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Abject to object

Colonialism preserved through the imagery of Muharram

REBECCA M. BROWN

The month of Muharram, the first in the Islamic calendar, marks the anniversary of the famous seventh-century battle at Karbala, the defining moment for the then nascent Islamic faith. At Karbala, Husain, the grandson of the Prophet, died on the battlefield, precipitating the split of Islam into two major sects. The majority Sunni sect centered its faith on the Qur'an, with secondary emphasis on the Hadith, or the sayings of the Prophet. The Shi'i sect, while still acknowledging the Qur'an as the word of God, included the family of the Prophet and the Prophet's sayings as a major aspect of Shi'i theology. Particularly in Shi'i majority regions, but also in the Islamic world more broadly, every year during the month of Muharram the death of Husain and the earlier death of his brother Hasan are mourned in a ten-day-long set of ceremonies. These ceremonies take on different characteristics in different historical and cultural contexts, based in part on whether the region is majority Shi'i (Persia, for example) or, in the case of India, minority Muslim and minority Shi'i.

This paper focuses on a British colonial representation of one part of the northern Indian Muharram observances, the procession, or *julus*, which serves as the most public of the various elements of Muharram in this region (fig. 1). The image of the Muharram *julus* in question was painted for a British patron by an Indian artist in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. This is thus a Company painting, and from stylistic and provenance information, it belongs to the Patna School. The artist was most likely from the Bihar region, as the school is named for Patna, Bihar's major city along the Ganges.¹

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1. Taking form during the rise of the East India Company to power in the subcontinent, this categorization derives its name from

This image represents a key part of a larger pattern of Muharram representations by and for the British in both text and image. For the British in northern India, the annual Islamic rituals of Muharram served as a primary moment of intersection and interaction between the colonized and the colonizer. The form of those interactions appears in the imagery commissioned for the British and painted by Indian artists, while simultaneously the procession is also the subject of extensive textual description that, from the early nineteenth century through the twentieth century, characterized Muharram processions as primary examples of spatial and social transgression in colonized India. This paper explores the tension between a British fascination with the processions, demonstrated by lengthy and detailed descriptions, and a simultaneous circumscription of the *julus* in colonial discourse, demonstrated by images of Muharram which omit major elements of the procession.

The British, for whom ceremony became increasingly important over the course of their rule of India,² were even at this early stage fascinated by the visual and cultural spectacle of Muharram—its mourning of the martyrdom of Husain, its community-centered, politically savvy speechmaking, its inclusion and exclusion of Hindus, Sikhs, Sunni Muslims, and Christians. That fascination, however, is marked by a concurrent rejection of and horror at Muharram—its self-flagellations, its transgressive movements across the city, its disregard for delineated cultural, religious, and ethnic categories. Rather than a colonialism of dichotomous colonized and colonizer, or a colonialism of a controlled European or British Self opposed to a chaotic Islamic or Indian Other, the colonialism

the patrons—those associated with the Company. One finds these works as individual paintings as well as in sets of images bound together in albums.

2. Bernard Cohn's work on Victorian India's ceremony details the development of ritual for the preservation of British India, but at a much later (post-1858) period. See Cohn, "Representing Authority in Victorian India," in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 165–210.

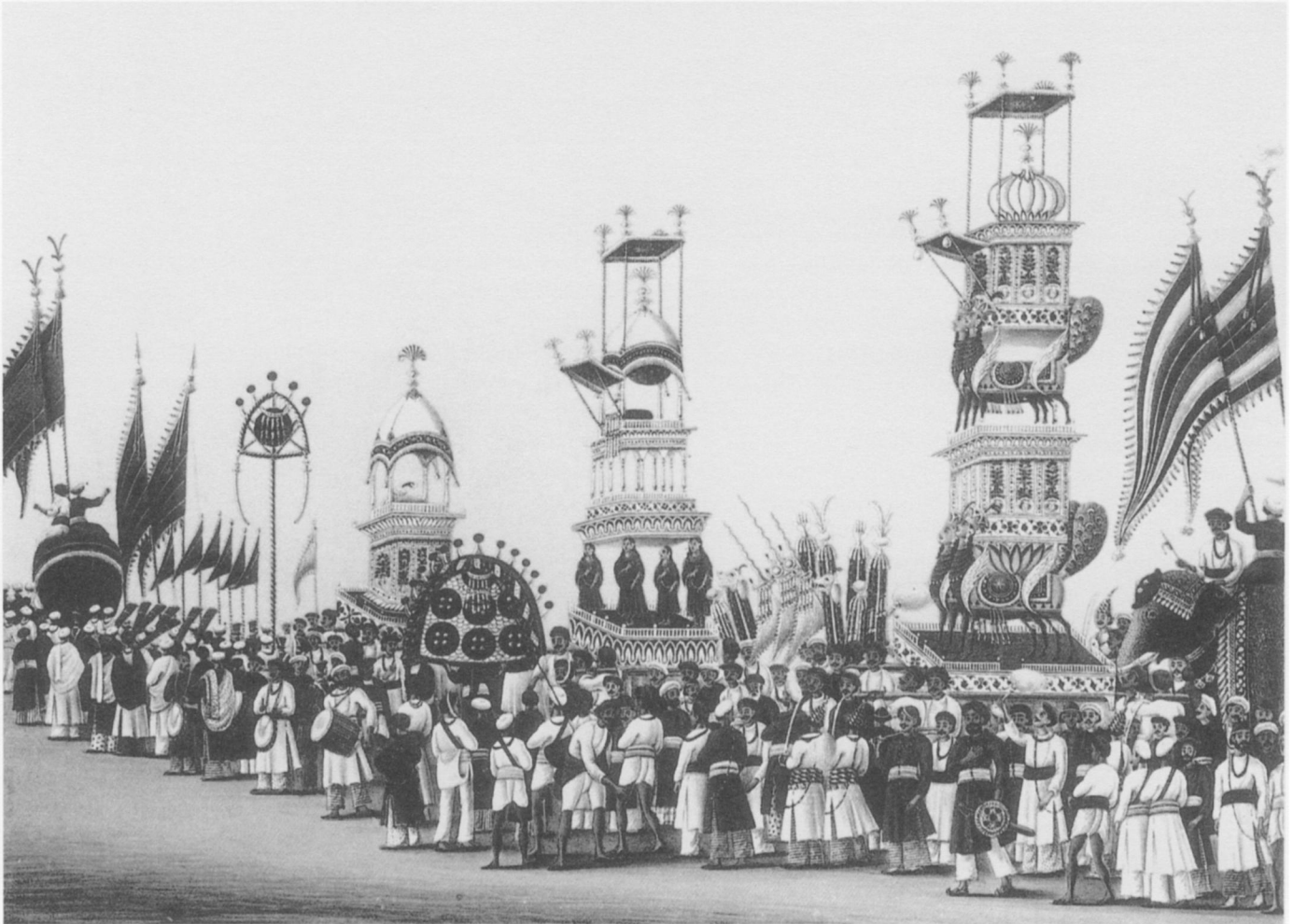


Figure 1. Anonymous, *Julus*, ca. 1820. Mica. Paul F. Walter Collection.

produced in paintings of Muharram is instead a colonialism of fascination and horror—hence a colonialism struggling with and negotiating the abject. Thus, this paper contributes to the growing literature problematizing colonial relations on a variety of axes.³

3. The dichotomous notion of the colonial as Indian versus British has long been the subject of deconstructive analysis, a project which marks almost all of postcolonial theory. This paper enters the debates through psychoanalysis (see below), a method shared by early analyses of colonialism, in particular Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, (New York: Grove Press, 1963). Homi Bhabha and others, following Fanon, have articulated a variety of concepts which attempt to break down the colonized/colonizer duality. Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994). Studies outside of postcolonial theory have also analyzed the relationship of colonized/colonizer in ways that refuse the notion of an

I argue that as the images demonstrate the repulsion and attraction that the British grappled with in a struggle to represent and to know Muharram, they also direct us to the threat felt by the colonizer from this religious, community observance: not a threat caused merely by the physicality of the events, or a fear generated by the movement of the processions across the city, but a deeper challenge to the very stability of colonialism. In the image of the *julus*, this threat is defused, with crucial elements of the textual descriptions erased in favor of a controlled, decorous movement through an undefined

antagonistic dualism, most recently David Cannadine, who argues that the British saw the colonized in similar terms to British society: *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw their Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

space. Despite the differences between the textual and visual descriptions of the Muharram procession, these two coexistent representations together constitute colonial discourse, and they represent a negotiation of the threat of the procession for the British position in early nineteenth-century India.

