated upon the voices and experiences of the female survivors of the battle. While the 7 Muharram is ostensibly about Qasem, it is in fact Fatimah Kubra, in her role as bride-widow, who teaches both the women *and* men of Hyderabad how to be good individuals, Muslims and members of society. In the poem “*ghar chalo bhāī mehndī lagā‘ūn,*” Sakinah, Fatimah Kubra’s younger sister, plays a significant role in defining the proper order and meaning of Indian wedding rituals, particularly with regard to how they are intended to introduce the bride and groom to a proper state of relations in married life. In the devotional literature and ritual-performance context of the *majlis*, Fatimah Kubra (and, to a certain extent, her female relatives involved in the marriage preparations and the aftermath of widowhood) performs the role of the ideal bride (and widow) teaching Hyderabadi women how to be the ideal wife. She also teaches men how to be kind, self-
sacrificing husbands and sympathetic fathers to their daughters. After her bridegroom-warrior Qasem is killed, Fatimah Kubra transforms her gendered state into the renouncing inauspicious widow, removing her adornments and accepting her abject status. Fatimah Kubra’s gendered performances fulfill a crucial hagiographic function: the didactic nature of her performance shows Hyderabadi men and women their proper gender roles that are life cycle specific.

**Embodyed Ideals: Stylizing Fatimah Kubra as the Model Indian Bride-Widow**

The portrayal of Fatimah Kubra in Urdu devotional literature and in the ritual environment of the *majlis* constructs her into a practical saint whose function is to connect her willingness to sacrifice Qasem at the battle of Karbala with her spiritual status as an exemplary Muslim based upon her direct blood relationship to Imam Husain. Unlike Wahab ibn-e Kalbi, the other warrior-bridegroom of Karbala and his bride, Fatimah Kubra understands the cosmic responsibility she embodies in her roles of bride and widow, which she assumes with full intention, albeit with a heart heavy with grief. Like all of the hero(in)es of Karbala, Fatimah Kubra’s exemplification of ḥusainiyyat-wilāyah is recognized by her devotees as the embodiments of two ideal types, or more specifically, two gendered states: the ideal Indian bride and the perfectly renouncing widow. Thus, “characteristics of another body can become part of my imaginary body by identifying with it”—exactly the function of Fatimah Kubra’s embodiments.20 One is supposed to incorporate Fatimah

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Kubra’s idealized embodiments of bride-widow and merge those forms with the individual’s “imaginary body.” How then, is Fatimah Kubra’s body constructed, and how does she embody idealized South Indian Muslim gender roles?

Judith Butler’s theoretical work on gender and embodiment through performative production provides a useful hermeneutic frameworks for understanding how the hero(in)es of Karbala are constructed in devotional literature and performance in Hyderabad. Butler’s theory of the performativity of gender creates an interpretive space in which the materiality of gendered being may be manifestly expressed, yet not reified by its own significations. Thus, Butler defines gender “as a shifting and contextual phenomenon...[that] does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations,” that is, gender is “performatively produced” through the “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame.” In the Deccani-Urdu devotional literature and ritual context of the majlis, a historically specific, rigid regulatory frame is inherent. The stories told about the hero(in)es of Karbala are constantly being adjusted to be relevant to the participants in the majlis. For example, in Iran during the years prior to the 1979 Revolution, the imagery of Karbala and the suffering of the Ahl-e Bait was constantly invoked by clerics and intellectuals like Ayatollah Khomeini and ‘Ali Shari’ati. Fatimah Zahra and Zainab were transformed by Shari’ati into idealized revolutionary models and exemplars of Muslim womanhood.

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A performative theory of gender in which a body is consciously stylized and outwardly performed for public recognition requires that the body of the individual be something materially real and not inert or passive. The body in its gendered performance and stylization must be aware and complicit of what it is doing to itself. It is these very markings and performances that make the body into a material, meaningful being. In the estimation of some feminist critics and scholars of Shiʿi devotional literature and practice, the stylization of Fatimah Kubra’s body to be properly gendered as an Indian bride—wearing the nath or nose-pin, bangles for the arms, the maṅgalsūtra around the neck,23 and colorful clothing—may reflect a Foucauldian inscription of oppressive gender signs upon a passive, oppressed body.24

Scholars who study the texts and ritual-devotional performances that invoke the events of Karbala in both South Asian and Iranian contexts frequently comment upon Fatimah Kubra’s marriage and subsequent widowhood. For some scholars, this episode is another tragic vignette in the Karbala cycle, while for others it is an example of how women are depicted by the hagiographers as lacking agency, and for yet others, at least in the case of South Asia, it represents the “syncretic”25 dimension of Indian Islam. In this

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23Maṅgalsūtra literally means the “lucky thread,” which is a necklace worn by women so long as their husband is alive. Hindu and Muslim alike wear the maṅgalsūtra, and it is an easy way to determine the marital status of a woman. For Hindu women, there is the added visual marker of wearing vermillion in the parting of one’s hair. Hindu women place vermillion in their part after they marry and they cease to mark their bodies with this auspicious sign upon entering into a state of widowhood.


chapter, I am particularly interested in the second interpretive tendency to understand the heroines of Karbala as victims upon whom the narrative is enacted.26

Writing about Kashefi’s depiction of Fatimah Kubra in Rowżat al-Shohadā’, David Pinault portrays the bride-widow as a victim clutching desperately at her departing bridegroom-warrior husband:

The portrait of Fatima Kubra that emerges from Kashifi’s account is one that emphasizes her fear, lamentation, and distress—epitomized in a single gesture as she clutches at her husband’s clothes in an effort to prevent this death. By drawing our attention to the gesture, Kashifi contrasts the husband’s resolve with Fatima’s anguish. The emotional tension between the two characters heightens the sense of pathos for the audience hearing the story.27

Scholars are becoming increasingly interested in the ways in which the hero(in)es of Karbala are gender coded.28 This emerging field of scholarship is important because it signifies a scholarly recognition of the centrality of the women of the Ahl-e Bait in the devotional literature and rituals commemorating the battle of Karbala.

Despite this emergent focus on the feminine, there remains the tendency to view the women of Karbala as bodies upon which action is emplotted without feminine agency. For example, in his essay in The Women of Karbala, Kamran Scot Aghaie writes, “Men were generally portrayed as warriors, leaders, and martyrs. They usually acted as individuals, by

26 From a narratological perspective, we have seen in chapter two that the epic structure of the Karbala narratives is predicated upon the female voice and it is the male figures that occupy static roles.

27 David Pinault, Horse of Karbala: Muslim Devotional Life in India (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 68.

sacrificing themselves directly.” Does this mean that the women of Karbala were not individuals devoid of any subjectivity of their own? Aghaie’s interpretations of Karbala devotional literature leads one to conclude that the female characters are passive bodies that are acted upon, lacking agency, and exist in relation to men: “In general men were more often portrayed as actors in the story, while women were often acted upon or acted through male intermediaries.” Based upon such interpretations of the passivity of the women of Karbala, how can one construct an alternate meaning of the roles and significations of the women of Karbala in which they are active, positively gendered, holy figures?

Writing Women’s Bodies in the Hagiographical Imagination

If we recall the story that I told at the beginning of chapter one in which Dr. Taqui Khan focused his *khuṭbah* on Fatimah Kubra’s bravery and willingness to sacrifice her husband for her faith in family and religion, a different woman is constructed. Dr. Khan’s Fatimah Kubra is not a victim. Certainly, she feels anguish at being in such a terrible situation; who would not? Fatimah Kubra’s grief does not make her a passive body upon which the events of Karbala unfold. Similarly, Mir ‘Alam’s Fatimah Kubra presented in chapter two is neither a victim, lacking agency upon whose body events are enacted. This Fatimah Kubra, too, is a tough woman with a sharp tongue and full awareness of cosmic

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30Aghaie, p. 48.
role in the “battle of good versus evil.” When Qasem tries to sneak off to the battlefield, Fatimah Kubra chastises her husband for trying to deceive her. He dissimulates, tries to placate his irate bride, and finally Qasem calls to his mother to deal with her new daughter-in-law. In her act of chastising her husband, Fatimah Kubra is asserting her right to be treated with respect. She wants her husband to be honest and tell her himself that he is going to battle and will be martyred.

The Deccani-Urdu devotional Karbala literature does not inscribe the gender roles of a “proper” bride-widow upon an inert, passive body of Fatimah Kubra, rather, as the examples above demonstrate, she takes on and performs through her clothing, dress, and mannerisms, idealized embodiments of these two gendered states. Butler’s theory of gender as being a non-binary, performatively produced stylization of the body allows us to expand our understanding of how a Shi’i theory of sainthood and its textual inscription in the form of hagiography are dependent upon vernacularized embodiments of the religious exemplar. In Gender Trouble, Butler desires to deconstruct the very “binariness” of gender, whereas, I find binary theory combined with the performative nature of her conception of gender to be a useful hermeneutic strategy for understanding how Shi’i sainthood functions and is gendered in localized contexts. Butler’s critique of Structuralist binary theories of gender is based upon a rigid reading of Claude Lévi-Strauss’ conception of “the raw” and “the cooked” that parallels “nature” and “culture,” that finds its gendered


32Mir Alam, Dāh Majlis (Hyderabad: Oriental Manuscripts Library and Research Institute, 1196/1781), Urdu MS, no. Ta. 437.

33See Butler, especially pp. 35-43.
correlate in “female” and “male.” The table below outlines Butler’s categorization of these binary pairings as reflections of hierarchical distinctions categorized below as “superordinate” and “subordinate.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate</th>
<th>Subordinate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The Cooked”</td>
<td>“The Raw”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1: Gender in Binary Theory

Butler’s critique of Structuralist binary theory is fair; although it has its limitations with regard to the non-Western Indo-Muslim context of the literary and ritual performances of Fatimah Kubra’s bride-widow gendered identities. Butler’s critique extends the nature/culture binaries to examine the role of the bride as a passive object of patriarchal exchange who, to speak in Freudian terms, is an ontological lack in that she “does not have an identity, and neither does she exchange one identity for another. She reflects masculine identity precisely through being the site of its absence.” Butler further conflates the bride’s absence of identity declaring that they even lack a name for themselves: “As the site of a patronymic exchange, women are and are not the patronymic sign, excluded from the signifier, the very patronym they bear.” In the context of Muslim culture, there is not an exchange of patronyms upon marriage for a woman. A married woman retains the patronym with which she is born. Butler’s assertion of woman’s

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34 Butler, pp. 37-38.
35 Butler, p. 39.
36 Butler, p. 39.
patronymic exchange as further illustration of her lack must be viewed within its proper cultural context, and in the course of two years’ fieldwork in India, I cannot agree with Butler’s construction of the bride as a passive body upon which masculine desires and refracted identities are inscribed. Such trenchant criticisms of the institution of marriage and the loss of feminine identity, subjectivity and control over her body is counterproductive and serves to reinforce fetishized fantasies of the oppression of Muslim women.37

Butler’s critique forces Muslim women into a state of false consciousness in which, according to her analysis, their lack of identity is reinforced through the institution of marriage. Butler’s critique politicizes women’s status and it condemns the Muslim woman for whom marriage, to borrow the words of Lila Abu Lughod with regard to veiling, “signifies belonging to a particular community and participating in a moral way of life in which families are paramount in the organization of communities.”38 The politics of Butler’s theory of gender does not recognize cultural and religious difference, and to the extent that it does, it sets up those who fall outside of Butler’s tightly circumscribed ideological framework to be victims of their own lack, which prevents them from knowing any better. My goal in this chapter is to depoliticize the issue and to understand how Hyderabadi Shi’as recognize Fatimah Kubra’s possession of husainyyat-wilāyah, through which she embodies the qualities of the idealized Indian bride and widow.

Despite Butler’s lack of awareness or acceptance of cultural difference in the construction of gender, there are aspects of her theoretical work that can be extracted


38 Abu-Lughod, p. 785.
from her political agenda. Rather than accept the absoluteness of binary theory, particularly with regard to gender, in which the male-female pairing is usually arranged in a relationship of inequality, I find the non-absoluteness of complementary pairing to accommodate aspects Butler’s theory of gender. Male and female can exist as complements to one another. Fatimah Kubra is portrayed in the *majlis* and Deccani-Urdu Karbala literature as the structural dyad of bride and widow, both ontological states that exist upon a non-binary gender continuum.

In the context of Karbala, the story of the men could not be told except through the voices of the female survivors. Nor are the women of Karbala the passive bodies upon whom the action is exerted, as has been suggested by Pinault and Aghaie. Fatimah Kubra is a bride-widow, and as I discovered in the course of interviews and participation in two years of *mehndī kī majlis* events in Hyderabad and many marriage rituals, men and women venerate her for the choice that she made for herself, her family and her faith to marry Qasem. In the first stanza of Mir Muhammad Rafi’ Sauda’s *maršiya* commemorating the marriage of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra, the bride is not portrayed as a passive female body upon which men inscribe their desires. Fatimah Kubra (and all of the other hero(in)es of Karbala) is in the hands of fate:

*Friends! Hear of the injustice wrought by the celestial orb!*
*It has set its heart upon an unnatural wedding for the son of Hasan;*
*That bride and groom have joined together in such a union,*
*The shroud’s inauspicious thread has been tied to this wedding.*

The hermeneutic impasse that results from Butler’s literal reading of Structuralist binary theory, combined with analysis of feminine passivity and lack in marriage, and

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exacerbated by the scholarly reception of the women of the Karbala literature being similarly disempowered, demands an alternate framework for understanding the powerful roles that the heroines of the Ahl-e Bait possess in Shiʿi ritual and devotional literature and practices. Hagiography is a genre that creates a space in which we can understand how Fatimah Kubra actively performs the gendered roles of bride and widow without being denied her own agency or identity.

Shiʿi hagiography is centered upon the battle of Karbala, and because it was the women of the Ahl-e Bait who survived and told the story of what happened, the lessons that are learned necessarily are imparted from a feminine perspective. As I have demonstrated in chapter one, Shiʿi devotional life is based upon veneration of both the men and women of Imam Husain’s family who are recognized for their consummate personification of ḥusainiyat-wilāyah. The women of the Ahl-e Bait are venerated as saints and they are accorded their sanctity and status because of the positive gendered roles that they occupy. The women of Karbala teach the Shiʿa how to be good Muslims, men and women. In the Urdu hagiographical tradition, Fatimah Kubra and Qasem are portrayed as honorable individuals who despite their tragic situation, do what is socially correct:

In its place, a canopy of broken heartedness has been spread over humanity, The king has been anointed with arrows instead of turmeric oil. Instead of a bridal gown, she has been clothed in widow’s garb, and The robe of honor for the bridegroom [naushāh]\(^{40}\) is the shroud of grief.\(^{41}\)

\(^{40}\)Naushāh literally means ‘new king’ (perhaps of his home, wife and future children), an apt allusion to the status of the groom on his wedding day.

\(^{41}\)Sauda, *Urdū Marşıya kā intikhāb*, p. 7.
Bride and bridegroom endure their wedding gone awry, and they each style their body in their appropriate garb: widow’s white for the bride and the bloody shroud for the bridegroom. Despite the inversion of the proper order of the world, the bride substitutes, in honorable Indian fashion, her red sārī for the widow’s white mourning dress, and the bridegroom who fought for the honor of faith and family has traded his wedding whites for a bloody shroud. These lines from Sauda’s marṣiya are ritually recreated in the barāt-funeral procession of the Qasem ‘alam during the annual mehndī mourning assembly hosted by Dr. Taqui Khan.

In Deccani and Urdu Shi‘i devotional literature, both prose and verse, Fatimah Kubra is stylized as the ideal Indian bride, wearing the traditional mehndī or ḥinā on her hands, the nath or nose-ring, and jangling bangles (chuṛī) adorn her wrists. In a marṣiya written by the 19th-century Urdu poet Dilgir, Kubra is portrayed in a touching vignette with her mother who laments her inability to provide her daughter with the marital bed upon which she will sleep with her husband, nor any of the rituals such as sāchaq and mehndī, so essential to any respectable Indian wedding (whether Hindu or Muslim).⁴²

This time of separation that has come is Kubra’s,
In the encampment it is a tenderhearted moment for all.
Truly, this time of separation is calamitous,
Bano had said this is a time of affliction;
She said, “Under trial, there is separation,
Today my daughter has become another’s.”

She said to Kubra, “My rosy-cheeked one,
I will not meet you again,

I cannot offer you protection.
Daughter! I am stricken with shame for your condition!
Do not lament my plight,
Even in departing our homeland, I will give you your right!"

“Daughter, accept what I say [my advice]
Understand that which is the mother-in-law’s right,
For me, too, increase your affection,
And resolve not to turn away your heart from anyone.
Battle with flowered sticks, departure to the husband’s home, and in these
customs,
Do not speak out of turn [learn your place in the marital home]”

“A great desire is lodged in my heart,
That I might provide you your marital bed!
But alas! Such a debased time is this!
My innermost heart has become paralyzed with emotion,
That your marriage has happened in such place as this.
Where nothing can be attained [is barren], alas!”
...

“Daughter, many people blame women,
To your face, such words they will say.
My daughter, this is not the behavior of daughters-in-law!
Hush! Your in-laws have come.
From your maternal home such a burden will be borne”

Dilgir’s maršiya is fascinating because of its emotional tone, complexity and the
multiple levels of interpretation that are possible. The last stanza from this selection is
particularly significant for its ambiguity of tone. Read from a Euro-American feminist

\footnote{al-Zaman, pp. 259-260.}
critical perspective, the words of Fatimah Kubra’s mother may appear to reaffirm the patriarchal order and their feminine helplessness over what is enacted upon their bodies and lives. In light of the features of hagiography and the use of the voices and emotions of the epic heroine outlined in the first two chapters, there is another way to interpret these words. The “people” of this last stanza might refer to those enemies of the Ahl-e Bait and those who do not understand the extreme circumstances under which Fatimah Kubra was wed to Qasem. There is a tone of reproach in the voice of Fatimah Kubra’s mother: only those who have hearts of stone could criticize the paucity of ritual and finery in this battlefield wedding. In the next line (#3), Fatimah Kubra’s mother declares, “This is not the behavior of daughters-in-law” meaning from a hagiographical perspective that she is an extraordinary young woman who must exhibit bravery and forbearance, giving honor to her family. Fatimah Kubra teaches men and women how to be resolute and brave when confronting the unknown, be it marriage or battle.

In the Urdu hagiographical literature and performance, at the moment of Qasem’s martyrdom, Fatimah Kubra is transformed to embody the ideal Indian widow: she breaks her bangles, removes her veil or ghungat, and takes out her nose-pin as expressions of her grief and to indicate her status as an inauspicious widow who is no longer entitled to wear ornaments or display her fecundity. Fatimah Kubra, although just ten years old, understands fully the requirements of honorable widowhood as they have been constructed by the elite sayyid class of Muslim South Asia. In the biography of Bibi Ashraf, a nineteenth-century North Indian Muslim woman, there is an interesting story told about a teacher who comes into her natal home to teach the girls of the household to read and write. This is a young widowed Muslim woman who broke the Indic taboo against widow
remarriage, much to the consternation of Bibi Ashraf’s grandfather who felt that she committed a dishonorable act:

“I have heard it said that our teacher had been eleven at the time of her first marriage, and fifteen when she became a widow. Twelve years had passed before she was married again. And during that entire time she had lived with utmost modesty and propriety—may God bless her soul! She was full of virtue and piety, and remained devoted to prayers and fasts till her dying day. The second marriage, which was clearly her religiously allowed privilege [ḥaqq-i shar‘], was not in fact something she had wanted—she had merely given in to the pressure mounted by her mother.”

