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'Do not say they are dead' : the political use of mystical and religious concepts in the Persian poetry of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88)

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CHAPTER FOUR

‘ĀSHURĀ PARADIGM IN IRAN-IRAQ WAR POETRY

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter discussed the important role that the Hallājīan motifs and the concept of ascension played in the war poetry for motivating the Iranian soldiers. The objective of this chapter is to discuss how the event of ‘Āshurā is introduced as a model for the Iranian soldiers in the war poetry, and how the fight between Iran and Iraq was compared to the battle of ‘Āshurā to legitimize the former.⁴⁰⁰ The event of Karbalā and the execution of imam Hosein is commemorated annually in Iran, and is effectively used in war poetry. During the war, the war poets referred to the events of the day of ‘Āshurā, when the third Shiite imam, Hosein, was killed at Karbalā on the orders of the Umayyad caliph, Yazid. The leaders of the Islamic Republic, and the war poets, referred to the event to link the war to imam Hosein’s fight at Karbalā. On the one hand, the poets intended to introduce him as a perfect role model of moral behavior. The figure of Hosein as one who died for his beliefs in the fight against an unjust ruler was applied directly and literally to the Iran-Iraq war. On the other hand, they wanted to link Iranian soldiers to those early Muslims killed at Karbalā. To legitimize Iran’s fight against Iraq and emphasize on the necessity of participating in the fight, the leaders of the Islamic Republic, in their sermons, relied on Qur’ānic concepts such as righteous and legitimate authority (*haqq*) versus false (*bātel*) authority. The same concepts are used in the Persian Passion Play (*ta’ziye*), where imam Hosein stands up for his legitimate authority (*haqq*), while Yazid is called *bātel*. Iranians familiar with these concepts believed that Iran had legitimacy, because Iranians are Shiite Muslims and supporters of imam Hosein. Sunni Iraq’s authority was false and invalid (*bātel*), since it derived from Yazid. The fact that the majority of the Iraqi population is

⁴⁰⁰ The word ‘*Āshurā* is derived from Arabic word ‘*ashr*. It means ten and refers to the 10th of Moharram 680 when imam Hosein was killed at Karbalā.

Shiite Muslims was ignored by the leaders of the Islamic Republic.⁴⁰¹

The following sections will illustrate how the ‘Āshurā paradigm is a living tradition in Iran, and how it is used as a model for the fight of Shiites against the Sunni Saddam Hosein, the various meanings of Karbalā and of service to imam Hosein, and the comparison of imam Hosein to a cupbearer, and of martyrdom to mystical drunkenness.

THE ‘ĀSHURĀ PARADIGM

On the day of ‘Āshurā, the prophet’s grandson, imam Hosein and his companions were killed in fight against the soldiers of the Umayyad caliph, Yazid. Their families were captured and taken to Yazid’s court in Damascus. Imam Hosein’s followers, the Shiites, believe that they should revenge his blood and support his descendents to achieve their legitimate claim to lead the Muslim community. During the war, Iranian poets drew on the events of ‘Āshurā as a source of inspiration for everyone, to fight against Iraq. My objective in this part is to illustrate how the ‘Āshurā paradigm was used as a political tool to legitimize the war and the political demands of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The poets, and the leaders of the Islamic Republic, use the language of ‘Āshurā to assert that there is a similarity between the war and imam Hosein’s fight against Yazid’s senior commander, Ebn al-Ziyād.

The events of Karbalā have been kept alive in Shiite Islam for more than a millennium. Each year, during the first ten days of Moharram, Shiites commemorate the death of imam Hosein and his companions at Karbalā. Almost three centuries after this event, on the tenth of Moharram 963, the death of imam Hosein was officially commemorated, by the order of the Buyid rulers (945-1055). For the first time, the mourning processions passed through the streets and markets. In the following year, the participants beat themselves on the head and face, reciting elegies and begging water in imitation of imam Hosein and his companions.⁴⁰²

Under the Safavids (1501-1722), the ta‘ziye performance was developed and

⁴⁰¹ C. Hunt, *The History of Iraq*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005, p. 6.

⁴⁰² J.G.J. ter Haar, “Ta‘ziye: Ritual Theater from Shiite Iran,” in *Theater Intercontinental: Forms, Functions, Correspondences*, eds. C.C. Barfoot & C. Bordewijk, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993, p. 159.

reached its highest point. The Safavids have had a significant effect on Iran's history because Iran converted to Shiite Islam under their rule. A political reason for the conversion and for propagating imam Hosein's martyrdom was the Ottoman invasion of Iran (1533-1548). The first Safavid king, Shāh Ismā'il (1501-1524), used the event of 'Āshurā to stimulate mass mobilization in the fight against the Sunni Ottoman Turks. Shāh Ismā'il maintained that through his rule, the principles of the religious law (*Shari'at*) were being implemented. In his poems, Shāh Ismā'il says, "We are Hosein's men, and this is our epoch/ in devotion we are the slaves of the imam; Our name is 'zealot' and our title 'martyr.'" ⁴⁰³

In the Safavid period, imam Hosein's martyrdom became a national icon. The commemoration of imam Hosein's death during the month of Moharram made him a model of self-sacrifice emulated by Iranians. The popularity of ta'ziye reached a peak during the Qājār dynasty (1779-1925). Because Nāser al-Din Shāh Qājār was very fond of ta'ziye, the ta'ziye ritual performance developed dramatically during his reign (1848-96). ⁴⁰⁴ In modern Iran, in the Pahlavi period, the ta'ziye performance declined because Rezā Shāh was seeking to modernize the country, on a Western model. During the Islamic Revolution, the 'Āshurā paradigm was revived to stimulate the people to participate in demonstrations. Ayatollah Khomeini, in *Velāyat-e faqih* ('The Guardianship of the Jurisconsult') tells Iranian Muslims that they should "create 'Āshurā in their struggle to launch an Islamic state.'" ⁴⁰⁵ He implies that protesting against the Pahlavi monarch (i.e. Yazid of the time) is a religious duty that should be fulfilled by Iranians. Slogans referred to 'Āshurā: one example is "this is the noon of 'Āshurā / the Pahlavis are shamed today (*zohr-e 'Āshurā-st emruz/ Pahlavi rosvāst emruz*). In this slogan, the Pahlavi monarch is compared to Yazid and his men, and Iranian activists to imam Hosein and his companions. Motivated by such slogans, Iranians participated in the revolts at the risk of their lives. They gave a new meaning to the 'Āshurā paradigm, based on their historical need.

During the war the leaders of the Islamic Republic emphasized the importance of

⁴⁰³ R.P. Mottahedeh, *The Mantel of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985, p. 173.

⁴⁰⁴ J.G.J. ter Haar, "Ta'ziye: Ritual Theater from Shiite Iran," pp. 164-5.

⁴⁰⁵ H. Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1982, p.194.

the ta‘ziye rituals because they commemorate self-sacrifice and martyrdom for the sake of Shiite Islam. During the war, there was a great need for manpower because the Islamic Republic was not equipped with military weapons. Motivating the crowd to offer their lives at the front was the best solution. To encourage the young men to fight against the enemy, the leaders of the Islamic Republic made numerous references to the events of ‘Āshurā, and imam Hosein’s martyrdom. Even in the most remote villages, Iranians knew perfectly well that imam Hosein was killed unjustly. They internalize this when they participate in ta‘ziye performances. The ta‘ziye audiences are not passive observers; they show their grief at imam Hosein’s death, and the afflictions that his family endured during and after the battle. Their identification with the Shiite party in the drama, and the teaching that participation in the war was a religious duty, prepared them to fight the enemies of imam Hosein. The newspapers of the time show that there was a widespread motivation to engage in the war.⁴⁰⁶

‘ĀSHURĀ IN THE WAR POETRY

By comparing the Iran-Iraq war to the battle of ‘Āshurā, the war poets legitimize the fight, and assimilate the former to the latter. This comparison brings a religious and moral dimension to the fight, leading Iranian soldiers to believe that they are imam Hosein’s companions on the plain of Karbalā.