The impetus for this paper lay in my own surprise at the staid, quiet appearance of a particular painting of Muharram from the early nineteenth century, today housed in the Paul F. Walter Collection (fig. 1). Having read a great deal about South Asian Muharram processions in scholarship and literature, and seeing contemporary *julus* in India, with their activity and sound, I did not expect such a static, controlled, decontextualized image. Indeed, images of Muharram from the early nineteenth century are consistent in exhibiting this quiet distancing from the ceremonies.⁴ It is the sorting out of this anonymous Company painting—hereafter called the Walter *Julus*—which has led to this paper.⁵

This painting includes most but not all of the elements of a *julus*, which forms a central, public element of the ten-day Muharram ceremonies. The procession is only the most visible of the activities comprising Muharram in the northern Indian context.⁶ In addition to the processions, participants hear sermons, or *majlis*, on the martyrdom of the two grandsons of Muhammad, which relate the story of the battle at Karbala in which Husain and his followers died.

Participants include those in the Shi'i community, but also Sunni Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and others of the region, making the observance of Muharram one which encompasses the entire Indian community in one way or another. This should not be read as a utopic coming together of all peoples, as different groups participate on different levels, some assisting with the construction of the procession, and some merely

witnessing the ceremonies. In many cases, the various groups participating in Muharram in South Asia divide not on religious lines but on class or caste lines, drawing different community connections across the city.⁷ The alternate vision of Muharram in which only Shi'i Muslims participate is also inaccurate for northern India, where Shi'as do not represent a majority population.⁸

The painting of the procession depicts a series of *ta'ziyehs*, or replicas of the tombs of Husain and his brother Hasan, surrounded by groups of people, including musicians and soldiers, who process with animals of various sorts, most prominently elephants.⁹ The variety of decoration depicted on these tombs indicates that different groups created these replicas for the procession, as is normal for this region, with different communities competing across neighborhoods for the biggest and most lavish *ta'ziyeh*. *Sipars*, or the shield-like elements carried on poles, reference the battle at Karbala; more specifically, the shield symbolizes Hussein's shield. The flags, generally bearing the image of two swords, and *'alams*, or posts topped by a sculpted hand and carrying the battle standard of Husain, also underscore the historical context of the procession, referring both to the battle itself and the family of the Prophet through the five fingers representing the

4. Procession images share a controlled, quiet quality with the *majlis*, or sermon, images. See examples in Mildred Archer, *Company Paintings: Indian Paintings of the British Period* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1992).

5. As this image has no official title, I have named it after the collection in which it currently resides: The Paul F. Walter Collection. The painting is on mica, and was likely part of a set of images sold together, representing various Indian festivals and ceremonies. An image of hook-swinging, part of the Charak festival, also on mica, comes from the same set (fig. 2). See Pratapaditya Pal and Vidya Dehejia, *From Merchants to Emperors: British Artists and India, 1757–1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 162–163.

6. Vernon James Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam: Shi'i Devotional Rituals in South Asia* (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 1993).

7. See Nita Kumar, "Work and Leisure in the Formation of Identity: Muslim Weavers in a Hindu City," for an analysis of the Benarsi weavers' participation in Muharram, and Sandria Freitag's introduction to the same volume, "Introduction: The History and Political Economy of Banaras," which examines the multiple identities delineated through the ceremonies. Both articles in Sandria B. Freitag, ed., *Culture and Power in Banaras: Community, Performance, and Environment, 1800–1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

8. India's Shi'i population is a minority within a minority. For a discussion of the mixed population in Lucknow's eighteenth-century Muharram observances, see J. R. I. Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran & Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California, 1988), p. 117. For a broader picture of this facet of Indian Muharram, see David Pinault, *Horse of Karbala: Muslim Devotional Life in India* (London: St. Martin's Press, 2001), p. 14. In Persian culture, majority Shi'i since the sixteenth century, Muharram includes primarily Shi'a participants, but like India, other sects and religions also observe or participate. See Peter J. Chelkowski, ed., *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1979) for discussion of the central Persian observance of Muharram, the *Ta'ziyeh* passion play.

9. In the Indian context, *ta'ziyeh* refers to the replicas of the tombs of Hasan and Husain created for Muharram observances. In the Persian/Iranian context, this word refers to the passion play performed during Muharram as well as the theater in which that play is held. While reenactments of the battle do take place in the Indian context, they are not as elaborate or staged as the Persian *Ta'ziyeh*. See Chelkowski (note 8).

five major members of the Prophet's family.¹⁰ The anonymous artist includes all of these elements in the Walter *Julus*.

The artist gives the procession a slow, measured pace by turning some of the participants to look to the rear of the column and by refraining from expansive gestures of motion in any of the figures, animal or human. He shows the solemnity of the event in the slow movement of the crowd: the figures inch forward, away from the viewer, some of them pausing to look back at the *ta'ziyehs* behind. The crowd, which one *could* see as a rowdy bunch, given the variety of poses, the variation in the direction of the gazes, and the few hands up in the air reads also in a spatially controlled manner. Most notably, the prominent figure to the right of the composition with a flywhisk in his hand is lost in the crowd around him, and his gesture is overwhelmed by the tall *ta'ziyeh* above him. The participants follow a diagonal line from the bottom-right foreground back in space to the top-left middleground. Figures on the left side of the procession repeat one another in their planted stance, marking a rhythm of enclosure on that left side. The rhythm of the *ta'ziyehs*, flags, and *sipars* also echo this diagonal, moving compositionally from top right to mid-left, completing the triangular, diagonal recession in space indicated by the bottom edge of the procession. This ordering overwhelms any variation that occurs within the crowd depicted, as if the crowd were poured into an preexisting mold for easy display. The solemnity achieved by this composition might be expected in a procession meant as a mourning ritual, but the textual descriptions do not match this level of quietude.

While most aspects of the Muharram *julus* appear in this image, several do not. Conspicuously absent are two elements which are central in textual descriptions of the procession: mourning rituals, or *matam*, and the transgression of city space caused by the procession. The absence of these two elements was what drew me to the image in the first place: when one reads accounts of the procession, it becomes surprising to see the image without those key elements that dominate textual descriptions.

First, the painting provides no images of mourners who outwardly exhibit *matam*, the manifestations of suffering that can take several forms, most often verbal and physical mourning, including both verbal cries and

weeping. Also encapsulated within the term *matam* are the more (in)famous elements of Muharram: self-flagellations and other sorts of self-inflicted physical pain. This aspect of the observances, like audible cries and weeping, communicates a connection with the experience of the Prophet's family as they were defeated at Karbala. The yearly observance becomes a reliving of the events of the seventh century, in order to remind present-day Muslims of those early sacrifices and the foundational elements of the Shi'i faith.¹¹

These mourning elements are absent in both the content of the Walter *Julus* and in the manner of its portrayal. The question of *manner* is crucial, for the image not only misses the physical act of *matam* so integral to Muharram's procession and its *majlis*, but also lacks the emotional engagement mentioned by early nineteenth-century commentators in their descriptions of the ceremonies.¹² The column moves slowly forward, with each element—elephant, drummer, *ta'ziyeh*—playing its part. But in its overall impression, the image of the ceremony lacks an emotive connection with the events commemorated. One might seek an explanation in stylistic limitations here, arguing that the northern Indian Patna style of Company painting, out of which this work comes, does not lend itself to overt scenes of emotion.¹³ While this may be true in terms of facial expression and body language, the level of emotional turmoil indicated by acts of self-flagellation could be communicated via other means: a dynamic composition, details indicating such mourning (tearing of hair, rending of clothes), or similar elements. Indeed, these types of emotional imagery can be found in other contexts, for example a ca. 1810 image of a Muharram sermon, or *majlis*, in the Victoria and Albert Museum collection, which includes figures weeping.¹⁴ None of these elements exist within this image.

