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WOUNDS OF DEVOTION:
RECONCEIVING *MĀTAM*
IN SHI'Ī ISLAM

In February 2005 on the sunny morning of ʿĀshūrā, the odor of blood and rosewater wafted up in sweetly metallic waves from the floor of Bargah-e ʿAbbas in the Old City of Hyderabad, India.¹ From the rooftop, dozens of women, encompassed by the wafting odors of blood and roses, gathered to observe several hundred men, stripped to the waist, performing *mātam*, flagellating themselves with razor blades and knives in time to the chanted mourning poetry performed by *nauḥa-khwāns*. The women maintained a steady commentary on the men's performance of *mātam*, and the men devoted considerable attention not only to their bodies but also to those of their fellow

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¹ ʿĀshūrā refers to the tenth day of Muharram, when Imam Husain was martyred at the battle of Karbala. This day marks the climax of the Muharram ritual cycle when Shi'ā throughout the Islamic world go out in processions and perform bloody self-flagellation (*mātam* in Iran and South Asia and *laṭm* in the Arab world) to mourn the Imam's martyrdom and to physically show their love and solidarity with Husain and his family.

mātamdārs (flagellants). While these men were demonstrating their loyalty for Imam Husain by striking their bodies, they were also taking great pleasure in this bloody work. As an analytical frame, I engage with the term “pleasure” in a variety of ways, paying close attention to how Shi‘i rituals of mourning are, I argue, counterintuitively life affirming. The performance of *mātam*, I contend, is not rooted in feelings of guilt and penance but rather based on an ethic of love and caring.

This essay takes a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on ethnographic field research on Muharram ritual in Hyderabad and analyzing the constitution of the Shi‘i pleasurable body through a critical engagement with gender studies, ethnography, and religious studies. My observations and analysis of Muharram ritual is based on fieldwork that I have conducted among various Shi‘i communities in Hyderabad since 2003. I do not speak to the universality of these traditions—in fact, many of the rituals that I describe here are distinctively Indian or inscribe a particularized modality of pleasure.

In this essay I seek to theorize the ways in which *mātam* and its aesthetic forms are expressed as different modalities of pleasure on the physical bodies of Hyderabadī Shi‘a, as an efficacious tool for spiritual growth and for reaffirming family and social ties. First, the soteriological anticipation of heavenly reward for entering the subjunctive realm of Karbala of shedding blood is a universal pleasure shared by all Shi‘a.² The second form of pleasure is situated in the ongoing project of developing a morally and ethically attuned personhood through rituals of austerity, such as eating vegetarian food, dressing in black or not wearing shoes, and performing *faqīrī*. Third, the hypervisualized public rituals of ‘Ashūrā are potent markers of masculinity for Shi‘i communities that have been subjected to persecution and outsider status in many parts of the Islamic world. Finally, the wounds inflicted through *mātam* are intrinsically socioerotic, characterized by socially integrative affects of love, care, and vulnerability. These modalities of pleasure seamlessly overlap.

How do these outpourings of pleasure occur and by what logic? How is the scourging of the body with knives, blades, and flails loving, caring, and pleasurable, that is, a positive act of social integration that reaffirms family ties? Furthermore, how are acts such as cutting the head with a knife (*qameh zanī*), striking the chest with blades or flails (*sīneh zanī*), or weeping signs of how

² In his theory of the ritual process, Victor Turner describes the liminal zone as the space between one’s past identity and that which is impending. The limin is the subjunctive space of the “what if,” more specifically, of the open-endedness and uncertainty of the “what could be”—reflecting the particularity of one’s needs, wishes, and desires. For further elaboration on the role of the subjunctive and ritual, see Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 82–84. Schubel elegantly applies Turner’s theory of the subjunctive to his study of Muharram ritual in Karachi; see Vernon James Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam: Shi‘i Devotional Rituals in South Asia* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 3.

the Shi‘a excel in their devotion to Imam Husain and the family of the Prophet Muhammad (Ahl-e Bait)? Such questions are destabilizing and have been the source of considerable polemical discourse within Shi‘i communities and from critics outside in the Sunni and non-Muslim communities regarding the excessive, violent, and transgressive nature of the performance of bloody *mātam*. These critiques and debates have been the focus of a considerable body of scholarship focusing on Shi‘i ritual in South Asia, Lebanon, and Syria,³ yet much less attention has been paid to those Shi‘a for whom *mātam* is an act of devotion and not politics or polemic.⁴ These debates and polemics, internal critiques within transregional and local Shi‘i communities, and comparisons between the rituals of ‘Āshūrā and the Passion of Jesus Christ do not fall within the purview of this study, which focuses instead on *mātam* as loving devotion to the Ahl-e Bait in Hyderabad.

LAYING ONESELF BARE FOR THE LOVE OF HUSAIN

In the Hyderabad context, a clear distinction must be made between imaginative presence—the subjunctive act of imagining that had I been at Karbala, I would have sacrificed my life—and penitence, for in this Shi‘i economy of pleasure, these are not at all the same.⁵ Both Mahmoud Ayoub and David

³ For an overview of the complexities of the reception history of *mātam*, see Yitzhak Nakash, “An Attempt to Trace the Origins of the Rituals of ‘Āshūrā,” *Die Welt des Islams* 33, no. 2 (1993): 161–81; and Werner Ende, “The Flagellations of Muḥarram and the Shi‘ite ‘Ulama,” *Der Islam* 55, no. 1 (1978): 20–36; for the South Asian context, see David Pinault, *Horse of Karbala: Muslim Devotional Life in India* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); David Pinault, “Shia Lamentation Rituals and Reinterpretations of the Doctrine of Intercession: Two Cases from India,” *History of Religions* 38, no. 3 (1999): 285–305, and *The Shiites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1992); Mary Elaine Hegland, “Flagellation and Fundamentalism: (Trans)forming Meaning, Identity, and Gender through Pakistani Women’s Rituals of Mourning,” *American Ethnologist* 25, no. 2 (1998): 240–66; Mariam Abou Zahab, “‘Yeh matam kayse ruk jaye?’ (How could this *matam* ever cease?): Muharram Processions in Pakistani Punjab,” in *Religious Processions in South Asian and in the Diaspora*, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen (New York: Routledge, 2008), 101–14; Stig Toft Madsen and Muhammad Hassan, “Moderating Muḥarram,” in *Religious Processions in South Asian and in the Diaspora*, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen (New York: Routledge, 2008), 115–25; on the Syrian context, see Edith Szanto, “Beyond the Karbala Paradigm: Rethinking Revolution and Redemption in Twelver Shi‘a Mourning Rituals,” *Journal of Shi‘a Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2013): 75–91; for debates in Lebanon, see Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi‘i Lebanon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); and Augustus Richard Norton, “Ritual, Blood, and Shiite Identity in Nabatiyya,” *Drama Review* 49, no. 4 (2005): 140–55.

⁴ In their studies of South Asian Muḥarram ritual, both Amy Bard and Vernon J. Schubel (*Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam*) describe with sensitivity the devotional aspects of the *majlis* (mourning assembly) and the performance of bloody *mātam*; see Amy C. Bard, “‘No Power of Speech Remains’: Tears and Transformation in South Asian *Majlis* Poetry,” in *Holy Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination*, ed. Kimberly Christine Patton and John Stratton Hawley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 145–64.