“Be that as it may, my grandfather was shocked when he heard the news. Out of his sense of shame, he didn’t step out of the house for a whole month. Everyone reasoned with him: ‘Why must you feel so bad? She was only a hired teacher in your household; she wasn’t, God forbid, a kin.’ My grandfather always replied, ‘She was, nevertheless, the tutor to my girls. It shames me greatly if my girls’ tutor should marry a second time. When I think of it I want to hid my face from the world.’

“He sent word to our teacher never to cross our threshold again. He also wouldn’t allow the Syed who had married her to come before him; he kept that vow as long as he lived.”

Bibi Ashraf’s memory of the expulsion of her twice-married teacher reinforces the fact that Fatimah Kubra as a saintly reflection of Hyderabadi social values, cannot remarry because she is the most ashraf or noble of all Muslim women: she is a blood relation of the Prophet Muhammad. Here, we can see the tension between sharī‘a and customary practice, and the diminution of orthodox law. Numerous scholars have analyzed the presupposition of local custom and law over orthodox Islamic law, particularly in the realm of personal law.45


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Although the *sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad enjoins men and women to always be in a state of marriage (lest the social disorder of fornication ensue), in the context of Muslim South Asia, the Indic taboo of widow remarriage has effected too significant a cultural imprint.\(^{46}\)

Fatimah Kubra’s status in South Asia as the bride-widow saint compels her to style her body and to perform her gender as a widowed woman. Recalling Judith Butler’s definition of gender as the performatively produced stylization of the body, in clothing, behavior, language and adornment, Fatimah Kubra performs the idealization of Indic widowhood. In “Bazm-e Shādī kī hai,” “Rasheed,” a popular Hyderabadi *nauha* composer, styles Fatimah Kubra in her state of widowhood (*bevāhpā*) stripped of all adornment; the proper stylization of an inauspicious woman’s body:

> Alas! That young bride must wear widow’s dress,
> ...
> Not even an anklet or bracelet will Kubra wear,
> Lament, for the bonds are now fastened to the bride.\(^{47}\)

Fatimah Kubra will not wear the anklets and bracelets that are given to her on her wedding day. Nor will she ever wear the *maṅgalsūtra* or “lucky thread” necklace that marks her as a married woman. In Sauda’s *maršiya*, Fatimah Kubra removes her *nath* or nose-ring and she

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pours dust over her bare head—she need no longer protect her modesty as a widow. She must uphold her ashrāfī status and exemplify and perform the gender roles that she embodies in the hagiographical literature and performances of Karbala. For the Shi‘i women of Hyderabad, there is no better role model in marriage and widowhood than Fatimah Kubra.

**Modeling Saintho in Hyderabad: The Culture-Gender Matrix in Shi‘i Hagiography**

Annemie Halsema’s exegesis of Luce Irigaray’s notion of “becoming one’s gender” provides a useful framework by which to understand how Fatimah Kubra teaches Hyderabadi Indian women how to become good brides and proper widows. Halsema explains that,

> Becoming one’s gender implies a process of: 1. relating to one’s particular history, 2. relating to one’s collective history, and 3. relating to cultural constructions of gender. Firstly, relating to one’s particular history, or also genealogy, means for women to relate to their predecessors in the female line, their mother, their grandmothers. Secondly, relating to one’s collective history implies connecting to others of the same gender. And thirdly becoming one’s gender involves relating to the societal norms, images, and descriptions of one’s gender.

Halsema’s description of the tripartite process by which one becomes gendered is predicated upon the dialectical nature of human relationships. In the devotional

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49 Halsema, p. 154.
literature and ritual performance of Hyderabad’s majlis, Fatimah Kubra is transformed into a ‘real’ woman becoming Indian in dress, custom, idiom and values. Shi‘i women and men in Hyderabad integrate Fatimah Kubra into their fictive kin networks.

Fatimah Kubra relates to one’s particular history in the very fashion Halsema describes. In the course of numerous conversations and interviews with Hyderabadi men and women, Fatimah Kubra and the other women of Karbala were absorbed into the large, ambiguously defined kin networks common to South Asian Muslims. For example, in one conversation, Dr. Taqui Khan, himself the father of six daughters, tearily explained to me that Sakinah is like another daughter to him. He asked me how he could not feel intense grief for the four year-old orphan of Imam Husain; no father wants to see his daughter suffer. Fatimah Kubra, whether gendered as a bride or widow, fits into the imaginative genealogies of Hyderabadi Shi‘as. Such close relationship to Fatimah Kubra makes her real and relevant, while maintaining her authority as an exemplary Muslim saint whose power and charisma resides in the blood of husainiyat flowing through her veins.

Halsema’s third dimension of the process of becoming one’s gender is the most significant with regard to the intersection of gender and the vernacular in South Asian Shi‘i hagiography. The cultural constructedness of becoming one’s gender reflects one of the central aspects of the potency of hagiography as a genre: its ability to adapt the sacred biography to reflect vernacular cultural values and worldviews. Robin Rinehart has observed that hagiography at its most basic level, is “the history of how the saint’s followers have chosen to remember him or her”—precisely the function of the devotional literature and performance of Karbala—and that hagiographers “serve as mediators, creating a bridge between the saint and his followers through their texts” . . . chronicling
the ways in which “followers experienced the saint as a saint.” The ritual performance and devotional literature of the battle of Karbala is as much the story of what it means to be a twenty-first century Hyderabadi man or woman as it does to be a Shi’a. The responsibility of the interpreter of hagiography is to learn how to interpret these collective expressions of identity.

In the majlis, the collective memory and re-presentation of Karbala is not only an expression of the community’s identity, but within this social frame, there is also space for the individual to make meaning for herself. How the Shi’a of Hyderabad remember the events of Karbala in both the devotional literature and ritual performance of the majlis is a form of collective autobiography, for the modes of commemoration and re-presentation can be read as a “purposeful, intentional, and institutionally supported” articulation of group identity. We can extend this line of thinking to accommodate the function of the performance of gendered becoming in the hagiographical literature and performance of the Hyderabadi majlis. Within this social frame, the individual’s act of memory is significant because through remembrance of the past meaningful gender roles for women and men are made, applied to the present, and projected into the future.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Who Could Marry at a Time Like This? Debating the Mehndī kī Majlis in Hyderabad

I had arrived in Mashhad to conduct research and visit the tomb of the eighth Imam Reza. It was the middle of the fasting month of Ramzan, and the pilgrimage scene in the city was quiet. In most other months of the year, the shopping bazaars, hotels, restaurants, and the shrine complex burgeon with pilgrims from all over the Shi‘ī world. It was much quieter in Mashhad than it had been when I visited Qom and conducted ziyārat or the visitation of the tomb of Imam Reza’s sister Fatimah Ma‘sumeh. At the Fatimah Ma‘sumeh shrine, I went into the sacred precinct, which was mobbed by elder Iranian women who had come in from the villages to pay their respects. I got caught up in a literal human wave departing the tomb and it was an alternately exhilarating and terrifying experience of being simultaneously elevated, crushed and rapidly propelled forward by short, sturdy women possessing astonishing strength. The feeling of terror came as this enormous crowd had to pass through the astāna or the threshold between the sacred and profane spaces. Standing in the doorway, further narrowing our exit way were women volunteers shouting and pushing—ostensibly in service of order, yet causing further chaos—I felt my ribs crushing as the large, amorphous crowd narrowed to pass through. I popped out of the other side of the threshold where I had not only touched the silverwork grill over Fatimah
Maʿsumeh’s tomb, but I had also been born through the doorway and back into the world just a little bit touched by the experience.

Unlike the raucousness of Fatimah Maʿsumeh and the activity in Qom, Imam Reza’s shrine and Mashhad felt almost somnolent yet spiritually splendid. I got off the train in Mashhad in the morning after an overnight journey from Tehran and took a taxi across town to a hotel on the other side of the Astan-e Qods complex. I went for a walk that day to get a sense of what Mashhad was like as a town and its somnolent impression continued to impress upon me. On that late-October day, the sunlight was a bit diffuse, and there seemed to be more ancient Paykan’s puttering along the streets, and the clothing and other durable goods seemed so unfashionable after living in tony North Tehran. But I wasn’t in Mashhad evaluating fashion or lifestyles—I had work to do.

The next morning, I tied a headscarf on my head and spent several minutes assiduously making sure that not a single hair was visible. I made sure that my socks covered my ankles and that the manteau1 that I wore for extra warmth and modesty was in order. Then, I pinned my chador underneath my chin (much in the manner of a little girl—not sophisticated but functional, particularly since I needed to take notes and look at texts) and I was ready to go.

Entering the gates of Astan-e Qods, I passed through a tent flap marked “khwāharān” or Sisters for the security check. Unlike the raucousness and relative ease with which one could come and go at Fatimah Maʿsumeh, security is much stricter at Astan-e Qods. Not only was my bag checked for dangerous objects, but the women volunteers also thoroughly patted me down checking for any weapons, and then they

1The manteau (Fr. “coat”) is a coat-like garment worn by many Iranian women in place of the more encompassing chador.
scrutinized my attire to be sure that I was entering the sacred precinct with the appropriate degree of modesty. All was good and I was able to pass through to the enormous marble courtyard surrounding the tomb. I had studied my map of the complex before setting off that morning, but the sheer enormity of Astan-e Qods disoriented and overwhelmed me. I set off to the right and decided to have a bit of a look around before I sought out the Islamic Research Foundation where I was supposed to meet a professor with whom I had been in email contact and had promised to meet me.

I wandered for hours around the sprawling complex of Astan-e Qods and finally asked one of the volunteers where I could locate the Islamic Research Foundation (*Bonyad-e Pazhuhish-e Islami*), and he delivered me to the Office of Foreign Relations where I was promptly put into the care of a young woman named Shireen[^2] who following a brief discussion told me that she would be happy to show me around and introduce me to faculty members, staff of the Astan-e Qods Library, and serve as my assistant. While the more jaded part of me knew that this “assistance” was a means of also keeping track of me, I was grateful for the presence of an interested and genuinely helpful woman.

I told Shireen that I was looking for a certain Dr. Ghulam ʿAbbasi* who was a researcher at the Islamic Research Foundation. She made some phone calls and we set off—she found a Dr. ʿAbbasi, although I quickly realized that he was not the person with whom I had been in email contact and had received an introduction[^3]. Nevertheless, I was always willing to speak with mullas about my research. In the course of research in Tehran, I had encountered surprising reactions to my project focusing on Mulla Husain Va’ez Kashefi’s

[^1]: I have changed the name of this woman in order to preserve her privacy. All other names that I have changed in this chapter will be indicated by a “*” the first time that I introduce a pseudonym.

[^2]: Interview with Dr. Ghulam ʿAbbasi at Astan-e Qods Razavi, Mashhad, Iran (October 26, 2004).
Rowżat al-Shohadā’. I had arrived in Iran with the assumption that Rowżat al-Shohadā’ was universally respected and venerated as a foundational Karbala hagiography. My assumption was promptly challenged by several of the mullas whom I interviewed who expressed surprise that I should be studying such a text.

The first time I explained my research to one of these religious scholars, I received the following response, “Why are you studying this text? Don’t you know that it is full of lies and it is not a true historical study of Karbala?” I went back to my apartment in North Tehran feeling deflated and uncertain about my project. Sitting at my desk, I considered this man’s reaction and then remembered that a colleague had told me several months before about the critique leveled against Rowżat al-Shohadā’ by Hujjat al-Islam Morteza Motahhari who proclaimed Kashefi’s Karbala narrative to be “perverted” and “made up of lies,” and it should therefore be avoided. As I began to read through Motahhari’s critique of Kashefi’s distortions (taḥrīf) of the true sequence of events at the battle of Karbala, I began to better understand the reaction of these different mullas to the subject of my research.

By the time I met Ghulam ‘Abbasi in Mashhad, I was prepared for his dismissal of Rowżat al-Shohadā’. Sitting on the edge of a large sofa with Shireen by my side, I explained the topic of my research to Dr. ‘Abbasi who sat more than 10 feet away from me and behind an enormous wooden desk. As I spoke, his eyebrows rose and he folded his hands together. I could sense that he was getting ready to inform me that my research was sorely misguided. After I finished speaking, Dr. ‘Abbasi leaned back and said, “Khānom, how did you ever come across this topic and why are you studying Rowżat al-Shohadā’? Surely you

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know that this text is full of lies and superstition. Did you know that Kashefi didn’t even refer to the authentic tārīkhī (historical) sources?” By now, I was prepared to counter these arguments. I explained, “Dr. ’Abbasi sir, I understand your concerns and I have read the very same argument in Shaheed Motahhari’s Hamāseh-ye Ḥusainī. Unfortunately, Motahhari never read Rowżat al-Shohadā’⁶ I have read Rowżat al-Shohadā’ and I have analyzed the text and translated sections of it into English. In fact, this is an interesting text because parts of it are translations from Shaykh al-Mufid’s al-Irshād. The translation from the Arabic history of Karbala is almost verbatim in parts.” Dr. ’Abbasi was a bit nonplussed that I was able to cite the source for his critique and then critique his critique, particularly by demonstrating my familiarity with the Shi‘i textual tradition.

Dr. ’Abbasi then reiterated that Rowżat al-Shohadā’ should not be read because it is not historical account of Karbala and particularly because Kashefi put “words into the mouths of the Ahl-e Bait.”⁷ In response, I posed two questions to Dr. ’Abbasi, “Do you think that Rowżat al-Shohadā’ should be read as an objective history of the battle of Karbala? If we agree not to read the text as history, then what is wrong with Kashefi creating dialogue because it seems difficult to have actual transcripts of every conversation that took place over the many days of siege and battle.” Dr. ’Abbasi did not really answer my question about reading Rowżat al-Shohadā’ as something other than history. He did inform me that there are, indeed, verifiable recordings of what was spoken at Karbala. “By whom?” I asked. “Well, Hazrat-e Imam Zain al-ʿAbidin remembered what was said, and so did Sayyidah Zainab,” he replied. I asked him how Hazrat-e Zain al-ʿAbidin could have remembered

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⁶Dr. Ghulam ’Abbasi (October 23, 2004).
⁷Motahhari, p. 94.
⁸Dr. Ghulam ’Abbasi (October 23, 2004).
everything, particularly since he was lying ill in a tent during the entire period of siege and battle. It was evident to Dr. ‘Abbasi that our conversation was not progressing in a satisfactory way. Our conversation came to a close and he wished me the best of luck with my research and his final words to me encouraged me to reconsider my topic: “There are many other authentic books about Karbala that you should study instead of Rowżat al-Shohadā’. Khoda ḥāfez, khānom.”

It is obvious that neither Dr. ‘Abbasi nor I were able to persuade the other about the function or acceptability of Rowżat al-Shohadā’ as a foundational Persian hagiography of the hero(in)es of Karbala, and I realized that interactions such as this forced me into a liminal state. How can I as a researcher and a non-Muslim argue for the necessity of reassessing Kashefi’s Rowżat al-Shohadā’? Is that what I was doing? Were these discussions— that were later to be occasionally repeated in India—of a theological, theoretical religious studies, or literary critical nature? Was I committing an ethnographic faux pas by arguing for a critical reconsideration of Rowżat al-Shohadā’ as a work of hagiography and not history?

In retrospect, these discussions that took place between me and various Iranian mullas were similar to the disputational methodology employed as a teaching and learning tool in the howzehs (religious colleges) of Qom and Mashhad. In Mantle of the Prophet, Roy Mottahedeh describes a class in which a professor at the Faiziyieh, one of Qom’s most famous religious colleges, engages with his students about Mulla Abdollah’s Commentary on “The Ultimate Rectification of Speech in Writing About Logic.”8 Following the professor’s introduction of the text and his interpretation of it, a lengthy discussion between teacher and students follows. Students are expected to dispute what the professor has taught—he is

8Roy Mottahedeh, The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 71. The full account of this class can be found on pages 70-76.
supposed to find flaws with the logic or explain alternate interpretations—and it is in this way that they will ascend the intellectual hierarchy of the 'ulamā. Students prove their arguments by engaging explicitly with texts that they have studied, and they employ knowledge that they have learned in other courses. The teacher may often be able to prove the student wrong or still deficient in his reasoning, rhetorical or argumentative skills yet, the teacher is often encouraging, “You are here to learn to reason, not just to learn to read. Think about the basic text and commentary on your own, and master it by asking about it in class.”

Although not a seminary student, I had studied the important Shi’i texts and I was learning the intellectual, theological and devotional traditions, and I was able to engage with the mullas asking them to “Prove it!”

Dr. 'Abbasi left our impromptu lesson and, in retrospect, it was most likely an unexpected and new experience for him to have an American non-Muslim woman engage in a disputational dialogue with him and be able to prove a point about the intertextual credentials of Kashefi’s Rowżat al-Shohadā'. One of the tasks that presents itself in this project is to understand why Kashefi has been so profoundly discredited and why the Qasem-Fatimah Kubra marriage is offered by many to be the single most significant example of why Rowżat al-Shohadā’ is not an authentic Karbala history.

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9Mottahedeh, p. 74.

10Michael M. J. Fischer has also written about the seminaries of Qom and the teaching style employed by the mullas in the religious schools. Fischer begins his book with a marvelous story of one of his first experiences in Isfahan in 1975. Fischer sat down in the Madrasa Jada Buzurg, and moments later, “a couple of mullas immediately came to ask who I was and to sit and debate” (p. 1). The mullas promptly began to question Fischer about the nature of the Trinity, and a series of arguments and disputational dialogue ensued, which ended in a draw. Fischer realized that he could not fully participate in the discussion until he “learned more of the tradition of argumentation invoked against [him]” (p. 2). Please see Michael M. J. Fischer, Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).
Mulla Husain Va’ez Kashefi: A Muslim Devotee of the Ahl-e Bait

Kamal ad-Din Husain ibn-e ’Ali Kashefi was born sometime during the 1420s CE in the town of Sabzevar in the province of Bayhaq. Prior to the founding of the Shi’i Safavid dynasty in 1501, Sabzevar was known as a Shi’i city that most likely was deeply influenced by the shrine city of Mashhad (43 miles east of Sabzevar) where the eighth Imam Reza is buried. Kashefi spent his youth in Sabzevar where he completed his studies. He was particularly well known for his speaking skills and he trained to become a preacher (vā’ez). As Kashefi’s later prolific literary output indicates, he was broadly educated in the disciplines of mysticism (taṣawwuf), chemistry, literature, poetry, traditions (ḥurūf), and astronomy. In 860/1456, Kashefi left the nearby town of Nishapur and moved to Mashhad where he stayed briefly before settling in the Timurid capital of Herat. While in Herat, Kashefi became acquainted with the influential and well-known Naqshbandi Sufi ʿAbd al-Rahman Jami (d. 898/1492). Kashefi and Jami became close enough that the preacher was not only initiated into the Naqshbandi order, but he also married the shaykh’s sister.

According to al-Shaybi, “the star of good fortune shined upon Kashefi.” Members of the Timurid court were Kashefi’s patrons, and he was commissioned to write books in a number of genres. The Timurid ruler, Sultan Husain Bayqara (r. 875-911/1469-1506) commissioned Kashefi to write Rowţat al-Shohadā’. Sultan Husain Bayqara was a Sunni although it was well known that he possessed strong ‘Alid sympathies. There was nothing unusual about such ‘Alid devotionalism amongst Sunni communities in places such as Iran

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12 al-Shaybi, p. 324.
13 al-Shaybi, p. 324.
and India prior to the hardening of communal/sectarian identities that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the rise of colonialism. Sunni and Shi'i as categories of real difference significantly emerged in the decades following Kashefi’s writing Rowżat al-Shohadā’. The Safavids appropriated Kashefi’s Persian and Persianized hagiography of the hero(in)es of Karbala and ritualized its recitation (rowţeh-khwānī) in the majlis-e ‘azā.  