Alongside *matam*, a second major element is missing from the Walter *Julus*. In the textual discussions of Muharram, including both contemporaneous narrative accounts and the scholarly writings detailing the history

11. Schubel, *ibid.*

12. See for example Emma Roberts, *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan with Sketches of Anglo-Indian Society* (London: William H. Allen and Co., 1835), vol. 1, p. 178 ff.

13. For more examples of the Patna School, see Mildred Archer, *Patna Painting* (London: David Marlowe, Ltd. for the Royal India Society, 1948).

14. Victoria and Albert Museum, *Asura: Ceremony of Mourning for Hasan and Husain*, by an anonymous artist, Murshidabad, about 1810. IS 11-1887, no. 1. Published but not reproduced in Archer (see note 4), p. 83.

10. For more on *'alams* and the symbolism of these processional elements, see Pinault (note 8), p. 78, and Schubel (see note 6), pp. 108-109.

of this observance, the transgression or violation of the city space by the procession plays a central role. The Walter *Julus*, however, altogether neglects the context of a city or town. The procession is isolated, with no architectural background or context. Visually, this isolation focuses the viewer on the foreground and the procession taking place. One can more easily see the silhouette of the *ta'ziyehs*, the variety of people, and the shapes of the flags against a plain background. The absence of context, however, becomes one charged with political and historical implications, particularly when compared to the textual descriptions of the processions.

In this case, the context could be extrapolated as the location where the painting was made, specifically Patna, or the region around that Bihari city. The Patna School of Company painting is linked stylistically with the Murshidabad School, named for the nineteenth-century seat of the Nawab (governor) of Bengal, and thus the center of patronage for the region.¹⁵ While similar to Murshidabad paintings, the Walter *Julus* differs in both style and content from contemporary images of Muharram set in Lucknow, a city in Uttar Pradesh to the west, and the seat of the Nawabs of Oudh (Awadh), a Shi'i dynasty that traces its ancestry to Persia. For example, images from Lucknow usually include some architecture, as the cityscape is defined, in part, by its grand *imambaras*. Thus, despite the complete absence of town or even landscape setting in the Walter *Julus*, the types of *juluses* that the artist and patron would draw from are those which took place in northeastern colonial India, specifically in either Patna or Murshidabad.

The textual history of Muharram processions in this region of colonial northern India is one of conflict and tension generated by the procession's movement through the streets of a city. Most treatments of the Indian Muharram procession in text—whether fictional, travel-related, journalistic, governmental, or historical—focus on the confrontations among various groups within the city, generally instigated by the movement of the procession through the streets. Indian cities are organized into neighborhoods (called *mohallas* in Islamic communities) centered on a temple or mosque. As the procession traverses these spaces, it passes through sacred community areas, a transgression which triggers protest from the inhabitants of the neighborhood.¹⁶ This is, of course, not unique to India.

15. Toby Falk and Mildred Archer, *Indian Miniatures in the India Office Library* (London: Sotheby Parke Bernet, 1981), p. 215.

16. While it is likely that the participants felt this element of transgression as well, and indeed the idea of crossing boundaries (of

Many religious processions cross boundaries within cities and disrupt the order of urban space in the process, such as the Catholic and Protestant conflicts in northern Ireland, which often erupt around similar processional transgression.

We see this transgressive element of the *julus* in a wide variety of textual sources. Perhaps the most famous instance of the textual illustration of Muharram appears in the fictional account given in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. Forster modelled his fictional Chandrapore after Patna.

Mohurram was approaching, and as usual the Chandrapore Mohammedans were building paper towers of a size too large to pass under the branches of a certain pepl tree. One knew what happened next; the tower stuck, a Mohammedan climbed up the pepl and cut the branch off, the Hindus protested, there was a religious riot, and Heaven knew what, with perhaps the troops sent for. There had been deputations and conciliation committees under the auspices of Turton, and all the normal work of Chandrapore had been hung up. Should the procession take another route, or should the towers be shorter? The Mohammedans offered the former, the Hindus insisted on the latter. The Collector had favored the Hindus, until he suspected that they had artificially bent the tree nearer the ground. They said it sagged naturally. Measurements, plans, an official visit to the spot. But Ronny had not disliked his day, for it proved that the British were necessary to India; there would certainly have been bloodshed without them.¹⁷

Written a century after the Walter *Julus* was painted, Forster here deploys his famous sense of humor in exposing one of the truths about the colonial presence in India: the British produced a frame of reference in which they were necessary for keeping the peace, and as a result the tensions created by Muharram processions are highlighted in the text. Muharram's reputation precedes it—"one knew what happened next"—and its capacity for disruption is emphasized here in order to enhance the effect of the peacemaking British colonizer. Forster makes it clear that this is a common story, and that Ronny's "day" can be considered emblematic—a model for the strife that Muharram caused among Indian communities, or more

historical time, from the mundane world to paradise, across community lines) is central to most aspects of Muharram, this paper is about the colonial discourse surrounding the ceremonies rather than a study of Muharram for its nineteenth-century participants. See Schubel (note 6) for a discussion of the liminality engendered by Muharram rituals for the participants.

17. E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1984 [1924]), pp. 102–103.

properly, for the British policing those Indian communities.

It is clear that by the time Forster wrote this fictional account of a Muharram procession, the story itself was already established in colonial lore. If we look back to the early nineteenth-century context of the Walter *Julus* and examine contemporary texts, we find early versions of the need for keeping the peace and the conflict that Muharram processions engendered. Emma Roberts, who traveled to India with her sister and brother-in-law in the 1820s, visited Patna and the entire northeastern region of India and wrote about it in her serialized memoir, later published as *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan*. In her chapter on Patna, she spends a great deal of time describing the Islamic cemetery, primarily due to its role in the Muharram processions each year. In Patna, as in most northern Indian *juluses*, the procession of the *ta'ziyehs* ends at the cemetery, where the tomb replicas are deposited.¹⁸ Roberts's description of this event includes many of the same elements as Forster's fictional account:

But this cemetery displays a stirring and magnificent spectacle during the annual imposing ceremonies of the Mohurram. [. . .] The riches of the city enable it to celebrate the obsequies of the young martyrs, Hossein and Houssein, in a very splendid manner; and this noble square is selected for the final depository of the *tazees*, or tombs, which are carried about in commemoration of the funeral honours paid by the followers of Ali to his slaughtered sons. The whole population of Patna, Moslem, Christian, and Hindoo, assemble to witness the procession. [. . .] The whole square rings with shouts of "Hossein! Houssein!" accompanied by deep groans and beatings on the breast, while amid the discharge of musketry, the last sad scene is enacted by groups personating the combatants of that fatal battle in which Hossein perished. Whenever the venerated martyr is beaten to the ground, the lamentations are redoubled, many being only withheld by force from inflicting desperate wounds upon themselves. Woe to any of the followers of Omar who should dare to intrude upon the mourners; the battle is then renewed in earnest. Whole companies of *sepoys* have been known to engage in deadly combat with each other, and numerous lives are lost in the revival of the old dispute respecting the claims of the sons of Ali, in opposition to those of Omar, who represents himself as the adopted heir of the prophet. It requires the

18. Patna's procession was extensive in the nineteenth century, by some accounts incorporating approximately 14,000 *ta'ziyehs*. See Surendra Gopal, *Patna in the 19th Century (A Socio-Cultural Profile)* (Calcutta: Naya Prokash, 1982), p. 22. See also Sir William Wilson Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal* (London: Trübner & Co., 1875), p. 61.

utmost vigilance on the part of the magistracy to prevent the recurrence of bloodshed in the fierce collision of contending parties at Patna during the festival; the Moosulman population of that place being more turbulent and arrogant, and, as it has been already remarked, more bigoted than those of any other city belonging to the Company's territories. Even the mild Hindoos are not very governable upon these occasions.¹⁹

The elements of the Muharram procession highlighted here involve the reenactment of the battle at the end of the procession which requires, as Roberts says, "the utmost vigilance on the part of the magistracy" in order to prevent bloodshed. Forster's description of a century later mirrors the narrative arc of Roberts's telling of the Muharram events, with both moving toward the "inevitable" conflict and the necessary presence of the British as peacekeepers. Roberts's narrative also highlights the deep emotion and turbulence of the procession and reenactment, emotion which spills over into the non-Muslim population participating in the ceremonies.