⁵ On “subjunctive,” see Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam*, 3.

Pinault have explored the penitential dimension of Muharram rituals, describing communal feelings of guilt as being expressed through acts of self-mutilation with hands, swords, blades, and flails.⁶ Pinault characterizes the *mātamdārān* as latter-day *Tawwabūn* (the Penitents), who perform self-flagellation in order to “atone for the failure of the seventh-century Shiite community to come to Husain’s aid in time.”⁷ I concede that when Shi‘a enter into the subjunctive mode of “‘what if’ and ‘what could have been,’”⁸ a certain range of feelings are produced that compels the individual and collective performance of *mātam*, although it may not necessarily be guilt but rather feelings of love and desire—love for the Ahl-e Bait and desire to help those whom one loves.

While there are certainly structural parallels that we can discern between Roman Catholicism and Shi‘ism, I believe we need to be cautious in how we “read” these affective performances. Pinault is not the first or only scholar to apply a Roman Catholic gloss to the performance of *mātam*. Even Michel Foucault, in his coverage of the Iranian Revolution, described Muharram ritual through a Roman Catholic lens in his emphasis on such Christological imagery as penance, sinfulness, and sacrifice: “On December 2, the Muharram celebrations will begin. The death of Imam Hussein will be celebrated. It is the great ritual of penance (Not long ago, one could still see marchers flagellating themselves). But the feeling of sinfulness that could remind us of Christianity is indissolubly linked to the advance toward death in the intoxication of sacrifice. During these days, the Shi‘ite people become more enamored with extremes.”⁹ This quote is rich with imagery that plays on notions of the carnivalesque (the juxtaposition of celebration and penance) and transgression (the “intoxication” of sacrifice and the performance of extreme emotions and acts). Babak Rahimi has described Foucault’s deployment of the word “intoxication” to refer to “that which exceeds boundaries, especially everyday subjective ones”—an act of transgression.¹⁰

It is the transgressiveness of striking the head with knives (*qameh zanī*) and beating the back with flails and chains (*zanjīr zanī*) that motivated Ayatollah ‘Ali Khamene’i’s 1994 fatwa prohibiting bloody *mātam*. Khamene’i argued that *mātam* appears barbaric to non-Muslims, diminishing Islam’s seriousness.¹¹ Khamene’i’s concern is that non-Muslims will see this bloody

⁶ Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islām: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of ‘Āshūrā’ in Twelver Shi‘ism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978).

⁷ David Pinault, *The Shiites*, 106.

⁸ Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam*, 3.

⁹ Michel Foucault, quoted in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 216.

¹⁰ Babak Rahimi, *Theater State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran: Studies on Safavid Muharram Rituals, 1590–1641 CE* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 32.

¹¹ David Pinault, “Shia Lamentation Rituals,” 299.

action take place without understanding it, resulting in misunderstanding and parody of Shi'ism.¹² What is at stake is the optics of the performance of these men whose devotion (their upper bodies) is stripped bare and of the blood, which is a sacrificial offering to the beloved, Imam Husain. Khamene'i's fatwa deploys an Islamic morality that instills shame for being in a state of nakedness in front of others, yet it is largely unsuccessful because it fails to follow the logic of passionate devotion in which a nude chest with blood flowing from wounds, inflicted as a sign of one's overwhelming love for Husain, is anything but shameful, but by contrast it morally compels the gaze. The women gazing at the men at Bargah-e 'Abbas are neither disgusted, nor afraid, nor saddened, nor aroused by the sight of hundreds of men striking themselves with razor blades and knives—most of these women would most likely not view the performance with the same optic as Ayatollah Khamene'i.

Drawing on the examples that I provide in this essay, I posit that Indian Shi'i 'azādārī rituals do not focus simply on an ideal of sacrifice that is either penitential or self-annihilative, deriving from jihadist glorification of martyrdom (*shahādat*). Such an emphasis on martyrdom has been placed on 'azādārī in post-Revolution Iran, especially during the 1980–88 war with Iraq, in Lebanon during the civil war, and in contemporary Pakistan, where sectarian violence has inculcated an emphatically promartyrdom and militant form of *mātam*: to die for one's faith at the hand of a violent oppressor is to die the martyr's death like Imam Husain. In this regard, it is vitally important to take into consideration the cultural and political context in which the Shi'a and other devotees perform Muharram rituals in order to discern how different modalities of sacralized pleasure are embodied and understood, for in Hyderabad, these performances are neither transgressive nor carnivalesque.

THE PERFORMATIVE THEATRICALITY OF *MĀTAM*

Typically, scholars do not describe the ritual performance of *mātam* as a polyvalent act of pleasure. More usually, *mātam* is cast in terms of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque and transgression. Both the carnivalesque and transgression are interpretive frames that do not readily apply in the Hyderabad context, where *mātam* is a life-affirming, demonstrative act of love and caring.

Many scholars have drawn on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque in the public sphere to describe what happens in Muharram rituals. Bakhtin's carnivalesque is deployed in a number of ways. For example, Edith Szanto's recently completed doctoral thesis on ritual activities in Sayyida Zaynab, Syria, focuses on the carnivalesque qualities of the juxtapo-

¹² James M. Wilce, *Crying Shame: Metaculture, Modernity, and the Exaggerated Death of Lament* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 125–26.

sition of bloody *mātam* (Bakhtin's grotesque body) and excess of food. Drawing on Michael Taussig's concept of transgression, Szanto identifies bloody *mātam* (Arabic: *laṭm*) as a subversive act that resists political and religious authority.¹³

In his study of Muharram ritual in the Safavid period, Babak Rahimi extensively engages Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque to frame his analysis. Rahimi describes the "carnavalesque male body" that is fundamentally "impure[,] protuberant, disproportionate, a symbolic filth, an entity out of place, revolving around the breakup of flesh and dissolution of body parts (arm, armpit, chest, forehead, hand) and materiality."¹⁴ Rahimi argues that the shedding of blood and the intentional wounding of the self creates a grotesque body that transgresses bounds. Rahimi's carnivalesque male body, which he identifies as the epitome of the grotesque, compels us to raise a number of questions regarding the process of aesthetic valuation. Why is this body grotesque? According to whose judgment? Does it become grotesque by virtue of the spectacle it creates?

I posit that the wounded body also becomes a site for care and is therefore neither grotesque nor transgressive. In reviewing photographs of bloody *mātam* in Hyderabad, I am struck by the repeated acts of caring that are displayed: a man serving water to a *mātamdār*, two boys tending each other's wounds, men taking care of each other as they perform *qameh-zanī* (fig. 1).

In the course of my field research I also heard from several men that they believed the shedding of blood to be positive and that the sharing of knives and blades was safe. In fact, many informed me that no one had contracted HIV from performing bloody *mātam*. All attributed this to the protection of ʿAbbas, Imam Husain, or Fatimah al-Zahra. Some more scientifically oriented individuals explained that the rosewater sprayed on the flagellants has antiseptic qualities, thus preventing infection and disease. For these men, *mātam* is a beautiful act of pleasure.

