

Role of Shia Women in the Production and Transmission of Religious Knowledge:Autonomy and Empowerment through Management of Mourning Rituals and Practices

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Abstract

Few issues in Islam and Muslim societies have attracted more attention and debated so widely and intensely as issues involving women. Lot of stereotyping has also been done vis a vis women. This paper deals with the participation of Shia Muslim women in religious rituals and how they challenge patriarchy within the context of Islam. An analysis would also be made in the context of 'women friendly' religious paradigms and spaces and to see how autonomy and power is sought to be achieved through the practices related with the Moharrum mourning.

Key words: *Shia, Moharrum, Azadari, Majlis*

I

Few issues in Islam and Muslim societies have attracted more attention and debated so widely and intensely as issues involving women. Lot of stereotyping has also been done vis a vis women. As JL Esposito (1998) has rightly pointed out, "women in Muslim societies have been the subject of images and generalization, romantic orientalist tales and feminist expose". For many, women in Islam is characterized by *Chador, Hejab*, segregation and subordination. Subjugation and second class citizenship probably best describes the perception of Muslim women in the west.

The principle of equality between men and women in religious practices is deeply embedded in the social structure of a society. In most of the organised and unorganised religions, there exist certain spaces which are either not accessible to women or her entry into it is strictly restricted. This is also true that all religions are predominantly patriarchal and women are given only a subservient place in it. This is more so in the realm of rituals.

Islamic laws and traditions have a profound impact on the women's life-education, employment, dress, age of marriage etc. The status of women in Islam has always been imbued with ambiguity. For instance Islam does not mandate a Muslim woman to lead her existence within the four walls of the household as housewife yet she needs her father or husbands' permission to leave house and take up employment. However, their social-cultural autonomy varies from society to society as per the local traditions.

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II

The Shias constitute one of the two most important sects of Islam spread over the entire Muslim world. They are roughly 15-20 % of the total Muslim population of the world. Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan are the only Shia majority countries among the fifty six odd Muslim majority countries of the world.

India has a substantial presence of Shias in its Muslim population. Though we don't have any census figures about their population in India, it is widely and popularly believed that the Shias constitute 10-15 % of the total Muslim population in India. Thus, they have always been a minority within a minority in India. The largest number of Shia population may be seen in Uttar Pradesh followed by Hyderabad and areas around it, Jammu and Kashmir, Bihar, and Mumbai. In rest of the country they live in small numbers except the north-east states, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu where their presence is too small to be taken into consideration for any relevant description.

'Tragedy of Karbala' and its Impact on the Growth of Shiaism :

After the 'martyrdom' of Ali the 'tragedy of Karbala' played the greatest role in the growth of Shiaism. It was in the year 680 A.D. that Imam Husain was brutally massacred together with his seventy-two companions, by those who professed Islam, at the behest of Yazid, the then Muslim Caliph. Even a babe of six months was not spared. The ladies of the Prophet's family were looted in broad day light. This heinous act has no parallel in the history of Islam. The tragedy of Karbala was so shocking that it shook the whole Islamic world. Its wide human significance has since then increasingly captivated the hearts of many irrespective of caste and creed. The tragedy of Karbala is the basis of the Moharrum mourning popularly known as *Azadari* observance throughout the world. In Karbala (Iraq), Imam Husain had to undergo, alongwith his kinsmen and friends, the worst possible cruelties and killings. Water was denied to them, women and children were tortured, their bodies trampled and their heads taken out on the points of spears. Thus the tragedy of Karbala was such a heart-rending and sad incident that it threw up a lesson of humanitarianism and righteousness. It paved the way for justice, truth and moral values.

The universal appeal of Imam Husain and the 'tragedy of Karbala' reflects in the tributes paid by the cross section of scholars, philosophers, political leaders and religious preachers alike and many of them do not subscribe to Shia faith or Islam.

III

No event in the history of Islam has so deeply stirred the emotions of Muslims especially the Shias as the massacre at Karbala. Like the crucifixion of Christ, the *Shahadat* (martyrdom) of Husain has lent a halo to Shiaism. Many Shias are of the view that, ‘heart of every Shia is a living tomb of Husain’. S A Hyder (2006) capturing the spirit of mourning says that “the story of Karbala is the cornerstone of institutionalized devotion and mourning for millions of Shii Muslims. Apart from its appeal to the Shii community, invocations of Karbala have also come to govern mystical and reformist discourses in the larger Muslim world. Indeed, Karbala even serves as the archetypal resistance and devotional symbol for many non-Muslims”. Karbala also serves as a celebration of martyrdom, a source of personal and communal identity, and even a tool for political protest and struggle. Martyrs of Karbala still influences Shia’s world view and political stances at present.

