

Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory

Syed Akbar Hyder

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Most studies on the epic events in Karbala and the martyrdom in 680 of Husayn, the Prophet's grandson, have focused on the possible ramifications of his sacrifice and the paradigmatic models that can be constructed from this event. Other studies have examined the various genres of Shi'i rituals enacted to commemorate Husayn's martyrdom. Akbar Hyder's *Reliving Karbala* examines this death from very different perspectives.

The author does not claim to provide a systematic exposition of the historical events or philosophy of Husayn's martyrdom. He neither focuses on the written texts of history nor presents a normative reading of Karbala. Rather, he transcends the traditional Shi'i-coded understanding by offering a more trans-sectarian and trans-communal, as well as multiple readings, of this entire episode. The book also covers Karbala's influence on the South Asian cultural and literary landscape, demonstrating, in the process, how this narrative is appropriated and lived in the contexts and memories of South Asian Muslims and non-Muslims at different times.

Hyder uses a wide array of sources, ranging from classical Islamic texts to modern twentieth-century discourses and incorporates citations from Iqbal,

Premchand, Gandhi, and others. The book opens a window on how various interpretive strategies can be utilized to read a seventh-century event and how they can shape social milieus inhabited by more than a billion people.

The book's first half combines the role of Muharram gatherings commemorating Karbala (*majalis*) with a discussion of how South Asia's Islamic religious literature has portrayed the battle. Here, Hyder shows that Karbala is invoked to mediate the Shi'ahs' personal sorrows and sufferings and that the Shi'ahs of Hyderabad and Lucknow have expressed this momentous event through poetic elegies and ritualized mourning. He focuses on the sermons delivered by Rashid Turabi, a prominent *majlis* reciter, and the impact that such sermons have on the community. Hyder maintains that in India the *majalis* affirm Shi'i identity in the midst of a double minority setting, for the Shi'ahs are a minority within the Muslim community, which is itself a minority community within Hindu-majority India. Moreover, the *majlis* becomes a statement of Shi'i piety and reinforces the community's emotional attachment and devotion to the Imams. In the process, due to the community's remembrance of the Imams' virtuous and heroic conduct, they become the compelling paradigm of correct demeanor and upright human conduct.

Hyder provides the reader with a wonderful insider's perspective of what Muharram means to lay Shi'ahs. He explains the division of the *majlis* into various segments and why these elements are important in affirming the Shi'i concept of identity and loyalty to the Imams. This insider view is valuable insofar as it reveals the community's self-understanding of charismatic authority, loyalty to its leaders, and how it seeks to identify with them.

The author, however, needs to critique the sermons and their functions in greater depth. What are the functions of polemics and the *fada'il* (excellences of the Imams) mentioned in the *majalis*? Why have they taken a particular form? I would suggest that the polemics and *fada'il* serve multiple purposes: they articulate and delineate the "orthodox" position (stating what is and what is not acceptable to the Shi'ahs) and reflect the community's attempts at self-identification and differentiation from the Sunnis. Shi'i preachers construct boundaries of identity and exclusion, thereby establishing the basis for Shi'i differentiation from Sunnism, while positing, in the process, Sunnism as an aberrant "other."

The section on the poetry of Mirza Dabir and Mir Anis is fascinating, especially as there is little discussion of such panegyrics in western scholarship. Equally compelling is his illustration of how Karbala polarized poets and how one event, Husayn's last prayer, is depicted in different ways. The concept of *barakah* (blessings) in the *majalis* also receives scant attention. It is important to note that *barakah*, considered to be the Imam's curative and

intercessory powers mentioned in the sermons, enable him to impart blessings and intercede for his followers long after his death. Like Sufism, Shi`ism locates *barakah* in the dead as much as in the living. Due to his spiritual connection, the Imam offers the profane world a sacred encounter.

The book's second half provides a literary analysis of South Asian Sufi literature and interpretations of Karbala by Sunni, secular, and non-Muslim South Asian writers and intellectuals, among them Iqbal and Gandhi. Hyder demonstrates that the symbolism of Husayn's death in a struggle for justice has influenced non-Shi'i intellectuals throughout South Asia, from Gandhi and Iqbal to Sufi poets and Marxists. He also shows how diverse groups appropriated Husayn's martyrdom to meet their own needs – from people involved in personal and communal laments to those seeking a basis upon which to build a movement of protest and struggle that will lead to demanding socio-religious reform.

Chapter 4, "Lyrical Martyrdom," is a compelling analysis of the imagery of Karbala in Sufi devotional poetry and musical performances. As Hyder explains, given that Sufis have depicted Husayn and his companions as ideal lovers who annihilated themselves in the love for the Divine, his martyrdom is an occasion for rejoicing. The section also examines how Husayn is lauded in *qawwali* music, since its practitioners emphasize the highest levels of spirituality.

Chapter 5, which focuses on Iqbal's exposition of Karbala, argues that his poetry transcends the traditional sectarian understanding and configures this event as a transhistoric and universal struggle for justice. It is Karbala, Iqbal reminds us, that has kept Islam alive. Chapter 6 maintains that many Muslim political activists and writers have used Karbala as a symbol for their "righteous" struggle against what they see as oppression and injustice. Husayn's blood is cherished as a life-bestowing reminder. As Hyder ably illustrates, Karbala's legacy remains open to perpetual revision and reinterpretation. As poet Banarsi Lal Varma would say: "Even Hindus say: 'Husain is ours.'"

Hyder's work exemplifies the popular usage of Karbala, for his study is interspersed with personal narratives that often reflect popular culture rather than historical realities. Due to the book's nature, there is no sense of history or an analysis of historical sources – their historicity is taken for granted. Traditions are quoted from secondary sources without any discussion of their authenticity.

When he discusses Muharram in the United States, Hyder does not mention or analyze how Shi'i rituals have been modified. Rituals pertaining to a particular culture or religion may lose their significance when transferred to

a new context, for they often have to be adjusted and adapted to suit the new environment. Some Shi`i communities in the United States have done this. For example, instead of shedding blood on the day of Ashura some of them donate blood to the Red Cross in Husyan's name. Many supplications and *majalis* are displayed in Power-Point so they can be comprehended. By modifying and adapting these rituals, the Shi`ahs have paved the way for future generations to relate to them and what they mean in a different, American way. The modified versions also enable younger generations living outside of Iran to relate to the rituals and incorporate a distinctly Shi`i identity.

Another missing key component is the concept of *wilayah* (the Imams' moral-spiritual authority). Hyder has much to say about love and devotion to the Imams; however, this concept needs to be discussed within the framework of the Imam's person-centered and mediatory powers.

Reliving Karbala is a significant contribution to the existing scholarship on Karbala. Hyder adds vitality and depth to his analysis through a range of personal anecdotes, including memories of his own experience of growing up between cultures. This book is an invaluable resource from which students of various disciplines will benefit.

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