

The Karbala Myth and Recent Protests in Iran

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“Every day is Ashura, and every land is Karbala.” This saying points to the foundational importance of the Karbala myth in Shia Islamic communities. Yet, it is through performance that this myth is enacted on a specific day in a specific place. My research’s focus is on the performance of mourning during Muharram in Iran. During this month, various performances of mourning, from the specific play of *ta’ziyeh*, a dramatic reenactment of the martyrdom of the Prophet’s grandson Hussein, to general performances such as wearing black garments and holding religious sermons occur.

After the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in the custody of the “morality” police, the pious beliefs of government officials came under suspicion. Of course, this did not happen overnight. Their hypocrisy has been coming more into the light, due to different factors such as the use of social media. “They call themselves moral, yet they act immoral. They told us to stay on the side of Hussein and they, themselves, took the side of Yazid.” This is one of the repeated sayings of protestors on social media. Although some people lost their religious beliefs due to their doubts, a significant response of the protesters is finding the similarities between the Karbala event, as a religious story, and the recent events in Iran. The efforts to find the similarities have functions such as attracting “true” religious folks to join protests.

Interesting comments were made by the general Iranian public in response to images of the guard soldiers riding on horses in Tehran streets on Nov 7th, 2022. Many believe that “it’s the display of troops of Umar ibn Sa’d” who killed Hussein, the martyred Imam of Shia, and his supporters in 680 AD. Many wrote, “They feel it is Ashura” or ironically ask, “Are they Shemr?” Shemr also was one of the leaders of the troops who murdered Hussein.

Despite the fact that security forces are attempting to silence the families of the killed protestors, protests remain. The mothers of martyred protestors call themselves “the Zeynabs of our time.” Zeynab was the surviving sister of Hussein who delivered Hussein’s message to the Shia community. Erfan Rezaei’s mother who lost her son wrote an open letter saying, “Even Yazid allowed Zeynab to disclose tyranny in his palace.” In a video published on social media, one mother mourning on her son’s grave cries, “They are Yazid. If they were in Karbala, they would kill Hussein and I am today’s Zeynab... ‘Karbala would have remained in Karbala, if not for Zeynab.’” Protestors call Khodanour, a Balouch martyr, their Hussein. The state officials did not let him drink water when he was thirsty in their detention and killed him. According to historical narratives, Hussein was killed thirsty, too.

The rituals of mourning in Muharram, including *ta’ziyeh*, symbolically display the Karbala event through the condensing of time and place as a principle for showing the constant battle between evil and the divine. In my ongoing study, I argue that we can expand the meaning of *ta’ziyeh* to broader performances like the protests due to the aforementioned resemblances. After all, the local and non-official name of *ta’ziyeh* is *shabih* (meaning alike) and *taziye* means mourning.