One of the greatest challenges to nineteenth and twentieth-century scholars and theologians of Shi'i devotional literature is determining how to characterize or even categorize Mulla Husain Va’ez Kashefi. Was he a Sunni who lived in a Shi'i environment? Was he a Shi’a in a state of taqiyya or dissimulation? Rather than simply labeling Kashefi as a Muslim, many scholars have engaged in what I consider to be unfruitful debates about his religious identity.¹⁴ One recent example about this speculative endeavor can be gleaned from Maria Subtelny’s introductory essay, “Husayn Va’iz-i Kashifi: Polymath, Popularizer, Preserver,” in the December 2003 issue of Iranian Studies dedicated to Kashefi. When Subtelny mentions Rowżat al-Shohadā’ on the fourth page of her essay, she notes that, “the question of his religious leanings has long been the subject of lively debate.”¹⁵ Subtelny posits that some scholars have asserted that Kashefi must have been Shi’a because he was born in the “traditionally Shi’ite region of Sabzavar, and particularly because his ‘Alid martyrlogy, Rawżat al-shuhadā, achieved near-canonical status under the Safavids...he

¹⁴Most of the scant scholarship that has been written in English on Kashefi and Rowżat al-Shohadā’ tends to be devoted primarily to trying to solve the puzzle of Kashefi’s sectarian identity. A recent example is Abbas Amanat’s essay, “Meadow of the Martyrs: Kāshīfī’s Persianization of the Shi’i Martyrdom Narrative in the Late Timurid Herat,” Culture and Memory in Medieval Islam: Essays in Honour of Wilferd Madelung, edited by Farhad Daftary and Josef W. Meri (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), pp. 250-275.

must have been a Shi‘ite.” Alternatively, he must have been a Sunni because he was
initiated into the Naqshbandi order. What is most telling, however, is that Kashefi’s
contemporaries “did not even address the question.” Why, then, do contemporary
scholars obsess over Kashefi’s sectarian identity? Does it ultimately change who he was as a
writer?

For many scholars, the only logical conclusion that may be made about Kashefi’s
religious identity is that he wrote a “Shi‘i” hagiography, therefore, he, too, must be Shi‘a.
The fact that Kashefi wrote Rowżat al-Shohadā’ at the request of the Sunni Sultan Husain
Bayqara is conveniently forgotten or perhaps more likely, misunderstood. As I have
already mentioned, ‘Alid devotionalism was an integral aspect of Sunni spiritual life. The
preponderance of Sufi silsilas esteemed the Prophet Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law
‘Ali as their order’s founding father. It is odd, however, that while most Sufi orders claim
‘Ali as their founder, the Naqshbandiyya have attributed the roots of their silsila to the first
Rashidun khalīfa Abu Bakr. Kashefi was initiated into the Naqshbandiyya order, one of the
few Sufi silsilas that does not claim ‘Alid roots (although they include later Imams), yet he
was the writer of hagiographies of Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait.

With the exception of a very few orders, Sufis (who are Sunni) in Iran and the
Indian Subcontinent have traditionally venerated Imam Husain and they have used his
martyrdom at Karbala as a guiding principle in their spiritual practices. Many Sufis have
compared al-Hallaj, the mystic who was martyred in Baghdad in 922 CE, to Imam Husain.

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16Subtelny, p. 466.
17Subtelny, p. 466.
Both suffered greatly because of their annihilating love for God. The twelfth-century Indian Sunni Chishti shaykh Mu’ inuddin Chishti is credited with a brief poem in praise of Imam Husain and his spiritual exaltedness:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Shāhast Husain, bādshāhast Husain} \\
\text{Dīn hast Husain, dīn panāh hast Husain} \\
\text{Sar dād na dād dast dar dast Yazīd} \\
\text{Ḥaqqā ke banāye lā ilāhah ast Ḥusain.}
\end{align*}
\]

Husain is the King, Husain is the Sovereign
Husain is religion, Husain is the refuge of religion
He gave his head, not his hands to Yazid
Verily, Husain is the foundation of ‘there is no god’.

This poetic encomium to Imam Husain continues to be popular in India today. It is common to see these words adorning the exterior walls or as a calligraphic border near the ceilings of ʿāshūrkhanās. Veneration of Imam Husain as an idealized Sufi lover of God (muḥibb) is practiced by both the Shi’as of all types, and by mystically oriented Sunnis. Therefore, although Kashefi was a Naqshbandī Sufi, he certainly was exposed enough to other Sufi traditions in which ’Ali and Husain were considered spiritual role models.

In the rational modernist’s mania for clear sectarian identities and obvious categories of belonging, Kashefi is an enigma. Kashefi is a difficult man to categorize—it is

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19 Interview with Nasrollah Pourjavad, Tehran, Iran (October 19, 2004).

20 The authorship of this eulogy for Imam Husain is dubious. Over time this poem has come to be pseudonymously attributed to Mu’ inuddin Chishti, which is significant because the pro-ʿAlid sentiments expressed in these verses reflect a Sufi conviction that the Imams are the spiritual heirs of the Prophet Muhammad.

21 Mu’ inuddin Chishti writes this line using physical imagery. Imam Husain preferred to give his head, that is, die, rather than give his hands in allegiance (bay’ah). Bay’ah is an oath of allegiance that is formalized through the act of shaking or giving one’s hand as a sign of loyalty and obedience to another person. Thus the Persian compound verb dast dādan literally means to make an agreement or to give one’s hand—an allusion to bay’ah, or the allegiance that Yazid demanded from Husain, and which he refused to give.

obvious that he was comfortable living in the pluralist Sunni and Shiʿi environment of Khorasan in Eastern Iran and Herat, Afghanistan, and from the mixed genres of writing that he produced in his lifetime, we can surmise that he did not conceive of himself as either Sunni or Shiʿa. In fact, this congenial communitarian environment in which Kashefi lived in Northwestern Afghanistan is further attested to by the commissioning of the rebuilding of the tomb of Imam ʿAli at Mazar-e Sharif by Kashefi’s patron, the Timurid Shah Husain Bayqara in 1481. The Euro-American, positivist scholarly ideal of being able to place people, ideas, behaviors and ideologies into neatly circumscribed ontological categories is, as we have seen thus far, limiting and exclusivist. While scholars have struggled to draw a conclusive picture of Kashefi’s religious identity, his hagiography of the Imams and the hero(in)es of Karbala has had a less ambiguous and more negative reception history.

From a scholarly perspective, Rowżat al-Shohadāʾ is the awkward text that few scholars are willing to engage as a serious hagiography. Not one of the nine essays on Kashefi in the December 2003 special issue of Iranian Studies devoted to his scholarship focused on Rowżat al-Shohadāʾ. In her introductory essay, Maria Subtelny explained that the essays in this special issue were the result of a panel on Kashefi’s scholarship that were

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23 According to local traditions, after ʿAli was assassinated in 661 CE, his supporters, fearing desecration of the Imam’s body, disinterred it and placed it upon the back of a she-camel. This camel was set free to wander where she will until she collapsed. The camel wandered thousands of miles, eventually collapsing and dying in the Balkh region of Afghanistan in what is now called Mazar-e Sharif. Imam ʿAli’s body was removed from the camel and buried, and it was forgotten for centuries. The Seljuk Sultan Sanjar commissioned the construction of a tomb in 1136, which was destroyed during the Mongol invasions in the 13th century. Nancy Hatch Dupree reports in An Historical Guide to Afghanistan, that the Timurid Shah Husain Bayqara had a dream in which he was informed of the location of Imam ʿAli’s true grave, and he was instructed to rebuild the tomb, which he promptly did. Please see, Nancy Hatch Dupree, An Historical Guide to Afghanistan (Kabul: Afghanistan Tourist Organization, 1965), and http://www.zharov.com/dupree/chapter25.html (accessed on February 20, 2007). For an in-depth history of ʿAli’s tomb at Mazar-e Sharif, please refer to the following: Robert D. McChesney, Waqf in Central Asia: Four Hundred Years in the History of a Muslim Shrine, 1480-1889 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).
presented at the Fourth Biennial Conference on Iranian Studies in 2002. The goal of this special issue, Subtelny states is “to ‘rehabilitate’ Kashifi, who has usually been regard merely as a compiler or popularizer, and to present him as a figure who was instrumental in the preservation of the state of the art of knowledge in a wide variety of fields in late medieval Iran.” After listing the forty or more works written by Kashefi in his lifetime, most notably in the fields of qu’anic hermeneutics (tafsīr), ethics, traditions (ḥadīth), astronomy, the sciences, and belles letters, Subtelny explains why an essay focusing on Rowżat al-Shohadā’ (incidentally, the first text listed in her inventory) has been excluded. In the estimation of the editorial board, “the essays in this issue are devoted to works that are less well-known in Western scholarship than his famous ‘Alid martyrlogy.” In fact, Kashefi’s discourse on ethics, Akhlāq-e Mohṣinī, and his treatise on chivalry, Futūwwat-nāmeh-ye Sulṭānī, have both been translated and the subject of sustained scholarship. Rowżat al-Shohadā’ has not received such sustained analysis, nor has it been been translated into English in its entirety. For being such a famous and important text, as so many European and American scholars briefly attest in their studies of Shi’i devotional practices or early Safavid Persian literature, the lacuna in sustained scholarship on Kashefi’s Rowżat al-Shohadā’ is significant.


Missing the Genre for Text: Is Historical Authenticity Necessary?

The intellectual anxiety that Kashefi’s being and scholarship has induced in contemporary Euro-American and Iranian scholars, while perplexing on the surface, reflects deeper epistemological struggles about the form and function of hagiography, which is further complicated by vernacular commemorations of Karbala—particularly in places where the Shiʿi community has been resistant to the homogenizing, “de-vernacularizing” impulse of the post-Revolution Iranian clerical class. The assertion made by Dr. Ghulam ʿAbbasi, the mulla from Astan-e Qods in Mashhad, that “Surely you know that this text is full of lies and superstition,” reflects the peculiar situation into which Rowžat al-Shohadāʾ finds itself, in which for many Shiʿas of a certain intellectual or ideological persuasion, are neither content with this Karbala narrative as either history or hagiography.

Debates about the nature of Rowžat al-Shohadāʾ in Iran emerged in the 19th century, particularly with regard to the issue of being able to scientifically determine the authenticity of the events mentioned in the text. One of the earliest critics of Rowžat al-Shohadāʾ was Shaykh Hajji al-Nuri al-Tabarsi (1254-1320/1838-1902) who castigated Kashefi in his Lūlūʿ wa Marjān, a handbook for the proper etiquette and subject matter for majlis orators (rowžeh-khwān).27 Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari relied upon Hajji al-Nuri’s critique of Rowžat al-Shohadāʾ in his series of lectures on the distortions (taḥrīfāt) that have infiltrated the literary and ritual-devotional commemorations of Karbala. Motahhari extols Hajji al-Nuri for his sharp critique of rowžeh-khwans or narrators of the events of Karbala.

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for their telling of lies, ignorance of ‘true’ history, and greed for fame and fortune.\textsuperscript{28}

Motahhari cites an experience narrated by Hajji al-Nuri in which a learned ʿālim from India sought his advice about the degradation of Muharram rituals in his homeland:

Some esteemed scholar from the ʿulamā of Hindustan has written a letter to me. He complains that in India, the rowzeh narratives are falsehoods. He has requested from me that I do something, that I write a book revealing how the rowzehs there have been overcome with lies...This Indian ʿālim thought that when rowzeh-khwāns went to Hindustan they told lies [about Karbala]. He does not know that the water is polluted from its very well-spring. The center of the false rowzehs is Karbala, Najaf and Iran! The very centers of Shi`ism are the centers of the lies, too.\textsuperscript{29}

From such accounts, every member of the Shi`i clerical classes seemed to be deeply concerned with the veracity of the Karbala narrative being recited in the majlis-e ʿazāʾ by the rowzeh-khwāns. While Hajji al-Nuri does not directly discredit Kashefi and Rowzat al-Shohadā', he does so indirectly, in his critique of the narrations of Karbala that are in his opinion, divergent with the ‘official’ history of Karbala. Thus, Hajji al-Nuri’s critique of the distortions and lies told by the rowzeh-khwāns in the majlis is therefore, a rejection of Rowzat al-Shohadā', from which most of the narrative performance of the commemoration of Karbala was derived.

The critiques of Shi`i scholars like Hajji al-Nuri and Ayatollah Motahhari are indicative of several sites of contestation and search for identities (Iranian, Shi`a, universal vs. vernacular) that for religiously-minded people were situated in the single-most visible marker of Shi`i identity: the ritual commemoration of the battle of Karbala. An important sub-field within Iranian studies focuses on the tension between tradition and modernity in

\textsuperscript{28}Morteza Motahhari, Ḥamāseh-ye Ḥusainī, pp. 71-72.

\textsuperscript{29}Motahhari, p. 72.
the articulation of Iranian national identity.\textsuperscript{30} Many scholars have analyzed the collapse of the Qajar dynasty during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906 and the internal political-ideological quest for Iranian identity, and several have considered the role of the religious, traditional bāzārī\textsuperscript{31} class, the role of the seminaries in Qom in the struggle to define a Shi‘i identity vis-à-vis Iranianness. These studies are significant and important for the ways in which they interrogate the long process of Iranians articulating for themselves an ideology of Iranian national identity, but the religious dimension is often examined solely from the religio-political angle taken by scholars such as Mottahedeh. Concurrent with this struggle for Iranian national identity, independent of definitions imposed by the ‘West,’ there was also a struggle for the articulation of a Shi‘i identity that was rooted in both Iranianness and in the desire to define a global Shi‘a-ness based upon a model defined by the Iranian clerical class.

In the struggle to define what it meant to be Shi‘a in the second half of the nineteenth century—a debate that continues until today—Iranian mullas found Rowżat al-Shohadā’ to be a text that resonated with their ontological dilemma. In a nineteenth-century global environment in which many Muslim societies in such places as Egypt, the


\textsuperscript{31}Bāzārī refers to the powerful class of merchants, dealers, and traders who have historically had a close relationship with Iran’s clerical class. The bastinadoing of two sugar merchants in the Tehran Bazaar in December 1905 brought the city to a standstill when all of the bāzārīs allied with the mullas, shut down the Bazaar and forced the Qajar government to accede to their demands—thus ushering in the beginning of the Constitutional Revolution. For a brief account of the Constitutional Revolution and the close relationship between the bazaar and the masjid, see Roy Mottahedeh, \textit{The Mantle of the Prophet}, pp. 34-37. Book 4 of Amin Maalouf’s historical novel \textit{Samarkand}, contains a vivid account of the bāzārī-mulla partnership and the downfall of the Qajar dynasty.
Indian Subcontinent, and the Levant were the subjects of European colonial domination, Islamic revival and reform movements were popular and powerful. In the Indian Subcontinent, reform movements such as Deoband endeavored to cleanse Islam of the Hindu accretions that had emasculated the religion and made it possible for the British to dismantle the Mughal empire and exert their cultural, political and economic control over the Muslims and Hindus of India. Many reformists believed that a return to a more masculine, vigorous, and ‘pure’ Islam for Indian Muslims would aid them in their struggle to free themselves of British colonial domination.\[32\]

Further complicating the issue of Muslim religious identity on a cross-regional scale was the ambitious Wahhabi revivalist movement in the Arabian peninsula.\[33\] Centered in the holy pilgrimage cities of Makkah and Madinah, pilgrims from all over the Muslim world were exposed to Wahhabi interpretations of Islam that forbade the veneration of the

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32Barbara D. Metcalf’s extensive scholarship of the nineteenth-century Deoband movement and its most prominent thinkers is particularly relevant. In Metcalf’s translation of Maulana Ashraf ‘Ali Thanawi’s Bihishti Zewâr (Heavenly Ornaments), we can see the Deobandi reformist impulse to cleanse Islam of all Indic practices that have seeped into Muslim ritual, devotional and life-cycle practices over the centuries. Bihishti Zewâr targets Muslim women, educating them in how to be properly Islamic, which ultimately left them vulnerable to the indirect blame for India’s colonial predicament. Because Hinduism, in the schema of British colonial ideology, was a mystical, spiritual and ultimately effeminate religion, any diffusion of Hindu practices into Islam rendered a vigorous, tribal religion effeminate. The way to reform Islam and make it vigorous (and pure) once again was to teach women, who, according to Thanawi and other like-minded reformist ideologues, were guilty of the Hinduization of Islam, what is true and correct Muslim practice. Of course, the gendered blame, however subtle and implicit, for the emasculation of Islam resulting in colonial domination, neglected to acknowledge several obvious complicating issues: men, too, participated in and promulgated ‘Hindu’ practices as Muslims (visiting shrines, flying kites, wedding rituals, taboos against widow remarriage), and over the course of more than six centuries, these were no longer Hindu practices, but rather, Indic cultural features. For more detailed analysis, please see Barbara D. Metcalf, Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, [1982] 2002), and Maulana Ashraf ‘Ali Thanawi, Bihishti Zewar (Perfecting Women), translation and commentary by Barbara D. Metcalf (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

33The Wahhabi movement is named after its eponymous founder Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792). Those who follow ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s teachings tend to refer to themselves as as-Salafyya or the “pious ones.” ‘Abd al-Wahhab rejected the adherence to any one madhab, instead privileging the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad as the most important source of law in conjunction with the Qur’an. The Wahhabis assume a literalist stance with regard to issues such as listening to music, praying at shrines, and celebrating the birth and death anniversaries of holy figures. Such opposition, clearly made the Wahhabis antagonistic toward Shi’ism.
graves of Fatimah Zahra and several of the Shi’i Imams at the Jannat al-Baqi’ (Everlasting Cemetery) in Madinah. With the founding of the Sa’udi kingdom in Arabia in 1932 and its cooptation of Wahhabi reformist ideology, Muslim ḥājjīs hailing from diverse locales were subjected to a narrow interpretation of Islam that adjudicated most of their vernacular religious practices and beliefs to be un-Islamic and therefore unacceptable. While on pilgrimage, Muslims could learn about ‘proper’ Islamic ways and return home and teach their family members what they had learned. For Shi’as the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam was not a possibility, but the revitalizing and unifying potential that lay in reforming Shi’ism certainly was appealing to the scholars of Qom, Najaf and Karbala.

In this complicated nexus of revival, reform and colonialism, religious scholars in Iran and Iraq struggled to articulate what it meant to be a Shi’a in the late-nineteenth century. As we have already seen with Hajji al-Nuri’s Lū’lū’ wa Marjān, Muharram and its devotional literature and practices became the focal point in the articulation of a properly authentic religious identity. The Indian ‘ālim who wrote to Hajji al-Nuri asking why the practice of rowṣeh-khwānī and its narration of the exploits of the hero(in)es of Karbala was distorted when it came to India reveals a number of underlying and important issues with regard to the global movement to reform and de-vernacularize Islam. First, Shi’as felt an equal yet different desire to construct a version of their faith that was global and universal, that is, purified of the perceived taint of vernacularism, which I suggest is all that is not

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34The Sa’udis razed the graves of Fatimah Zahra, Imam Hasan, Imam Zain al-‘Abidin, Imam Muhammad al-Baqir, and Imam Ja’far as-Sadiq at the Jannat al-Baqi’ cemetery in Madinah in 1925. I have also heard from many Shi’as who have gone on the umrah (supplementary) pilgrimage to Madinah that they have been beaten by the religious police (al-mutawwīn) with sticks if they exhibit any form of emotion when visiting the Prophet Muhammad’s grave, which evaded demolition. Both women and children have told me about their experiences being struck with sticks and threatened by the religious police, and that particularly as Shi’as they feel uncomfortable performing the hajj and umrah. To view photographs of the Jannat al-Baqi’ cemetery before and after the demolition of the graves of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, see the Shi’i website: http://www.al-islam.org/gallery/photos/image2nd.htm (accessed on January 8, 2007).
faithful to Arab identity and the history of Karbala and the Ahl-e Bait. Second, in order to purify and articulate a global Shi’i identity, the source of Karbala’s vernacularization needs to be identified, vilified, and ideally purged from the canon. Third, by identifying the authentic narratives of Karbala, a set of authentic pan-Shi’i devotional practices might be delineated, thus expurgating all un-Islamic vernacular practices that were perceived to distance Shi’as from the universal history of Karbala and liable to distortions (taḥrīfāt).