In a later chapter devoted entirely to Muharram as a cultural event, Roberts elaborates on the early nineteenth-century observances. While focused on the grand Muharram ceremonies at Lucknow, Roberts takes some care to indicate when her narrative centers on that city and when it is more generally about Muharram observances in northern India. She distinguishes the elaborate ceremonies of the Indian subcontinent from those of the Persian and Arabian regions, emphasizing the pomp with which Muharram is observed in the subcontinent:

Imbibing a love of shew from long domestication with a people passionately attached to pageantry and spectacle, they have departed from the plainness and simplicity of the worship of their ancestors, and in the decorations of the *tazees*, and the processions which accompany them to the place of sepulture, display their reverential regard for Ali and his sons in a manner which would be esteemed scandalous if thus accompanied in Persia and Arabia, where the grief of the Sheah is more quietly and soberly manifested . . .²⁰

Roberts continues her description with a specific discussion about Lucknow's observances, including several pages detailing the participation of the Hindus in the procession, the patronage of *ta'ziyehs*, and the mourning in general. She concludes this section on Hindu-Muslim amity by noting that it is not always so friendly:

19. Roberts (see note 12), vol. 1, pp. 178–181.

20. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 179.

[. . .] when, as it sometimes happens, the holidays of the Hindoo and the Mussulman fall together, it requires no small exertion on the part of the authorities to prevent a hostile collision. At Allahabad, on the celebration of the Mohurrum, some of the leading persons repaired to the judge to request that the Hindoos, who were about to perform some of their idolatrous worship, should not be permitted to blow their trumpets, and beat their drums, and bring their heathenish devices in contact with the sad and holy solemnity, the manifestations of their grief for the death of the Imaams. They represented, in the most lively manner, the obligation which Christians were under to support the worshippers of the true God against the infidel, and were not satisfied with the assurance that they should not be molested by the intermixture of the processions, which should be strictly confined to opposite sides of the city. The Hindoos were equally tenacious in upholding their rights, and it became necessary to draw out the troops for the prevention of bloodshed.²¹

Again, the tension that the processions cause is central to Roberts's narrative of the ten-day ceremony. She turns for several pages to the *majlis*, or sermon, element of Muharram, and then spends the last pages of her chapter on the final day of the Muharram ceremonies and the most elaborate of the processions. She describes the participants:

Devout Mussulmans walk, on these occasions, with their heads and their feet bare, beating their breasts, and tearing their hair, and throwing ashes over their persons with all the vehemence of the most frantic grief; but many content themselves with a less inconvenient display of sorrow, leaving to hired mourners the task of inciting and inflaming the multitude by their lamentations and bewailments.²²

This is followed by another discussion of the conflicts that arise during the end of the procession, echoing her narrative about Patna in her earlier chapter.

Roberts's narrative of Muharram, both within the context of Patna and more broadly in the chapter devoted to the observances, proceeds through three stages. First, Roberts notes with surprise that while Muharram commemorates the deaths of two martyrs, and thus it should be somber and quiet, it is in fact an energetic, inflammatory, and spectacular show, one that might be taken for a celebratory festival. Indeed, she calls it a festival on several occasions in her text. Second, the participation of Sunnis, Hindus, and Christians in the ceremonies is elaborately detailed in her writing, again with some surprise at the capacity of Islamic mourning rituals to become broader Indian

festivals. Finally, these discussions of cross-religious interaction generally lead to an exposition on the potential for bloodshed and conflict that the processions of Muharram engender, making necessary a British peacekeeping presence.

In addition to these three narrative elements, Roberts gives us an idea of the mourners themselves, both in their level of energy and also in their specific actions and appearance. She includes the tearing of hair, the beating of breasts, and the dusting of the body in ashes as specific actions mourners take, and adds that hired mourners perform these rituals for those not willing or not able to do so themselves. In the context of more private mourning that takes place during Muharram, Roberts describes the physical beating of these hired mourners as extremely vigorous:

After some well-wrought passage, describing the sufferings of the unhappy princes, the reader pauses, and immediately the mourners on the ground commence beating their breasts and shouting "Hossein! Houssein!" giving themselves such dreadful blows that it seems incredible that human nature should sustain them, until at length they sink exhausted on the ground amid the piercing cries and lamentations of the spectators.²³

Thus, the physicality of the mourning, as well as the emotional engagement with the commemoration of these martyrs, takes a central role alongside the narrative arc of the various communal conflicts Muharram induces. These textual descriptions—both the conflict and the physical mourning—are not present in the representation of Muharram's procession seen in the Walter *Julus* painted the same decade as Roberts's visit to India.

On the other hand, the image gives the viewer all of the rich details of the *ta'ziyeh*, something not usually described in detail in the verbal descriptions. While the height of the tomb replicas and the basic form are described, the variety of architectural forms used in their stacked pavilions, the variety of *'alams* and *sipars*, and

23. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 191. Roberts's description of the mourning is not unique. On the reverse of a *majlis* image in the Oriental and India Office Library Collections, a long paragraph companion to the image on the front includes this description of the mourners: "A Machine is constructed very superbly painted and gilt, supposed to represent their Tomb—Before which is a priest reading the circumstances of their Death which in general has a most enthusiastic effect upon the audience who weep, groan and beat their breasts with the greatest violence, loudly calling upon the names of Hussein Hossein, prostrating themselves before the Tomb and offering the sacrifice of their lives in the defence of the cause of these two Saints." Add Or 938, Prints and Drawings Collection, *Muharram*, text on reverse.

21. Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 188–189.

22. Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 194–195.

the way the procession is organized—none of these elements are usually described, whereas the image shows some of these details. What is certain, however, is that neither the text nor the image represents the “true” Muharram procession narrative of the early nineteenth century. Indeed, both operate in similar ways: what is described in detail and what is left out are negotiated, historically contingent decisions made by patron, editor, writer, and artist along the way. Therefore I resist the idea that Roberts’s text is the “reality” of Muharram processions and the Walter *Julus* is thus somehow merely a representation. Both the text and the image became emblematic for Muharram: these narratives repeat themselves across the nineteenth century. Thus, even in the 1820s, an emblematic description of Muharram emerged, based on British observance and description of the *juluses* and *majlises* in a variety of northern Indian communities, including Patna, Murshidabad, Allahabad, and Lucknow.

This description carried much weight, as it continued to be used into the early twentieth century and shaped Muharram observances even in post-independence India. For example, Nita Kumar, in an essay examining the weaver community in present-day Varanasi, relates a similar contemporary Muharram conflict, one that, like Forster’s fictional account above, occurs with some frequency.

. . . Many of the tazia processions pass through crowded localities in the center of the city where lanes are only a few yards wide. Common threats to the sacredness of the occasion arise from possible collision between relatively oversized tazias or absolutely oversized *‘alam*, and low tree branches or telephone wires. A collision portends Hindu–Muslim conflict: the locality, the surrounding houses and porches, and the public spaces being Hindu, the “victimized” processionists Muslim, and the offending tree probably the sacred pipal.²⁴

Kumar’s description stems from her own interviews with police and recent observations of the processions in Varanasi; it is a contemporary recounting of the problematic procession of Muharram. Its similarity to Forster’s fictional account—from the oversized *ta’ziyeh* to the pipal tree itself—points to a continued pattern both of governmental policing and, more to the point, of widely held perceptions of Muharram that stretch from pre- to post-independent India. Again, we see a pattern emerge: an emblematic image of Muharram that seems utterly opposed to that seen in the nineteenth-century

Walter *Julus*, where a calm, slow procession proceeds through a space absent of any context.