The most elaborate and organized form of mourning during the Islamic month of Moharrum is observed best in South Asia, mainly India and Pakistan, with the only exception of Iran and Iraq. While such mourning observances are discouraged or curbed in most of the Muslim countries, dominated by the Sunni rulers, it has been crushed with an iron hand in Saudi Arabia, the most conservative of Muslim countries.

This paper deals with the *azadari* (mourning) in the Oudh region of Uttar Pradesh where the ruling Shia Nawabs had patronised it. It begins with the first day of Moharrum and continues till the eighth day of the Islamic month of Rabiulawwal, a whole two months and eight days. The intensity of mourning reaches its peak on the tenth day of Moharrum popularly known as *ashura*, the day of martyrdom. The mourning consists of wearing black clothes, wailing, beating of chest, self flagellation with a bunch of sharp knives and small swords. The bloodbath on the day of martyrdom and fortieth day of martyrdom is seen to be believed. Besides these, walking on fire lit with charcoal on certain days is yet another form of self torture as an expression of mourning. Such overt forms of mourning are observed on certain days but the entire mourning period is characterised by mourning congregations (*majlis*) of men and women where a *Zakir* (narrator) describes the tragedy of Karbala and related issues. Significantly, in all these forms of mourning there is no segregation of men and women but attending and participation in *Majlis* is another issue. In the males’ *majlises* women either sit behind a curtain or in one corner while the female’s *majlis* (*zanani majlis*), is all women affair.

Management of Mourning Activities by Women :

Like the mosque movement of Cairo (Saba Mahmood,2005) the Shia women have already achieved a type of autonomy and empowerment by taking over the organization and management of mourning rituals and activities, independently as well as in collaboration with their menfolk. Thus, they demonstrate their skill of leadership in dealing with diverse people

and situations. They find it as a means for self development, evolving self and world view, for gender transformation through the practice of their group services.

Among the multitude of devotional/religious activities, the *majlis* (mourning congregation related with the tragedy of Kerbala) represents the most important event through which the women demonstrate strong streaks of their cultural autonomy. The *majlis* is regularly organized during the mourning period of Moharrum and for three days in the month of Ramzan when the first Imam of Shias, Ali, was wounded in a murderous attack in a mosque and died on the third day of the attack. Women have the extra advantage of involvement in 'women only' *majlis* as well as all male *majlis*. In the exclusive womens' *majlis* known as *aszenani majlis*, they are the organizers and managers while in the male *majlis* popularly known as *mardanimajlis* they attend it gathered in a particular area of the venue and are a common part of the mourning. The venue of those *majlis* especially for large gathering is the local *Imambada* or *Azakhana* (a building designed as the place of the mourning). There is no exclusive venue for men and women. Same venue is used for both the purposes at different timings. There are several dozen such *Imambarasin* Lucknow. Besides these, there are hundreds of private *Imambaras* in the homes of the Shias where the *Alam* (flag/standard) of Husain, *Tazia* (replica of the mausoleum of Imam Husain located in Karbala, Iraq) and other mourning related paraphernalia are kept. One room is specially reserved for this purpose if the mourner has a separate room. Otherwise, in smaller urban housings, a small portable wooden *Imambarais* maintained where the, small models of these items are kept.

The mourning assembly known as *majlis* is an integral part of the Shia society though the pattern of mourning varies from region to region. These *majlises* are held not only during Moharram mourning period and three days in the month of Ramzan but is an integral part of mourning for a deceased member of the family; it is held immediately before the burial, on the third or fifth day, on the fortieth day, half yearly and annually. Some devoutly religious Shias hold it more frequently.

The male *majlis* or *mardana majlis* is addressed by a male *Zakir* (a professional moulvi/cleric or non-moulvi speaker) while a *Zenanimajlis* is addressed by a female *Zakira*. Thus, a *Zenani majlis* is the exclusive domain of women. Right from its planning, arranging a *Zakira* and necessary paraphernalia and *Tabarruk* (blessed offering, usually some food item), the women are the decision makers and often the advice of the male members of the family is overruled. If this *majlis* is held in a public *Imambara*, the gathering may be in several hundreds, otherwise in a private/household *Imambara*, it may vary between 50-100 female mourners while the male members of the family are totally sidelined. On certain days, a mock coffin known as *Tabut*, representing the casket of the dead body of Imam Husain is also taken out within the premises of the *Imambara* or home.