The critical scholarship of Karbala literature written in Persian in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has singled out Rowḍat al-Shohadā’ as the source for what have been perceived to be distortions in the recollection of the battle of Karbala. As Dr. Ghulam ‘Abbasi said, “This text is full of lies and superstitions,” which is a point that is reiterated by many Shi’i scholars like Motahhari. According to Hajji Nuri, the marriage (‘arūsi) of Qasem was mentioned for the very first time in Rowḍat al-Shohadā’, and he argues that other figures such as Imam Husain’s wife Layla could never have been at the battle of Karbala.

In short, Rowḍat al-Shohadā’ is not true history (tārīkh). I had many conversations with religious scholars in Iran who generally asked me the same question and leveled the same criticisms regarding Kashefi’s corrupted history of Karbala. I was usually addressed in the following manner: “Khānom, in kitāb tārīkhī nīst. Chetor in kitab rā mī khwānīd? Fikr mī konam ke shomā digar kitābi dar bārāye Karbalā ke rastgū bayad bikhwānīd.” Motahhari critiques Kashefi for vernacularizing the history of Karbala. Before Rowḍat al-Shohadā’, “people used to refer to the original sources for this book (R-S). Shaykh al-Mufid (Rūzwān Allāhu ’Alayhi) wrote the

\[35\] Motahhari, Ḥamāseh-ye Ḥusainī, pp. 75-76, 94.

\[36\]“Madam, this book is not historical. Why are you studying this book? You should study another text about Karbala that is truthful.” I need not cite each conversation that I had with people, as the reaction was nearly universal amongst the Iranians who asked me about my research. Most people could not understand why I would be interested in studying such a (boring, irrelevant, problematic, corrupted) text.
Irshād (The Book of Guidance) and many other pious works. If we ourselves refer to the Irshād of Shaykh al-Mufid, we haven’t any need to refer to other sources.”37 For reform-minded religious scholars like Motahhari and Hajji al-Nuri, Shaykh al-Mufid’s (d. 413/1022) Arabic history of the Imamate, Kitāb al-Irshād (The Book of Guidance) has been ascribed the role of the authentic history of Karbala.38 I suggest that one of the reasons for Kitāb al-Irshād’s privileged status is that it was composed in Arabic.

Kitāb al-Irshād’s received authenticity as an Arabic history of Karbala elevated its status because it is a text that retained the Arab milieu of Karbala and the Arab ethos and worldview of the Ahl-e Bait. Kitāb al-Irshād, according to its contemporary reception history in Iran, is the ideal universal history of Karbala—localizing no place, except Karbala, perceived to be neutral in the fact that its composition predates the distorting, popularizing, vernacularizing Rowžat al-Shohadā’. Kashefi’s Rowžat al-Shohadā’ may have translated the events of Karbala into the Persian language, making Imam Husain’s martyrdom understandable to a broader audience of Shi’as, but concomitant with the act of translation was vernacularization. One will not find the term shāh-e Karbalā (the King of Karbala), a popular epithet for Imam Husain, in Kitāb al-Irshād. Employing royal imagery is distinctively Persian, harking back to Iran’s pre-Islamic Sassanian heritage. While the epithet shāh-e Karbalā may not be objectionable to the de-vernacularists, it is awkwardly perched at the threshold of a distorted, vernacular Karbala. The innovative elements such as new characters or events in Rowžat al-Shohadā’ marks a significant rupture with Shaykh al-Mufid’s history that in the positivist historical perspective of modern Iranian

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37 Motahhari, p. 95.

intellectual thought narrates the battle of Karbala in a desired and idealized objective, rational fashion. *Rowżat al-Shohadāʾ* does not.

The marriage of Qasem, which according to Hajji al-Nuri was first introduced in *Rowżat al-Shohadāʾ*, is paradigmatic of how distortions of what actually happened at the battle of Karbala reflects deeper anxieties about the nature of a unified, global Shi‘i community, an especially important concern considering their minority status.\(^{39}\) A universal narrative of Karbala that de-vernacularizes\(^ {40} \) the rituals of remembering Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait, is an implicit dual strategy employed by the clerical classes of Iran as a means of exerting a regulatory control over the practices and beliefs of the global Shi‘i population, and to create a singular identity around which Shi‘as may assert their authenticity as Muslims.

\(^{39}\)This issue is further amplified in the current geo-political situation in Iraq. On November 12, 2006, I heard a story on National Public Radio (NPR) about the reorientation of Shi‘i devotional poetry to reflect the current religio-political strife in post-Saddam Iraq. In the report filed by NPR correspondent Jaime Tarabay, she reports that, “In Iraq, Shiite Muslims have publicly revived an ancient tradition long banned by the former regime of Saddam Hussein. Laments about the most beloved Shiite saint are now heard in mosques, on car stereos, and on the Internet. But the mournful chants that hark back to past grief are now making way for new pain and show how many Shiites still feel they face persecution at the hands of Iraq’s Sunnis.” One of the *nauha* poems compared the dangers of making pilgrimage to the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala to those encountered by Imam Husain and his entourage 1400 years ago. The *nauha* mourned the death of Shi‘i pilgrims who have been stopped en route to Najaf and Karbala and executed by Sunni militias. For a transcript of the story, “Revived Lament Tradition Makes Way for New Grief,” please refer to [http://www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org) (last accessed on January 8, 2007).

\(^{40}\)De-vernacularization as the corollary to vernacularization was brought to my attention during my interview with the faculty of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. In the course of my preliminary interview at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, I was asked whether there are any movements for “de-vernacularizing” Shi‘i practices. While this was an idea that was clear in my mind, I had not explicitly thought of these two impulses as a pair that exists in a state of dynamic tension. I am grateful to the search committee members who transformed my interview experience into a lively and beneficial exploration of the role of the vernacular in my project.
“De-Vernacularizing” Vernacular Shi’ism

In chapter two, I outlined the history of the transmission of Rowżat al-Shohada’ to the Deccan region of South India. Within decades of the text’s arrival in the Deccan in the mid-sixteenth century, the Qutb Shahi kings commissioned vernacular Deccani-Urdu translations of Kashefi’s Karbala narrative. With these translations two transformations in the telling of Karbala were effected. At the most basic level, translating Rowżat al-Shohada’ from Persian to Urdu made the text linguistically understandable to the average Indian of the Deccan who may not have been fluent in the original language of composition. More specifically, the translation of Rowżat al-Shohada’ transformed the ecology of Karbala and its hero(in)es to reflect an Indic worldview. In short, Rowżat al-Shohada’ was vernacularized, constructing a memory of Karbala that was refracted through the lens of India. But what does vernacular Shi’ism mean?

At the most general level, I use the term vernacular in reference to the myriad forms and contexts in which Islam is practiced by Muslims outside of the Central Arab Muslim lands of Arabia and the Middle East. For Sunni Muslims, the center of the Muslim cosmopolitan is located in the (Sa’udi) holy cities of Makkah and Madinah, where we can say that basic Muslim religious identity is “Strictly tied to the Arabic language and the Arabian Peninsula by a genealogical theory of religious practice, Muslims...conceive of

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4 Islamic studies scholars are increasingly becoming more aware of and interested in the ways in which Islam is manifested and practiced outside of the Central Arab lands. Richard Bulliett’s Islam: The View from the Edge (1994) has prompted considerable scholarship on Islam outside of the Central Arab lands. For other scholarship focusing particularly on the history and cultures of Islam in South Asia, please refer to the following: Richard M. Eaton, The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (editors), Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000); Peter Gottschalk, Beyond Hindu and Muslim: Multiple Identity Narratives from Village India (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and, Joyce Burkelhalter Flueckiger, In Amma’s Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).
their religion in highly universalistic terms.” John Bowen’s characterization of what he calls the universal nature of Islam and Muslim identity is accurate to a certain extent. While all Muslims do look (and pray) toward Makkah as the locus of their global communitarian (ummah) identity, for the Shi’a, this identifying locus is de-centered and relocated to Karbala and Iran. This is in part because of the anti-Shi’i policies of the Wahhabi S’audi government, but also because Shi’i religious identity is more profoundly situated on the imagined and remembered battlefield of Karbala. Furthermore, in her ethnography of a female Sufi healer named Amma in Hyderabad, India, Joyce Flueckiger seeks to reveal “the potential flexibility and creativity of Islam, a tradition that is often viewed by Muslims and non-Muslims alike to be universal, singular, and monolithic.” The vernacular is often the site of the dynamic transformations and adaptations that Islam undergoes in order to perpetuate and remain relevant and meaningful for the average person. Thus, for a Shi’a in Hyderabad, there are several degrees of vernacularization that are enacted in order to make Islamic theology and spiritual practice meaningful in an Indic context.

One of the most visible markers of this vernacularizing impulse in the Indian Deccan can be seen in the ritual commemoration of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra’s wedding in the 7 Muharram mehndi kī majlis. In the cultural context of South Asia, the Indic articulation of elaborately constructed and defined rules of marriage and strict rules on the taboo of

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42 Sheldon Pollock’s work on the Sanskrit cosmopolitan exerts a subtle yet significant influence in the formulations of questions that I have asked of my ethnographic data, and the Persian and Urdu texts that I am engaging in this chapter. In particular, please see Sheldon Pollock, “Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History,” Public Culture 12:3 (2000), pp. 591-625. John Bowen has also examined this issue in a global Islamic context through the analogous categories of universal (cosmopolitan) and local (vernacular). Especially useful is the first paragraph of his introductory essay, “What is ‘Universal’ and ‘Local’ in Islam?” Ethos 26:2 (June 1998), p. 258.

43 Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, p. xii.
widow remarriage make marriage in any circumstance a partnership that is fraught with uncertainty and risk, the battlefield wedding of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra resonates. Like Lord-King Rama’s wife Sita, Indians can relate to the tribulations Fatimah Kubra experiences as she permits her groom to rush from their wedding into battle where he is mortally wounded and she is widowed before the marriage is even consummated. Fatimah Kubra’s suffering, particularly her immediate widowhood, establishes an emotional bond that both men and women can forge with her.

This wedding introduced in Kashefi’s Rowżat al-Shohadā’ assured the enduring popularity of this hagiography of the hero(in)es of the battle of Karbala. As many of the Shi’a whom I interviewed in Hyderabad explained to me, the historical veracity of whether or not the wedding of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra actually happened is irrelevant. They believe in the wedding, Fatimah Kubra’s sacrifice, and Qasem’s martyrdom for the cause of religion. For them, this is a matter of the heart, not of the mind. It is not a matter of empirically proving whether or not the wedding happened. For the Shi’a of Hyderabad, I was told repeatedly that the mehndī kī majlis helps them to remember the battle of Karbala, and heroes like Fatimah Kubra and Qasem remind them of their family members and friends who suffer bad marriages, poverty or widowhood. This story vernacularized to make Qasem and Fatimah Kubra idealized Hyderabadi Shi’a, orients one’s faith and allegiance to the husainiyyat of the Ahl-e Bait, because they can imagine and feel Karbala in a truly real and immediate fashion: through the idiom and worldview of the Deccan, not the Arabistan of an Iraqi Karbala.

The nearly immediate popularity of Rowżat al-Shohadā’ in effecting the consolidation of Shi’ism in the Deccan has similarly not been accepted by all. Since the mid-nineteenth
century, Indian Shi‘as in the cities of Lucknow and Hyderabad have debated whether or not it is properly Islamic to observe such obviously Hindu-influenced Muharram rituals such as the *mehndī kī majlis*. In the following section, we will examine the content and form of those debates and how the Shi‘a community in Hyderabad has largely resisted the de-vernacularizing pressures exerted by Iran in the past 150 years. I begin the following section with an account of several interactions that I had with a young Shi‘i man named Shaja‘at who, based upon a clear case of ethnographic intervention, began to question his rejection of the *mehndī kī majlis*, an experience that exposed him to an ontological dilemma that he had heretofore not encountered.

**Who Am I? Negotiating Multiple Subjectivities**

I spent more than three months in 2005 working in the archives at the Salar Jung Museum. I was slowly transcribing a manuscript section about Qasem’s wedding—a laborious process considering the fragile condition of the manuscript and poor lighting—when the manuscript preservationist who was sitting next to me asked me if I was working on Shi‘a manuscripts. I explained my project to him and he told me about the Kutbkhaneh-ye Ja‘fariyya located just around the corner. Although I had been in Hyderabad for several months at this point, no one had yet told me about a Shi‘i (!) library located in the Darulshifa locality. Haidar* told me to ask for Shaja‘at and that he would be more than willing to help me locate some of the texts for which I had been searching.

I decided that paying a visit to the Ja‘fariyya library would probably be more productive than sitting around Salar Jung, so I hopped on my scooter and set off. It turned
out that I had walked past the Ja’fariyya library on several occasions without realizing that it was a library. Located in a small building on the grounds of the Sartauq-e Alava ʿashūrkhana dedicated to the fourth Imam Zain al-ʿAbidin, it was unremarkable and lacking an signs designating its presence. Adjusting my dupattā to cover my head, I entered the small room where three or four men were sitting quietly and reading. I asked for Shajaʿat, a young bespectacled man who was sitting at one end of the long table with his head bent over some text that he was reading with great interest. I introduced myself to him and explained yet again the subject of my research and that there were several books that I needed for my research, especially Sayyid Mahdi Lucknawi’s proof-text of Qasem’s wedding, ‘ʿAbāʿir al-Anwār.’ This is one of a significant series of texts that began to be composed in the mid-nineteenth century responding to critiques of the historical veracity of Kashefi’s Rowzat al-Shohadā’ and the permissibility to observe the mehndi kī majlis as a ritual expression of Indic vernacular Shiʿism. Shajaʿat produced this text for me and he also provided me with an introduction to Hyderabad’s minority Akhbari Shiʿi community.

I returned to the Ja’fariyya Library on several more occasions to search the catalogues, and one afternoon in passing, Shajaʿat mentioned that Zahra Academy, the women’s wing of the Daneshgah-e Ja’fariyya madrasa was hosting its annual seminar and commencement on July 31, 2005. I was invited to attend the event, and I told Shajaʿat that I would try to attend. I did not realize that I was invited as a guest of honor, and when I showed up at the Zahra Academy, I was rather taken aback when I walked into the hall in which approximately two hundred women were seated and wearing Iranian-style hijāb. I felt that I had committed a social gaffe wearing a loose shalwar-qamis and dupattā—typical

44Sayyid Mahdi Lucknawi, ʿAbāʿir al-Anwār, 3 volumes (Lucknow: Sarfaraz Qaumi Press, 1925).
modest dress for most of Hyderabad’s Shi‘i women. I had the impression that I was in Iran once again; there was even a mullah sitting on the stage in his robes and turban. What I did not realize at that moment was that I was a “chief guest” at the institutional center of the Akhbari Shi‘i community of Hyderabad.

The Akhbaris are a minority group within the Shi‘i community whose interpretation of Ja‘fari fiqh (jurisprudence) has lost out to the dominant and more liberal (at least in Hyderabad) Usuli interpretation. The principal differences between the Akhbaris (traditionalists) and the Usulis (rationalists) center around the authority of the clerical elite as adjudicators of Islamic law and the nature of the religious community in the absence of the twelfth Imam al-Mahdi who is in occultation (al-ghayba) until he returns to usher in the end of times. Akhbari interpretation of Ja‘fari fiqh is based upon the occultation of the twelfth Imam. In the absence of the Imam, the only possible source of authority in addition to the Qur’an and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad are the hadith of the Imams. If one cannot derive a clear directive from these sources of authority, then one should abstain for the action in question. This is a more literalist legal methodology in comparison to the Usulis who advocate the use of ijtihad or independent reasoning and the consensus (ijmā’) of the community. The Akhbaris forbid the following of a senior mujtahid or legal scholar as a source of emulation (marja‘at-taqlīd); the only living source of imitation is the Imam. With the ascendance of the seminaries in the holy cities of Qom, Najaf and Karbala, the political, economic and social power exercised by the clerical class contributed to the triumph of Usuli fiqh.

After the commencement at Zahra Academy, I had a number of conversations with several of the invited women speakers. One of the women invited me to her daughter’s
wedding that was taking place the following week. She informed me that this was going to
be a truly jāʿiz or legal Muslim wedding, unlike so many of the weddings that take place
amongst the Shiʿas in Hyderabad. I was immediately intrigued by this piece of unsolicited
information about Hyderabadi Shiʿi weddings. I asked what will make this wedding jāʿiz in
her opinion. A woman whom I call Zeba Husaini* explained that no dowry will be given,
and she responded that neither sāchaq, mehndī, nor the barāt (procession of the groom to
the bride’s natal home on the day of the wedding) would constitute this wedding. Another
woman, a social worker whom I will call Zahra*, stated that they are different from the
other Shiʿas in Hyderabad because they do not attend majlis-eʿazāʾ, and most importantly,
“We do not participate in Muharram activities like the mehndī of Qasem.”45 Zeba affirmed
that only the ʿaqd-e nikāḥ or the signing of the wedding contract was necessary and that
was all that is truly Islamic. It seemed to me that every Indic element—everything that
rooted Zeba and her family in India as Indians—had been excised from this upcoming
wedding. I felt even further drawn into the aesthetic and ideology of Khomeini’s idealized
Islamic Republic.

Following this event at Zahra Academy, I returned with Shajaʿat and his wife Seema
to have lunch at their house located just down the street. Seema had just completed a
course of study at Zahra Academy and had just received her certificate. She works as a
social worker for the Imam-e Zamanah Mission, a charitable Shiʿi organization that serves
the Old City. I was looking forward to speaking with Seema about what she believes about
Qasem’s marriage and whether such vernacular Shiʿi devotional practices as mehndī are

45Zahra, informal conversation at Zahra Academy, Hyderabad (July 31, 2005).
positive expressions of devotion to the Ahl-e Bait in an Indian context. I tried to ask Seema several questions and she always deferred to Shaja’at to respond. I was disappointed, but instead tried to discern her thoughts by paying close attention to her reactions as I spoke with her husband about Kashefi and mehndī.

After a delicious lunch of chicken and rice, we began to discuss the matter of mehndī and whether it is appropriate for Indian Shi’as to use it as a tool for remembering Qasem and Fatimah Kubra. Shaja’at asked me whether I believe that the wedding happened—a question that I am often asked, and one that I am reluctant to answer. Part of me wonders, does it matter what I think? What stake do I have in this question? Of course, I do have a stake, and I have an important role in this debate, as I am engaging all types of Shi’as and am trying to discover what is happening in the devotional and ideological life of the Hyderabadi Shi’i community. The situation is growing ever more complex, and how do I open these issues up to people on each side of the divide? Do they recognize that there is an apparent ideological and praxis-oriented split within the community?

In response to Shaja’at’s question, I asked him what he thinks—do I believe in the wedding or not, and then I said, it doesn’t matter what I think. I am here to find out about what Hyderabadi Shi’as think about the wedding. I asked him if he believes that the wedding took place. He gave a click of his tongue, lifted his chin and closed his eyes a bit. The standard non-verbal response of ‘no,’ conveyed by a click of the tongue while the chin is slightly upraised. This is often done in response to a comment, question or situation that is perceived to be annoying or not worth asking. I knew that he did not believe that the wedding took place, but I also thought how interesting that he is so willing to help me in my research, especially as I am looking for texts that prove it happened. I asked him why
he doesn’t believe that Qasem and Fatimah Kubra married, and he said that it would have been impossible and inappropriate considering the circumstances.

