

The Masculinities of Shi'ite Men in Karachi, Pakistan

by

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Introduction

During Muharram 2016, a woman sang mournfully about the Battle of Karbala in a darkened lecture theater. As she recounted the events of the tragedy through nauha, the audience around me began to weep. They did not weep in a soft way, nor did anyone seem to be attempting discretion as such. The dim lights of the theater had meant to cater to an element of privacy in the somber atmosphere – yet there was nothing private in the expression of grief that was occurring around me.

Coming from a Sunni Muslim background, I had never experienced something like this before. This event is known as a marsiya-goī, the recounting and lamentation of the tale of Karbala. It is an event that occurs mostly in the month of Muharram, and is primarily attended by those of the Shi'ite sect of Islam. From the poetic verse to the composition of the recitation, the experience is meant to evoke passion and sorrow (Bard, 2015; Burckhardt Qureshi, 1981; Pinault, 1999). What stood out to me during this event was not that grief was expressed, but the cultural and political implications of this form of expression.

The male friends who I see every other day in university and from whom I observe heteronormative performances of masculinity were the ones who were openly engaged in these expressions of grief. Those male friends in particular who have previously exhibited traits of hypermasculinity were the ones who wept the loudest. There was no shame or social cue hinting at gender roles being transgressed, no concept of the act of crying equating anything emasculating. The implications of this are immense and indicate a variance in the conceptualization of masculinity in Shi'ite Islam when compared with the framework of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) otherwise existing within the larger social fabric of gender performativity.

While gender roles in Islamic jurisprudence may be boldly characterized, it would be an anachronism and folly to understand the gender roles of today in South Asia and the larger Western framework through that of what existed 1400 years ago, or vice versa (Al-Hibri, 1999; Moghissi, 1999). It would also be inaccurate to generalize gender dynamics through the framework of an “Islamic world”, especially when it is argued that no such monolith befits the title (S. Ahmed, 2015). Cultural context differs vastly and creates a significantly different experience across both time and space, and is therefore liable to gross misrepresentation or an incomplete discourse on the subject at hand (Najmabadi Afsaneh, 2005).

Furthermore, neither can jurisprudence, itself open to interpretation, be a precursor or definer for social realities. Islam for the past few decades has been considered irreconcilable with feminist principles of equality (Gressgård, 2003; Honig, 1999; Moghissi, 1999), but it is not my intention to refute or support the claim. My research aims to expand on the possibility of a reality where the strict binary of masculine and feminine expression can dissolve to make space for a broader imagination.

Rituals of the Shi'ite faith are specific and packed with symbolical meaning. They consist of activities that involve forms of self-flagellation (matam) and ostentatious expressions of grief (majales¹) (Hammer Juliane, 2008; Mir-Hosseini Ziba, 1993). Ranging from the processions of Ashura to the everyday concept of martyrdom and sacrifice, there is much to analyze about the implications of such symbols on the construction of gender. Moreover, these symbols need to be analyzed keeping in mind the political climate that affects the form and expression of these rituals in Karachi and larger Pakistan. In tandem with this context of the Shi'ite faith in Karachi is a lack of political security and their status as a sectarian minority. Therefore, it is important to consider this lived reality and the means that have been established to deal with such a context. All of this affects the making of a masculine identity, and this is what I seek to observe.

My research objective is therefore to engage in critical discourse regarding gender and religion in a cultural context. My research questions probe into how masculinity is perceived and performed in the Shi'ite community, and how the political context of a city like Karachi and a region like South Asia effects the lives of the Shi'ite community.

My original observation was regarding a softer expression of grief - the element of crying. The fact that Shia men openly weep during moments like a marsiya-goī is an interesting juxtaposition to the hyper-masculine image of the man in a julus tolerating extreme levels of pain on his body. This variance in high and low forms of expression is what I aim to map in order to present a conceptually sound understanding of masculinity within the Shi'ite faith, experienced and contextualized in Karachi.

Multiplicities in Masculinity

The epistemological framework for my research is feminist, filtered through a postcolonial dialectics. All inquiry is therefore analytical and deals with the significance of metaphors and symbols in the cultural context at hand.

I start from an assumption of the existence of plural masculinities and aim to contribute towards the emerging field of CSM, or Critical Men's Studies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt,

¹ Majales – plural. Majlis – singular.

1993), or Masculine Work (Neal, 2011). Connell categorizes masculinity broadly into a “hegemonic masculinity” and “multiple masculinities”, and this is a framework that works well with the conceptualization of gender that my research is based on (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity in this context would be the overarching theme of dominance and power that exists as a general social expectation of what it means to be a “man”. This expectation may very well be a colonial import, stretching the morality of British or Western society onto South Asian fabric (Babayan, 2016; Brown, 2003; Moghissi, 1999). It is therefore the multiplicity that I mean to identify in the Shi’ite experience in Karachi.