The usual structure of a standard *majlis* consists of the recital of the *Soz* or *Mersia* (elegies devoted to the martyrs of Karbala) followed by a speech by the *Zakira*. The first part

of the speech focuses on the explanations of some part of the Qoran or Islamic history (this part is popularly called as *Fazail*, praise of the worthy) followed by a soulful narration of the tyranny perpetrated on the Imam, his family, and companions known as *Masaib*, literally meaning tragedy. This whole part is sometime drowned in the wailing, bitter weeping, and beating of chest and head. The concluding part of *Zenanimajlis* is usually the group recital of *Nauha* (poetic narration of the tragedy of Karbala). A *Nauha* is led by a leader who initiates a verse which is repeated by the entire gathering. The *Nauha* recital may consist of one or several *Nauhas* depending upon the preferences and enthusiasm of the organizer and time constraint. This is followed by the distribution of *Tabarruk*. Till 1-2 decades back it used to be a simple affair. The usual items were an oven baked *roti* (bread), a *Sheermal*, also a relatively expensive variety of oven baked *roti* of refined flour or some *namkeen* (saltish snack). With the growing prosperity of a section of Shias, new types of *Tabarruk* have taken over. It is often being used as an enhancer of social status. Now the *Tabarruk* may be anything - a box of tea mugs, glass or stainless steel plates, a small pressure cooker or anything. Some organizers of these *Majlises* feed the entire gathering of several hundred mourners, a sumptuous lunch or dinner immediately after the *majlis*, consisting of the best of *awadhi/mughlaic* cuisines - *Sheermal*, *Biryani*, *Kabab*, *Qorma* etc.

Some educated and well informed *Zakiras* have added new dimensions to the narration in a *majlis*. They also talk of contemporary social issues, women's rights and empowerment. The life of Zainab, the surviving sister of Imam Husain who led the survivors after the martyrdom of Kerbala, is projected as an example of how women may lead from the front. Zainab is portrayed as a symbol of resistance. Some *Zakiras* also speak on the life and role of Khadija, the first and the dearest wife of the Prophet Muhammad, who was a successful business woman of her times and Fatima, her daughter, a symbol of piety, ideal parenthood and organiser.

Muharrum mourning has been impacted significantly after the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran in 1979. The Iranian revolution has had deep impact on the Shias of the world including India. As far as Indian Shia women are concerned, many of them who were observing *Purdah* by wearing *Burqa* covering their face and the entire body, have given up *Burqa* and adopted *Hijab* (covering only head and upper part of the body) or a *chadar*, a sheet of cloth to cover the entire body except face. Some Shia clerics have also motivated them to participate in processions and demonstrations related with quasi religious issues such as restorations of *Wakf* (trust) properties, atrocities on Shias of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain etc., or against American or Israeli actions against Iran and Palestine. Moreover, the mourning activities have been used by them to attain greater freedom and mobility as even among the most conservative Shia families, women move about freely, without any hindrance, and in the process explore new avenues for betterment of their status, and enhancement of rights. Acting as ritual managers also confer upon them higher status.

Conclusion :

With only a few ethnographers having studied the Shia women's rituals, a number of collateral aspects remained hidden from the view in the feminist discourses in the context of Muslim women. Shia women's activism comes to the fore mainly in the lamentation rituals and other activities. It helps them come out from the strict patriarchal control. It may be seen as women challenging patriarchy within the context of Islam developing women friendly religious paradigms and spaces. It enhances their social visibility.

The mourning and lamentation rituals empower the Shia women to confront any male censorship. Shia rituals, as practiced in India, present women a distinctive occasion to express their faith publicly. It may be seen as a rare opportunity where women are discouraged to go into mosques and are not allowed to attend the Friday Prayers. Thus, these practices are uniquely empowering to Shia women reconstituting female authority. It also helps us to understand gender dynamics and women's coping mechanism under extreme conditions. This is not the case with their Sunni counterparts. The Sunni women do not have such occasions and avenues and that is perhaps why only a miniscule section of them coming from the elite who may express themselves so freely. Thus, through the process of participation in transmission and production of Islamic knowledge and rituals, the Shia women have been able to achieve some degree of autonomy not available to them through any other traditional avenues.

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