We also see this emblematic transgressive Muharram in descriptions of nineteenth-century Muharram observances in Bombay, as explored in James Masselos’s work.²⁵ One of the major threats to the peaceful conduct of these ceremonies was the increased presence of Persian Shi’i immigrants in nineteenth-century Bombay. These newcomers incorporated fresh elements into the ceremony, including a horse procession (in honor of Husain’s mount) that involved shouting abuses at those who did not participate with the Shi’i group. As these changes clashed with the mid-century custom of carrying *ta’ziyehs* in procession, the British banned horse processions in order to alleviate the tension. After the mid-nineteenth century, the British further separated the variant forms of Muharram in order to “preserve the peace”—a peace constructed through colonial discourse as well. The policing of this division meant both the physical presence of British officers in the streets as well as legislative intervention. Laws banned certain practices perceived as dangerous, and certain “safer” customs continued—often to the detriment of those perceived as more threatening, such as the horse procession.

Masselos points out that the British curtailed Muharram because of their desire to keep control over the population, most particularly because of the aspect of transgression of space involved in the processions. He makes clear that the movement through the city did not merely carve out sacred space. Rather, the process both invaded and controlled space not normally given to the group in question. This could mean crossing boundaries between two neighboring Islamic *mohallas*, or alternatively, crossing traditionally British areas on the way to the final destination of the procession.

Thus, rather than interpret Muharram in terms of a creation of the sacred alone, Masselos acknowledges and highlights the politico-religious core of these processions and as a result explains the British intervention as one centered on order:

The issue was not merely of maintaining peace between conflicting groups or of preventing sporadic limited incidents of lawlessness or violence. It also related to the British concern over maintaining their domination given their numbers and the size of the population over which they ruled. . . . Mohurram raised the spectre not of a

24. Kumar (see note 7), p. 159.

25. James Masselos, “Change and Custom in the Format of the Bombay Mohurram During the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” *South Asia* ns 5, no. 2 (December 1982), pp. 47–67.

planned or concerted revolt but of a spontaneous, contagious upsurge.²⁶

Thus, the maintenance of domination over a population larger than that of the colonizer anchored the concerns of the British in Bombay; and, as a result, the policing of Muharram took on a heightened importance. The colonizers needed to stop the transgressive acts, for they threatened the very fabric of control and order that the British attempted to produce in colonized India, by making that very numerical advantage clearly apparent.

The textual examples above—Forster, Roberts, Kumar, and Masselos—all highlight the transgression and potential for violence of Muharram's procession, a transgression policed by the British to maintain or establish order. Roberts and Forster, with Kumar in the context of contemporary India, illuminate the need for Muharram's transgression in order to support the presence of a policing force. Masselos fleshes out this discussion by articulating the threat to order. The threat posed by Muharram is greater even than a planned revolt, precisely because it is spontaneous and unpredictable—it strikes against the very principle of ordering that constitutes British colonial rule.

If this disruption of order is crucial for the textual descriptions of Muharram it is not to be found in the *Walter Julius*. Instead, we find only a compositionally static, isolated scene. The viewer is expected to focus only on the procession in isolation from the well-documented conflicts and tensions which arise in relation to it. The *julus* thus occupies a space outside a city and its varying populations and neighborhoods, evacuating the transgressive elements so central to textual descriptions of the Muharram procession.

Why is this image marked by these two absences: absence of spatial, ethnic, and religious transgression within the city, and absence of *matam*, or outward mourning rituals? These are major parts of the ceremony—indeed, one could argue that they *define* Muharram for the British viewer—and yet they are missing here. Rather than read these absences as a separation of two distinct discourses—that of transgression and *matam*, as seen in the textual descriptions, versus that of isolated, sanitized parading, as seen in the image—I read these two seemingly disparate descriptions of Muharram as *together* producing a *colonial* description of the ceremonies, a discourse of transgression, isolation, and erasure all at the same time.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

The *Walter Julius* gives us insight into how these two seemingly opposed descriptions work together. The absence of external architectural or urban context helps to simplify and order the composition, and the lack of any violent gestures or active displays of mourning or *matam* further contributes to the stability and calm of the scene. The painting creates an image of Muharram occurring happily within bounds, in control, and overseen by the (British) viewer. The event of Muharram is transformed into a spectacle to behold from a distance. It bears little if any resemblance to the threatening near-riot that the textual descriptions of conflict above suggest.

Rather than highlighting the various performances of mourning, and rather than communicating the conflicts caused by the height of the *ta'ziyehs* or the self-flagellations, this image presents a Muharram neatly packaged for consumption. What we see in the *Walter Julius* is not the opposite of the transgressive, *matam*-filled ceremony seen in texts, but perhaps a visual policing of the procession—an image of the conclusion to Ronny's day: a controlled, delimited, and ordered Muharram fit for viewing by the British public. Here, the image of the *julus* makes Muharram manageable within colonial discourse, renegotiating its threat to colonialism by eliminating those elements too threatening to acknowledge in an image.

Is this the end of the story, then? Does the *julus* image serve as a neat resolution for the explosion of discourse surrounding the issues of policing crowds, legislating processions, and describing bloodshed—a sort of plot closure for the colonial discourse surrounding Muharram? Here, the textual descriptions might be read as the conflict and tension between the protagonist and the antagonist, followed by the resolution and denouement of the *julus* painting. In this plot-driven model, one reads both of these images (textual and visual) as delineating and concretizing a separation between British and Indian. The painting puts the Indians on the page, isolated from any cityscape or British presence, viewed by a British controlling eye.²⁷ The Indian procession is ordered and controlled through this imagery: what was transgressive chaos is now under control and able to be known.

I suggest, however, that this is not the end of the story. The *Walter Julius* cannot merely serve as a closing

27. The absence of British presence in these images is characteristic of colonial and Orientalizing imagery, a facet discussed in detail in the context of French imaging of northern Africa in the nineteenth century. See Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," *Art in America* 71, no. 5 (May 1983), pp. 118–131, 187–191.

element for the disruption of the Muharram procession, an ordering moment after the chaotic transgression of the city and interruption of the colonially imposed order. This reading would highlight the return to order prevalent in the verbal narratives. In this reading, transgression is a temporary incursion across an established and legitimate border. However, with Masselos, I argue that the threat to British hegemony represented by Muharram is stronger than mere transgression. In order to examine this deeper threat to British hegemony, I turn to the art historical context of these images.

No Muharram images were produced before the late eighteenth century, despite traditions in India of the representation of public ceremony in both Hindu and Islamic courts.²⁸ While many subject matters show continuity from the late-Mughal era into the colonial period, Muharram emerges as a new subject within Company painting. Thus, the imaging of Muharram develops out of colonial patronage, with the Walter *Julus* a representative example. The effort to represent Muharram is intimately linked with colonial discourse and its effects, namely the consolidation and preservation of British hegemony in the subcontinent.

Examining other images commissioned at the same time—or even more specifically, an image from the same set as the Walter *Julus*—we find subject matters which seem to focus on physically graphic ritual. Hook-swinging, for example, part of the Hindu Charak festival, involves men placing hooks in their backs and swinging on a rope from a pole (fig. 2).²⁹ Why and how can this

28. While festivals are well represented in paintings for Indian patrons during this period and earlier, Muharram rarely figures in these works, even in works patronized by Islamic rulers. Efforts to uncover examples of Muharram representations prior to the nineteenth century in any context (Indian or otherwise) have proved fruitless. Furthermore, during the nineteenth century, representations of Persian *Ta'ziyeh* performances (in Persia, the word *ta'ziyeh* refers not to the tomb replicas but to the passion plays staged during Muharram) are the only examples of other Muharram imagery found in this search. In British India, representations of Muharram include the processions, *majlis*, and various scenes of individuals with flags, *ta'ziyehs*, or lamps decorating *imambaras*. My thanks to the H-ISLAMART list for their responses to my queries on this subject, particularly Oleg Grabar, Andras Riedlmayer, Jonathan Bloom, and Ulrich Marzolph.