A BLOODY DIGRESSION

While conducting dissertation fieldwork in Hyderabad in 2005, I met a woman I will call Khushbu. I had gone to Yadgar-e Hussaini, an ʿ*āshūrkhāna* exclusively for and led by women, to attend a *majlis*, but had mixed up the time and arrived early. I sat down on the white floor cloth and relaxed, anticipating that some of the women would approach me for conversation during the quiet time before the *majlis* begins when the women slowly trickle in to the ʿ*āshūrkhāna*, paying their respects to the ʿ*alam* (metal battle standard or

¹³ Edith Szanto, "Following Sayyida Zaynab: Twelver Shi'ism in Contemporary Syria" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2012).

¹⁴ Rahimi, *Theater State*, 283.



FIG. 1.—Two boys tending each other's wounds during the *Āshūrā julūs* (procession) in Hyderabad, February 2006. Photo by the author.

flag; nonfigural representation of imam or member of Ahl-e Bait), greeting one another, and finding their preferred spots to sit in the room.

Khushbu, a young woman in her late twenties, approached me and asked if she could sit with me. She asked if I was the scholar doing research on Muharram and then launched into her story of her personal troubles through which her relationship to the Ahl-e Bait has tended to play an important intercessory role in her life. Recently, however, Khushbu's life had been beset by a number of family and relationship troubles that even the intercession of her beloved Bibi Fatimah and Hazrat Qasem could not resolve. Khushbu required a more powerful, more potent form of intervention:

Jumping from telling me about a dream that she had one night about an old woman who had lost her daughter and the *bībī kā 'alam*, she went on to talk about *mātam*. She again explained that she is such a sensitive person, and for that reason she cannot stand to see the sight of people doing bloody *mātam*. Well, this year for the first time she wanted to touch the blood of the *mātamdārs* at Bibi ka Alava. She thought that by touching the blood of the *mātamdārs* it would make her problems go away. She went to Bibi ka Alava and watched the performance of *mātam* and then she took some of the blood that was spilled and wiped it on her. I asked her if this helped her with her problems, and she didn't directly answer the question. She replied that she is so

depressed. This was probably the fourth or fifth time in the course of our half-hour conversation that she had revealed her emotional state. She said that if she doesn't go to Bibi ka Alava at least once a month then her depression becomes worse. She said that she wants to read more about Bibi Fatima. I asked her if she feels close to her because she, too, had a difficult life. She said yes, exactly.¹⁵

Khushbu was not obviously complaining to me about the state of her life, but telling me, a complete stranger, about her "troubles." As my field notes indicate, Khushbu's emotional state dominated our conversation, which was rather one-sided. According to Jim Wilce, "The telling of troubles disturbs listeners"; every meeting I had with this young woman centered on her efforts to find a cure for her troubles through the intercession of the Ahl-e Bait, which I sometimes found awkward, especially when she wanted my help.¹⁶ As Khushbu's story demonstrates, "the implicit model of troubles expressed here is somatopsychic rather than psychosomatic; that is the body is portrayed as the source of her *mānasik* (heartmindish, roughly parallel to our 'mental') trouble."¹⁷ The most potent cure for her trouble is the blood of the lovers (*maḥabbān*) of Imam Husain when they perform *mātam* (fig. 2).

After I spoke with Khushbu, I went back and looked closely at my field-work photographs; I was able to corroborate what she told me and also (based on my previous research) through observation of a functionally homologous ritual on the seventh of Muharram *mehndī kī majlis*, commemorating the battlefield wedding of Imam Husain's daughter Fatimah Kubra to her cousin Qasem. In this ritual, plates of henna paste (*mehndī*) are circulated during the *majlis*, and young women and men who hope to marry within the next year and who seek the saintly couple's intercession to make this happen gather a small daub of this green mixture and apply it to their right palm. Once the paste dries, it leaves a reddish mark (the color reminiscent of blood) on the palm that invites Qasem and Fatimah Kubra to intercede and make a good marriage alliance.

Perhaps a few of the women standing along the margins of the courtyard with the men performing these several hours of *mātam* with sharp razor blades and knives needed a stronger form of intercession to help solve their problems. A bit of henna, prayers, or votive offerings to the *alam* are not as morally potent as the blood shed through this ritual of loving devotion, which compels the reciprocal action of the Ahl-e Bait in the here and now rather than in the eschatological future.

¹⁵ Field notes, April 18, 2005.

¹⁶ James W. Wilce, *Eloquence in Trouble: The Poetics and Politics of Complaint in Rural Bangladesh* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.



FIG. 2.—Women standing in courtyard of Bargah-e ‘Abbas during *mātām* on ‘Āshūrā, February 2005. Photo by the author.

A RETURN TO PLEASURE: SACRED FLOWS

In the practice of *mātām* pleasure and pain are not mutually exclusive. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant asserted that “in order to distinguish whether anything is beautiful or not we refer the representation, not by the understanding to the object for cognition, but by the imagination (perhaps in conjunction with the understanding) to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or pain. The judgment of taste is therefore not a judgment of cognition, and is consequently not logical but aesthetic.”¹⁸ According to Kant, taste, the ability to judge what is beautiful, is entirely subjective. Pain and pleasure are socially constructed, institutionalized phenomena. Kant’s observation that the role of the imagination is of critical importance for the subject’s discernment of whether a sensation is pleasant or painful is echoed in Talal Asad’s assertion that “*What* a subject experiences as painful, and *how*, are not only culturally and physically mediated, *they are themselves modes of living painful relations.*”¹⁹ Furthermore, by understanding the relationship between “body-sense

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000), 45.

¹⁹ Talal Asad, “Agency and Pain: An Exploration,” *Culture and Religion* 1, no. 1 (2000): 43.

and body-learning,” the “perception of pain threshold varies considerably according to traditions of body training.”²⁰

In analyzing religious ritual, the relationship between “body-sense and body-learning” relates to the integral connection between “*living and acting*.”²¹ In European and North American performance studies, there has been a shift away from the perceived falseness of theater as fictitious—the product of the playwright’s imagination—to the reality of performance as representative of the lived experience. Yet a tension between these two performative modes persists. Some scholars, however, are attempting to reconcile these two dimensions in the study of performance in Western contexts. I posit that the theatrical and the performative are fused in Muharram ritual.

The rituals of the *majlis* and the poetry to which *mātām* is performed are based on scripts already written and subject to continuous revision.²² The performance of the script is a matter of interpretation. Virginie Magnat describes the potential that the intersection of theatricality and performance is “a privileged, intimate area of human experience within which one can demand that the promise of another dimension of existence be revealed, and that the impossible be achieved/experienced here and now, in the presence of other living human beings—the *impossible*, namely a sense of unity between what is usually divided in our daily life: the material and the immaterial, the human body and spirit, our mortality and our propensity for perfection, for infinity, for the absolute.”²³ We might extend Magnat’s realm of the impossible to include the life-affirming, positive performance of *mātām* as an act of love for the Ahl-e Bait and a demonstration of commitment to one’s social group.