In the war poetry, ‘Āshurā is a paradigm of suffering and love, and the symbol of self-sacrifice to preserve Shiite Islam, and the struggle of faithful Muslims against unbelievers, including the Sunnis. The leaders of the Islamic Republic created an image of the infidelity of the Iraqi Sunni state, calling the Iraqis Yazid’s heirs who had seized the caliphate from the prophet’s family. In their sermons to the masses, Iranian leaders emphasized that Iranians were willing to participate in the fight, and to die following Hosein example. Ayatollah ‘Ali Khāmenei, who was the President of the Islamic Republic from 1981-1989 and later the *rahbar* (‘leader of the Islamic Republic’), says, “Every one of the soldiers who, yearning for *jehād*, went to the front like the soldiers of Hosein the son of

⁴⁰⁶ S.M. Gieling, *Religion and War in Revolutionary Iran*, p. 119.

‘Ali during ‘Āshurā, is longing to sacrifice himself ... the spirit of ‘Āshurā, of Moharram, the Hoseini spirit shows itself in our youths everywhere along this broad front... in the month of Moharram blood must become victorious over the sword, and so it will be.”⁴⁰⁷ Ayatollah Khāmenei holds that imam Hosein’s self-sacrifice on the day of ‘Āshurā can be characterized as a longing for death. Therefore, Iranians should emulate him. In addition, by repeating the word spirit, Ayatollah Khāmenei makes the day of ‘Āshurā an ideal beyond time and distance, a living tradition.

The poets employed the religious concept of martyrdom (*shahādat*), and in particular the martyrdoms of the day of ‘Āshurā, to motivate the community to participate in the fight against the Iraqi enemy. In this respect, the war poetry develops out of the poetry of the 1979 revolution, when Mohammad Rezā Shāh was identified with Yazid. For instance, in a poem from 1985, ‘Ali Musavi Garmārudi, who was raised in a religious family, likened the Pahlavi monarch to Yazid in a poem entitled the ‘Blood Line’ (*khatt-e khun*):

...
marg-e sorkhat
na tanhā nām-e Yazid rā shekast
va kalame-ye setam rā bi-sirat kard
ke fowj-e kalām rā niz dar ham mishekanad ...
yā Zabih- Allāh
to Esmā‘il gozide-ye khodāi
va ro’yā-ye be haqiqat peyvaste-ye Ebrāhim
karbalā miqāt-e to-st
moharram mi ‘ādgāh-e ‘eshq
va to nakhostin kas ...
ke hajj rā nime tamām
dar este ‘lām hajar vānahādi

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 118.

*va dar Karbalā bā buse bar khanjar, tamām kardi...*⁴⁰⁸

Your red death
 Not only, broke Yazid's fame
 But also humiliated the word oppression
 It breaks the word's influence
 O *Zahbih- Allāh!*⁴⁰⁹
 You are God's elect, Ishmael,
 And Abraham's dream that comes true
 Karbalā is your meeting place
 Moharram is love's meeting place
 And you are the first one...
 Who has left the pilgrimage to Mecca halfway,
 At the point of kissing the black stone,
 And has completed it at Karbalā, kissing the dagger...

Garmārudi praises imam Hosein's act of sacrifice at Karbalā, and asserts that his death dishonored Yazid, as it revealed the fact that he was an illegitimate ruler. In the revolutionary context, the poem says that the death of a youth in opposing the regime shows that the Pahlavi monarch is an illegal and unjust king, like Yazid. Such poems were written against the Shāh but could easily be used during the war against Saddam Hosein. The soldier who wears his uniform and begins his journey to the military front is comparable to a *hāji* who clothes himself in the *haji* garment and travels to Mecca.

Khalil Mozanneb employs the 'Āshurā motif to inspire the Iranian young men to offer their lives to preserve the principles of the Islamic Republic.

hamishe ruz-e qiyām-e Hosein-o 'Āshurā-st

⁴⁰⁸ 'A. Musavi Garmārudi, *Gozine-ye ash ār*, selected and prologue by B. Khorramshāhi, Tehran: Morvārid, 1375/1996, pp. 141-48.

⁴⁰⁹ The compound word *Zabih-Allāh* is derived from Arabic root z-b-h means to kill and Allāh is a God's name. The word means is killed for the cause of God.

*tamām-e ruy-e zamin Karbalā, shahid, Hosein*⁴¹⁰

Always, it is the day of Hosein's rebellion, 'Āshurā

The entire surface of the world is Karbalā, and the martyr is Hosein.

The poet universalizes the events of 'Āshurā, using the word 'always' (*hamishe*). This means that Muslims everywhere are at 'Āshurā, they face a choice and should protest against injustice. One does not need to wait for a specific time, or be in a specific place, to begin to resist injustice. In this poem, Karbalā is a symbol of strength and self-sacrifice, and Iranians' willingness to fight. By saying that every day is 'Āshurā, he also compares the soldiers already killed on the battlefield to imam Hosein.⁴¹¹

The war poet, Now-Bahār refers to 'Āshurā in a poem entitled 'The Revolution of 'Āshurā' (*enqelāb-e 'Āshurā*)

...

hanuz rāyehe-ye lālehā-ye khun ālud

nasim āvarad az khāk-o āb-e 'Āshurā

hanuz mishenavam sowt-e delrobāy-e Hosein

*pey-e hedāyat-e khalq az khetāb-e 'Āshurā*⁴¹²

Still the wind brings the pleasant odor of bloody tulips

from the soil and water of 'Āshurā (i.e. Karbalā)

Still I hear Hosein's heart-ravishing voice

in order to guide the people through the discourse of 'Āshurā.

Now-Bahār uses the images of tulips' smell to assert that the martyrs of Karbalā are still present. Their sweet odor is spreading everywhere, which reminds the soldier of their

⁴¹⁰ *Sure-ye adabiyyāt-e 'Āshurā* 2, selected by M. 'A. Mardāni, p. 25. For more examples see Ibid. p. 22.

⁴¹¹ The slogan was used during the Revolution (1979) when the youth were killed during demonstrations by the Shāh's forces. See K.M. O'Connor, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, under Iranian Revolution of 1978-1979, ed. J. E. Campo, New York, NY: Facts On File, c2009.

⁴¹² *Sure-ye adabiyyāt-e 'Āshurā* 2, selected by M. 'A. Mardāni, p. 79.

bloody deaths, and that one should emulate their act of self-sacrifice. In the third and fourth lines, one reads of the fact that today imam Hosein is guiding the people, giving the same instructions that he gave on the day of ‘Āshurā. The poet uses the literary device of repetition (*takrir*) on the word ‘still’ (*hanuz*) to signify that the Iran-Iraq war is the continuation of imam Hosein’s battle on the day of ‘Āshurā. The poet goes on to specify the events: imam Hosein and his companions were killed brutally; the enemy mounted their heads on lances; they carried the women and children into captivity and imprisoned them in a ruined mosque in Damascus. All these events are still experienced by Shiite Muslims, thus, they are responsible for avenging the martyrs of Karbalā. “Still the song of God’s unity (*towhid*) and the cry of freedom/ are heard, because of the pure message of ‘Āshurā (*hanuz naghme-ye towhid-o bāng-e āzādi/ resad be gush ze peyghām-e nāb-e ‘Āshurā*). The event of Karbalā sends two messages to the people of the world. One is the oneness of God, meaning everyone should testify to God’s unity and submit to His religion, presumably Shiite Islam. The second is self-sacrifice for freedom. Since *towhid* is the essence of Islam, the poet implies that imam Hosein struggled to protect Islam from false beliefs and inappropriate practices. According to Shiite readings, the Umayyad caliph, Yazid, did not respect Islamic law (*shari‘at*). Read in the war context, the poem is saying that Iranian soldiers are fighting against infidels to revive the *shari‘at* and expand Shiite Islam. After the Revolution, the leaders of the Islamic Republic propagated the necessity of exporting the Islamic Revolution.