Another ontological premise for this work is to view gender as performative, especially through reinforcement and societal construction (Butler, 1988, 2006). Masculinity is performed through social imagery, but relies on context that extends to aspects of race, economics, religion, and history (to name a few). Gender identity becomes fundamental to the concept of the Self, therefore the categorization of the “man” and “male” is not challenged but only elaborated upon.

My subject is the individual who largely resides in Karachi and identifies as a male Isna Ashari (Twelver) Shia believer. However, I also approached female members of the community to understand their experiences with the men in their households. Therefore, the scope of my participant subject(s) consists of and encompass a cross-sectional variation in socio-economic backgrounds while remaining faithful to the central requirement of them being male Shia believers residing primarily in Karachi. The variation in the socio-economic context of my interview subjects is part of this research, as the aim has been to identify as many of the factors that lead to the current context of Shia masculinity in Karachi.

Masculinity, and men, in simple terms are a social category of gender. Patriarchy as a system links gender to a structure of power. This is why in most cases and contexts, masculinity and men occupy the dominant category of gender, both as collective and individual agents (Hearn, 2004). Masculinity may be perceived to be a category that operates within a binary, in diametric opposition to femininity. It is my contention that this is a limited perspective lacking nuance, and the realities of operation are vast and more accommodating of variances even if we were to navigate only within a binary. However, the binary is a poor conceptualization of gender, and must therefore be set aside in order for there to be a valid understanding of the lived realities of men.

Simone de Beauvoir infamously stated that “one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman” (Beauvoir, 1949). In order to understand them, the similar phenomenological tradition must be applied to men. Masculinity is therefore both the expression, and the process of becoming a “man”. Expression is not the final product of a process, but one that is a repetition of acts and movements that constitutes within the

process. Furthermore, expression also assists in identifying the markers of gender identity. These expressions are performed through the body and are therefore implicit in even mundane gestures and movement. Beauvoir's claim of "becoming" a woman primarily alludes to the process that includes culture becoming the medium of translation through the body. Gestures are therefore implicitly political and indicate the allowance or assertion of expression and are a form of the realization of gender.

This process is also understood to be fluid, as with any identity it is also a phenomenon that is rooted in time and context. This "social temporality" of gender as a particular form of expression is therefore also a testament to its construction as a social category (Butler, 1988). This temporality also refers to context and indicates a situational existence. For example, if violence is associated with masculinity, then it is so within a particular context of masculinity, and within a specific space-time. This category can cover particular types of women as well and does not exclusively equate maleness to men. I have used men synonymously with masculinity because I am considering "man" or "men" as a social category instead of a natural one.

This is a social category consisting of actors who believe in their identity and perform it with a belief in its reality. It is also received and understood as a reality by those who enable or witness this identity and are hence participatory even if in passivity. Gender is therefore not abstract. Connell states that "hegemonic masculinity" is the epitome of masculinity that all men (and other binaries) acknowledge but do not necessarily fully inhabit (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This is especially apparent when the violence performed against men who do not appropriately perform masculinity becomes apparent. Furthermore, men who do not "exude or embrace virtues of dominant masculinity are often viewed in pathological terms: they are perceived as inferior, immoral" or even criminal (Neal, 2011, p. 559). This means that whether one performs hegemonic masculinity or not, one is required to acknowledge it as the touchstone of masculinity. Those who are in closest proximity to this touchstone will be considered "men" without second consideration, and those who are most in distance from it are deviant and likely to have their status as "men" challenged. Gender performance is a recognized thing, one that you "do" (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Masculinity is also comprised of interaction with women, with women as both receptors and contributors Gender constitutes of the body and all that modifies it, and its expression validates it. Gender as a construction does not therefore delegitimize its expression or experience.

"Hegemonic masculinity" is the supra construct that other masculinities navigate around, but do not revolve around. These other masculinities, comprising of context such as class, race, religion, maneuver through a space that shifts with the audience – especially if it is a marginalized masculinity (Messerschmidt, 1993). bell hooks in "Men: Comrades in Struggle" contextualizes the power dynamic between white men, white women, and black men to explain why the ideals of feminism may not reflect

or take into account a realistic model of society (hooks, 1998). Due to cultural context, the power dynamic between white women and black men may not be as simple as that between white men and white women. These are instances where further societal roles and identities must be taken into consideration. In parallel within this context is the Shi'ite man, who while a man, may not host all the social power attributed to men as expected in a typical male role or patriarchal social setup.

Gender is therefore a negotiated territory, navigated through performance and acceptance. As established, these social categories are fluid, and therefore determined by a value system. If the value changes, such as a rise in the social currency of male feminists, then the hegemonic determinant also shifts. There is no center of gravity, but there is plenty of motion.

Contextualizing Masculinity

The linkage of gender to power is not only through the relationship of dominance between men with women, but also men with other men. As alluded to above, homosexual men experience masculinity in a form different from heterosexual, black, or working class men (Lorber, 1994). Black homosexual or trans working class men definitely experience masculinity differently from other social groups. Such intersections display the multiplicities of the dynamics that exist within the social conceptualization of masculinity. These lived realities are testament to the existence of a multiplicity in experience, and therefore by extension, the multiplicities within masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In this dynamic of power, and the context of my research, it is not just Shia men with non-Shia men, but also Shia men with other Shia men.