The theatrical dimension of *mātām* and other Muharram rituals is reflected in the very nature of these acts. Dressing in black clothing, going about without shoes or jewelry, and eating vegetarian food are forms of role-playing that cast one into several possible roles: mourner, ascetic, supplicant. These roles are taken up only temporarily—yet the performance helps to cultivate a mode of behavior and ethics that lasts throughout the year. In his study of *faqīrī* rituals dedicated to the saint Kullyappa in the village of Gugudu in Andhra Pradesh, Afsar Mohammad has observed the transformation of theatricality (acting) into performance (living). Asked about how *faqīrī* affects its performers, one man

²⁰ Talal Asad, “Remarks on the Anthropology of the Body,” in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 48.

²¹ Virginie Magnat, “Theatricality from the Performative Perspective,” *SubStance* 31, no. 2–3 (2002): 147.

²² Two sources for these *mātām* scripts are Husain Va‘ez Kashefi’s early sixteenth-century Persian history of the imams and the battle of Karbala *Rowzat al-shohadā* (The Garden of the Martyrs) and the *ta‘ziyeh*, an indigenous Iranian genre of theater art in which the events of Karbala are reenacted in a real-time tableau vivant; see Peter J. Chelkowski, ed., *Ta‘ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1979).

²³ Magnat, “Theatricality from the Performative Perspective,” 154.

explained the transformative process thus: “Since we have been doing this *faqiri* for several years, it’s like it has seeped deep into our minds, as water into the soil. Now I cannot separate it from my personality. . . . Three days of *faqiri* provides you with a model for observing various acts of purity in everyday life.”²⁴ Likewise, the performance of *mātam* is explicitly theatrical. A *mātamdār* is not literally going to kill himself to prove his love for Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait—that would be a pointless performance. Rather, this theatrical performance represents the impossible through an aesthetic of pleasure that is developed through continual practice transforming pain into something beautiful, positive, and life affirming.

SPONTANEOUS OUTPOURINGS

During the *majlis*, when bloody *mātam* is replaced with striking the chest, head, and thighs with the hands (*hāth kā mātam*), there is often a spontaneous outpouring of grief (*‘azādārī*) that produces profound tears (*giriyan*) and sorrow (*gham*). The devotee’s sobs and percussive beat of *mātam* on the body are in perfect syncopation to the rhythm of the *majlis* orator’s (*zākir*) narrative of the calamity of Karbala (*maṣā’ib*) and the rhymed tragedy chanted in a heartbreaking tone in the *nauḥa* poems. When the trouble-telling narrative (*maṣā’ib*) reaches its dramatic climax—martyrdom—and suddenly concludes, so too do the weeping and *hāth kā mātam*. As faces are wiped, people emit deep sighs, and for a brief moment a cathartic hush fills the *‘ashurkhāna*, in which the sense of pleasure for having felt such an upwelling of passionate love and outpouring of grief for the Ahl-e Bait spreads over the Shi’a gathered in the assembly.

These tears and outpouring of grief may appear to the casual observer unaccustomed to such intense displays of emotion as, at best, scripted or, at worst, crocodile tears (*makkārī*).²⁵ How can someone burst into tears so suddenly and be so overwhelmed as to strike her thighs as she is wracked with sobs at the moment the *zākirah* begins to narrate the sufferings of one of the heroes of the battle of Karbala? Admittedly, when I was first doing fieldwork and was attending the *majlis* I did not fully understand the multiplicity of action that

²⁴ Afsar Mohammad, “Following the Saint: Temporary Asceticism and Village India in South India,” *Journal of Hindu Studies* 3, no. 2 (2010): 158.

²⁵ Some Sunnis critique Shi’as for “turning on the waterworks” and putting on a show of tears during the *majlis* as a show of piety (Bard, “No Power of Speech Remains,” 154). References to weeping crocodiles proliferate Medieval Latin bestiary texts, which describe these creatures with the negative human qualities of hypocrisy and being dissimulative. Their tears are the primary distinguishing markers of their subterfuge and dishonesty—their tears do not indicate their moral integrity; see Gary L. Ebersole, “The Function of Ritual Weeping Revisited: Affective Expression and Moral Discourse,” *History of Religions* 39, no. 3 (2000): 226.

takes place when the *mātamdār* sheds tears and strikes her body with her hand during the recitation of the *maṣā'ib* (sufferings narrative) or short rhythmic mourning poems (*nauḥa*). For the Shi'a, *mātamdārī* (weeping, self-flagellation) and its emotional affects are a naturalized performance, because one hears (and feels) the suffering of Imam Husain and his family at the battle of Karbala as it is remembered in the *majlis* from the mother's womb. When children attend the *majlis*, they run around and play games—it seems that they are hardly attending to the ritual emotion and action of the *majlis*. Yet, if one pays close attention, you will see a little boy striking his forehead with conscious deliberation and looking to his father for either correction or approval. In another *majlis*, perhaps a little girl is struggling to cry, knowing that the suffering of the children at Karbala was terrible. What is significant is that each child is immersed in an environment saturated in the constant memory and love for the Ahl-e Bait that is expressed through the ethic of hospitality and love for family members both real and fictive.

As these children grow, their life experiences and their constant presence in the *majlis* will effect two significant transformations of her tears and his performance of bloody *mātam*. First, as they grow older they will have more of their own life experiences that will cause them to expand their fictive kin network to include the imams and Ahl-e Bait. The tears and blood that are shed in *mātam* are forms of hospitality and generosity that one learns to give to one's kin, respected guests, and those in need. During Muharram throughout the Shi'i world, tents are erected where charitable organizations and families distribute water, milk, and sweet *sharbats* known as *sabīl*, which is considered an especially pious act of liquescent hospitality. Because the hero[ines] of Karbala were denied access to the Euphrates River for three days before the penultimate battle on 'Āshūrā, thirst is a ubiquitous theme. For this reason, the tears and blood shed by the Shi'a during 'azādārī are not polluting but, rather, nourishing, sustaining substances offered to the Ahl-e Bait as a sign of love—just as the pre-Islamic poet Thabit endeavored to feed his tribe in times of famine.

Second, as Shi'a develop extensive kin networks that are inclusive of the imams and Ahl-e Bait, weeping and *mātam* acquire a moral valence. The soteriological value of weeping for the Ahl-e Bait has received considerable scholarly attention, yet one critical aspect of how weeping and performing self-flagellation as a sign of love of and loyalty to the family of the Prophet Muhammad has not been sufficiently examined. Shedding tears and blood and striking the body establish a moral contract between the Shi'i lover and the Ahl-e Bait. The loving action of the devotee compels the attention now, in the form of intercession in matters of health, family, education, and careers, and also in the eschatological future in rewarding such love and loyalty with the pleasures of paradise.

The aesthetic of pleasure and its cultivation through the performance of *mātam* is exemplified through the process by which boys learn to flagellate themselves during Muharram. Like a method actor training for a role, boys must learn the theatricality of the performance of *mātam* as an aesthetically pleasing, socially affirming, masculine ritual performance. When a little boy learns how to perform *mātam*, his experience is passive and initially painful and even disconcerting. In the course of fieldwork in Hyderabad on Shi'ī ritual, I paid close attention to how children learned to become mourners, or *mātamdārs*. Small children, both male and female, learn the rituals of the *majlis* with their mothers and other female relations. When boys reach the age of eight or nine they enter the masculine domain of *mātam*.