This political usage of ‘Āshurā, during the revolution and the war, draws on the work of ‘Ali Shariati. Shariati says, “The martyr teaches and sends a message against oppression and tyranny ... with his death, he defeats the enemy, and if he cannot break the enemy, disgraces him.”⁴¹³ The martyr’s blood conveys a message to the people that they are members of the community and should emulate the martyr in protesting against injustice and violation.

The motif of the book of ‘Āshurā (*ketāb-e ‘Āshurā*) in Now-Bahār’s poem is another way of saying that the battle of ‘Āshurā continues eternally, and is essential to the

⁴¹³ ‘A. Shariati, “Pas az shahādat,” in *Hosein vāreth-e Ādam, majmu‘e-ye āthār 19*, Tehran: Qalam, 1367/1988, p. 204.

survival of the Shiite religion.

hanuz fāje 'e-ye qatl-e zāde-ye Zahrā
*be khun neveshte shavad dar ketāb-e 'Āshurā*⁴¹⁴

Still, the tragic event of the execution of Zahrā's grandson
 Is written in blood on the book of 'Āshurā.

The death of the grandson of Zahrā is written on the book of 'Āshurā, according to Now-Bahār.⁴¹⁵ In this poem, several religious and mystic concepts are used to assert that the death of imam Hosein and his companions will never be erased from the book of 'Āshurā. The poet refers to the commemoration, which is performed from the 1st to the 10th of Moharram in Shiite countries. Thus, one who dies following imam Hosein's way of life will also be remembered, and consequently will survive eternally.

To show the influential and everlasting role of the 'Āshurā events among Shiites, Nowbahār asserts indirectly that imam Hosein's death was preordained by God on the day of *alast*, when God determined the fates of all creatures. Because his death is written on the heavenly tablet, it will be preserved from destruction. To indicate the manner of his death, stabbed by the enemy's daggers, the poet writes that his death is written in blood. The poet links the day of 'Āshurā to the preserved tablet, to illustrate the importance of self-sacrifice on the battlefield. In short, Now-Bahār suggests that Āshurā was ordained, and robed in honour, at the time of predestination.

The war poet Javād Mohaddethi introduces the motif of 'Āshurā in a poem to remind the reader that Hosein's example also means sacrificing one's loved-ones in the struggle.

darsi ke ze 'Āshurā āmukhte-im in bud

⁴¹⁴ M. 'A. Mardāni, *Sure-ye adabiyyāt-e 'Āshurā* 2, p. 79.

⁴¹⁵ Zahrā is a title of the prophet Mohammad's daughter, Fāteme.

*qorbāni-ye rāh-e din farzand-o pedar kardim*⁴¹⁶

The lesson that we have learned from ‘Āshurā

Is that we should sacrifice our children and fathers in the path of religion

This poem emphasizes, self-sacrifice for the cause of the Shiite Islam. Mohaddethi personifies ‘Āshurā as a teacher guiding Muslims to offer what is most precious, their family and their own lives, to revive the religion. ‘Āshurā is a metonym for imam Hosein, the teacher whose example all should follow.⁴¹⁷ According to Shiite sources, on the day of ‘Āshurā, imam Hosein sent the male members of the household, and his companions to battle against the enemy. The scholar Mahmoud Ayoub writes, “The special status of the imam Hosein in Muslim piety and devotion has in large measure been due to the imam’s great sacrifice of family, wealth and life itself in the way of God.... Above all, however, the imam Hosein’s martyrdom became a source of strength and endurance for Muslims in times of suffering, persecution and oppression. He has stood with every wronged man or woman before oppressive rulers, reproaching wrongdoers and encouraging the oppressed to persist in their struggle for freedom and dignity.”⁴¹⁸ Ayatollah Khāmenei, in a sermon at Friday prayers at the University of Tehran campus said, “... He [imam Hosein] is the source of inspiration for our revolutionary movement; he inspires (*elhām-bakhsh*) our children, and our youth to sacrifice their lives and strive for martyrdom. This yearning for martyrdom guarantees the victory of Islam and the Muslims.”⁴¹⁹

War poets made several references to the sufferings that imam Hosein endured on the battlefield. Mohaddethi holds that imam Hosein suffered from the death of his family. However, Iranians should follow the act, and sacrifice one who they love for the cause of Islam, and suffer in the same way and to the same degree that imam Hosein suffered at

⁴¹⁶ J. Tajlil, “Vizhegihā’i az she’r-e enqlāb-e eslāmi,” *Majmu’e-ye maqālehā-ye seminar-e barrasi-ye adabiyāt-e enqelāb-e eslāmi*, Tehran: Samt, 1373/1994, p. 100.

⁴¹⁷ See the motif of the teacher of love in chapter 2 of the present study.

⁴¹⁸ M. Ayoub, “The Imam Hosein in Sunnī Tradition,” in *al-Serāt*, vol. XII, Paper from Imam Hosein Conference London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986, p. 67.

⁴¹⁹ *Dar maktab-e jom’e: majmu’e-ye khotbehā-ye namāz-e jom’e-ye Tehran*, vol. 3, p. 237, (sermon of 15/03/1360).

Karbalā. There is no doubt that through voluntary suffering and enduring pain the soldier will receive rewards in heaven. The martyr's families benefited from the governmental benefits. They were supported by the organization called the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs (*bonyād-e shahid va omur-e jānbāzān*) that was founded in 1980 to tend families of the war's victims. The bonyād got the right to prioritize university admission and job employments offer other benefits to the martyr's families such as paying for a wedding ceremony.⁴²⁰

During the war, the leaders of the Islamic Republic made many references in Friday prayers to the battles between Muslims and infidels in early Islamic history, to teach their audience that they should act like the early Muslims. For instance, a year after the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war in 1981, Ayatollah Hāshemi Rafsanjāni told the following story to participants at Friday prayers: "We have read stories about the Muslims' behavior at the dawn of Islam; they astonished us. For instance, Nasibe Jarrāhe in the battle of Ohod⁴²¹ saw that her son was fleeing from the battlefield. She stopped him and said, "O my son! I do not make my milk lawful to you (*shiram rā halālat nemikonam*)⁴²² unless you go to the battlefield and become a martyr." She returned her child to the battlefield to die a martyr's death. He goes on to give another instance, when the mother of a youth put a shroud on his neck at Karbalā and said, "Proceed to the battlefield to be martyred before 'Ali Akbar becomes a martyr."⁴²³ Ayatollah Khomeini praised the mothers of martyrs he said, "Often we hear our women ... cry out loud, saying that they have given children in the path of God and Islam and are proud of it. They realize what they gain in return is far above the blessing of the Heaven, let alone the material things of this world."⁴²⁴

⁴²⁰ See S. Maloney, "Agents or Obstacles? Parastatal Foundations and Challenges for Iranian Development," in *The Economy of Iran: The Dilemmas of an Islamic State*, ed. P. Alizadeh, New York NY: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2000, p. 151.

⁴²¹ Usually transliterated 'Uhud, but the vowels are short. A Meccan force sought revenge for their defeat in the battle of Badr, and was successful. For further information see C.F. Robinson, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under Uḥud.

⁴²² This does not imply that the child was actually breast-feeding. In Iranian culture the construction *shir rā halāl nakardan* is used when a mother is angry with her child or to encourage him or her to do something that he/she has no interest in doing.

⁴²³ *Dar maktab-e jom'e: majmu'e-ye khotbahā-ye namāz-e jom'e-ye Tehran*, vol. 3, p. 354. It is not possible to vouch for the historical accuracy of these stories.

⁴²⁴ J.M. Davis, *Martyrs: Innocence, Vengeance, and Despair in the Middle East*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 51.