Actually, I was shocked by what he said. Shaja’at asked me how many daughters Imam Husain had, and I said, three. He disagreed and said that he had only two: Sakinah (Roqayya) and Sughra. He asserted that it was Sughra who is purported to have married to Qasem, and that Fatimah Kubra never existed. I was a bit shocked by this, and said that there are countless references to Sughra being ill and remaining behind in Madinah. He said, no that is not true. This issue of identity and presence or absence of characters (kirdār) at the battle of Karbala is fascinating. It brings to mind Taqui Khan’s observation that people deliberately try to create confusion about who was at Karbala. We continued this conversation in this vein for a few minutes, and I sort of let Shaja’at make his point. He said that Fatimah Kubra is not real, and the wedding could never have happened.

I asked him why he doesn’t believe in Rowżat al-Shohadā‘ as a text, and again he gave me the standard response that there are many other more ‘authoritative’ and ‘ṣaḥīḥ’ martyrdom narratives (maqātil) to which I should be referring. He cited Lahūf, Bahār al-Anwār, Shaykh al-Mufid’s Kitāb al-Irshād. I said, “Yes, I am familiar with all of these texts and they are very important (they are all also written in ARABIC). I said, while were at it, we may as well include the Tārikh of al-Tabari in this list, as he does mention the battle of Karbala in his history. Shaja’at heartily agreed with me, and said that this is also an authoritative text. After having gotten Shaja’at to identify the authoritative texts, I asked him what makes Karshafi so unauthoritative. Aside from reiterating Ayatollah Motahhari’s argument that it is based upon weak or faulty riwāyats and includes events that ‘never happened’, he couldn’t say specifically what is so wrong with the text. I pointed out that
this text has been very influential in the development of Muharram literature in Hyderabad. Shaja’at then lowered his voice even more (he always speaks so quickly and he mumbles, which makes it very difficult for me to understand sometimes, esp. on the phone) and he said, sometimes the transmission of what happened at Karbala goes around and around and bits and pieces of things get added or deleted from the narrative. I lit up and said that when I was a child we used to play a game called ‘telephone’. We would sit in a circle and one person would whisper a sentence in the next person’s ear. By the time we had transmitted the sentence around the circle, it had become something completely different. I asked him if he thinks this is a similar situation and he said absolutely, yes. I asked him then, what makes us so certain that the ‘authoritative’ texts are the correct narratives. He seemed a bit nonplused by this questioning, and our luncheon slowly came to an end after our conversation desultorily drifted off into other topics of a less theological nature.

When I met Shaja’at for lunch on a hot summer day in March 2006, he was carrying a notebook. We chatted through lunch—he filled me in on news about his wife and what was happening at the Shi’i library where he works in Hyderabad’s Old City. After lunch, we went outside to sit, hoping to catch a cooling breeze. Shaja’at said to me, “I have been thinking a lot about this Qasem marriage, and I have even been looking through some of the books about this. See, in this text I found a reference to the marriage, and in this other text, too. But, I still cannot believe that it happened.” A member of the minority Akhbari Shi’i community in Hyderabad that does not believe in or accept the historical possibility of the marriage of Qasem, the thirteen year-old son of the second Imam Hasan to Fatimah Kubra the ten year-old daughter of Imam Husain at the battle of Karbala, Iraq in 680 CE,
Shajaʿat was clearly interested in this matter. He, too was interrogating the archive to find an answer as to whether or not it is correct practice for Shiʿi Muslims to observe the *mehndī ki majlis* or the mourning assembly commemorating the South Asian custom of decorating the bride and groom with henna. Shajaʿat’s act of sharing his own research with me not only brought into dramatic relief the influence of the ethnographer’s presence, but it also made me understand how the emotional and intellectual contours of Hyderabadis debate the appropriateness of observing the *mehndī* mourning assembly as an expression of their Indian and Shiʿi identities. In the context of the *mehndī* mourning assembly and the debates that have been prominent for the past century and a half, the local or vernacular matters very much.

The expansion of Muslim networks in the past 150 years, while connecting minority Shiʿi Muslim communities together, has also resulted in pressures to conform to the notion of a pan-Shiʿi *ummah*. In the Introduction to their edited volume, *Muslim Networks*, miriam cooke and Bruce Lawrence have observed that, “because Islam is not homogeneous, it is only through the prism of Muslim networks—whether they be academic or aesthetic, historical or commercial—that one can gain a perspective on how diverse groups of Muslims contest and rearticulate what it means to be Muslim.”

Networks of pilgrimage and the movement of Shiʿi religious scholars between the Indian cities of Lucknow and Hyderabad and the spiritual centers of Iran (Qom) and Iraq (Najaf, Karbala) indicate the connectedness of Shiʿi Muslims transregionally, yet these very networks highlight the significance of the local in defining Shiʿi religious practices and worldviews.

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The Shi’i community in the South Indian city Hyderabad has strongly resisted campaigns launched by the religious elite of Iran and Iraq to homogenize Muharram ritual-devotional practices. The mehdī ceremony or majlis is steadfastly observed on 7 Muharram by Hyderabadi Shi’as in defiance of pressures from the ‘ulamā in Iran and Iraq to eliminate practices deemed to be unauthentic and un-Islamic. I suggest that the participation in the mehdī mourning assembly narrates a worldview connecting Hyderabad’s Shi’as to Karbala through the ecology, aesthetics and values of the local Deccani culture.

Hyderabad has been a center of Shi’i culture in India since the founding of the Qutb Shahi dynasty in 1512 CE. From the first decades of the Qutb Shahi dynasty, countless Iranian Shi’i poets, theologians, artists, and warriors came to the Deccan to serve in the court. The Iranian influx had a significant influence on the development of Deccani Shi’ism. Theological-devotional texts and devotional practices were carried along with these immigrants (āfaqīs), which were adopted by the Qutb Shahi kings and incorporated with the cultural and religious practices of the Telugu-speaking Hindus indigenous to the Deccan plateau. Very quickly, Persian maqtal or martyrdom narratives about the battle of Karbala, such as the Iranian Mulla Husain Va’ez Kashefi’s early-16th century Rowżat al-Shohadā’, were translated into meaningful local forms. Marsiyas or verse narratives eulogizing the martyrs of Karbala also became a popular genre of memorial literature in the Deccan. In the Shi’i kingdoms of the Deccan, the literature, both prose and poetry, and rituals of the majlis mourning assembly gradually transformed their Persian language and idiom to express the vernacular world of the Deccan in the local languages of Urdu and Telugu. This was neither a difficult nor an unnatural process of translation. These epic stories of Karbala resonated with the Hindus of the Deccan who themselves participated in
the great oral epic traditions of the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* in which kings are larger than life, yet the heroes and heroines are identified with being truly real and human. Mir Vali Khan Munis’s *Riyyāż al-Ţāhirīn* (The Gardens of the Chaste), an Urdu translation of Kashefi’s *Garden of the Martyrs*, describes the wedding of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra in astounding and thoroughly Deccani-Indian—not Arabian or Persian—detail.

The devotional rituals and practices that were brought with the Iranian āfaqīs were also transformed by the local Deccani culture. The description of the Deccani-Indian style wedding of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra at the battle of Karbala in *Riyyāţ al-Ţāhirīn* reflects the practices that the Shi’as of the Deccan had adopted from the local Hindu culture. Wedding rituals such as sāchaq, mehndī, manjha and barāt do not exist in Arab Muslim culture—these are distinctively Indic practices that Indian Muslims, both Sunni and Shi’a have integrated into their cultural and religious identities. In Urdu devotional poetry commemorating the battle of Karbala, these rituals are invoked to great emotional effect, making men and women weep for this young couple’s sufferings. In one of the most popular salāms sung on 7 Muharram, and in the assembly of grief held before any joyous occasion, the child Sakinaah calls out to Qasem, “Come home brother so that I may adorn you with mehndī.” The mehndī ceremony is usually held on the day before an Indian wedding. The bride’s family goes to the groom’s house singing songs and bearing gifts and trays of mehndī or henna for decorating the hands and feet. It is a joyful occasion for Hyderabadi Shi’as, but in honor of the hero(in)es of Karbala, there must always be a moment of remembrance and grief before happiness. Again, Karbala is brought to memory through a Deccani worldview influenced by Indic cultural practices and values, yet made into something distinctively Muslim.
In attempts to construct a transregional homogenized Shi‘i identity, the religious elite of Iran and Iraq has targeted practices such as the *mehndī kī majlis* as being not truly authentic. Cities like Lucknow in North India have largely abandoned the observance of *mehndī*. I became aware of the debates about Qasem and Fatimah Kubra’s wedding in August 2002 when I was studying Urdu in Lucknow. In the course of an interview with a prominent scholar of Urdu Karbala literature, in response to a question that I asked about the Hindu influence in the ritual remembrance of Qasem and Kubra’s wedding, this professor emphatically assured me that these days far fewer Lucknowi Shi‘as observe the *mehndī* on 7 Muharram. He declared, “We don’t follow these superstitious practices any longer. *Mehndī* is un-Islamic and all of these wedding rituals are too expensive. A Muslim wedding shouldn’t have all those extra Hindu-type rituals. Instead, we celebrate the sacrifice of Fiza. Did you know that she was black—from Ethiopia. That is more modern.”

Yet Hyderabadi Muslims, unlike those in other parts of India, have resisted pressures to conform to what they perceive as an arbitrarily defined set of Muharram practices. In the course of interviews with a diverse sample of Hyderabadi Shi‘as, I constantly heard both men and women assert that the *mehndī kī majlis* of 7 Muharram is authentic and it is truly Muslim.

In the course of ethnographic fieldwork and archival research, I have identified three principal arguments used by Hyderabadi Shi‘a to defend the practice of *mehndī*. First, people say that if they believe that it happened, then why does it matter so much whether one can historically verify whether Qasem and Fatimah Kubra were married at Karbala. Second, Hyderabadi Shi‘as openly acknowledge that the wedding rituals observed in the

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47 Interview, with Sharib Rudaulvi, Lucknow, India (August 2002).
mehndī kī majlis derive from local Hindu culture, but Muslims have adopted these practices and values making them equally Islamic. Third, it is for the Shi’a of Hyderabad to determine what is acceptable Muharram practice and what is not.

One of the most common explanations that I heard from my informants in Hyderabad for why the mehndī mourning rituals continue to be observed is simply that they have faith that it happened. One of my informants asked me, “Does it matter whether it is in some history book?” Another informant named Sabiha who is the daughter of one of Hyderabad’s most renowned ḍālims or religious scholars postulated, “Mir Anis and Mirza Dabir [two famous 19th century Urdu composers of Karbala poems] wrote about the marriage of Hazrat Qasem and Bibi Kubra, and Muslims believe that their poetry was signed by Imam Husain. Therefore, whatever they wrote about Karbala in their maršiyas [poems about Karbala] is historically verifiable.” For some Hyderabadi Shi’as, the absence or presence of textual proof does not affect one’s belief in whether the wedding happened. For others, the belief that Imam Husain sanctions the composition of poems about Karbala validates the authenticity of the marriage. It is a matter of faith.

A second argument that I encountered roots the mehndī of 7 Muharram in the local Hyderabadi context. Reza Agha, Hyderabad’s senior-most Shi’i religious scholar and the preacher at the city’s largest annual mehndī mourning assembly explained to me in several interviews that the Urdu word for wedding shādī, which literally means ‘joy’, is not what happened at Karbala. Reza Agha asserted that only nikāḥ or the signing of the Muslim marriage contract could have been performed in such a situation. He declared, “There is a

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48 Interview with Sabiha Asghar, Principal of Solar Public School, Darulshifa, Hyderabad (February 8, 2005).
big difference between the joyful rituals of a wedding and the actual marriage.”

Reza Agha pointed out that there is a semantic range of meaning that we must keep in mind. The marriage act may have taken place, but there were none of the rituals. Hyderabadis observe the mehndī because it is such a central aspect of Indian marriages, both Hindu and Muslim. Dr. Sadiq Naqvi, another informant explained that the clothing, jewelry and customs that are performed by Indian Muslims are derived from Hindu practices, but over time, these practices have been thoroughly Islamicized and are considered completely authentic and not in tension with religious law or sharī’a.

The third explanation was one that I heard while sitting around enjoying a snack of spicy chickpeas and ice cream at a manjha or tumeric ceremony at the home of another Shi’i family in the Old City. A young woman who is working on her MA at Osmania University beckoned her father to speak with me after she learned of my research. She said, “My father, although he works in the Gulf, has lived in Iraq and he has very strong feelings about Hazrat Qasem and the mehndī.” Fatimah’s father joined our small circle sitting on an immaculate white sheet and entered into our discussion of the mehndī—many of the Hyderabadi Shi’as who have emigrated to the Gulf, Canada or the US have renounced the 7 Muharram mehndī rituals for being un-Islamic and rooted in superstition. I admit that I expected the same from this man, but in a few words, Riaz consolidated aspects of the first two arguments mentioned above, and he effectively resolved the dilemma in his final two sentences: “The mehndī kī majlis is a way of expressing our love, affection and gratitude for them. All of the rituals associated with the recollection of the Ahl-e Bait are acceptable because they help the devotee to remember the Prophet’s family and their sufferings.

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Living in South Asia we have been influenced by our environment. “One can choose personally if one observes the rituals or not. Either way it should be fine. What is religious allowed or not can only be determined by Allah. It is not the prerogative of individual religious scholars. None of them have the right to say what is halāl or harām (permitted or forbidden).”

Through the Mehndī kī Majlis, We Remember Karbala

In this chapter I weave together stories of experiences that I had with two men, one Iranian and the other Indian, each deeply influenced by a de-vernacularized, cosmopolitan Shi‘ism that he learned in the howzeh of Qom. Yet, Shaja‘at, the young Shi‘i librarian, found that his belief that Qasem and Fatimah Kubra could have never married at Karbala became a bit shaken through his interactions with me. Sometimes I wondered if Shaja‘at had imbibed too much of the ethos of the Qom seminaries and in the process ceded a bit of his Hyderabadi, Indian Shi‘i identity, yet on that March day when he showed me his own investigations whether the marriage could have happened and whether it is okay to observe such a distinctively Indic event and still be authentically Shi‘a. I could sense his own ontological struggle as a Shi‘a deeply embedded in the trans-regional homogenizing interpretation of Shi‘ism espoused by the post-Revolution Iranian government, and the vernacular, hybrid Deccani identity of Hyderabad.

The Shi‘a of Hyderabad feel deeply connected to the Imams and through devotional texts and practices they keep the memory of Karbala constantly in the present. For the

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50Conversation with Dr. Riaz at the home of Dr. Riaz Fatima, Purani Haveli, Hyderabad (December 12, 2005).
majority of Shi’a living in the Deccan whose mother-tongue is either Urdu or Telugu, the Arabic language and the worldview espoused by the ‘ulamā of Iran and Iraq renders a devotional spirituality that is vibrant with the culture of the Deccan into something foreign and as arid as the desert of Karbala. The nature of this debate indicates the importance of local or vernacular contexts in the shaping of several religious worlds for Hyderabadi Shi’as. In Hyderabad, Fatimah Kubra and Qasem are religious and social role models—hagiographers depict Kubra as an idealized Indian Shi’i Muslim bride and widow, willing to sacrifice her own status as an auspicious bride in order to allow her husband to be martyred for the cause of justice and religion. As one of my informants stated, the mehndī mourning assembly is both a method for remembering Karbala, demonstrating one’s love for Imam Husain and his family, and it is a means of articulating what it means to be Muslim, what it means to be Shi’a and an Indian, too.
CONCLUSION

Hagiography Alive: The Ahl-e Bait as Enduring Paradigm in the Ordering of Shi‘i Social and Religious Life

20 Safar 1426/March 31, 2005 (Arba‘īn). Today is Arba‘īn or the fortieth day after Imam Husain’s martyrdom at the battle of Karbala. After the ten days of Muharram leading up to ‘āshūrā’, and the martyrdom of Sakinah on 13 Safar, Arba‘īn is one of the most important days of mourning. It is 9am and I am attending my first majlis of the day at Yadgar-e Husaini, the women-only ‘āshūrkhāna located in Purani Haveli in Hyderabad’s Old City. When the zākirah, Zakia Sultana mounts the minbar, there are few formalities and following of the conventions of the majlis format. From the first word that comes out of her mouth, straight maṣā‘īb, or recollection of the tribulations of the hero(ī)nes of Karbala, is recited. She recollects that today is Arba‘īn, the fortieth day after the battle of Karbala when Zainab returned to Karbala to visit her brother’s grave. Today is Arba‘īn, and this ‘āshūrkhāna is Imam Husain’s grave in Karbala. There is an erasure of time and geographical distance for the majlis participants. Imam Husain implores his sister Zainab, “Go to Makkah, go to Madinah, go to Karbala, but leave Sham;” so, too, do the majlis participants travel with the “Messenger of Martyrdom.”¹ Today, the battle of Karbala is renewed in the hearts and imaginations of Hyderabad’s Shi‘i community.

¹Zakia Sultana, Arba‘īn majlis, Yadgar-e Husaini, Purani Haveli, Hyderabad (March 31, 2005).
The weather has been hot, and there is a hum of weeping in the air. The air feels liquid from the grief being expressed. At particularly high moments in the maṣāʿīb, there is an upswelling of grief. It is so hot and crowded that I am finding it difficult to pay attention to what is happening. My mind is wandering, and I find that I am more interested in observing the women in the majlis. Despite their grief and their joining Zainab as she visits her brother’s grave, many of the women are also smiling at me and giving small signs of welcome and recognition. When I had arrived for the majlis, so many different women came up to me, asking where I have been. It is amazing that so many women in the community are aware of my presence and participation in the remembrance of the hero(in)es of Karbala, and when I am not present in the majlis, my absence is also felt. My visibility or lack of anonymity seems strange to me, but at the same time it does make me feel as though I have been accepted, to a certain extent, by the community.

I have taken these words from my notes and reflections on the Arbaʿīn majlis, which at the time, seemed like just another mourning event in my estimation. This majlis, however, demonstrates the ways in which the Ahl-e Bait remains alive and real through their embodiment of husainiyat-wilāyah as it is recognized and constructed to reflect the South Indian, vernacular ideals and values of Hyderabad’s Shiʿi community. This majlis and the countless others that I attended and that I have analyzed in this project, are hagiography alive. The accounts of what befell the hero(in)es of Karbala is not merely the recitation of narrative history. The epic of Karbala is not dead words on a silent page. The hero(in)es of Karbala may be deceased in body but they remain vividly alive and real in the hearts and memories of the Shiʿa of Hyderabad.
In order to identify the ways in which the hero(in)es of Karbala are made alive and real social and religious role models for the Hyderabadi Shi’a in the devotional literature and ritual performance of the majlis mourning assembly, I have followed the example of Dwight Reynolds’ study of the Egyptian Arabic Bani Hilal epic. Reynolds used a single performance as fundamentally representative of the various oral recitations of the poem he observed. I, likewise, have taken the battlefield wedding of Fatimah Kubra to Qasem as my paradigmatic example. Focusing on the remembrance of this wedding in devotional texts and performances in Hyderabad indicates that there is representative model for the ways in which the members of Imam Husain’s family are venerated and transformed into what I call real or practical saints, that is, religious exemplars who fulfill a significant social function teaching individuals how to be good men and women, faithful Muslims, and in the context of this project, authentic Hyderabadi Indians.