The process by which boys learn the pleasure of self-flagellation is through an act of double mimesis: the boys imitate the older men who are imitating the suffering and sacrifice of Imam Husain and the heroes of Karbala. Bare-chested and standing in a crowd of hundreds or thousands, at first the boy beats his chest with the palms of his hands, contributing to the percussive refrain accompanying the *nauha* poems of mourning. Later he will take a razor blade and awkwardly try to place it in his hand so that it stays firmly in place as he strikes his chest. He stops frequently to reposition the blade and to examine the wounds on his chest. Watching the act, it is obvious that this bloody form of flagellation is painful for the child—he has not yet actively appropriated Imam Husain's suffering onto his own body, transforming his pain into a pleasurable act affirming his loyalty to faith and community. Transforming pain into pleasure signifies his transformation into a man responsible for being committed to faith and social justice in this world, thus ensuring a place with the Ahl-e Bait in paradise.

SHI'Ī HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY: LOVE YOUR FAMILY AND
BE A GENEROUS HOST

The scars that mark the bodies of Shi'ī men are pleasing signs of faith and the appropriation of Imam Husain's bodily suffering. On 'Āshūrā these scars of fidelity are put on display for all to see, and the scourge of the blade, flail, and hand reopen those wounds as a public declaration of one's willingness to protect those whom one loves. On the tenth of Muharram, thousands of men, boys, and women gather at the Bargah-e 'Abbas 'āshūrkhāna, located in the Pathergatti locality of Hyderabad's Old City. The 'āshūrkhāna is located in a lane just inside the arched gate (*kamān*) near the Badshahi 'āshūrkhāna, which dates from the Qutb Shahi period (r. 1518–1687 CE). The 'āshūrkhāna houses an 'alam dedicated to 'Abbas that is installed each Thursday for devotees to perform *ziyarat* and make votive offerings (*mannat karnā*) in exchange for the saint's intercession in a host of matters. Bargah-e 'Abbas is a

popular gathering place on Thursday evenings and it is one of the centers of *mātam* on ʿĀshūrā in the Old City.

At the Bargah-e ʿAbbas, hundreds of men gather in the courtyard of this ʿ*āshūrkhāna* dedicated to Imam Husain’s half brother, who was martyred while attempting to fill water skins at the bank of the Euphrates River in order to slake the thirst of the children in the entourage. At the beginning of the *mātam* session, the men remove their shirts and stand about bare-chested. Some men casually chat, and others sneak glances at the men around them, examining scars and musculature. One man told me about the popularity of gyms in the Old City that have names such as YAM (*yā ʿAlī maddad*, or “Help, ʿAli!”), 786,²⁶ or God’s Power, where, despite being segregated by sex, there are special times for “ladies” to exercise their bodies and souls. In the months leading up to Muharram, one Shiʿi friend told me, membership at these “religious” gyms increases significantly, as men lift weights not only to increase their stamina for the rigors of performing bloody *mātam* on ʿĀshūrā but also to present a more toned physique to the thousands of men and women who will be watching their every move.

One enters the courtyard where the *mātam* ritual takes place through a passageway. Tall walls enclose two sides of the courtyard, and the *dālāns* (halls), where the ʿ*alam* are stored and the *majlis* take place, form the other two walls of the small courtyard. The courtyard is not large, yet it is a peaceful space where one feels removed from the busy intersection nearby. Opposite the space where the ʿ*alam* is displayed is a replica of the waterskin (*mashk*) that ʿAbbas used to fetch water from the Euphrates River.

This *mashk* is monumental in size, sculpted from metal with a couplet inscribed in fresh white paint on its side. There are several distinctive features that help identify this visually dense object: the waterskin rests on a bright green pedestal resembling a lingam resting inside the yoni, or receptacle. On the right side of the *mashk* in this picture is a waterspout—symbol replicates function in this instance—although ʿAbbas was unable to obtain water at the Euphrates River, devotees are invited to drink his generosity and benefit from his sacrifice. One might wonder whether the iconography of the *mashk* and its pedestal is intentional on the part of the architect of the shrine; nonetheless, it is a visually potent sight invested with several layers of meaning, rooting the icon to its Hindu-majority Hyderabad context (fig. 3).

²⁶ The number 786 is the numerological reference to the invocation “Bismillāh al-rahman al-rahīm” (In the name of God, the merciful and mercy-giving) in the Arabic system of *ḥurūf al-abjad*. According to this system of assigning numerical value to the letters of the Arabic alphabet, the sum of the letters *bismillāh al-rahman al-rahīm* equals 786. Throughout South Asia, 786 is ubiquitous and offers talismanic protection to the person who has decorated an auto rickshaw, business, or wall with the number.



FIG. 3.—*Mashk* (waterskin) in the courtyard of the Bargah-e ‘Abbas *‘āshūrkhāna*, Hyderabad. Photo by the author, 2005.

Looking at the *mashk*, we also note that the icon is not without word. Inscribed on the side of the waterskin is a couplet:

Like a shining Damascene sword he fought;
On account of his love for Sakinah, the Water-Carrier gave his life.

This couplet further places ‘Abbas in a Hyderabad religious imaginaire, in which the Ahl-e Bait has been absorbed into devotees’ fictive kin networks.

‘Abbas is popularly venerated in Hyderabad devotional traditions, both textual and ritual, as the water carrier (*saqqah*) who sacrificed his life to provide water for his beloved niece Sakinah, Imam Husain’s youngest daughter. He is nonvisually represented by the *mashk* that he used to collect water at the Euphrates River. ‘Abbas’s martial identity is reflected in his *laqab* (epithet) *‘alamdār* (the standard bearer) that is used somewhat less frequently in Hyderabad Shi‘i devotional poetry.

‘Abbas represents a modality of (Shi‘i) Islamic hegemonic masculinity that is both transregional and transcultural and that is defined by an ethic of care,

hospitality, and devotion to family and kin.²⁷ We can see the origins of this idealized masculinity in the pre-Islamic poetry of the poets Labid (d. 660–61 CE) and Shanfara, who express their hospitality and filial devotion, each demonstrating in its own way the obligation of caring for one's family in good times and in bad. In his poems, Labid hyperbolically extols the generosity of his tribe in sharing food on "many a chilly morning in which the reigns of the cold had fallen into the hands of the frigid North Wind, have I [eased the people's suffering] with food."²⁸ Shanfara, the "outlaw poet," who was exiled from his tribe, appropriated the vocabulary of kinship in his *Lāmiyyat al-ʿArab* to establish fictive familial ties with the animals of the desert: "[5] I have closer kin than you: a wolf, swift and sleek, a smooth and spotted leopard (smooth speckled snake), and a long-maned one—a hyena."²⁹

Imam Husain's half brother ʿAbbas ibn ʿAli performs this role of hegemonic masculinity in the persona of provider and caretaker that prevails throughout the Shiʿi world, although it is especially amplified in the Deccan, where kinship bonds and the nurturing of children structures society regardless of religious or caste identity. In the Arab world, by contrast, ʿAbbas performs this hegemonic masculine role, yet he is also valorized for his martial prowess, noble tribal genealogy, and hypermasculinity—qualities that are generally muted in Deccani hagiographical narratives and poetry about ʿAbbas. In his study of the cult of saints in Iraqi Shiʿism, Yitzhak Nakash notes that ʿAbbas epitomizes "the attributes of ideal manhood of the Arabs (*murūwwa*)—i.e., masculinity, courage, pride, honor, and chivalry."³⁰ In Iraqi devotional narratives, ʿAbbas is portrayed as such a brave and skillful warrior that he was able to fend off enemy soldiers "like a wolf dispersing a flock of sheep."³¹ Nakash asserts that "the moral and cultural values of Iraqi Shiites were built into their religious practices," and the hagiographical tradition extolling the heroic qualities of Karbala's heroes is amplified through stories of blood lineages, tribal identity, and the absolute protection of the honor of family and faith.³²

²⁷ R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society* 19 (2005): 829–59.