29. This image of hook-swinging is not an isolated one. Two Murshidabad School hook-swinging images, ca. 1800, at the Victoria and Albert Museum depict this ceremony in an active way, one with the spectators pointing at the figure swinging from the rope (IS 11:1887 nos. 11 and 37, Archer (see note 4), pp. 72, 83). A similar Murshidabad painting (ca. 1800) is reproduced in Mildred and W. G. Archer, *Indian Painting for the British, 1770–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), plate 3, fig. 5.

image of physical ritual exist alongside the Walter *Julus* with its total lack of *matam* imagery? Clearly, not all Indian festival or ceremonial subject matter is treated the same in this genre of painting. It must not be a simple horror at the physical elements of this ritual, for there is no problem with metal hooks piercing the shoulders of participants in the Charak festival. Moreover, this cannot simply be an Indian versus British dichotomy. It must prove more complex, in which the Islamic Indian subject matter is treated with different concerns than Hindu Indian subject matter.

The threat here is not Muharram itself or the transgression of spaces. The threat stems from a different colonial problematic. We see a discursive dualism threatened by a third term: the position of the Islamic Other. Certainly this is not the only “third” term in colonial discourse, but it is a prime example of the ways in which this discourse negotiated the complexity of India’s various populations.³⁰ One sees in both the *Julus* imagery and the textual descriptions of Muharram the same goal played out: the discourse works in both cases to defuse the threat of a third term. Hindu ritual can be fully “Othered” in its strangeness, separated entirely as utterly different from British ceremony, and thus representations of hook-swinging can be depicted without threat. But Islamic ritual cannot fill that same position, as it is too close to British practice: not different enough. Furthermore, the idea of the British as heirs to Mughal rule in the subcontinent was already current in the last quarter of the eighteenth century; this complicated the othering of Islamic culture in India and led to a discourse of sameness between British Christian and Islamic cultures.³¹ Thus, I argue that the proliferation of textual description regarding the British control and the policing of Muharram serves the same purpose as the extracting of dynamic elements from the *Julus* imagery. Together, these elements serve to negotiate a non-threatening position for Muharram within colonial discourse.

The discourse of Muharram therefore exists between colonial categories. As a boundary it marks both the separation of colonized and colonizer *and* the point at

30. In the postcolonial context the idea of a “third space” has been articulated by Homi Bhabha in order to discuss the diasporic cultures in both the metropole and throughout the formerly colonized world, but this is certainly distinct from what I discuss here. See Bhabha, “The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. J. Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), pp. 207–221.

31. See C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 13.

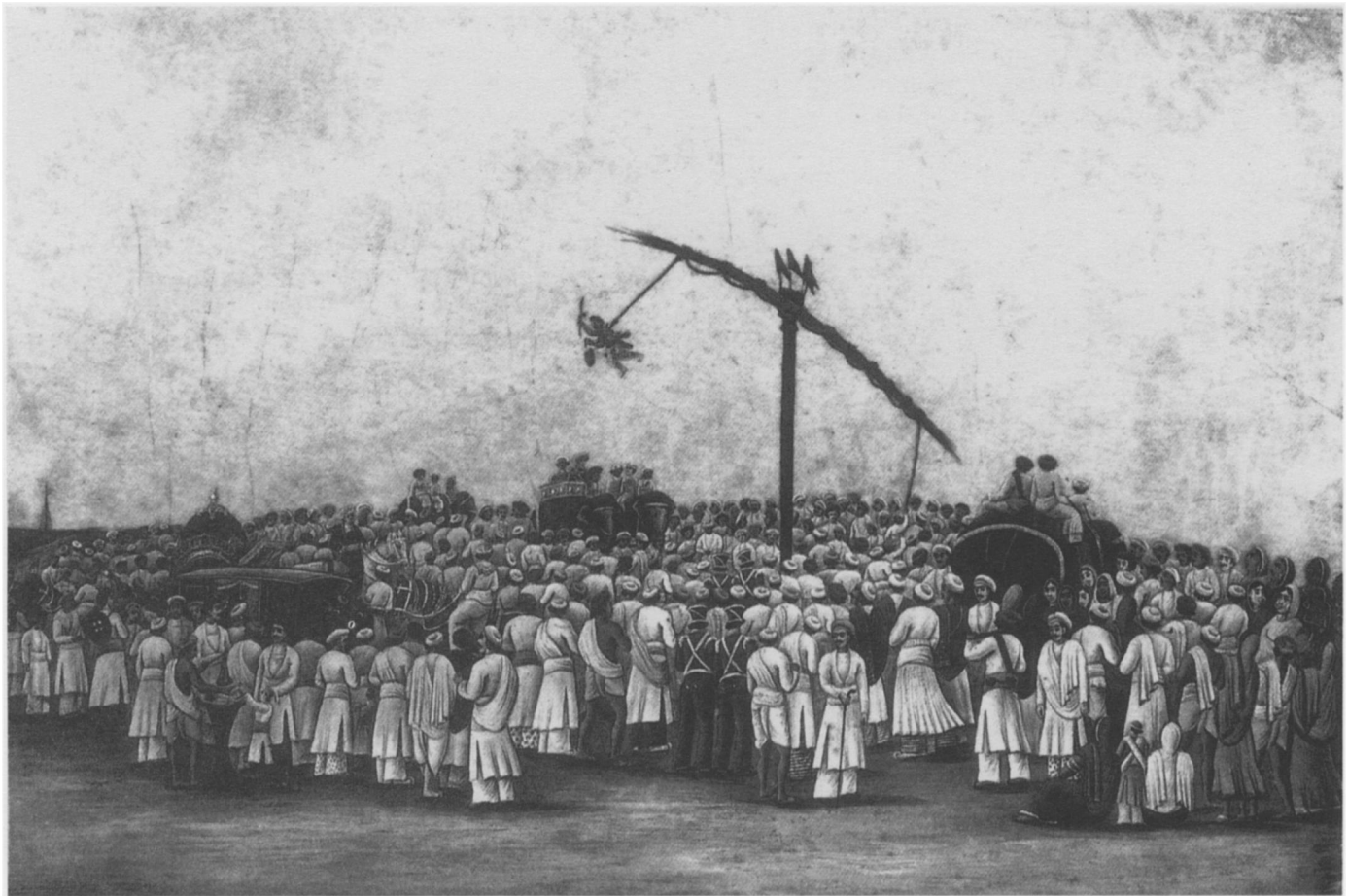


Figure 2. Anonymous, *Hook-swinging*, ca. 1820. Mica. Paul F. Walter Collection.

which they join together. The text and image of the Indian ceremony separates the British from the Indian by creating both a chaotic Other in the text and a neatly packaged Other in the imagery. Yet simultaneously this discourse ties the two sides together. This representation of Muharram is never outside that discourse but instead helps to create it. Imagings of Muharram, textual and visual, do this because they exist as a site for representation “in between” chaos and order, riot and calm, Indian and British. These representations cannot be reduced to the actions of the British domesticating this Indian ceremony. And they are not two parts of a unified plot line. Much of the work done by these representations involves more than the last move of domestication or denouement.

Rather than simply discuss these representations as one of a subject (the British colonizer/protagonist) domesticating an object (the Indian colonized/antagonist)

through the resolution of a crisis moment in the plot, the interstices between the two must be acknowledged. The analysis must shift from the domestication and objectification of an Islamic Indian ceremony toward an understanding of the colonial relations of power as taking place in the realm of the abject—that space in between chaos and order, subject and object, Indian and British—that space within colonial discourse, marked by the Muharram procession.

For psychoanalysis, in which field the term first gained currency, the *abject* is that which borders and marks the boundaries between a subject and its other. The abject both establishes the boundary but *also* produces both the subject and the object (that is, through the constitution of the boundary between subject and object). One of the most powerful elements of the abject—one which can enhance the reading of the discourse of Muharram processions—lies in the deep

interconnections of attraction and repulsion, fascination and horror situated at its core. The most well-known characterization of the abject stems from its manifestation as physical excretions from the body (excrement, vomit, menstrual blood) that emanate from the subject, and are reviled by the self but at the same time mark the individual as a subject, and therefore elicit fascination with revulsion simultaneously.³²

By marking a space of “not me” outside of the self through these excretions, the connections between the self and the abject solidify around seeing this “not me” and the concurrent revulsion/fascination. For psychoanalytic philosopher Julia Kristeva, the corpse represents the most striking abjection: “If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything.”³³ The abject is more than merely the membrane that divides self and other: the abject exists as part of both. Excrement, the corpse, and menstrual blood are all a part of the self while simultaneously becoming a jettisoned, reviled exterior.