Taking the battlefield wedding of Fatimah Kubra and Qasem as my paradigmatic example and Hyderabad as the site for my microstudy of how practical Shi’i sainthood is constructed and enacted, I highlight the ways in which these seventh-century Arab Muslims are transformed into idealized Indians. Using the example of Fatimah Kubra, the bride-widow of Karbala, this study has examined why and how the ritual remembrance of her marriage resonates so deeply with the Shi’a of Hyderabad. How has Fatimah Kubra been constructed to reflect the ideals of Shi’i Islam, and the gender and social roles of Shi’ism in the vernacular context of South India?

In chapter one, I offered a stipulative definition of Shi‘i sainthood based upon the categories of \textit{imāmah-walāyah}, which is reserved for the descendents of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatimah Zahra, who were chosen by God to lead the Muslim community. The second category, and the subject of this study, are also family members of the Prophet Muhammad, yet limited to the family members of Imam Husain who were present with him at the battle of Karbala. These individuals, based upon their blood relationship to the Imam and their suffering at Karbala, possess the quality of \textit{ḥusainiyyat-wilāyah}, which reflects the social, of-this-world dimension of personal sacrality as it is recognized by the Shi‘a in different cultural contexts over time. As we have observed in the case of the bride-widow Fatimah Kubra, \textit{ḥusainiyyat-wilāyah} is culturally specific.

While the manifestation of \textit{husainiyyat-wilāyah} is culturally specific, it is reinforced by the most important quality for the Arab Muslims of the seventh century, a value shared by all Muslims: esteem for the purity of the blood of the Prophet’s lineage. What makes Fatimah Kubra a saint is the \textit{charismatic} blood flowing through her veins. She is a direct descendent of Muhammad, and she is Imam Husain’s daughter who was patrilocally married to her first cousin Qasem. Fatimah Kubra possesses charisma because of the consanguinity attaching her to the Prophet Muhammad. Fatimah Kubra’s charisma and authority resides in the recognition that she possesses a “‘personal gift’ received from a source of legitimacy,” that can be “physical[ly] enforced.”

\footnote{Hamid Dabashi, \textit{Authority in Islam: From the Rise of Muhammad to the Establishment of the Umayyads} (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1989), p. 42.} By virtue of her contiguity to the Prophet Muhammad, Fatimah Kubra’s embodiment of \textit{ḥusainiyyat-wilāyah} is legitimating and the means by which her saintly example is physically enforced can be
seen in the ways in which her body is marked and gendered in the mehndī kī majlis of Hyderabad. As an idealized bride and subsequently model widow, Fatimah Kubra, by virtue of her consanguine embodiment of ḥusainiyyat-wilāyah, enforces and constructs gendered roles that are a reflection of local, Hyderabadi values for women and men.

The portrayal of Fatimah Kubra in Urdu devotional literature and in the ritual environment of the majlis constructs her into a practical saint. Her function is to connect her willingness to sacrifice Qasem at the battle of Karbala with her spiritual status as an exemplary Muslim, based upon her direct blood relationship to Imam Husain. Like all of the hero(in)es of Karbala, Fatimah Kubra’s exemplification of ḥusainiyyat-wilāyah is recognized by her devotees as the embodiment of two ideal types, or more specifically, two gendered states: the ideal Indian bride and the perfectly renouncing widow. Engaging Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance and embodiment, I have endeavored in this project to highlight the prominence of the women of the Ahl-e Bait in the construction of practical Shiʿi sainthood. Through the lens of Euro-American feminist critique, Fatimah Kubra’s role as saint might be overwhelmed by the assumed masculine desires in which women are merely brides or widows—the objects of patriarchal exchange without an empowered, feminine subjectivity of their own. By depoliticizing this critique in order to show how Fatimah Kubra’s embodiment of the bride-widow dyad is an idealization of South Indian social and religious values, my goal is to show how the very presence of the heroines of Karbala as powerful saints is distinctive to Shiʿism. While gender is a reflection of culture, so, too, is the practical sainthood of ḥusainiyyat-wilāyah.

The voices and emotions of the heroines of the Karbala epic tradition, as it is performed in the majlis, bring this “body” of hagiography to life. Employing a strategy of
narrative engagement, Reza Agha articulates the voices and emotions of the Karbala heroines to draw the majlis participants into the scene of battle. It is the women of the Karbala epic—those who live to tell the story about what happened—who are portrayed as dynamic characters who directly engage with the audience, who are constructed into ‘real’ women by becoming Indian in dress, custom, and values, enabling the average Hyderabadi Shi’i man and woman to enter into the realm of Karbala and take their place in the scene of battle, in the presence of these women who are similar to one’s female relatives.

This dimension of fictive kinship that is fostered in the devotional literature and performance of the majlis deepens one’s bond of loyalty and affection for Imam Husain and his family. This fictive filial bond further blurs the line between hagiography and history—an issue that we see being played out in the debates about the authenticity and permissibility of observing the mehndî kî majlis in Hyderabad where this event is an expression of vernacular Shi’i identity. With regard to the question about the historical veracity of Fatimah Kubra and Qasem’s wedding, many Shi’as in Hyderabad assert that it is impossible to know everything that happened; because of loyalty to Imam Husain, they say, “We really cannot refuse to accept certain events and not others. If one refuses to accept that the wedding between Kubra and Qasem took place, then one is rejecting the Imam, and one is therefore refusing to believe in Islam. Unless someone is an authority on the subject and has absolute proof, then one cannot refuse to accept that the wedding happened.” These words spoken by Reza Agha were echoed in the voices of countless Shi’as during the time I spent in Hyderabad.

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4Interview with Reza Agha at his home in Nur Khan Bazaar, Hyderabad (May 31, 2005).
The Shi’a of Hyderabad believe that the Fatimah Kubra wed Qasem on the battlefield of Karbala, and the ritual remembrance of this event in the devotional literature and performance of the mehndi ki majlis of 7 Muharram indicates the powerful, positive and coercive functions of husainiyat-wilāyah. The goal of this project has not been to articulate a definitive global theory of Shi’i sainthood, but instead to highlight some of the local elements that construct the texts and performances of remembrance of the battle of Karbala; these in turn transform the men and women of Imam Husain’s family into real, living role models for how to be good individuals, members of society, and Muslims. Using Hyderabad as the locus of fieldwork and archival research, and focusing on the bride-widow Fatimah Kubra for the paradigmatic example, we can discern that sainthood, like gender, is culturally constructed, and that it exists in a state of dynamic interaction, transforming itself as the values, desires and aspirations of society change over time.
APPENDIX A

Chronology of the Battle of Karbala, 60-61/680

The chronology of Karbala events that I outline below weaves together the historical events surrounding the battle of Karbala and the commemorative calendar of ritual remembrance in Hyderabad, India. These two calendars do not always “match up,” for Hyderabadis (and Shi’as in other South Asian cities) have developed their ritual calendar over time, and the events that are popularly commemorated are those that most resonate in the Indian vernacular context. In the right-hand column is the cycle of the ritual commemoration of the battle of Karbala as it is observed in Hyderabad.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 Muharram</th>
<th>Historical Overview of Karbala</th>
<th>Ritual Cycle in Hyderabad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imam Husain’s entourage is intercepted by the military commander al-Hurr at-Tamimi who was dispatched by ibn Ziyad, the pro-Yazid governor of Kufa. Hurr warns Imam Husain not to progress any further. Imam Husain offers Hurr water and they join together for prayer (salat).</td>
<td>Under pressure to pledge his allegiance (bay’ah) to the ’Umayyad khalīfa, Imam Husain departs from Madinah to Mecca in the hope of obtaining safe refuge.</td>
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</table>

| 2 Muharram | Imam Husain and his entourage continue on toward Kufa. The Imam stops at Karbala and sets up an encampment in view of the Euphrates River. | Imam Husain and his entourage depart Mecca and travel toward the Iraqi city of Kufah where they have been invited and offered protection by the city’s Shi’i population. |

| 3 Muharram | Yazid dispatches 4,000 troops led by the general ’Umar ibn Sa’d who has been ordered to make Imam Husain give his hand in allegiance (bay’ah) to the ’Umayyad khalīfa Yazid. Imam Husain and his followers are denied access to the waters of the Euphrates River. | Imam Husain arrives at Karbala and sets up his encampment. |

<p>| 4 Muharram | Imam Husain engages in Remembrance of the | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 Muharram</td>
<td>Reinforcements are sent from Damascus to surround Imam Husain’s encampment. Some Shi’i sources claim that as many as 100,000 troops were sent by Yazid in comparison to the 72 able-bodied men who were in Imam Husain’s entourage.</td>
<td>The martyrdom of Zainab’s two young sons, ’Aun and Muhammad is commemorated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Muharram</td>
<td>This is the third day that Imam Husain’s entourage has been denied access to the waters of the Euphrates. In the heat of the Iraqi desert, Imam Husain grows increasingly desperate as those in his entourage and suffering from thirst. He digs a well that promptly dries up and ibn Sa’d increases security along the River.</td>
<td>The martyrdom of Imam Husain’s 18 year-old son ’Ali Akbar is observed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Muharram</td>
<td>Imam Husain sends his brother ’Abbas to fill some waterskins under the cover of night. ’Abbas manages to procure a small amount of water, which although helpful, is not nearly enough to quench the thirst of the entire entourage.</td>
<td>Commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hasan’s son 13 year-old Qasem following his marriage to Imam Husain’s 10 year-old daughter Fatima Kubra. This event is observed in what is popularly called the mehndī kī majlis (henna mourning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event</td>
<td></td>
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<td>------</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 Muharram</td>
<td>Becoming increasingly desperate, Imam Husain meets with ibn Sa‘d and beseeches him to relent. Ibn Sa‘d refuses, briefly reconsider, and then at the urging of his comrades, takes a firmer stand against Imam Husain. The martyrdom of Imam Husain’s half-brother ‘Abbas ibn ‘Ali Abi Talib is commemorated. One of ‘Abbas’ epithets is ‘alamdar or the “standard-bearer.” He is revered for his attempt to get water from the Euphrates River to quench the thirst of Imam Husain’s 4 year-old daughter Sakinah.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Muharram</td>
<td>Imam Husain gathers his followers together and warns them of the impending battle. He gives each man, woman and child the opportunity to walk away without fear of repercuission. Every one of his followers elects to remain with Imam Husain and be martyred. Imam Husain asks ibn Sa‘d to leave them be for one more night so that they may pray together as a community. Hurr is overwhelmed by Imam Husain’s piety and conviction of faith in the face of almost certain martyrdom, and he joins Husain’s side. The martyrdom of ‘Ali Asghar, the six-month old infant of Imam Husain is commemorated. ‘Ali Asghar’s throat was pierced by an arrow as he was crying out in thirst. In Hyderabad, ‘Ali Asghar’s martyrdom is typically symbolized by an empty cradle (jhūlā). This day also is important because it is shab-e ‘Āshūrā—the long night before the penultimate battle that Imam Husain and his entourage spent in prayer.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 Muharram (‘Ashura)</td>
<td>The battle of Karbala. Imam Husain asks ibn Sa‘d to have mercy and to leave him and his followers in peace. Around noon, ibn Sa‘d begins the battle. One-by-one the men and boys of ‘Ashura is day when Imam Husain was martyred along with all other men in his entourage. The only male survivor is Imam Husain’s eldest son ‘Ali Zain al- ‘Abidin who was lying ill in</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Imam Husain’s entourage are killed: ‘Ali Akbar, ‘Aun and Muhammad, Qasim, and ‘Ali Asghar. In the final moments of battle, Imam Husain is decapitated and his head placed atop a spear. His body is trampled into the dust of Karbala. The only survivors are women, children and Imam Husain’s eldest son ‘Ali Zain al-‘Abidin.</td>
<td>the encampment and was unable to fight. Hyderabadis go out in julūs on ‘Ashura performing bloody mātam (self-flagellation) and the Ṣabī kā ‘alam, containing a fragment of Fatimah Zahra’s funeral bier, is taken out on procession atop an elephant.</td>
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**APPENDIX B**

*Genealogy of the Ahl-e Bait, Including the Epithets Typically Used in Urdu Devotional Literature on Karbala*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Biographical Note</th>
<th>Kunya¹</th>
<th>Laqab²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muhammad</td>
<td>Born in the year 570 CE in the Arabian city of Mecca. He was the son of ʿAbdallah and Aminah and his full name was Abu al-Qasim Muhammad ibn ʿAbdallah ibn Abd al-Mutalib ibn Hashim. His first marriage to Khadijah bint Khuwaylid al-Kubra (d. 619) produced a daughter Fatimah, with whom the Prophet was very close. The Prophet died in 11/632.</td>
<td>•Abū Qāsim (Muhammad and Khadijah’s son Qasem died at a young age)</td>
<td>•Rasūl Allah (The Messenger of God)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>•Nabī Allah (The Prophet of God)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>•Al-Muṣṭafā (The Chosen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatimah bint Muhammad</td>
<td>Fatimah was the youngest of Muhammad and Khadijah’s six children. She was born around 615.</td>
<td>•Umm Abīha (The mother of her father)</td>
<td>•Al-Batūl (The Chaste, The Virgin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>•Al-Zahrā (The Radiant)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹*Kunya* is an Arabic word derived from the triliteral root ka-na-ya, which in its second form means to designate by the name of, e.g. “the father of...” and “the mother of.” Thus, the Prophet Muhammad’s kunya is Abu Qasim, since his eldest born child was a son of the aforementioned name. Interestingly, Muhammad’s daughter Fatimah’s kunya is Umm Abīha or “the mother of her father.”

²The *laqab*, derived from the Arabic trilateral root la-qa-ba, is an honorific, epithet or nickname. In Islamic, and particularly Shi‘i devotional literature, the Prophet and his family members are rarely referred to by their given names. Further complicating matters is the fact that most members of the Ahl-e Bait have multiple *alqāb* (nicknames) and it is expected that the reader/listener has a functional knowledge and understanding of the subtlety of meanings for the constellation of epithets by which an individual is referred.
(not all historical records agree as to the year of her birth) and died very shortly after her father's death in 11/632. Fatimah was married to the Prophet's cousin ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib and they were the parents to Hasan, Husain and Zainab.

| 'Ali | ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib was the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, the last of the Rashidun (“Rightly Guided”) khālifās, and the first of the Shi‘i Imams. ‘Ali was the son of Abu Talib, who was the custodian of the Ka‘ba, and the Prophet’s earliest supporters and protectors. ‘Ali was married to the Prophet’s daughter Fatimah Zahra and it was their two sons Hasan and Husain | •Abū al-Ḥasan (Father of Hasan) | •Abū al-Ḥasan (Father of Hasan) |
|      |                                                                 | •Amīr al-Mu‘minīn (Commander of the Faithful) | •Abū Turāb (Father of the Dust) |
|      |                                                                 | •Asad Allāh (Lion of God)³ | •Al-Mortaẓā (The Chosen One) |
|      |                                                                 | •Haider (Lion) | •Sher-e Khodā (Lion of God)⁴ |

³ Asad Allāh and Sher-e Khodā have the same meaning: Lion of God; the former is the Arabic laqab and the latter is Persian. In the context of South Asian Shi‘i devotional literature, sher-e khodā is far more commonly used, although Asad Allāh appears with adequate frequency. Most often, ‘Ali is graphically depicted in Shi‘i shrines in the form of a tiger because in India there are not any tigers and the lion is not a meaningful or majestic animal.

⁴ There are at least three epithets for ‘Ali the Lion in common circulation throughout the Shi‘i world that give honor to his great skill as a warrior. ‘Ali was one of Muhammad’s military commanders who was responsible for many of the most important victories in the many battles that the nascent Muslim community waged with the Quraysh in Mecca.
Husain who succeeded ’Ali as the second and third Imams.

| Hasan  | Hasan ibn ’Ali ibn Abi Talib was the second of the twelve Shi’i Imams (661-669) who died in 49/669 after being poisoned by one of his wives. Hasan was the eldest of the children born to Fatimah and ’Ali. The Prophet Muhammad felt a deep connection to his grandchildren born to his daughter Fatimah, as can be attested by this hadīth: “Tirmizi and ibn-e-Habban quoted from Hazrat Usama bin Zaid (r.a.) that Prophet Mohammad (saw) said: “Hasan (a.s.) and Hussain (a.s.) are my and my daughter’s sons. O Allah I love them so you love them too and you love... | •Abū Muḥammad
•Shabbar
•Al-Mujtabā (The Chosen) |

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5 There is a tradition that explains how the Prophet Muhammad received a revelation (waḥy) in a dream instructing him as to the names of his two future grandsons Hasan and Husain. In the Manāqib of Khwarizmi a tradition (hadīth) is narrated in the following isnād: “Wathila Bin Asqa’ Bin Qarkhab, from Jabir Bin Abdullah Ansari, from Abu’l-Fazl Shaibani, from Muhammad Bin Abdullah Bin Ibrahim Shafi’i, who reports Jabir Ansari (one of the chief companions of the Prophet), that the Prophet Muhammad met Moses (Musa) who told him that as ’Ali is to Muhammad, his brother Aaron (Harun) is to him. Likewise, Harun’s son Shabbar is to his soon-to-be-born grandson to be named Husain.’ This hadīth links the Imams into the prophetic lineage. According to this tradition, Muhammad is told that ’Ali, Hasan and Husain are analogous to Elias, Shabbar and Shabbir who can be found in the Torah. “Birthday of Imam Husain,” Sayyed Muhammad Sultan al-Wa’ezin Shirazi (http://www.al-islam.org/peshawar/last.html), accessed 12 December 2006.
anyone who would love them.”

| Husain       | Husain ibn ’Ali ibn Abi Talib was the third of the twelve Shi‘i Imams (669-680) who was martyred at the battle of Karbala in 680. Husain was the son of ‘Ali and the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter Fatimah. | • Sarvar (Chief)  
• Shāh-e Karbalā’ (King of Karbala)  
• Shabbir⁶  
• Sulţān-e Karbalā’ (King of Karbala)  
• Shāh-e Mażlūm (King of the Oppressed) |
| Shahrbanu    | Shahrbanu was the senior-most of Imam Husain’s wives. She was the daughter of Yazdigird III who was the last Sassanian king (shāh) of Iran. Shahrbanu is particularly beloved by Shi‘as in Iran and South Asia because of her Persian identity. Many Iranians claim that it is because Imam Husain was married to Shahrbanu that Shi‘ism established itself so firmly. | • Bano |
| ‘Abbas       | ‘Abbas ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib was the son of ‘Ali (half-brother of Hasan, Husain and Zainab) and Umm al-Banin. | • Abū Qāsim  
• ‘Alamdār (Standard Bearer)  
• Abū Fażl (Father of Virtues) |

⁶See footnote 5, above.
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Additional Names</th>
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</table>
| Zainab       | Zainab bint ʿAli ibn Abi Talib was a central figure in the events of Karbala and its aftermath. According to popular, theological and devotional traditions, Zainab is credited with preserving the Imamate following the martyrdom of her brother Husain. Zainab and Husain were born of the same parents, ʿAli and Fatimah bint Muhammad, and she is therefore endowed with a special combination of wilāyah and walāyah, similarly possessed by her mother. | • Saqqā (Water-bearer)  
• Abū Qurbā (Father of the Waterskin)  
• Shāhanshāh-e Wafā’ (The Supreme King of Loyalty)  
• Umm al-Maṣāʿib (The Mother of Afflictions) |
| Umm Kulsum   | Umm Kulsum bint ʿAli was the fourth of the children born to ʿAli and Fatimah. She was present at Karbala and often figures as a minor character in many of the narratives of | • Sayyidah (Lady)  
• Zāhidah (Abstemious)  
• ʿĀbidah (Devoted One) |
the Karbala cycle. Her participation in Karbala is exemplified by a speech that she gave to the people of Kufah when taken captive after the battle of Karbala. Umm Kulsum never had any children.

| **Qasem** | Qasem ibn Hasan (b. 669) was the son of the second Imam Hasan and his wife Umm Farwa. The martyrdom of thirteen year-old Qasem is observed on 7 Muharram in the *mehndī kī majlis* in which his marriage to his cousin Fatimah Kubra is ritually remembered. | • *Naushāh-ye Karbalā'* (The ‘New King’ [Bridegroom] of Karbala)  
• *Dulhā* (Bridegroom)  
• *Yatīm* (Orphan)  
• *Yatīm-e Hasan* (The Orphan of Hasan)  
• *Ibn-e Hasan* (The Son of Hasan)  
• *Bane* (Bridegroom) |
| **Fatimah Kubra** | Ten year-old Fatimah Kubra was the second daughter of Imam Husain and Umm Ishaq (daughter of Talhah bin Ubaydallah Taimi) who was present at the battle of Karbala. According to Kashefi’s *Rowzat ash-Shohada*, | • *Dulhan* (Bride)  
• *Banī* (Bride)  
• *Banrıği* (Bride)  
• *Kubrā* |
Fatimah Kubra was married to her cousin Qasem on the eve of `Ashura and was widowed the next day when her new bridegroom was martyred in battle. Little is known of what happened to Fatimah Kubra after Karbala.