KARBALĀ: SYMBOLIZING THE PLACE OF MARTYRDOM

After discussing the events that happened on the day of ‘Āshurā, in the ensuing paragraphs, I will explain how Karbalā as a physical place functioned in Iran’s modern war poetry and on the battlefield. Karbalā was both literally and metaphorically the destination of the Iranian soldiers. They aimed to conquer Iraq, to enter Karbalā and go to the sanctuary of their beloved, imam Hosein. Then, I will illustrate how the war poets pictured Karbalā as a captive waiting for Iranians to be freed from the power of Saddam Hosein. The war poets equated Iran with Karbalā, in the sense that if Iranian soldiers did not defend their country it would be occupied by the Sunnis, like Karbalā. They also referred to Karbalā as the gateway to Jerusalem and said after conquering Iraq the soldiers should continue their fight to overthrow the Israel regime in Jerusalem. Finally, I will examine the motif of the path of Hosein (*rāh-e Hosein*).

For Shiites, Karbalā is a third holy city, after the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Since imam Hosein was buried in Karbalā, Shiites have considered it a holy land. Throughout history, the Karbalā paradigm has been attractive to diverse groups opposing the state, and to states seeking to strengthen their legitimacy.⁴²⁵ An instance of the use of Karbalā to legitimize power is in the Safavid period in Iran when Moharram rituals were performed to stimulate both religious devotion and a sense of national identity and dedication to Safavid ideals.⁴²⁶

Although the motif of Karbalā was not popular with the mystic poets before the Safavid dynasty, there are some references to Karbalā, imam Hosein, and his act of sacrifice, which is used as a metaphor for the necessity of self-purification. While the war poets, extensively, used the motif to inspire self-sacrifice on the military front, Rumi uses Karbalā to encourage the reader to follow Hosein’s way of live and purify his lower soul

⁴²⁵ K. Scot Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi’i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*, Washington, the University of Washington Press: 2004, p. 10. Scot Aghaie asserts that Abu Moslem from Khorāsān (718/19 or 723/27-755) appealed to Shiites’ emotional attachment to the prophet’s family to encourage them to revolt against the Umayyad dynasty, in support of the ‘Abbāsids (r. 750-930). See Ibid.

⁴²⁶ F.J. Korom, *Hosay Trinidad: Muharram Performances in an Indo-Caribbean Diaspora*, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003, p. 35.

from negative attributes. Rumi writes that the importance of the battle of Karbalā is not Hosein's death at the hands of oppressors, but that he had defeated his lower soul. To understand love, man has to fight against his carnal soul; this is called the Greater War.⁴²⁷

On this account, Rumi writes,

bezan shamshir-o molk-e 'eshq bestān
ke molk-e 'eshq molk-e pāydār ast
Hosein-e Karbalā-i āb bogzār
*ke āb emruz tigh-e ābdār ast*⁴²⁸

Strike with a sword and take away the land of love
 Because the land of love is an eternal land
 You are Hosein at Karbalā, leave water!
 Today a sharp blade is water.

Rumi asserts that one should fight against one's lower soul in order to achieve the land of love. The word *pāydār* means literally 'having feet,' 'constant,' and 'firm.' Rumi refers to imam Hosein and his death while he was suffering from thirst to encourage the reader to extract himself from all worldly needs. Rumi says that, like imam Hosein, one should not think of water.

For Rumi, what distinguishes Hosein is that he had purified his self from negative attributes. He had become ideal enlightened to be emulated. Thus, the rest of the community should follow in his footsteps. In Chittick's words, "suffering and tribulation of the spiritual journey as exemplified in the outward world by trials of the imam Hosein and his family that man can attain the perfection for which he was created."⁴²⁹ In this poem, the word water is of great significance.

Visiting Hosein's shrine is a pilgrimage (*ziyārat*), and the pilgrims are believed to be

⁴²⁷ W.C. Chittick, "Rumi's View of the Imam Hosein," in *al-Serāt*, vol. xii, Paper from Imam Hosein Conference, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986, p. 8.

⁴²⁸ Mowlānā Jalāl al-Din Rumi, *Kolliyyāt-e Shams yā divan-e kabir, moshtamel bar qasāed, ghazaliyyāt, qat'āt-e Fārsi va 'Arabi, va tarji'āt va molamma'āt*, vol. 1, with corrections and explanations by Badi' al-Zamān Foruzānfar, Tehran: Enteshārāt-e Daneshgāh-e Tehrān, 1336/1957, p. 203, no. 3661-3662.

⁴²⁹ W.C. Chittick, "Rumi's View of the Imam Hosein," p. 9.

rewarded in the hereafter. It is said that Zeynab, Hosein’s sister, was the first to visit his tomb. The first group who commemorated imam Hosein’s death were the so-called Penitents (*tawwābun*): people from Kufa who had invited Hosein to come to lead their community, but did not support him at the crucial time. After his death, ashamed of their shortcomings and past mistakes, they tried to take revenge on Hosein’s blood against the Umayyad commander, Ebn al-Ziyād. The Penitents movement was defeated by his soldiers at ‘Ayn al-Wardā.⁴³⁰ At various times, the access of Shiite pilgrims to imam Hosein’s sanctuary has been restricted. The Sunni Caliph al-Motavakkel (r. 847-861) destroyed the tomb in 850, but it did not lose its importance for Shiites.⁴³¹ In 1927, Rezā Shāh Pahlavi banned Iranian pilgrims from visiting the holy cities,⁴³² but such restrictions have not stopped Iranians going to Karbalā to visit Hosein’s tomb, or longing to do so. For Shiites, visiting his shrine is a renewal of their commitment to Shiite Islam.

In the war years participating in the fight against Iraq with the goal of entering imam Hosein’s shrine was another means of proving love for the imam. Iranian soldiers fought selflessly in the hope of visiting the shrine, and in the belief that, in Paradise, imam Hosein would host those who are died in the fight.

During the war between Iran and Iraq, Karbalā played a role in the rhetoric of Iran’s campaign against Iraq. Karbalā is situated in Iraq but Iranians focused on the cultural and religious aspects of Karbalā, presenting it as a Shiite Iranian city that had been occupied for centuries by Sunni rulers. The time had come to free the city from the infidels. The leaders of the Islamic Republic encouraged young men to go to the battlefield to free Karbalā.⁴³³ In their sermons, they pictured it as a holy place waiting for Iranians to be liberated from the authority of a Sunni state: Saddam Hosein. They used various propaganda techniques to lead people to believe that Iranian forces were on the verge of entering Karbalā.

Soldier’s testaments expressed the wish to occupy Karbalā and to visit imam

⁴³⁰ E.A. Ghareeb with the assistance of Beth K. Dougherty, *Historical Dictionary of Iraq*, pp. 180-81.

⁴³¹ E. Honigmann, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, under Karbalā; for further information about the history of Karbalā see Ibid.

⁴³² *Middle East and Africa: International Dictionary of Historic Places*, vol. 4., ed. T. Ring, associate editor, R. M. Salkin; photo editor, Sh. La Boda, Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1996, p. 402.

⁴³³ S.C. Pelletire, *The Iran-Iraq War: Chaos in a Vacuum*, New York: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1992, p. 137. Eight Iranian campaigns were named after Karbalā. See Ibid. n. 1-4.

Hosein's shrine. For instance, the revolutionary guard martyr 'Azim Motuli Habibi writes to his family, "My wish from God is that He not take me from this world until I have visited the shrine of imam Hosein, so that I may enter the shrine on my own, and that if death should not allow me the opportunity, and the wish of God is that I die, that my spirit be taken there."⁴³⁴

Another political usage of Karbalā was in the code names for battles and military operations, such as 'Karbalā five.' Expanding on this paradigm, the nights before these big battles were called the night of 'Āshurā (*shab-e Āshurā-i*), during which the soldiers would mourn for imam Hosein, and for themselves, wishing to be killed to be united as martyrs with Hosein.⁴³⁵ Signs placed on the battlefield showed the direction to Karbalā and soldiers recited the slogan 'Karbalā Karbalā, we are coming' (*Karbalā Karbalā mā dārim miyāim*). According to Shiite traditions, imam Hosein's blood gave the soil of Karbalā a sweet smell, and the body of a soldier killed in the fight is supposed to smell of musk, which is the smell of the houris of paradise and shows that the angels have taken the martyr to heaven.⁴³⁶ Ayatollah Motahhari quotes from the Shiite imams, "It is better to prostrate oneself on earth from the graves of a *shahid*. If possible, the earth of Karbalā should be obtained, for it emits the smell of the *shohadā*."⁴³⁷ For this reason, clay tablets are brought from Karbalā and are available in Shiite mosques, for use in prayer.