²⁸ Jonathan A. C. Brown, "The Social Context of Pre-Islamic Poetry: Poetic Imagery and Social Reality in the *Muʿallaqat*," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (2003): 41.

²⁹ Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, "Archetype and Attribution in Early Arabic Poetry: Al-Shanfara and the *Lāmiyyat al-ʿArab*," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 18 (1986): 378.

³⁰ Yitzhak Nakash, "The Muharram Rituals and the Cult of the Saints among Iraqi Shiites," in *The Other Shiites: From the Mediterranean to Central Asia*, ed. Alessandro Monsutti, Silvia Naef, and Farian Sabahi (Bern: Lang, 2007), 117.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

³² *Ibid.*, 116.

Although certain features of ‘Abbas’s ostensibly historical persona is present in Hyderabad devotional literature and performance, “he is as much a creation and reflection” of local vernacular social and gender codes in which family and faith are central axes of one’s social and religious identity.³³ ‘Abbas’s identity as the standard bearer (‘*alamdār*), while referring to his prowess as a warrior, is ascribed different meaning in Hyderabad Shi‘ism. ‘Abbas is the idealized embodiment of Deccani family values, in which one’s loyalty is foremost to one’s kin.

“FAMILY MEN” AND THE ETHIC OF CARING MEDIATED BY *MĀTAM*

The men and women of Imam Husain’s family are the exemplars of a Hyderabad ethos that esteems the family, its members’ roles, and relationships (both fictive and real) at the center of social and religious life. Several figures from the battle of Karbala occupy a central role in Hyderabad Shi‘i mourning rituals (particularly *mātām*)—notably Imam Husain’s half brother ‘Abbas; young daughter Sakinah; and Qasem, the “bridegroom of Karbala,” who was married to the imam’s daughter Fatimah Kubra just before being martyred on the battlefield. During the commemorations of Qasem’s martyrdom on the seventh of Muharram and ‘Abbas’s death trying to fill waterskins at the Euphrates River on the following day, large numbers of men gather together to strike their chests with their hands (*sīneh-zanī*). The ritual remembrance of Qasem’s death marks the escalation of the performance of *mātām* in the *majlis*, shrine courtyards, and, more informally, in small groups on the street, although the type of self-flagellation performed for the “bridegroom of Karbala” is not bloody.³⁴ The significance lies in the fact that *mātām* performed for Qasem is inextricably linked to his status as a “family man,” whose wedding took place on the battlefield and who was martyred before he could enjoy the fruits of married life. Although I focus principally on ‘Abbas in this essay, *mātām* rituals dedicated to Qasem likewise reveal the important social role that self-flagellation has in affirming relationships and demonstrating faith in the imamate and Ahl-e Bait. In the Hyderabad context in which family is the

³³ For further discussion of ‘Abbas’s hagiographical persona in Hyderabad Shi‘ism, see Karen G. Ruffe, *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi‘ism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 4.

³⁴ A “running” (*bhāgā hū‘ā*) *julūs* takes place in the Old City in the middle of the night of 6–7 Muharram in which the ‘*alam* from the Alava-ye Shahzadeh-ye Qasem is taken out in procession. The ‘*alam* is carried at a running pace from the Alava located in the Yaqutpura locality along the main road leading to the Masjid-e Lashkar Jang. One informant explained that this running *julūs* symbolizes the devotees’ willingness to fight alongside Qasem and other members of Imam Husain’s family at Karbala; the ritual invokes memory of war (*razm*) and the battlefield setting (field notes, February 26, 2006).

source of one's place in the world, such a loss demands an emotional response and ritual action to reaffirm social and kin relationships.³⁵

The aesthetic production of grief is further amplified the following day when the Shi'a ritually remember 'Abbas's valiant effort to bring water to the children, especially Sakinah, who were suffering from heat and thirst in Imam Husain's encampment. Men gather in the *majlis*, shrine courtyards, and in small groups in the streets and lanes of Hyderabad's Old City to perform increasingly intense forms of *mātam* as physical signs of their loyalty and love for Qasem and 'Abbas.

For Hyderabad Shi'a, Qasem and 'Abbas are members of their extended fictive kin network, and their hagiographical personae reflect the centrality of their status as "family men." The love and affection that is expressed by Hyderabad Shi'a for 'Abbas and Qasem as "family men" reflect the constitutive role that the household and its web of relationships plays in the seamless integration of the religious, domestic, and social realms as they are mediated by shifting notions of family. Margaret Trawick's ethnographic study of family life in rural Tamil Nadu is useful for revealing a South Indian pattern of weaving together devotion to family and faith.³⁶

The hagiographical emphasis that is placed on such figures as 'Abbas and Qasem, casting them as "family men," reflects a fundamental ontology of Hyderabad Shi'a, which is grounded in a South Indian worldview based on one's multiple identities and roles in the family network and reciprocal relationships of love and affection for each other. Trawick observes that "love [goes] beyond pairing. Ultimately, as we have seen, it negated pair bonds, especially exclusive ones, and embraced everybody. Then it took the form of the confusion of plurality, when one lost one's identity, and one's loved one's identity, in the crowd."³⁷ While Trawick's characterization of this South Indian form of love may seem confusing, it conforms to the sensibility of family and love in Hyderabad Shi'ism. In many regards this love transcends the pair bond and is explicitly collective, especially in relation to the Ahl-e Bait.

Not only do we find expressions of love for the Ahl-e Bait physically manifested through the performance of *mātam*, but love is also expressed in various genres of informally produced devotional literature. For example, chapbooks of Urdu poetry and hagiographical texts found in Hyderabad describe the city's Shi'a as the "lovers of the People of the House" (*maḥabbān-e ahl-e bait*). The term *maḥabba* (the Urdu derivation of the Arabic word *muḥabba*)

³⁵ For a more detailed analysis of the rituals commemorating Qasem's martyrdom in Hyderabad Shi'ism, see Karen G. Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

³⁶ Margaret Trawick, *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 257.

is frequently used in regard to the love and affection one feels for these members of Imam Husain's family and, by extension, for one's own extended kin network.