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<th>Fatimah Kubra was married to her cousin Qasem on the eve of `Ashura and was widowed the next day when her new bridegroom was martyred in battle. Little is known of what happened to Fatimah Kubra after Karbala.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sakinah</strong></td>
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<td>Sakinah (real name Fatimah) was 4 year-old daughter of Imam Husain and his wife Rabab (daughter of Imra’u Al Qays, the chief of the tribe of Kinda) who died from grief while imprisoned in Damascus. Her martyrdom is observed on 19 Muharram and it is one of the most important days of mourning for Hyderabadi Shi’as.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sakīnah</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>•Ruqāyyah (common in Iran)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>•Sālī (sister-in-law: Sakinah is popularly referred to in devotional literature dedicated to Qasem as the sister-in-law who is unable to perform the pre-wedding rituals that she has anticipated: asking for neg, and applying mehndī)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>‘Aun and Muhammad</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Two brothers whose given names are ‘Aun/Muhammad ibn ‘Abdallah ibn Ja’far ibn Abi Talib. Their mother was Zainab and their father was ‘Abdallah, the son of Imam ‘Ali’s half-brother Ja’far. Their martyrdom is commemorated on</td>
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<td>247</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| **‘Ali Zain al-‘Abidin** | Imam Husain’s eldest son. His mother was Shahrbano the daughter of Yazdigird the last Sassanian Iranian king. Zain al-‘Abidin was the only male survivor of the battle of Karbala. He was the fourth Imam. | **•Al-Sajjād**  
(One Who Prostrates Always in Prayer) |
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<tr>
<td><strong>‘Ali Akbar</strong></td>
<td>‘Ali Akbar is the second son of Imam Husain and Laila (granddaughter of Abu Sufyana and Yazid’s cousin) According to historical record ‘Ali Akbar was around 18 years-old when he was martyred at the battle of Karbala. His martyrdom is observed in Hyderabad on 6 Muharram.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>‘Ali Asghar</strong></td>
<td>‘Ali Asghar was the youngest son of Imam Husain and his wife Rabab (daughter of Imra’u Al Qays, the chief of the tribe of Kinda) who was martyred at the battle of Karbala. At just 6 months, ‘Ali Asghar was the youngest male to be martyred at</td>
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</table>

5 Muharram in Hyderabad.
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<tr>
<th>Ahl-e Ḥaram</th>
<th>This refers to the women of the Ahl-e Bait.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ahl-e Sitam</td>
<td>The people of tyranny refer to Yazid and his allies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qaum-e Jafākār</td>
<td>The people of oppression; refers to Yazid and his allies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C

The Account of the Martyrdom of Qasem Ibn-e Imam Hasan

A transmitter relates that when Qasem ibn-e Imam Hasan (peace be upon him) saw the face of his brother, who was the rose of the garden of supreme beauty, scratched with the thorn of that soul-melting tragedy, a sigh emerged from his depths. He came before his noble uncle, crying and with a heart roasted with the fire of grief, and said, “Sayyid and Imam of the World, I can no longer endure the separation from my relatives. Time (zamāna) has removed me from the throne of glory and set me in the dust of grief and affliction. Give me advice, so that I might find out how to avenge your brother. I will give a spear-like answer with the sword of the tongue to the question of the people of misguidance (ahl-e ẓilāl).” Imam Husain (peace be upon him) said, “Life of your uncle, you are to me a memento of my brother and in this desert you are the companion of the melancholy. How can I give permission to you and place the brand of separation on my grief-filled heart?”

Qasem’s mother ran out from the tent and, twisting the hem of his robe (dāman) in her hands, exclaimed the following verse:

O you who have seized a place in my heart, be kind and do not leave my sight;
Because you are the balm of my breast, be the balm of my sight.

To return to our story, Qasem did not receive permission to fight in the battle, and the brothers of Imam Husain (peace be upon him) were outfitted for battle. Qasem came into the tent and placed his head on the knee of grief (sar bazānū-ye andūh). Suddenly, he remembered that his father had bound an amulet on his upper arm, saying, “In the place where much grief and boundless affliction overwhelms you, open this amulet and read it. Do that which is written there.” Qasem said to himself, “Ever since I have existed, such a
condition has not befallen me, nor has blame extended a hand to me in this fashion. Come, let me read the amulet and let me learn its contents.” Then, he opened the amulet from his upper arm and saw that Imam Hasan (peace be upon him), in his own blessed handwriting had written, “Qasem this is my testament (waṣiyyat) to you. When you see my brother, your uncle, the Imam Husain (peace be upon him) seized in the desert of Karbala at the hands of the treacherous Damascenes and the faithless (bī-wafā) Kufans, watch out! You will cast your head at his feet, and you will gamble your living soul. However much they hold you back from where the ranks are displayed, you will overcome them in your importuning and enthusiasm will increase. To sacrifice (jān fidā) one’s soul for Husain is the key to the gate of martyrdom (bāb-e shahādat), and the means of attaining prosperity and happiness.”

Which person is killed by his love, with face in the dust?

For the life drowned in his blood is not immersed in mercy.

At the time when Qasem read the testament, out of sheer happiness, he did not know what he should do. He quickly got up from that place and went to the Imam. Having kissed that writing [in the testament of his father], he delivered it into the hands of that revered person. When the King of the Marytrs (shāh-e shahīdān) saw that letter, he brought forth a grief-filled sigh from his heart and cried out in lament: “Life of your uncle! This is the testament of your father, and it relates to you. You wish that this testament be put into effect. In addition to what has been written in the testament, he [Hasan] has also given me a testament about you. I am also making this request so that I may bring it to its completion. Come, let us enter this tent for a while and put that testament into effect.”

Taking Qasem’s hand, he took him into the tent and called out to his “brothers” ‘Aun and ‘Abbas, and he said to Qasem’s mother, “Clothe Qasem in new robes.” He said to
his sister Zainab, “Bring the cloak (ʿayba) of my brother Hasan.” At once they were brought into his presence. He opened the top of the cloak and he put on the armor of Imam Hasan (peace be upon him), and Husain had him clothed in one of his own expensive robes. By his blessed hand, Husain wrapped a beautiful turban around Qasem’s head (ʿimāmah). Taking the hand of his daughter [Fatimah Kubra] who was betrothed to Qasem, he said, “Qasem, this is the trust of your father, which he made in his final testament, which until today was with me. Now, take it.” He put the hand of his daughter into Qasem’s hand and married them, and they came out from the tent. Qasem, standing to one side of his bride, took her hand and looked at her, lifting up her head.

Suddenly, a shout went up from the army of ’Umar Sa’d: “Does no other champion remain?” Qasem let go of his bride’s hand and asked her permission to leave the tent. His bride grabbed the hem of his skirt and said, “Qasem, what are you thinking and where do you intend to go?”

Say: Why are you going away from me?
Where are you going? Why are you leaving me?

Qasem said, “You, the light of my two eyes, I am going to the battlefield with the courage to repel the enemies. Let go of my robe. We will be bride and groom at the Resurrection.”

Dust blows from the path of injustice,
The wild rose and the tall tree were attacked at night;
A cloud rose up from the ocean of grief (daryā-e andāh),
And poured down a flood from one mountain to another;

From the parched plain, a brisk wind arose,
And the wind blew up the dust of the earth;

From the hidden world, a voice proclaimed;
It was an unfamiliar voice that proclaimed,

And said, “We done, O time and earth,
Give the couple in marriage like this.”

Fatimah said, “Qasem, are you telling me that our wedding will take place at the Resurrection? Where will I find you on the dawning of the Resurrection (fardā-ye qiyāmat)? By what sign will I recognize you?” Qasem said, “Look for me near my father and grandfather. You will recognize me by my torn sleeve.” Then, as he tore the edge of his sleeve, a lament rose up from amongst the Ahl-e Bait:

Qasem, what is this tyranny and injustice?
It is not the rite and ritual of the bridegroom!

Moreover, when Imam Husain (peace be upon him) saw that Qasem was going to the battlefield, he said, “Life of your uncle! You are rushing to your own burial ground.” He was not able to go to the battlefield in this manner. He thrust out his hand and tore his collar and he let down both ends of his turban. The clothes in which he was dressed resembled a funeral shroud. Qasem went to the battlefield and began to recite battle poems (rajaz kard). Here is a translation of some of the verses from his battle poem, which is found in the Manżūmāt of Abu al-Mufakhir. In the following manner, he recited these verses:

I am going to make my heart the purchaser of glory,
And I will sacrifice my life for the king.

With the trappings and clothing of the bridegroom,
I intend to make my preparations for the road.
With the horse and the spear tip,
I will destroy everything from the fish to the moon!

I will make the water of India and the breeze of Arabia,
Witness to his martyrdom.

Like the melancholy songs of the nightingale,
I will thus speak.

I will make the divine grandeur my ransomer;
I will make my refuge in Muhammad.

I will present the complaint of the people to Fatimah and 'Ali
In the sacred precinct of Allah.

He was quite agitated and he began the attack. He was seeking a champion, so that he might rob many a head for their bodies, and that he might take the lives of many heroes. But no other warrior attempted to fight him. Qasem went into the midst of the opposing army and called out to 'Umar Sa'd: “You faithless oppressor! You unfortunate one! You, who are far from the purity of the Ahl-e Bait. You have martyred so many of the brothers, loyalists, friends, and loved ones of Imam Husain (peace be upon him). You have destroyed his people and his relatives, and this small entourage is in a state of ruination. Finally, hasn’t the time come that you should lift your hand [of oppression] from us? Is it not time for you to go to Kufah with these worthless lackeys of yours, and leave us with this thirst and powerlessness? Be penitent and ashamed of that which you have done!”

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1 This hemistich (miṣra’) contains a nice play on the similarity of the Persian words māh (moon) and māhī (fish). Kashefi employs these two Persian words to convey the cosmological significance of the bridegroom-warrior Qasem, whose embodiment of ḥusainiyat-wilāyah connects him from the heavens to the earth.
No longer draw your sword in hunting the Holy—beware!
For that which you have done to our hearts—repent!

ʿUmar Saʿd replied, “The time has not come for you to proceed in such extreme disobedience. Look to your future condition and open the door to your safety. Enter into allegiance to Yazid and follow Ibn-e Ziyad.” Qasem cursed him and his generals and he said, “You villain! You have sold religion for the base world. You have consumed the value of the divine trust with the fire of treachery. You have been seduced by this treacherous, old woman. You have written with the hand of deception to her. Do you not know that anyone who enters into agreement with her, she will remain with him for a fleeting moment.”

She is beautiful, the bride of the world, but beware!
This virtuous lady will enter into the bond with no one.

Qasem continued, “ʿUmar, have you watered your horse today?” He replied, “Yes. First, I have watered the horse and then I mounted it.” Qasem went on, “Woe unto you, Ibn-e Saʿd. Do you make the claim of being a Muslim? You give your horse fresh water, but the cavaliers of the warriors of the Imams and the saints—they you keep thirsty. The women and the children of the Ahl-e Bait are on the brink of death and you are withholding water from them. Do you not heed the advice of the Warner: ‘Does God remember you among the people of my house?’ Think finally about the thirst of the Resurrection and recall the shame that you will feel before the cup-bearer of Kausar.” A fire arose in the heart of ʿUmar Saʿd and a stream of tears flowed from the well of his eyes. In a state of abasement, he had thrown away the cash of religion to the winds of annihilation. He gave no answer.

\[Qasem is making reference to his great-grandfather the Prophet Muhammad.\]
Shimr, however, turned to his army and said, “Do you recognize this man? He is Qasem, the son of Hasan, who, if on the day of battle saw a sword of diamond action and diamond color, would think that it is the ruby lips of the beauties of Teraz whom he would long to kiss. If the twisting coil of the noose came into his vision, then thinking it is the Chinese circle of the cunning hair of the Khan of Cathay reaching out to embrace him, he would desire her.”

*If an army is jumping around the world,*
*It fears war with the great or the small.*

Shimr continued, “Do not go before him one-by-one. Make the arrangements and take care so that you bring him in amongst you.” The opposing army being timid and afraid resolved to surround Qasem. Qasem was unaware of the developing situation, and when he saw that no hero was coming out before him, he turned his face toward the tent of his bride. When he reached the door of the tent, he heard the daughter of Imam Husain lamenting her separation [from Qasem]. From her eyes tears of grief rained down her cheeks. Qasem longed to join her and pronounced words to this effect:

*Come out my darlings whom I desire so much,*
*The end of life is near and I want to see you.*

The bride heard Qasem’s voice and she hastened from the tent, saying:

*Welcome! From whence do you come? Come and sit.*
*Come, so that I might give you the space between my two eyes. Sit!*

Qasem dismounted from his horse and approached her and said, “Alas, daughter of my uncle, and companion of my grieving heart! This is not the place to sit, nor the scene for making speeches. The army of enmity is acting malevolent and violent. I want to
extinguish their boldness with the violence of that fiery sword. By God! I will not be separated from you by choice!"

Separation from the sight of you is necessary for me, otherwise, no existing thing wants to have soul separated from its body.

Then, Qasem bade her farewell and decided to return to the battlefield. From the tongue of his bride, this point reached the understanding ears of the groom:

You are making eyes at me, you blooming rose; where do you go?
With me torn like the blown rose, in your skirt; where do you go?

You are the cypress, and the place of the cypress is nothing but the riverbank;
From the riverbank of the weeping eye, where will you go?

When Qasem returned to the battlefield once again, he demanded that a warrior oppose him, and no one gave a reply. The spark of the fire of wrath began to be kindled in him. He, himself, attacked the army four times on its right flank, left flank and at its heart. He threw many of the heroes to the ground and every time he finished playing with them, he returned to the battlefield and asking for another man to come forth.

This time, Qasem demanded a hero. 'Umar Sa'd called for Azraq Damashqi, who was the commander of one division of the Syrian army. He said, “Azraq, every year you take 10,000 dinars from Yazid with much fanfare and speeches about your bravery given to the courageous one of Syria and Iraq. Why don’t you get out there and decide the fate of this youth?” Azraq replied, “These words of yours are indeed strange! I am a person who by the Syrians and Egyptians is considered to be the equal of 1000 horsemen. Dishonor and infamy will come to me if I make war on him.” ‘Umar Sa’d yelled at him, “You unfortunate one! May your tongue burn! This is the son of Hasan the Chosen One (mujtabā), and the
grandson of Muhammad the Prophet, and the descendant of the Lion of God [ʿAli]. By God! If there were not the imposition of thirst and misery, it would be beneath him to come out and talk to us. Go! Stop making excuses. Do this so that you can be honored by Yazed and venerated by Ibn-e Ziyad.”

Azraq said, “Even if they tear my limb from limb, I will not go out and fight him. But since you are so exaggerating, I do have four sons who are brave and courageous. I will send one, who having gone to the battlefield will bring Qasem’s head. This will put a stop to these thoughts in your heart.” Then, he called to his elder son, and alighting from his horse, Azraq placed him on his own mount and girded his sword around his son’s waist. The son of Azraq was adorned with the following battle gear: a set of chain mail, shin protectors, arm bands made of gold, and he had a cummerbund brocaded with gold bound around his waist, and he gripped a special Khatti spear, 18 cubits in length, in his hand.³

Astride a lavishly decorated mount, he charged Qasem and attacked. Qasem, who saw him with all of that glory and battle gear, did not even have time to think for a moment. He yelled at his horse, and having charged him back, Qasem struck the son of Azraq in the chest. The son of Azraq brought his steel shield up to his face, and Qasem brought his spear tip down on the shield, and its tip broke from the force. Qasem was seized with rage and he threw away his spear and drew his sword from its sheath and attacked. Azraq’s son also threw away his spear and drew his sword from its sheath and struck Qasem who raised his shield. With his sword, the son of Azraq split Qasem’s shield in two. The back of Qasem’s hand was wounded and Muhammad Anas saw from the

³It is difficult to know the exact length of the spear carried by Azraq’s son. Steingass does not elaborate upon the specific value of the cubit measurement—it is possible that ʿadar can refer to the Arabian black cubit or the Arabian Hashimi cubit or even another value. Certainly, a spear measuring 18 cubits is a powerful, albeit unwieldy, battle weapon.
encampment that Qasem was bereft of a shield. He jumped from his spot and dispatched a shield that was firm and with a broad rim to Qasem. He saw that Qasem’s hand was injured and he tore a small piece of cloth from his turban and bound Qasem’s hand with it. Having become upset, Anas returned to the encampment. Qasem seized the shield and got ready to fight again. The son of Azraq lifted his sword once more so that he might strike Qasem. The horse reared up and he fell from the back of the horse. His head became uncovered, revealing his long hair. Qasem extended his hand and twisted the hair in his hand. He released the horse, and lifting the son of Azraq from the face of the earth by his hair, he twirled him around the battlefield and hurled him. Astride his horse, Qasem trampled him such that his limbs were tangled up and broken. He picked up the sword of the son of Azraq, and Qasem also seized the spear that was so expensive and dear.

Qasem stood there and demanded another champion. When Azraq saw that his son had died in such a lamentable and pathetic fashion, the smoke of grief rose up from the palace of his mind and he wept. When his second son saw his father weeping, without asking his father’s permission, he went to the battlefield and began circling around Qasem. The second son of Azraq said, “You merciless one! You have killed the youth who is unmatched in all of Syria.” Qasem replied, “You enemy of God. Even now, I will send you to your brother!” Then, he stabbed him with a spear so that it came out the other side of his body.