In the war poetry, Karbalā is connected with enslavement, as the holy city is in the hands of the enemies of God and of the prophet. In 'The Cheerful Days at the front line' (*ruzhā-ye khosh-e jebhe*), the poet 'Ali-Rezā Qazve personifies Karbalā as one who is enslaved:

⁴³⁴ N. Nazemi, "Sacrifice and Authorship: A Compendium of the Wills of Iranian War Martyrs," in *Iranian Studies*, vol. 30, no. 3-4, (Summer-Fall 1997), p. 270.

⁴³⁵ R. Varzi. *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-revolution Iran*, Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2006, pp. 102-103.

⁴³⁶ D. Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 119. For more information on the Islamic traditions about the smell emanating from a martyr's grave see *ibid*.

⁴³⁷ A.M. Motahhari, "Shahīd," in *Jihad and Shahadat, Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 144. According to Shiite jurisprudence, in prayers one is not allowed to prostrate oneself on any object other than earth or what is growing from earth. The small clay tablets (*mohr*) they use are made from the clay of Karbalā. See A. M. Motahhari, "Shahīd," in *Jihad and Shahadat Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 151, n. 33.

Zendegāni bu-ye ‘ādat midahad
*Karbalā bu-ye esārat midahad*⁴³⁸

Life smells like a habit
 Karbalā smells like captivity.

The poet condemns the man who lives a routine life, who makes no change in it and does not strive for a higher goal, but who only seeks to fulfill his bodily needs, and bodily desires. In the war context, the higher goal is to fight to free Karbalā from the power of infidel Sunnis. The poet’s reference to Karbalā as a captive alludes to the events of Karbalā. When the male members of the family were killed, the women and children were taken into captivity, and marched to the court of Yazid in Damascus. The poet says that a Shiite Muslim has a duty to abandon his family and land, and journey to the battlefield.

Seyed Hasan Hoseini also personifies Karbalā in a poem called ‘Farewell’ (*vedā*):

miravam mādar ke inak Karbalā mikhānadām
*az diyār-e dur yār-e āshenā mikhānadām*⁴³⁹

O mother! I am leaving; at this moment Karbalā is calling me
 From a land far away from here, a familiar friend is calling me

In this poem, Karbalā is a leader calling to Iranian soldiers and those who love him for support. The smell of imam Hosein blood and that of his companions drags the poet toward Karbalā. The Iranian soldiers are listening to the calling to avoid being treated as Kufans who did not assist imam Hosein.

⁴³⁸ *Kuche por az ‘atr-e nāme to: majmu‘e-ye ash‘ār-e defā‘-e moqaddas*, ed. A. Binā’i, p. 22.

⁴³⁹ S.H. Hoseini, *Hamsedā bā halq-e Esmā‘il*, p. 33.

THE PATH OF JERUSALEM GOES THROUGH KARBALĀ

During the Iran-Iraq war, the leaders of the Islamic Republic stressed the importance of al-Aqsā mosque in Jerusalem, to mobilize the soldiers to continue fighting against Iraq. They said that Palestine has been captured by a 'Zionist' state, although the holy sites in Jerusalem should be governed by a Muslim state. In the same way, a Sunni power occupies Karbalā. This link in the propaganda lies behind a slogan of the war: 'to conquer Qods (Jerusalem), we have to pass through Karbalā' (*az barāy-e fath-e qods az Karbalā bāyad gozasht*). The slogan says that after defeating the Iraqi regime, they would fight to free the holy mosque of al-Aqsā. Signs were posted on the battlefield, showing the direction of Jerusalem.⁴⁴⁰ The city is called al-Qods by the Iranian leaders, literally meaning 'the holy' and the war against Iraq was regarded as part of a holy war against the West, including Israel. In the first years after the beginning of the war, Ayatollah Khomeini called for *jihad* (holy war) to prevent Saddam Hosein from wresting actual, or even nominal, Islamic revolutionary leadership from Iran."⁴⁴¹

From a historical point of view, the Temple Mount in Jerusalem is important for Jews, Muslims and Christians. Jews believe that, in obedience to a divine command, the prophet Abraham constructed an altar on the mount to sacrifice his son Isaac. For Muslims, Jerusalem is also a sacred site because of its association with Abraham. The Temple Mount, known as the Haram al-Sharif (Noble Sanctuary) contains two very early and important sacred places of Islam: the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsā Mosque. According to Islamic accounts, the prophet Mohammad ascended from Jerusalem to the heavens, and returned to Mecca. Although al-Aqsā commemorates that event, it was built as a congregational mosque.⁴⁴² The conflict between Muslims and Jews over the Temple Mount emerged after the Six Day War (in 1967), when Israel captured the Old City of Jerusalem. Jewish control

⁴⁴⁰ S.A. Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran under his Successors*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 135. Arjomand writes: "General Shirazi, commander of the ground forces, declared that 'the Islamic combatants of Iran' would soon be praying with the oppressed Iraqi nation in Karbalā and attempt to eliminate the "Zionist regime" and liberate Jerusalem. Thus, 'God willing, the ground would be prepared for the appearance of Imam Mahdi, the Hidden Imam.'" See S. A. Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran under his Successors*, p. 135

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., p. 140.

⁴⁴² R.W. Stump, *Boundaries of Faith: Geographical Perspectives on Religious Fundamentalism*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000, pp. 161-62.

of the sacred site, and especially the possibility of Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount, was seen as a threat to core Muslim values, making the defence of the holy sites a sacred responsibility.⁴⁴³

BEYOND KARBALĀ, THE WORLD

The war poets referred to Karbalā as a model for all oppressed people, and to persuade Iranians that they are fighting in support of all oppressed people. Seyed Hasan Hoseini employs the motif of Karbalā in a poem entitled ‘The Narrative of Martyrs’ (*mathnavi-ye shahidān*):

tā verd-e labhāshān sorud-e sorkh-e lā shod
*har jā zamini bud ānjā Karbalā shod*⁴⁴⁴

As soon as the red song of ‘no’ became the mantra on their lips
 Wherever there was a land, it became Karbalā.

Hoseini describes death on the battlefield as the red song of ‘no,’ which is defiance of an illegitimate ruler at the price of one’s life. In this poem, the word *lā*, meaning ‘no,’ refers to the Qur’ānic verse, ‘there is no god but God’ (*lā Elāha ela Allāh*) (20:8), which is part of the Islamic profession of faith (*shahādat*).⁴⁴⁵ In *Hadiqat al-Haqiqat*, Sanā’i writes that man moves toward Truth when he goes beyond the beauties and temptations of the world. This is only possible by means of self-denial.⁴⁴⁶ In Hoseini’s poem, red (*sorkh*) signifies bloodshed and refers to death on the battlefield. The profession of faith is recited, when possible, at the point of death to ensure that one dies a Muslim. The blood of the soldiers is pictured as reciting this verse, signifying both defiance to injustice, and readiness for death.

In a *robā’i*, Hoseini states that one should draw a comparison between the world and

⁴⁴³ Ibid., p. 164.

⁴⁴⁴ S.H. Hoseini, *Ham-sedā bā halq-e Esmā’il*, p. 40.

⁴⁴⁵ L. Gardet, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, under Allāh.

⁴⁴⁶ A. Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalāloddin Rumi*, p. 238.

Karbalā. This comparison gives him the insight to protest against illegitimate rulers.