I turn to the abject here because it offers an interpretive space that acknowledges the constitutive link between the self and the rejected outside. Unlike a simple transgression, in which two “pure” elements cross paths and thereby cause tension (as in the case of the verbal descriptions of Muharram and its procession above), the abject describes an already established and constitutive interrelationship between the interior and the exterior.³⁴ Thus revulsion and fascination do not oppose one another so much as constitute parts of the same reaction to that which crosses the ultimate border. In crossing that border, that which is abjected (excrement, for example) performs two functions: it establishes the self as self *and* threatens the self by pointing out the shaky ground upon which it rests: the abject. That is, because the abject emanates from “me” and establishes “not me,” it also forces the self to acknowledge its

existence as contingent. Muharram’s seemingly contradictory representations in image and text stem from the problematic of instability caused by Muharram’s threat as abject.

Thus, any reading of the *julus* image above as an indication of separation between Indian and British is not sufficient, as reading this discourse through the abject shows. The *julus* image becomes instead a marker of fascination with the Muharram rituals on the part of the British. Its absences (self-flagellations, mourning, other visual expressions of *matam*) mark the horror of the procession *in their absence*—they are suppressed in this image quite rigidly with its ordered boundaries and its movement away from the viewer, out of threatening range. The limits placed on the procession in terms of its boundaries—what I described above as the artist “pouring” the procession into a pre-given mold—point toward this rigid controlling of some threatening facet of the procession: not illustrated directly, but indicated through its absence.

An understanding of the discourse of Muharram through the logic of abjection allows us to answer some of the remaining questions from the previous analysis. Why did the British feel threatened by the self-flagellations and the movement of the Muharram procession? Muharram might be a threat in terms of its transgressive qualities—crossing boundaries of the city, disturbing peaceful neighborhoods with disruptive *ta’ziyehs*—but this pulls the reading back into the dichotomous British versus Indian mode of the first, plot-driven analysis. Furthermore, this reading based on transgression legitimates the differentiation between British and Indian, suggesting that the transgressors were merely overstepping the bounds temporarily and that order would, of course, be restored after that brief moment. Transgression is never a long-term situation. A broader psychoanalytic context for the abject helps to move us out of the orbit of these dichotomous relationships by exploring the facets of the threat which constitute the pairs in the first place.

The abject is not merely an explanation of subject formation over and against the “not me” of excrement, menstrual blood, or the corpse. For Kristeva, this formation works within a broader frame of the constitution of what she terms the symbolic and semiotic realms,³⁵ which produce the site of subject

32. The abject here is articulated through Julia Kristeva’s exegesis in *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

33. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

34. For Kristeva this works on a very profound level: “I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and instead of what will be ‘me.’ Not at all another with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be.” *Ibid.*, p. 10. The object or other, here, is seen as inherent in a subject which has yet to be formed. Thus, complete separation, or the preexistence of Muharram in the sense that it exists before these images and texts is impossible. The discourse surrounding Muharram does not postdate Muharram itself—it constitutes Muharram.

35. The term semiotic here is used in a manner different from its use within semiotics. Kristeva acknowledges the relationship of the semiotic to sign systems, but claims that these systems are housed within the Mother, the representative of society for the pre-oedipal being, and thus the source of those sign systems. Thus Kristeva avoids

formation. In this context, the symbolic realm, or the linguistic, masculine realm of the Father's Law, stands in counterpoint to the semiotic, pre-speech, feminine realm of the Mother's Authority.³⁶ This counterpoint of course relies on the oedipal scenario, in which a child comes to subjecthood through first challenging the Father for his (a necessarily masculine child) mother's affection and then separating from the Mother when the Father says "no." By passing from the semiotic into the symbolic in this way a subject is formed. In other words, only by entering the realm of the Father's Law can an individual take shape. That Law takes the form of prohibitive juridical law: the Father sets limits (says "no") for the subject, creating rules and boundaries for subject formation.

Deploying this deeper psychoanalytic framework as a metaphor to understand the colonial encounter, one sees a symbolic realm of the colonizer producing the Law through which prohibitions and restrictions are established. The Authority of the past, semiotic realm, here inhabited by the colonized (those denied subjecthood because they are unable to pass fully into the symbolic realm), must be acknowledged and controlled by this Law. This scenario depends on the two realms—semiotic and symbolic—existing as homogeneous spaces. But Kristeva and other philosophers argue that in fact the border between these two realms exposes them as heterogeneous—there is semiotic in the symbolic (Kristeva finds this in poetic language, for instance) and symbolic in the semiotic (some argue that the latter is constituted by the former).³⁷ The borderland between these two, the moments when they intersect or when the semiotic introjects into the symbolic—those moments question the all-encompassing Law of the colonizer, upsetting the juridical control and as a result threatening not only the logical sensibility of the symbolic but also the fabric of the symbolic itself. For,

the dominant phallus of Lacanian psychoanalysis by refiguring Lacan's imagery in this way and re-centering the Mother. As Ian Craib suggests, Kristeva's semiotic differs from the Lacanian imagery, as the semiotic "is the poetic basis of our existence in the world, and the ordering of the experience in the 'chora,' as Kristeva calls it, is prior to the acquisition of identity, let alone a masculine or feminine identity . . . we have to move out of it [Kristeva's semiotic] to some degree to make civilized life possible." Craib, *Psychoanalysis: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 174.

36. Kristeva's articulation places emphasis on the Mother's Authority where other psychoanalytic theorists read the semiotic without this. Kristeva (see note 31), p. 71.

37. Luce Irigaray, for example, argues that Kristeva's semiotic realm is still constituted by the symbolic, phallogocentric language of the Father. *The Sex Which is Not One* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985).

once the symbolic is revealed as heterogeneous, its stability falters in the face of its permeable border: the abject. In the context of the colonial discourse under discussion here, the abject, bordering and constituting the two realms, disrupts the solidity of the colonizer's position (within the symbolic) and as a result, abjection as a bordering/liminal membrane threatens because it could easily break down the fabric of the Law—the very structures upon which the colonizer exists as colonizer.

Using the abject helps to explain the reasons why one sees a proliferation of discourse in the nineteenth century surrounding the policing of Muharram's spatial transgressions within the city, and yet a dearth of imagery of this transgression—marked by a lack of *matam* and a lack of even the depiction of conflict or bloodshed—in the British-sponsored representations of Indian ceremony. The transgression itself, as noted above, does not ultimately threaten the Law of colonialism; on the contrary, it underscores the need for the British presence in India. Ronny's passage in Forster's novel above demonstrates this dynamic clearly: "But Ronny had not disliked his day. . . ." What threatens British legitimacy and presence is the paired horror/fascination of Muharram. This procession represents a moment in which the colonizer recognizes both the distance ("not me") from the Indian colonized and also the potential for breakdown of that barrier—the interconnection and constitutive dependence that the abject represents. Muharram might just be unknowable and unexplainable in the context of the symbolic realm of the colonizer, and thus the very act of *matam* threatens that symbolic fabric and the base upon which colonialism rests. Hence, in representations of the Muharram processions, British-commissioned works represent a spatially controlled, *matam*-free Muharram.

In closing, I would like to introduce another image of the Muharram procession from a different moment in colonial discourse: the late eighteenth century. Through this image, one can trace an emergence of this abject threat and the construction of Muharram to address that threat. Earlier, the pre-nineteenth-century East India Company presence in India had a very different flavor than that of the second decade of the nineteenth century. An image by an amateur British painter in the 1780s allows this distinction to become clear.