Qasem called from another hero. The third brother, regarding this scene, rent his clothes and cast dust upon his head and he grieved. He approached his father and asked for his guidance. His father loved him very much, and he denied him permission to go to

4These words are spoken in Arabic in Kashefi’s text.
The third son of Azraq paid no attention to his father’s words. In a clamor, he mounted his horse and cursing, he came even with Qasem. When Qasem heard his villainous words, he stabbed him in the stomach with a spear, which came out through the back of the third son of Azraq. When Azraq saw that another of his sons had been killed, he adorned himself with his weapons. He decided to go to battle against Qasem. When the fourth son saw his father in such a state, without asking his father, he clamored upon his horse and came up to Qasem and began to abuse him. In response, Qasem paid him no attention and prepared to fight him. The son of Azraq attacked him. With a spear, the son of the king [Qasem] struck the sword that he had in his hand and he lopped off his right hand with the spear. That unfortunate one turned his back in defeat. The blood was flowing and when he arrived near his encampment, he fell from his horse and gave up his life. Moreover, when Azraq saw that all four of his sons were killed, the world’s light was extinguished in his eyes. In extreme anger, he prepared his weapons and mounted a fresh Arabian horse. Champing at the bit and running as if on fire, that was baby’s milk to that horse. From its fast pace and gracious stride, it shared its reins with the wind:

*From his horseshoe, everything on earth has taken on a crescent shape;*
*From his ear, everything in the air has taken on the shape of the spear tip.*

*In his joints, there is no weakness from the twisting of the stirrup;*
*In his disposition, there is not the terror of the reins.*

Having prepared for battlefield, he stood opposite Qasem and asked, “You merciless, unjust, stone-hearted one. You have killed my four sons who had no peer in all of Iraq and Syria.” Qasem declared, “Why are you suffering sadness for them? Now I will convey you to that very place where they have ended up!”
When Imam Husain (peace be upon him) saw that the accursed Azraq had come upon Qasem, he feared for him, for that wretch [Azraq] was a famous war hero. Then Imam Husain spread his hands in supplication to the heavens. He petitioned the divine Provider for Qasem’s victory. Men from near and far beheld the spectacle of these two warriors.

Azraq charged Qasem with a spear, but Qasem was not struck, and he nearly reversed it on him. Whatever one closed, the other opened. Twelve spear thrusts were exchanged between the two of them, and they were repelled. Becoming enraged, the foul Azraq stabbed Qasem’s horse in the stomach with a spear, and when it fell from its feet, Qasem remained on his feet. Imam Husain said to Muhammad Anas, “Find Qasem, and bring this horse to him.” Muhammad ibn-e Anas brought Imam Husain’s horse to Qasem so that he could mount it and assault Azraq.

Azraq sat astride a rosy-colored steed, like a mountain of quicksilver and outfitted with Moroccan armor, the edges of which were decorated with gold and silver. Azraq came before him and three more thrusts were exchanged between them. Finally, Azraq drew his sword and approached Qasem who drew his sword like blazing lightning and drew forth a thundering cry and said, “Come, so that I can see what you can do, and whether you have any of the skills of real men.”

Come! Let us battle like heroes,
And fight like lions on the field of battle!
Let us see who is better than me,
And who will be victorious in this battle!

When Azraq looked and saw that sword in Qasem’s hand, he said, “Qasem, I bought that sword for 1000 dinars, and then for another 1000 dinars I had it tempered. How has it fallen into your hands?” Qasem said, “This is a memento of your son. I want to make you
taste a draught from this sword. I will deliver you to your offspring, Azraq! Is it right that you are a military man, and at the same time you are mounted on a war-horse whose straps you do not tend? How quickly they have become slack! The saddle is nearly falling off the back of the horse.” Azraq turned around so that he could look at them. Qasem came up to his straps and he cut him in half like a limp cucumber. A cry went up from the Syrian army.

Jumping down from his horse, he mounted Azraq’s horse and seizing the reins of Imam Husain’s horse, he brought it to his own encampment. When he approached the Imam, he alighted from the horse and kissed the fortunate stirrup of his own illustrious uncle of blessed lineage. Qasem said, “Blindness—this thirst! This thirst! God, if only I could have a drink of water, then I would bring destruction upon this army!”

The Imam (peace be upon him) declared, “The time has come near that you will drink at the well of Kausar from your grandfather’s hand. You will forget all of this grief and pain. Go. You mother is weeping because of her separation from you. She is lamenting and spending all of her time sighing for you. The fire of your separation has left the brand of exhaustion on the breast of that unfortunate one, and from the hand of longing for your radiant countenance, the gates of despair have been opened in front of that afflicted one.”

This is the desolation in her life from the pain of separation from you;
Her heart burns in its oppression of longing for you.

Qasem went to the tent where his mother and bride were located. He heard his mother’s voice saying, “Dear son, comfort my suffering heart. Where are you? Why are you not showing your honored face?”

You have gone from my sight; I am lost without you,
Where are you? I do not know; I am lost without you.
His bride was also grieving. With tears raining upon her face, she cried one hundred laments and said:

*That moon departed; a hundred longings for him remain in my heart,*

*The grief of separation is in harmony with that sweet soul.*

Hearing these cries, Qasem let out a loud sigh of lament. His mother and bride fled from the tent and cast themselves at his hands and feet. Qasem comforted them and counseled them to have patience. He said, "Dear ones, today is the day. The breeze of joy and exultation is not blowing over the gardens of the hearts and breasts. The scent of gladness and felicity is not sensed by the spirits of the lords of love and affection. For you, the orchard of life no longer has a verdant appearance. You do not have the strength to be alone. For me, too, the power of endurance has fled. But, this distance is necessary and compulsory. This separation from your face is without choice. Flesh and blood is heading to the field of battle, and my heart and soul turns toward my beloved:

*We went away, but the desolate heart remained in the lane by your house;*

*Your life left, and from the separation of the grief-stricken heart, your face remains.*

When Qasem decided to depart, the contents of his passionate words and the meaning of these grief-filled words were gathered upon the tongues of his companions who were left behind.

*O’ pupil of the eye, for your sake the eye has become bloody,*

*Be a man—do not be separate from the bloodshot eye.*

Qasem came to the battlefield and his eyes befell the battle standard of Ibn-e Ziyad that was held over the head of ʿUmar Saʿd, he of evil omen. He inclined the reins in that direction and he transformed his ambition toward the overturning of that flag. All at once, he turned his face toward the heart of the army and he did not take his eyes off that
standard. He wanted to convey himself to that flag-bearer and overturn that flag. The foot soldiers tried to block him, and just as Qasem became occupied with fighting them, horsemen surrounded him and with arrows and spears, maces and swords, they attacked him. Qasem, having been cast in the sea of battle, overthrew approximately thirty foot soldiers and fifty cavalrymen. Having broken the rank of horsemen, he wanted to get out. Arrows rained down upon his horse and it was felled. Shabas ibn-e Sa’d struck Qasem with a spear in the chest, so that the tip of it came out through his blessed back.

In that battle, he was wounded twenty-seven times, and blood was flowing freely. He seized his horse and said, “Blindness! It has gotten me!” When his cry of anguish reached Imam Husain (peace be upon him) he got on his mount and, having broken through the line of foot soldiers and cavalry, he saw Qasem drowning in dust and blood, and Shabas was standing over his head, wanting to carry away his blessed head. Imam Husain struck him at the waist, cutting him in two. Then, seizing Qasem, he brought him to the door of the tent, and there was still a breath remaining in his body.

Imam Husain cradled his head in his arms, kissing him on the face. His mother and bride were standing there weeping. Qasem opened his eyes and gazed at them. Smiling, he surrendered his life to the Creator of Life (peace be upon him). A lament arose from the court of the Imamate. The veiled women of the Ahl-e Bait began weeping, and the mother of Qasem said, “You, whose mother is oppressed! Alas, for the moon of your face, which in the heaven of youth was the world-illuminating sun! Before that time when it should illuminate the face of the earth with its rays of manifestation, it was afflicted with the eclipse of separation. Woe to the spring of the life of abundant blessings, which was the
source of the drops of splendor and majesty, before it refreshed the thirsty ones in the deserts of longing. It was destroyed with rubbish and was muddied.”

*Suddenly, the rose of the garden of fortune became* 
*Withered in the early part of the day.*

“Qasem, open your eyes and see the daughter of your uncle. The grief of being a new husband remains in your heart.”

*Sorrowfully you departed this fleeting world;* 
*An uneaten fruit, you departed from life.*

The daughter of Imam Husain (peace be upon him) rubbed her hand in Qasem’s blood and smeared it on her head and face, and she thus spoke, revealing her emotional state:

*Those bereft ones whose beloved is killed,*
*They have rouged their faces with the blood of their beloved.*

*They are the new brides who washed the murdered saint,*
*They dye themselves like this from head to foot.*

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5This is an oblique reference to Qasem’s dying in a state of virginity. He is martyred before he is able to fully experience the fruits of life: he has been married, but he has not consummated that union. Qasem’s marriage to Fatimah Kubra will not become official until the time of the Resurrection when he will be reunited with his wife. The fact that Qasem does not consummate his marriage is alluded to in the image of him as an “uneaten fruit.”

6This hemistich (miṣra’) in the final bait of Fatimah Kubra’s poetic speech lamenting her deceased husband Qasem brings this chapter to a significant conclusion. Fatimah Kubra calls her husband (wālī), which conveys the dual meanings of “friend” and “saint.” I have chosen to translate wālī here as “saint” because it reinforces Kashefi’s intention to portray Qasem as an embodiment of ḥusainiyat-wilāyah.

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APPENDIX D

The Account of the Martyrdom of Wahab ibn-e ‘Abdallah al-Kalbi

Following the death of Barir [ibn-e Hamadani], Wahab ibn-e ‘Abdallah al-Kalbi sallied forth into battle. He was a youth of handsome face and good character with hair resembling fresh ivy and black musk. The artist of (divine) power has drawn his face’s picture with the pen of the summit, “and He formed you and He beautified of your forms” (Q 40:64) and has rendered upon the tablet the check of “in the most beautiful of frames” (Q 95:4).

Whatever the pen of fancy,
They have made the form imprinted by you more beautiful.

He was the bridegroom whose wedding feast took place seventeen days before, but the carpet of delight and pleasure had not yet been written. The mother whom they call qamar (“moon”) came before him and said, “My beloved son, brave youth, light of my failing eye and with the suffering breast. You are the light of the lamp of my life and the first fruits in the garden of the living soul. I have such affection for you that I cannot sit and pass one hour without you. I benefit such from your companionship that I am unable not to see you for a moment:

Though I may be asleep, you are in my thoughts;
Though I may be awake, you are in my heart.

But consider that the heart of the “Chosen One” (Muṣṭafā)¹ has been left in this desert of Karbala and this grief-filled wasteland by the cruelty of this faithless crowd. I desire that today you give your blood to me like a goblet of wine so that the milk you drank from my breasts will be lawful, and I wish that placing the cash of the soul on the plate of

¹Imam Husain.
sincerity. You take it before Imam Husain so that at the dawning of the Resurrection I may be pleased with you. Son of your mother, go! Before that lord sacrifice your head for his cause. Like men of the path, abandon greed and desire.”

*If you desire the end of this road, put greed beneath your feet,*  
*Be one pointed in this thought, and give a rabbit punch to the world.*

*You are seeking the path of love; bid farewell to wisdom,*  
*You seek the carpet of nearness; give welcome to affliction.*

Wahab said, “Loving mother, I am not distressed with the Prince of the Two Worlds, with the half-life that I still have. However, my heart is gazing on that new bride who in this state of exile has consented to be with us. She has not yet eaten the fruit of the plant of union with us. If you grant leave, I want to go and seek her pardon.”

The mother said, “Go, but women are deficient in judgment. God forbid that with spells and charms she might deceive you, and because of her words you are forbidden from the everlasting dominion and eternal bliss.”

Wahab said, “Oh, mother. Collect your blessed thoughts, for that one we gird the loins of our soul with the belt of love of Imam Husain (peace be upon him) in such as way that the fingertip of deceit cannot open it. We have inscribed the imprint of his love on the tablet of the heart in such a fashion that the waters of fraud and deception one cannot wipe it out.

*From the loyalty of friends, on the face of the book of our hearts,*  
*They wrote an image that cannot be erased.*

Then the youth came before his bride and said, “My bride and friend, my soothing companion. Know that today, the grandson of the Messenger of God (May God’s peace and
blessings be upon him) is prisoner in this desert of Karbala (pain and grief), left a stranger and alone, far away from [his] friends and homes. I want to scatter my life (like the money that is scattered amongst the guests at a wedding feast) before him, and read the blessed verse from the book of martyrdom, so that at the dawn of the Resurrection, the satisfaction of God, the intercession of Muhammad Mustafa (May God’s blessings be upon him and his family), the happiness of the Virgin mistress [Fatimah], and the aid of ʿAli Morţazā, who may be part of my condition and friends of my fortune.”

The new bride, letting out a sigh from her hope-filled heart said, “My soul, and loyal companion of mine. May a thousand of my lives be sacrificed for Imam Husain! Would that the sharīʿa gave a dispensation for women to wage war, so that I, too, could sacrifice my life. But, I know for certain that whoever today devotes life for Imam Husain, at the dawn of the Resurrection by the supernatural power of Buraq, we may be inclined toward the excellent heavenly arena, and in the castle of the highest paradise be contented with the companionship of the beautiful eyed virgins (ḥūrīs). Come. We will go near to the Imam and in his dignified presence together. State your conditions so that without me you do not set foot in the firmament of heaven, and that this woman and husband there who from your pleasure and friendship and intimate companionship and closeness, I will join you in the innermost chambers of the grave.”

Wahab said, “Be it well.”

At last they both agreed and came into the presence of the Imam (peace be upon him). With humility and humbleness (modesty), impatience and restlessness, the bride
said, “Oh, son of the Messenger of God, I have heard that for every martyr who falls from his mount to the ground, the ḥūrīs of Paradise make a cushion for his head on their laps. On the Resurrection they also [the martyrs] become their husbands, peers, friends and companions. This young man desires to sacrifice his life for another’s sake, and I obtain no advantage from him. Here I am a helpless stranger. I have no mother, father, sister, brother, relations, dear friends, companions, and helpers. My need is this: on the plain of the Resurrection, he will summon me and he will not go to Paradise without me. Moreover, he should entrust wretched me to you, so that you may entrust me to your daughters and sisters. In the honorable women’s quarters of the Ahl-e Bait, I will become one of the female slaves and servants, because I know for certain that behind the curtain of the royal harem, no forbidden hand will reach the hem of my chastity.”

Imam Husain (peace be upon him) wept and the companions from the words of that woman also wept. The youth replied, “Oh, son of the Messenger of God, I have accepted that on the day of the Resurrection, I will summon her back, and when I obtain permission to enter heaven through the powerful intercession of your illustrious grandfather; without her, I will not set foot in that destination. I entrust her to you, and you entrust her to women of the pure chambers.” This he said, and he turned his face in the direction of the battlefield, with a face like the new blown rose, and a cheek that is like the full moon. On a horse like running for dear life and like a sudden fate reaching enemies, wearing a Da’udi coat of mail and pulling down a chain mail vest, he seized a Khatti spear in the right hand and a musk-colored shield was slung upon the left shoulder. He began to speak an excellent rajaz, the first of which is this:

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2 Farzand means “son,” although in this sentence this refers to Imam Husain the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad.
My commander is Husain, what a wonderful prince;  
From him is brilliancy that is the illuminating lamp.

What kind of pleasure is it, that  
Wahab Kalbi is sacrificing his life in the corner of Husain.

His hand strikes with a sword until he makes  
The face of the enemy like the curls of Husain’s hair.

Urging the horse, he reached the middle of the battlefield. He pulled the horse’s reins and sang a qasīda in praise of Imam Husain (peace be upon him). Afterward, he galloped about the desert floor on that mountain of a horse, and he played some and showed off some, so that he made it seem like a game. Friend and stranger, friend and enemy shouted in praise. Then he called for a warrior, and whoever came to his field of battle, soon after stole him off the steed’s back with a spear, and sometimes by the sorrowless sword opened the door of destruction before his face. He cast many warriors in that dark dust. From the dead bodies in the battle arena he made small piles.

Then he came before his mother and said, “Mother, are you pleased with me or not?”

She said, “Yes, you are very manly and you increase in excellence and you raise your victorious standard, but I wish that so long as you have life in your body, do not go astray from the path of war.”

The son replied, “Mother, I shall uphold your command, but I desire my new wife. If you so command, I shall go and bid farewell and see one another for the last time.”

For God’s sake, gardener, don’t complain so much,  
For I inspect my newly blooming garden.
Come in from sweet sleep, misfortune—perhaps I will disclose
My sleepless eye to her moon-like face.

The mother giving her permission, the youth turned toward the tent of his new bride. He heard a voice that was lamenting from separation’s burning. From passionate desiring, a fiery sigh was exhaled from her love-inflamed heart, and she said:

Time has placed a burden of separation on my heart,
May the day of time’s separation be as dark as night.
The youth lost his strength. Casting himself down from his horse, he came to the tent. He saw the bride crying with her head on her knees and with tears in the fountain of her eyes. He said, “Dear girl, what condition are you in, and why do you wail in this lament?” She replied, “You peaceful soul and friend of weak heart,”

My life is decayed by grief; how do I not cry sighs?
My sigh is stained by pain, how should I not weep laments?
The youth sat and took her head to his breast. Suddenly, a voice arose from the midst of the battlefield: “Is there another warrior? There is no one who comes out in battle.” The youth heard that voice and rose up and said:

We went and our farewell should be made from the heart,
And if there are tears, they should turn dust to mud.

If you see bad, one should say that all is good,
And if there is vexation, they should be pardoned.
Then mounting his horse, he twisted the bridle in the direction of the battlefield (razmgāh). The bride gazed at the horse’s hooves and cried a lament. By her tongue the state she was in was signifying by a song:

From before me, since that moon has swiftly departed
My heart raised a cry, and soul and life departed.

Moreover, that youth like a fierce lion or a tiger or a terrible dragon, with a keen sword and a spear like the angel of death striking like lightning, he approached the battle arena. With the spear-tip, he knocked off the warrior who was on the battlefield from his horseback. They called him Hakim ibn-e Tufail. He was a notorious horseman and an awe-inducing warrior. Seizing him, Wahab cast him to the ground with one blow so that he shattered his bones. A clamor went up from both armies. No other warrior came even to him. Having urged on his steed, Wahab headed into the heart of the enemy army. From both sides he was hunted and both man and mount were cast down into the dust by the point of the spear. Until the spear of that felicitous one fell to pieces, he clapped his hand, drawing a sword like a water lily from the avenging sheath, he opened wide his hands and arms:

Everywhere that you find yourself with shield,
With the sharp sword you cut in two.

Heaven with one thousand eyes upon his battlefield was confounded. The angel with a thousand tongues sang praises of his swordsmanship. In short, the opposing army from his fight was reduced to distress. ʿUmar Saʿd called his army to his side so that they swarmed around Wahab. They dispatched blows and insults upon him. An arrow struck his horse and Wahab was left on foot. Finally, he was powerless and he fell to the ground. They cut his noble head and cast it in front of Imam Husain’s army.

His mother leaped up and taking her son’s head brought it to her face and said, “You did your best, oh life of your mother, noble son of your mother. You have now received my complete pleasure with the martyrs you are joining the path of God.” Then
she brings that head and places it in the embrace of the bride. The bride willingly raised it up and she rubbed her eyes with that head dripping with blood. A sigh was drawn out from deep inside [the depths of her soul]. The onslaught of destiny’s caravan brought her life and world to an end, at the end of her life she stretched out her hand to her husband.

There is a weak tradition that that woman went toward the battlefield and rolled around in the blood of her husband. She was smearing the blood and dust on her face when suddenly Shimr’s eyes fell upon her. He said to a slave, “Strike that person over the head with a cudgel.” That woman died. There is another report that his mother raised up her son’s head and came to the battlefield. She struck the chest of her son’s killer and he was killed. She picked up the tent stake and killed three people. Imam Husain (peace be upon him) called to her summoning her to return. She apologized and said, “Oh son [farzand] of the Messenger of God, accept my apology for in the separation of husband and wife I am burning with grief.” Nur al-A’imma\(^3\) has also transmitted that the old woman was saying, “Alas, where is the season of youth that no longer remains for me, which forasmuch I must seek vengeance for my son’s blood!”

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\(^3\)Nūr al-A’imma was written by the twelfth-century ḥadīth scholar Abu al-Mu’ayyad Muhammad al-Khwarazmi.
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