‘ālam hame khāk-e Karbalā bāyade-mān
peyvaste be lab khodā! khodā! bāyade-mān
tā pāk shavad jahān ze abnā-ye Yazid
*hamvāre Hosein moqtadā bāyade-mān*⁴⁴⁷

We want the whole world to be the soil of Karbalā
 All the time, on our lips, should be: God! God!
 We should follow the example of Hosein
 Until the world is cleansed from Yazid's sons

The struggle between justice and injustice, fidelity and infidelity is not restricted to Karbalā, according to the poet. He universalizes Karbalā and asserts that every individual is responsible for fighting against injustice. According to the poet, the Umayyad caliph, Yazid, is the archetype of a tyrant, and other rulers, like his sons, are following his example. Martyrs' testaments also refer to Yazid in this way. The poet stresses the importance of defying oppressors. Although the 'sons of Yazid' govern the world, a Muslim should follow the principles prescribed by imam Hosein. It is worth noting that Ayatollah Khomeini is introduced in this poem as a descendant of imam Hosein. Thus, one should follow his orders. The martyr 'Ali-Asghar Nuri writes, "... Even if the world were to overflow with Yazids, it is inconceivable that we would turn our back on the leader of the martyrs [Hosein] and the imam of the Islamic community."⁴⁴⁸ Nuri holds that nothing can prevent a community from overthrowing an unjust ruler, if they follow imam Hosein's example and obey the principles of the leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini.

⁴⁴⁷ S.H. Hoseini, *Ham-sedā bā halq-e Esmā'il*, p. 111.

⁴⁴⁸ N. Nazemi, "Sacrifice and Authorship: A Compendium of the Wills of Iranian War Martyrs," p. 266.

IRAN AS KARBALĀ

In a poem entitled ‘In the Howdah of Martyrdom’ (*dar howdaj-e shahādat*), the war poet Soleymān Farrokhzād compares Iran to Karbalā.

dar karbalā-ye khun gerefte-ye Iran
Allāh-o Akbarat
inak
selāh-e kāri –yo kubande ist
*bar farq-e kāferān*⁴⁴⁹

In Iran, which has become a blood stained Karbalā
 Your cry, “God is most great”
 Now
 Is an effective and striking weapon
 On the middle of the infidels’ heads.

Farrokhzād holds that the expression ‘God is most great’ (*Allāh-o Akbar*) is a weapon that defeats the enemy. He compares Iran with Karbalā to show the status of Iranian soldiers in comparison to the Iraqis. The former are Shiites, defenders of imam Hosein, and the latter are Sunni, supporters of Yazid, whose authority is illegitimate according to the Shiite tradition. The poet refers to the enemy (Iraq) as an infidel (*kāfer*) because he not only did not follow imam Hosein’s example, he is fighting with his heir, Ayatollah Khomeini.

The polarity of good versus evil is also found in martyrs’ testaments (*vassiyat-nāme-ye shohadā*). For instance, the martyr Bizhan Mohammadiyān, writes, “The present war is a conflict between truth and falsehood and since truth is the victor, we are victorious.”⁴⁵⁰ The overwhelming belief in Iran was that Iranians are victorious, whether the enemy kills them or not. If they are killed, they shed their blood to reveal the enemy’s falsehood. The soldiers also compared Iran to Karbalā. For instance, in his last will,

⁴⁴⁹ *Mosābeqe-ye she‘r-e jang*, p. 70.

⁴⁵⁰ N. Nazemi, “Sacrifice and Authorship: A Compendium of the Wills of Iranian War Martyrs,” p. 266.

Fathhollāh ‘Araji writes to his mother, “... You are not present to see that this land is truly Karbalā and it has been proven that it is always the best amongst us who are martyred.”⁴⁵¹

IMAM HOSEIN: THE ARCHETYPE OF MARTYRDOM

The fight between imam Hosein and his companions, and the soldiers of the Umayyad caliph were used as political tools during the Revolution and during the war by the state of Iran. The conflict between justice and injustice, good and evil became topical elements in Khomeini’s sermons. In 1963, in the month of Moharram, Ayatollah Khomeini preached a sermon and compared the Shāh to the Umayyad ruler, Yazid. Afterwards, Khomeini was arrested and was sent to exile to Najaf.⁴⁵² In 1978, during the Revolution, in his sermons, Ayatollah Khomeini compared the Shāh to Yazid more effectively, and other revolutionaries took up the comparison.⁴⁵³ Khomeini’s speech implied that the Iranian youth killed by the Shāh’s secret police were like the martyrs of Karbalā. This comparison connected all the people opposed to the regime: university students, the members of the Mojāhedín-e Khalq, communists, and others who protested against the Shāh for a variety of reasons. In the Pahlavi era, imam Hosein had been presented as a quietist, the innocent victim of oppression whose silence was a sign of his piety.⁴⁵⁴ Since this model was not suitable for inflaming the Revolution, in this period, the events of Karbalā were politicized. Rather than an oppressed innocent one, he was presented as struggling against Yazid to re-establish a just government. To reach the objective, he offered his life.⁴⁵⁵ This interpretation of his act increased Iranian’s willingness to revolt against the Shāh. In the same period, Iranians compared Ayatollah Khomeini to imam Hosein who fought against the illegitimate Umayyad caliph, while Iranian activists were like imam Hosein’s companions.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., p. 269.

⁴⁵² T.R. Mattair, *Global Security Watch Iran: A Reference Handbook*, Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2008, p.152.

⁴⁵³ S.A. Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, p. 100; N. Yegana & N.R. Keddie, “Sexuality and Shiite Protest in Iran” in *Shi‘ism and Social Protest*, ed. J.R.I. Cole and N.R. Keddie, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1986, p.122. Also see J. Afary & K. B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 57.

⁴⁵⁴ D. Pinault, *The Shiites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992, p. 173.

⁴⁵⁵ J. Afary & K.B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, p. 64.

During the Iran-Iraq war, imam Hosein and Yazid were used as symbols of good and evil respectively. The Iranian state compared Iraq's Sunni president with Yazid, calling him not Saddam Hosein but Saddam Yazid. The leaders of the Islamic Revolution emphasized that the ancestors of the Sunni authorities killed imam Hosein; thus Iranians should avenge the act as the followers and supporters of the Shiite imams. The notion has been popularly propagated among the people in annual commemoration of imam Hosein's martyrdom during the month of Moharram, in the *ta'ziye* ritual, in which participants identify themselves as the companions of imam Hosein.⁴⁵⁶

THE PATH OF HOSEIN

Another motif allied in the war poetry to that of imam Hosein's martyrdom is the path of Hosein (*rāh-e Hosein*). The poets identified death on the military front with the path of Hosein to link those who fell on the battlefield to Hosein companions. The war poets treat Hosein's act of sacrifice as a lesson in altruism (*ithār*). He offered his life for the sake of Shiite Muslims without expecting any reward. He wished to protect oppressed people from tyrannous authority, and to teach the oppressed population groups to protest against their oppressors. On the basis of this aspect of Hosein's protest, the leaders of the Islamic Republic said that Iranians were fighting against Iraqi for the sake of the oppressed nation of Iraq, expecting no reward. The war poets also characterized Hosein's path as a mystical way that leads to eternal salvation. For the war poets, the path of Hosein is the path of love. Hosein, like a mystic, detached himself from the world and its interests to purify his soul and seek annihilation in the Beloved. In addition, imam Hosein fought oppression because he had turned away from the world and its pleasures for the sake of Islamic principles. The concept of self-sacrifice for the sake of the Beloved was promoted in war propaganda, so that Iranian youth thought of the path of Hosein as the mystical path of love, and believed that death on the battlefield would unite them with the Beloved. Wearing the headband with Hosein's name identifies the soldier as Hosein, the Beloved. Thus his union with Hosein is

⁴⁵⁶ Imam Hosein as a model for a Muslim having reached the highest stage of perfection and the archetype of a martyr are also discussed in chapter 3 and 5 of this book respectively.

like the union of Hosein with the Beloved.