A set of paintings of festivals, marriages, and other events in the Victoria and Albert Museum is purported to consist of copies of paintings initially done by the British amateur artist George Farington (1752–1788).³⁸ Within

38. Archer (see note 4), p. 78.

this set there is a Muharram processional image (fig. 3) which, while similar in many ways to the Walter *Julus* discussed above, has certain key differences that demonstrate the movement over time of these images from the late eighteenth century (and the beginning of the Company's consolidation of its colonial presence in northern India and particularly Murshidabad) to the early nineteenth century, when the Company's position in eastern India had been relatively stable for several decades.³⁹

Compositionally, this *julus*, like the Walter *Julus* discussed above, moves away from the viewer in a diagonal recession through a fairly barren landscape. In this eighteenth-century painting, however, a landscape is given, with a horizon line, a hazy tent to the left, and a tree marking the left-hand border of the image. Unlike the Walter *Julus*, Farington's *julus* evidences a higher amount of motion and energy—in the center foreground a group of men gesticulate with their heads thrown back, and to the far left of the column two men engage in sword fighting. Overall, this composition is much less rigid in its form; one does not get the poured-into-a-mold sense that the later Walter *Julus* projects. The detail in Farington's *julus* of the *ta'ziyehs* and flags also heightens the movement of the column. Despite this qualitative change, the viewer still stands separate from the procession, viewing it here not only from a distance but also from the top of a small rise, as indicated both by the perspective and also by the dark earth in the foreground.

This copy of a late-eighteenth century British amateur painting offers a different view of the Muharram procession—one still separated from the viewer and therefore in some ways domesticated, but one which also acknowledges the movement and dynamism of the *julus*. The shift from this more detailed image to the later, more static one moves in an inverted trajectory vis-à-vis the verbal discourse about Muharram, which shifts from a lack of discussion altogether in the late eighteenth century to full-blown descriptions such as Roberts's above. This shift happens while the threat of Muharram increases and while a solid, ordered, symbolic space is established for the colonizer within India, necessitating a discourse of transgression and control in the written descriptions of Muharram and an imagery of closed-down, controlled procession in painted images. The descendants of the Company

39. Farington's original oil paintings have been lost, but textual evidence of the provenance of these images, as well as the clear stylistic and compositional differences between them and other Company paintings of this period and region, indicate that it is likely that these are indeed copies.

painters who copied Farington's works at the turn of the nineteenth century acknowledged in the following two decades the market for depictions of festivals which were more controlled, ordered images for the British viewer in India and in the metropole. These two works demonstrate that trajectory; the later Walter *Julus* becomes, for Muharram processional imagery, an iconographical pattern repeated throughout the nineteenth century as seen in examples from the India Office Library and Records and elsewhere.⁴⁰

What these images show us, however, is much more than simply a distancing or othering between Indian and British. For, with the absence of the procession's bloodshed and its threat to order, these images demonstrate the resultant domestication of the tension between a symbolic and an abject space, bringing the abject into the realm of object safely and solidly, defusing any threat so that all that remains is a mild fascination with this procession and others observed (from a distance) by the British colonizer. These images demonstrate the trajectory of colonial discourse as the Company presence grew in the subcontinent in the early nineteenth century, and the discursive defusing of this abject threat helped to consolidate the colonizing position.

My initial surprise, then, at finding a Muharram processional image devoid of both *matam* and an urban setting, making transgressing spaces impossible, finds its explanation in a close analysis of the threat to colonialism these discourses demonstrate. The British negotiation of the abject space of Muharram's procession in text and image runs much deeper than a mere objectification of the Indian observances into a particular shape ready for display on museum walls and in albums of festival images. More pointedly, the Muharram imagery discussed here demonstrates a dynamic threat to the position of the colonizer which, when represented by that colonizer, must not only be objectified but de-abjectified, leading to the controlled, orderly image of the mid-nineteenth century *julus* and the tales of triumphant and necessary British control of a transgressive annual ceremony.

40. Siva Lal's virtual copy of the 1820s image is in the Chester Beatty collection; other images which follow this pattern include the Sewak Ram's *julus* in a landscape at the Victoria and Albert Museum (IS 74-1954). Archer (see note 4), pp. 85–86. The one image of the *julus* which incorporates the cityscape, an anonymous work on mica, still evidences the controlled feeling of the anonymous image, with relaxed bystanders seated in the foreground: V&A IS 35-1961, no. 28. Archer (see note 4), pp. 194–195. Published in Robert Skelton and Mark Francis, eds., *Arts of Bengal* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1979), no. 98.

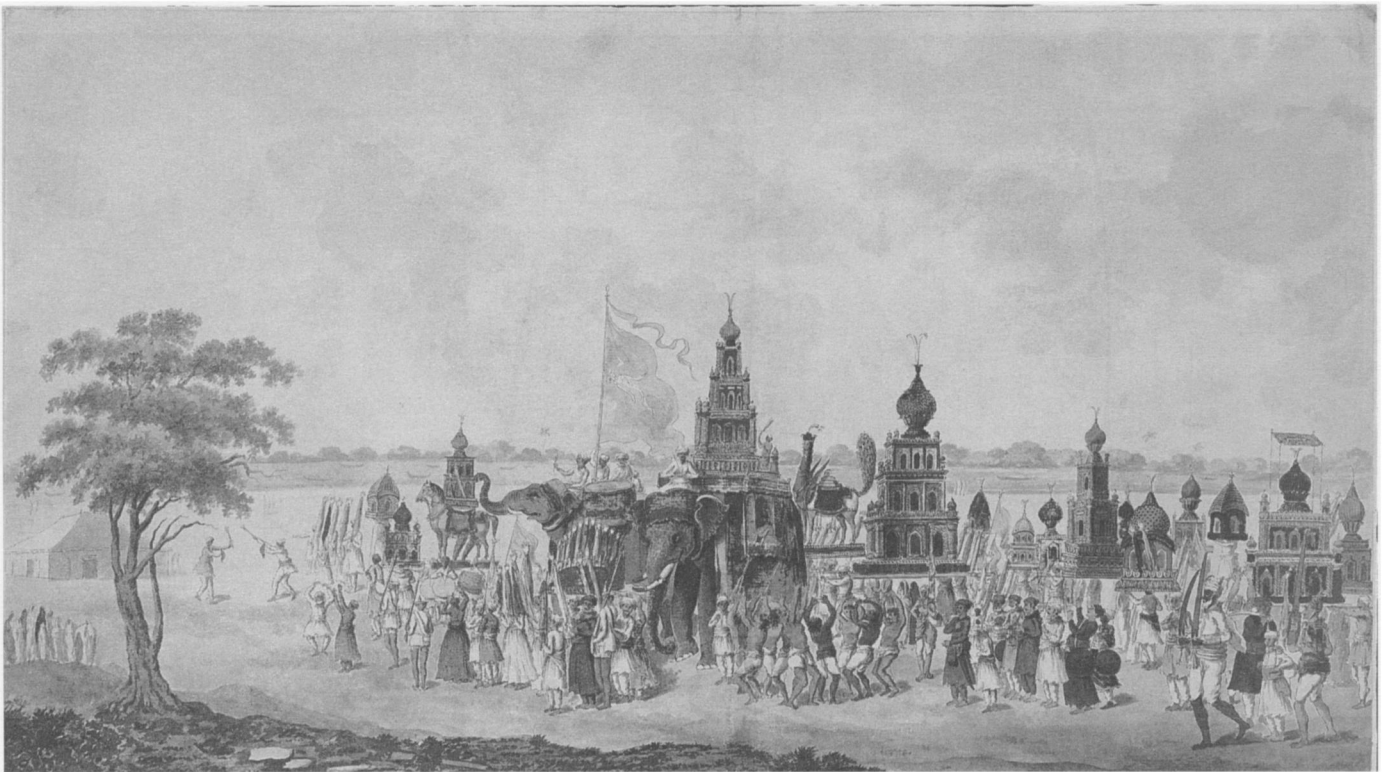


Figure 3. Anonymous (after George Farington), *Muharram*, ca. 1795–1805 (original 1780s), Victoria and Albert Museum, courtesy V&A Picture Library, IS 11–1887, no. 12.