Hyderabadī Shi'ā navigate a complex and oscillating universe of real and fictive kinship networks that straddle the realms of the mundane and the sacred.³⁸ Likewise, when the pre-Islamic poet Shanfara was disowned by his family and expelled from his tribe, he established kinship ties with the beasts of the desert and declared these new relations just as authentic, if not more so, than those of his natal tribe. Recent anthropology of kinship has focused on the two orders of blood kinship, the first of which is biogenetic (substance) and the second, relational (code).³⁹ Labeling bonds between Shi'ā not related by marriage or blood descent as "fictive" is misleading, as Helen Lambert has rightly critiqued in her essay "Sentiment and Substance in North Indian Forms of Relatedness."⁴⁰

Gazing on the nude torso of the *mātamdār* is permissible through the act of lovingly shedding blood for Imam Husain, 'Abbas, and other members of the Ahl-e Bait because everyone is bound together in a "nurturing relatedness." Instead of milk, the nurturing substance that binds men and women together into a fictive relationship is this blood shed for the hero[in]es of Karbala.⁴¹ The blood shed by the *mātamdār*s is as quenching as the water that the young child Sakinah cries out for her uncle 'Abbas to bring from the Euphrates River.

Just as the *'alamdār* of Karbala 'Abbas's masculine bravado is typically subordinated by his role as the protector of the children of the Ahl-e Bait, 'Abbas's devotion to his family and his willingness to sacrifice himself in order to save his sisters, nieces, nephews and beloved brother Husain is the focus of Hyderabadī hagiographical literature and ritual performance. 'Abbas's foray into the Euphrates River—access to which was blocked beginning on the seventh of Muharram, causing tremendous thirst and suffering for the children of

³⁸ There is a significant body of anthropological scholarship on fictive kinship in Indian society: Helen Rosebaugh and Mary Curry, "Fictive Kinship as Social Capital in New Immigrant Communities," *Sociological Perspectives* 43, no. 2 (2000): 189–209; David G. Mandelbaum, "Sex Roles and Gender Relations in North India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 21, no. 46 (1986): 1999–2004; Sylvia Vatuk, "Reference, Address, and Fictive Kinship in Urban North India," *Ethnology* 8 (1969): 255–72; Stanley A. Freed, "Fictive Kinship in a North Indian Village," *Ethnology* 2, no. 1 (1963): 86–103.

³⁹ Janet Carsten, "Substance and Relationality: Blood in Contexts," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40 (2011): 21.

⁴⁰ Helen Lambert, "Sentiment and Substance in North Indian Forms of Relatedness," *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship*, ed. Janet Carsten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 74.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 80–82; for a South Asian example, cf. Peter Parkes, "Alternative Social Structures and Foster Relations in the Hindu Kush: Milk Kinship Allegiance in the Former Mountain Kingdoms of Northern Pakistan," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43, no. 1 (2001): 4–36.

the entourage—is the most common theme in mourning poetry and discourses, which incites tears and *mātam* as expressions of grief:

Distressed, the innocent Sakinah asked the king, “Where is my uncle [*chachā*]?
Dear father, tell me! Whose blood is on this ‘*alam*? Where is my uncle?
He was not angered by my request for water, so why has he not yet returned?
Now I will never request water, say that papa! Where is my uncle?”⁴²

Sakinah calls out to her uncle, ‘Abbas, to return from the riverbank so that she may be relieved of the torment of thirst. While she beseeches her father, Imam Husain, to tell her where her uncle is, the listener is already overcome with grief for the moment that Sakinah will learn that her uncle is dead—this is already foreshadowed when Sakinah asks whose blood stains the ‘*alam*:

This is the lament [*nauḥa*] of the little girl Sakinah, “My water-carrier was killed at the river.
Alas, how could such cruel oppression be exacted on me? My water-carrier was killed at the river.
He was unable to bring the waterskin to the encampment; he was unable to give me water.
Now who will console me? My water-carrier was killed at the river.”⁴³

In another *nauḥa*, Sakinah invokes the thirst of her baby brother, ‘Ali Asghar. In the couplet of the following *nauḥa*, Sakinah’s beseeching ‘Abbas to rise up from the desert sands and come back to life draws on the nurturing, loving, and protecting role that her uncle plays in her young life. Sakinah uses words such as “console” (*dilāsā denā*) and “to look after her” (*sambhālṅā*) with respect to her uncle, which further establishes ‘Abbas as the consummate “family man.”

This is the third day that we have not been able to get even a drop of water—
Asghar is also thirsty,
You are sleeping, now there is no one to alleviate our pain—Rise up,
my uncle!⁴⁴

The tragic elements of *nauḥas* such as these are emphasized through the listener’s knowledge that ‘Abbas is dead and will not bring water to slake the thirst of suffering Sakinah. The little girl cries out for her uncle to relieve her

⁴² Sayyid Ghulam-e Panjetan “Nagin” Mansabdar, “Kahān mere chachā?,” in *Taskīn-e Fāṭimah*, vol. 2 (Hyderabad: Matba‘-e Haidari, 1987), 53.

⁴³ Sayyid “Shaukat” Bilgrami, “Mere saqqeh ko daryā peh mārā,” in *Jām-e Shahādat*, vol. 1 (Hyderabad: Kutbkhaneh-ye Haidari, n.d.), 97.

⁴⁴ Jenab Asghar Karar, “Uṭho Mere ‘Ammū, Uṭho Mere ‘Ammū,” in *Āwāz-e Karbalā*, ed. Sayyid Morteza Husain (Hyderabad: Anjuman Ahl-e Bait, 1415/1994), 43.

torment, producing a highly aestheticized affect of grief, which works to reaffirm bonds of love and loyalty by the Shi‘a for each other and the Ahl-e Bait.

THE PLEASURES OF RITUAL RELEASE

The ritual performance of *mātam* on ‘Āshūrā is a theatrical performance that aggregates the Shi‘i community through bonds of loyalty and love for the Ahl-e Bait and commitment to one’s extended kin network. The rituals of the *majlis*, the public display of asceticism through dress and food, the performance of *mātam* at Bargah-e ‘Abbas, and the mass procession (*julūs*) that take place in the Old City on ‘Āshūrā are expressions of a performative theatricality in which individuals take on different roles producing pious pleasures. Conceiving of these ritual performances as theatrical may help us to reconsider the aesthetics of Muharram as a site of pleasure. Here, I would like to compare as homologous the ‘Āshūrā procession to that most pleasurable of human acts—sexual intercourse.

On ‘Āshūrā, tens of thousands of Shi‘a, Sunnis, and Hindus and a small number of foreign tourists gather to watch the *bībī kā ‘alam* procession (*julūs*) as it moves through Hyderabad’s Old City toward the banks of the Musi River. The *bībī kā ‘alam* procession marks the climax of ten days of mourning in Hyderabad. During the procession, the *bībī kā ‘alam* (a metal standard in which a wooden fragment from the board on which Fatimah al-Zahra’s corpse was washed is embedded) is displayed. This symbol is imbued with Fatimah’s feminine and intercessory powers, and its procession is accompanied by thousands of men publicly marching through the streets stripped to their waists, beating their chests with flails and blades in rhythm with the chanted poems of the *nauḥa-khwāns*. Spectator and participant alike take pleasure in this event. For the casual observer and nondevotee, it is the spectacle of the grotesque, and for *mātamdār* and faithful Shi‘a alike, spiritual beauty is derived from the sensual experience of the “pleasure of the whip.”⁴⁵ For the Shi‘a, however, *mātam* is not a spectacle but an act of love and of pleasure.