Because the motifs of mystical love and the divine Beloved are so prominent in Persian literature and Iranian culture, it was natural to see imam Hosein as the spiritual beloved. The lover, in both metaphoric and mystic sense, yearns for union with the Beloved. This longing ends in self-sacrifice for the sake of the Beloved. During the war imam Hosein was seen as the beloved and union was thought to be possible through self-sacrifice on the military front. Soldiers would wear a headband on which imam Hosein's name was written. They would call his name when attacking, and name him before drinking water, using the phrase, "O Hosein the martyr!" (*yā Hosein-e shahid*).

Another concept associated with imam Hosein death, and propagated during the war, is that he chose death to save Shiites from eternal punishment in the hereafter. A soldier who dies on the front becomes a martyr, and like imam Hosein he would guarantee the eternal survival of his loved ones in Paradise.

Imam Hosein's self-sacrifice also served to protect righteousness from falsehood. A soldier's death likewise will save righteousness from destruction. From imam Hosein's behavior, the soldier learns to lay down his life to defeat the enemy, symbolizing falsehood, to save Islam and preserve the principles of the Islamic Republic. In the following *robā'i* by Seyed Hasan Hoseini, the path of Hosein motif refers to his self-sacrifice:

yāri ke por az khun-e jegar shod jāmash
in bud be ruz-e vāpasin peyghāmash
ān kas ke rah-e Hosein rā mipuyad
*shahd ast sharang-e 'āsheqi dar kāmash*⁴⁵⁷

A friend whose cup has been filled with the blood of the liver,
 This was his message at the last day of his life:
 One who walks on the path of Hosein
 Finds the bitterness of being in love like honey.

⁴⁵⁷ S.H. Hoseini, *Ham-sedā bā halq-e Esmā'il*, p. 133.

In this quatrain, the poet asserts that one who has been initiated to Hosein’s path endures bitterness and hardships but it is as if he is eating honey. In the first line, Hoseini uses the compound “cup filled with blood,” referring metonymically to the mystic concept of the ‘cup of love.’ In mystic poetry, if God pours the wine of love into a man’s heart, he will remain drunk eternally. His love transforms his attributes to those of God, until nothing remains of his own self. He hears through Him, speaks through Him, sees through Him and moves by His power. At this stage, duality disappears and One Reality remains.⁴⁵⁸ Mystic references to the cup symbolize the spiritual intoxication that results from profound love for the Beloved. In this poem, the motif of the cup filled with blood alludes to the martyr’s portion, which is the blood of his liver, indicating pain. As he has been chosen to be martyred, his cup is filled with blood by the divine decree.⁴⁵⁹ The poet holds that the martyr sends a message to the community, stating that Hosein’s path is the path of love.

In the fourth line, the poet employs the concept of love to draw an analogy between imam Hosein’s path and spiritual progress in the path of love. In mystical love literature, the lover suffers hardships and afflictions, but he is satisfied with those. In this poem, the calamities that the lover endures are called the bitterness (*sharang*) of being in love, which for the lover are as sweet as honey (*shahd*). Although in mystical treatises, the path of love is a metaphor for spiritual progress, imam Hosein’s path of love is identified as self-sacrifice on the battlefield. Following the path of Hosein unites the lover with the Beloved. For this reason, suffering and death in the struggle are sweet and desirable for the lover.

Seyed Hasan Hoseini creates a dynamic setting through which, on the one hand, the soldier equates himself with Hosein’s supporters and is ready to offer his life on the battlefield. On the other hand, he compares Hosein to a mystic master who teaches his pupils that if they follow the disciplines of self-sacrifice they will reach the summit of spiritual perfection.

In classical love poetry, imam Hosein’s death is seen as a means through which the soul develops to higher states of perfection. In his *Divān*, the poet Sanā’i illustrates how the

⁴⁵⁸ M. Smith, *Al- Ġazālī the Mystic*, p. 194.

⁴⁵⁹ For further discussion on the motif of the cup of madness see pp. 229 in this study.

soul progresses to the stage of eternal subsistence in God. He refers to Hosein and Hasan as “martyrs who were dead but are alive.”⁴⁶⁰ The main reason for attaining to eternal subsistence is his love for the Beloved. Sanā’i places Hosein in a mystic context, holding that imam Hosein is the archetype of bravery and selflessness, and a prototype of the martyr:

din Hosein-e tost āz-o ārezu khuk-o sag ast
*teshne in rā mikoshi vān har do rā miparvart*⁴⁶¹

Your religion is your Hosein, greed and wishes are your pigs and dogs.

You kill the one, thirsty, and nourish the other two

The poet compares the negative traits of the lower soul to dogs and pigs; they amuse man and distract his attention from his religion. These negative traits are seen as spiritual diseases that need to be treated: otherwise, they weaken man’s soul and man’s religion remains thirsty and hungry like Hosein and his companions who were left without water and food in the desert of Karbalā.⁴⁶² Rumi too compares man’s religion to Hosein and his negative traits to Hosein’s enemies. If a man does not mortify his soul it is like helping the enemy to destroy the faith.

SEIZING HOSEIN’S CUP

The poets often compare martyrdom to drunkenness, to soften the fear of death. Various motifs such as the attraction exerted by Hosein’s cup (*jazbe-ye jān-e Hosein*) are employed. Using this trope enables the poet to avoid using the word martyrdom, emphasizing instead the attraction of the wine in the cup, which attracts the drinkers who lose their conscious by no longer being concerned by worldly affairs. The war poet Ramezān-‘Ali Goldun employs the motif of martyrdom as drunkenness in a poem entitled

⁴⁶⁰ A. Schimmel, “Karbala and Hosein in Literature,” in *al-Serāt*, vol. XII, Papers from Imam Hosein Conference, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986, p. 31.

⁴⁶¹ Sanā’i, *Divān*, with introduction, noted and contetns by Modarres Razavi, Tehran: Ketāb-khāne Sanā’i, 1372/1962, p. 655.

⁴⁶² A. Schimmel, “Karbala and Hosein Literature,” in *al-Serāt*, vol. XII, p. 30. The translation of the poem is derived from Schimmel.

‘His Holiness Hosein, the Master of the Martyrs’ (*sālār-e shahidān, hazrat-e Hosein*), to illustrate the effects of the day of ‘Āshurā on the world. The youth who are ready to offer their lives for the goals of the Islamic Revolution are like drunken men:

*shur-o sheydā’i-ye ‘ālam hame az ‘Āshurā-st
masti-ye mā bovad az jazbe-ye jān-e to Hosein*⁴⁶³

The world is intoxicated and insane because of ‘Āshurā,
O Hosein! We are drunkards through the attraction of your cup.

The poet employs cliché mystical vocabulary such as drunkenness (*shur*) and insanity (*sheydā’i*) to indicate the soldiers’ passionate love, and their mystical drunkenness. He uses these emotionally laden words that are rooted in Iranians’ thoughts and hearts to promote the sense of self-sacrifice in the masses. In this poem, the day of ‘Āshurā is likened to a cup of wine that belongs to Hosein. One who drinks one sip from the cup becomes intoxicated with the wine of ‘Āshurā and offers his life. The poet implies that on the day of ‘Āshurā, when imam Hosein was killed, he was actually drunk from the divine love. Thus, he passionately offered his life for the sake of the Beloved. Hosein is seen as a medium between Shiite Muslims and the Divine.

In their treatises on love, Persian mystics used the motif of the cup of wine, saying that the wine increases the lover’s drunkenness or thirst. The mystics refer to the cup as a mediator through which God increases intoxication in the mystic’s heart. Mohammad Ghazālī writes that when God pours out “a draught from the cup of His love,” thirst increases in the heart of the mystic. The lover’s self is removed, he becomes selfless and intoxicated. In the stage of selflessness, he attains such a spiritual level that he “hears by Me and sees by Me.”⁴⁶⁴ The mystic ascends to the highest stages of spiritual progress, where the eternal Cupbearer offers him the wine of love.

In Goldun’s poem, cited above, imam Hosein is compared to a mystic master who

⁴⁶³ M. ‘A. Mardāni, *Sure-ye adabiyyāt-e ‘Āshurā* 2, p. 52.

⁴⁶⁴ M. Smith, *Al-Ghazālī the Mystic*, p. 194.

offers one sip from the wine of 'Āshurā, and intoxicates not only the Shiites but also the people of the world. One who drinks from this wine becomes selfless, and is detached from the world as well as from his existence. He strives to follow Hosein example to become a martyr. In the war context, the cupbearer, Hosein, offers the wine of love to make the soldiers drunk, to guide them to the frontline. Drunkenness makes them daring and brave. By using the concept of selfless love, the poet motivates the youth to easily leave behind their parents, family, and belongings to fight against the enemy. The soldier becomes a mystic on the path of union with the beloved, denying himself, leaving the material world and its concerns.

SELF-REPROACH FOR NOT ASSISTING IMAM HOSEIN

A central theme in the Persian war poetry is Iranians' regret that they were not present at Karbalā to assist imam Hosein, some 1300 years ago. According to several Shiite sources, on the day of 'Āshurā, imam Hosein had 72 male companions. This was a small group in comparison to Ebn al-Ziyād's soldiers. From the beginning of the fight, the outcome was obvious. Imam Hosein's helplessness at the battle of Karbalā is illustrated in Persian Passion plays. Surrounded by the enemy, he is thirsty, but no one offers him water or assists him. The plays also show how his family was taken as captives to Yazid's court, and are treated brutally by Yazid's men. These images show the helplessness of imam Hosein and his family at Karbalā. Hosein's isolation and lack of helpers in the battle is associated with the motif of the stranger (*gharib*).⁴⁶⁵ He is as a stranger among enemies at Karbalā. Iranians have become familiar with these concepts when they commemorate imam Hosein martyrdom during the first ten days of the month of Moharram. The concept of having no helpers (*bi-yāvari*) is developed in the war poetry, along with the identification of modern Iranians as Hosein's helpers (*yāvar*).

Iranians' regret for Hosein helplessness at Karbalā is reflected in various sources such as the elegies written about the death of Hosein, and the texts of the Passion plays

⁴⁶⁵ For further information see H. Sālehi Rād Darbandsari, *Majālis-e Ta'ziye*, vol. 2, Tehran: Soroush, 1380/2002, pp. 51, 84, 199.

(*ta'ziye*), and in the war poetry. These sources show that Iranians' regret for not being present at Karbalā has a historical root in Persian literature that begins with the advent of the Safavids in Iran. Iranians blamed themselves for imam Hosein's death. Every faithful Shiite wants to be known as one who suffers for the cause of Hosein. The war with Iraq provided an opportunity for Iranians to avenge imam Hosein's blood on Yazid's descendants.

Soleymān Farrokhzād emphasizes that imam Hosein was helpless at Karbalā because of the small number of his companions, but now the Iranian soldiers are his assistants:

ey yāvar-e Hosein
ey peyrov-e imam
az dasthā-ye pāk-e to
dirist
mā jelvahā-ye rowshan-e piruzi rā
dar rāh dide-im
*dar jebhe-ye nā-barābar-e bātel*⁴⁶⁶

O supporter of Hosein
 O follower of the imam [Khomeini],
 From your pure hands
 For a long time past
 We have seen on the way
 The lightening manifestation of victory
 In the unequal trench of falsehood.

Here, the poet, Soleymān Harāti, defines the soldier, the potential martyr, as a supporter (*yāvar*) of imam Hosein. *Yāvar* means both supporter, assistant and friend.

⁴⁶⁶ *Mosābeqe-ye she'r-e jang*, p. 70.

In this poem, ‘the unequal trench’ (*jebhe-ye nā-barābar*) in the last line refers to the small number of imam Hosein’s companions compared to the number of Umayyad troops. Yet, he says, the light of victory can be seen. The image of fighting a stronger enemy is applicable to the Iran-Iraq war. While the Iranian soldiers may be outwardly defeated, they are victorious because they are standing for a righteous cause (*haqq*), and fighting against falsehood and illegitimacy (*bātel*). The notion of the struggle between *haqq* and *bātel* was propagated by the Iranian state. *Haqq* and *bātel* are Qur’ānic (8:8) concepts. For the Shiites, the fight between Hosein and Yazid is the battle between the truth, and falsehood. Therefore, Iranians, as imam Hosein’s followers, fight against evil-doers. To ensure that Iranians knew the reason for the continuation of the war, Ayatollah ‘Ali Khāmenei refers in a Friday sermon to Qur’ān 8:8 to assert, “God wants to establish truth (*jā ofiādan-e haqq*) in the world and remove falsehood (*bar ofiādan-e bātel*) which is bound to vanish, to be abolished completely.” The leaders of the Islamic Republic repeated his words during the war, teaching that it was a struggle between righteousness and falsehood (*nabard-e haqq ‘alayh-e bātel*).⁴⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have explained how during the war between Iran and Iraq, the poets employed the event of ‘Āshurā and Hosein’s martyrdom as language of symbols to inspire the soldiers to fight against the Iraqi enemy.

During the Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini had used the potential of ‘Āshurā to teach that protest against the Pahlavi monarch, whom he equated with Yazid, was a religious duty. The Shāh was compared to Yazid for several reasons: Firstly, his father, Rezā Shāh Pahlavi politicized the veil (*chādor*, *rusari*) when he banned its use in public in 1963.⁴⁶⁸ The revolutionaries of Iran compared his act to the unveiling of imam Hosein’s sister, Zeynab, during the period of imprisonment and at the court of Yazid. Secondly,

⁴⁶⁷ S.M. Gieling, *Religion and War in Revolutionary Iran*, p. 93.

⁴⁶⁸ J.E. Tucker, “Women in the Middle East and North Africa: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in *Women in the Middle East and North Africa: Resorting Women to History*, eds. N. Keddi & J.E. Tucker, Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1999, p. 126.

Mohammad Rezā Shāh did not follow the principles prescribed by Ayatollah Khomeini. He killed Iranian youth to preserve his own authority, which was compared to Yazid’s killing of imam Hosein and his companions at Karbalā. Such comparisons motivated the Iranian youth to protest and give up their lives for the sake of the Revolution.

The theme of fighting tyranny was applied to the poetry of Iran-Iraq war. When the Sunni ruler of Iraq, Saddām Hosein, was compared to Yazid. This comparison made the soldiers believe that Ayatollah Khomeini, a descendant of the prophet Mohammad, was following the path of Hosein. Thus, Iranian youth were imam Hosein’s companions when they fought against the Sunni regime to establish a just Islamic state and to revenge imam Hosein’s blood on Yazid’s heir. In the war poetry, the soldiers are called the supporters and assistants of Hosein (*yāvar-e Hosein*). The symbolic use of narrative elements of time, ‘Āshurā, and setting, Karbalā, provided the soldiers with the opportunity to transcend time and space, and suppose that they were real helpers of Hosein.

Karbalā, where Hosein’s shrine is located, is used as rhetoric in the Iran-Iraq war poetry to encourage the soldiers to fight, and to free the city from the Sunni authority. Karbalā is also connected to Qods in another way. Similar to Karbalā, Iranians were fighting for the freedom of all Muslims. The soldiers yearned to capture Karbalā and to visit the shrine of Hosein. Karbalā was presented as the place where their beloved imam is buried. The soldiers believed that if they sacrificed their lives on the military front, imam Hosein would be their host in paradise.

For Shiites, the name of imam Hosein is associated with divine love and self-sacrifice for its cause. The war poets identified death on the battlefield as martyrdom in the path of love. The soldiers believed that following Hosein’s example is similar to initiation into the mystical path of love. For the soldier, going to the battlefield means abandoning all worldly concerns such as family and possessions. Therefore, the battlefield is a shortcut to spiritual perfection, and the soldier’s death guarantees his eternal salvation.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁹ For more information on imam Hosein’s role in mystical symbolism see the chapters 2 and 3 in this study.