As the procession makes its way through the Old City, there are moments of intense *mātam*, especially when the *bībī kā ‘alam* approaches another ‘*āshūrkhāna* or other important site. Traditionally, ‘*alam*s have been submerged into the Musi River in order to “cool off” the potent energy and heat that emanates. The symbolic submersion of the *bībī kā ‘alam* into the Musi River is the climax of Muharram, and for the remaining two or more months of the days of mourning (*ayyām-e ‘azā*), there will be periodic outbursts of rit-

⁴⁵ Niklaus Largier, *In Praise of the Whip: A Cultural History of Arousal*, trans. Graham Harman (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

ual activity, but on a distinctively smaller scale. Once the climax has taken place—that is, the submersion of the *‘alam*—there is a collective release and calmness. The structure of the *majlis* is remarkably similar: the *marṣiya-khwān* recites poems to get people in the proper emotional state; the *zākīr*’s discourse creates a slow buildup of grief in the audience, which is heightened intensely by the recollection of the sufferings of the Ahl-e Bait. Once the group’s crying has reached a fever pitch and people begin to strike head, chest, and thighs in grief, the *nauḥa-khwān* will come forward and recite rhythmic poems that increase the intensity and speed with which *mātam* is performed. This crescendo will be maintained for a certain period of time—the *nauḥa-khwān* determines how long he thinks the group can sustain this emotional intensity. Suddenly it is over, and the participants immediately stop weeping and striking their chests. The group is reaggregated, some *du‘ās* are recited, and the crowd disperses in a state of happiness and calm.

The pleasures of *mātam*, the mourning assembly, and the *julūs* are based on an engagement with an “erotic reality,” in which devotees feel more “keenly, vividly, deeply, sentimentally,” and sensually with their physical bodies with each lash of the flail, and each tear and drop of blood that is shed as an expression of love for the Ahl-e Bait.⁴⁶ In her study of the interrelationship between the social and the sexual, Sasha Weitman defines the socioerotic as a dimension of the lived experience that “provides people . . . with memories of and longing for what have been variously referred to as bonds, ties, relationships, attachments, affiliations, membership, belonging, fellowship, etc., and with concomitant experiences of happiness, gratification, fulfillment and the like. This realm, then, is one of the sources of *hope*, that important intangible which gives people something to look forward to, to work for, to wait for, even to suffer for—in brief, something to live for.”⁴⁷ The socioerotic realm is inclusive, where people take pleasure in a shared group identity in which one does not fear the threat of humiliation, violence, or pain.

The performance of *mātam* in Hyderabad is a socioerotic practice through which an intense pleasure in identifying with Imam Husain’s suffering is enacted on and through an explicitly masculinized body. When I was in Karachi in February and March 2009, I participated in several *majālis* sponsored by Khoja Ithna ‘Ashari Shi‘as located in the Pakistan Employees’ Cooperative Housing Society enclave,⁴⁸ and observed women performing a particularly vigorous form of *hāth kā mātam* that lasted for thirty minutes in one *majlis*—far longer than any that I have seen in Hyderabad. Keeping time to the chant-

⁴⁶ Sasha Weitman, “On the Elementary Forms of the Socioerotic Life,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 15, no. 3–4 (1998): 75.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁸ The Pakistan Employees’ Cooperative Housing Society (PECHS) is a cooperative housing society that is part of the Jamshed Town neighborhood in Karachi.

ing of the *nauhas*, the women and men beat their breasts vigorously with the flats of their palms. Likewise, Mary Hegland has noted in her fieldwork among Pukhtun, Mohajir, and Qizilbash Shi‘i women in Peshawar, Pakistan, remarkably different *mātam* styles, some more distinctively self-mortifying than others.⁴⁹

I often heard from my interlocutors in Karachi that the Shi‘a in Hyderabad perform “*mātam* lite,” because it lacks the particular intensity and duration that characterizes its performance in Karachi. While my interlocutors may have said this to me in jest, one mullah told me that he thought the Shi‘a in Hyderabad practiced a “soft” type of *mātam* that emphasized love far more than the *jihād* (struggle) against the *zulm* (tyranny) of the ‘Umayyad caliph Yazid.⁵⁰ When I interviewed these scholars in 2009, it was often under difficult conditions in which my credentials had to be verified; we met in secured interior rooms, because many Shi‘i public figures were on the “hit lists” of various Sunni sectarian groups. We must take into account the cultural and political context in which the Shi‘a perform Muharram rituals: the muscular jihadist *mātam* of Karachi is the “lite,” love-suffused *mātam* of Hyderabad. Each is shaped by love for the Ahl-e Bait and produces a particular pleasurable affect shaped by cultural and political context.

CONCLUSION

The sacrifice of Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait at the battle of Karbala is about family. Shi‘i hagiographical narratives place particular emphasis on the volitional aspects of Imam Husain’s martyrdom. In order to preserve Muhammad’s prophetic message conveyed through the Qur’an and his Sunnah (lived tradition), Imam Husain had to fight what is often depicted as a cosmic battle between good (the Imam and his family) and evil (the ‘Umayyad caliphate).

One of my Shi‘i interlocutors in Hyderabad explained that if Imam Husain had asked for God’s intervention at Karbala, he would have received it. All imams possess esoteric knowledge (*‘ilm*) that allows him to know everything that will happen until the end of time. *‘Ilm* is what distinguishes an imam from

⁴⁹ According to Hegland, Pukhtun women practice an especially “arduous facial self-flagellation, swinging their hands together from above to strike their cheekbones”; Mohajir women focus more on the moral discipline of mourning, refraining from wearing joyful colors or makeup, and they occasionally perform *hāth kā mātam* in the *majlis*; and Qizilbash women ostensibly change little in their everyday lives during Muharram, except that they recount stories (in Persian) about Karbala (in doing this, they neither weep nor flagellate themselves). For further discussion of Pukhtun women’s vigorous *mātam* performances, see Mary Elaine Hegland, “The Power Paradox in Muslim Women’s *Majales*: North-West Pakistani Mourning Rituals as Sites of Contestation over Religious Politics, Ethnicity, and Gender,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 23, no. 2 (1998): 406–8.

⁵⁰ Field notes, March 2, 2009.

a regular human being. My interlocutor elaborated on knowledge and divine intervention, describing how God asked Imam Husain if he wanted His help, and even the *jinn* were sent to offer intercession at Karbala. This account inevitably returned to the central role of family when my interlocutor stated that Imam Husain's infant son 'Ali Asghar seized the situation, fell from his cradle in a sign of his willingness to fight for his father, faith, and kin. Divine intervention was neither required nor desired in this situation—this was a battle that needed to be fought, and everyone, including a baby, was willing to fight.⁵¹

For the Shi'a of Hyderabad, such narratives reveal the intrinsically positive role that a ritual such as *mātām* plays in publicly declaring one's loyalty and affection to the imams and Ahl-e Bait. Furthermore, because the Ahl-e Bait has been incorporated into the extended fictive kin networks of Hyderabad Shi'a, the public performance of *mātām* serves to reaffirm one's faith and relationships. The love, care, and vulnerability of *mātām* reveal its deeply socio-erotic nature, which makes this a fundamentally positive and affirmational ritual performance. The wounds inflicted on the body are those of love and devotion; to the *mātām*dār they are neither transgressive nor grotesque. Each cut of the blade restores and reinscribes one's relationship with figures such as 'Abbas, with society, and with one's own family.

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⁵¹ Field notes, March 30, 2005.