On the question of attempting to identify non-Western sexualities, it becomes difficult to filter the politics of the non-Western South Asian body from the Western. Both have been shaped by interaction with one another, even when granting that this relationship is severely disbalanced (Srivastava, 2007). The anxieties of identifying South Asian masculinities to compare with the Western are not the domain of my research, but I do intend to allude to it. Hegemony in the "hegemonic masculinity" is incomplete without an analysis of Western hegemony on the perception of gender. South Asia has been through a major colonial tampering, and gender has been one such project of colonization.

Gender and sexuality are implicit agendas in the colonial project to civilize, and this civilizing of people and their bodies into projects of modernity has been a matter of significance for the settler-colonizer (Scott, 2012). The effects of this project can translate into expression and conceptualization of personhood and masculinity. It is a complex task to extract the colonial from the indigenous, but while reviewing archives of Muharram processions in colonial India, it becomes interesting to note the kinds of artefacts chosen to represent Muharram and also those who participate in activities during Muharram

(Jones, 2012; Office of the Registrar General, 1966). The project to un-do and un-learn traditional colonial sentiments and processes is a long one, but gaining momentum (Baines, 2010). However, South Asian masculine identity also comprises of European modernity, which is perhaps the ultimate and most dominant form of hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, I address this to establish an accurate framework of hegemonic masculinity, not necessarily pass value judgement on it.

On the concept of sexuality, Michel Foucault attributes an operating of frankness or openness that existed regarding the body before the 17th century. Post-seventeenth century, which is essentially the establishing of a Victorian setting, the morals of sexuality transformed into a repressive and limiting one. Shame and guilt were associated with the body, and the discourse violently framed desire itself as a criminal concept – along with of course, the realization of desire. This Victorian overture then turned “sex into discourse”, but the permeating features of discourse did more to include sexuality into the body than exclude it (Foucault & Hurley, 1988). This theory is relevant here in two separate instances. One is the intertwining of such a morality and conception with the South Asian body through its Victorian colonizers and simultaneous emergence as a subject under a newly formed State. The other is the semblance of a parallel of the Ayatollah as an enforcer of morality on the body as well. This is prominent especially in Iran, where the Ayatollah’s translation as Supreme Leader is literal in more ways than one. However, outside of a theocratic Iran, the power of the Ayatollah is varied, but influences Shi’ite belief and thought processes in a similarly dominant way.

For example, with a reference to Fatwas, the Ayatollah’s influence is primary in influencing the body, also consisting of thought in the same breath, without a dichotomy. Another such actor is of course the State itself. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan holds a Sunni majority, and the rise in sectarian politics amounting to violence (Qasim, 1998) has also contributed to the forming of a Shi’ite identity and masculinity. Foucault’s concept of repressed sexuality therefore feels pertinent to mention.

My research has revealed that many Shi’ite men operate through a situationally specific negotiated masculinity within the hegemonic norm. This also hints at a plurality of masculinity within Karachi and larger Pakistan, because these masculinities have existed without active challenge. While the colonial imposition and globalization mechanisms present a hegemonic taking over of plurality, the plurality also becomes a hegemonic form when the boundary is drawn in on community. The modus operandi is thus shifted.

Within the discourse of context, it would be amiss to not refer to the larger religious framework at hand. While I hold that there is a difference within the Shi’ite expression, the larger umbrella that Shi’ism comes under is Islam, which itself falls under the domain of the Abrahamic faith. Ronald Neal asserts that

a dominant description of the Abrahamic man is prevalent globally through the influence and spread of the powers of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. This is a property-owning man who is chosen for purpose (by god) to be a leader and it is he who establishes a tradition of patriarchy sustained through male progeny. Neal recognized that these traits also operate within a sphere of historical and cultural context (Neal, 2011). The significant difference between such a description of the larger Abrahamic faith with Islam and in particular the Shi'ite sect, is that in the house of the Prophet Muhammad, it is his female offspring who carries forward the bloodline. In fact, multiple interviewees from different socio-economic backgrounds mentioned the text "Fatima is Fatima" by Dr. Ali Shariati to point out that the family of the Prophet Muhammad was referred through their relation to Fatima, that is "Bani Fatima", as opposed to "Bani Ali" (Shariati, 1971). It is from the female offspring of Muhammad that the bloodline is carried forward, and that fact seems to hold weightage in Shi'ite Islam imagination. While the basic ontology of all Muslim sects contains the same history, Fatima's proximity with Ali and Hussain put her on the forefront of Shi'ite thought. Furthermore, while the "symbolism and ideals of ritual performance" may have encouraged a limitation on female roles, they have also "served as a vehicle for greater public participation of women" in broader society (Aghaie, 2004, p. 80). This may explain the difference in women's agency within different Islamic factions². However, the same interviewees did acknowledge a cognitive dissonance between respect for Fatima, and the translation of that respect on to other women.

While I do not propose that Abrahamic masculinity is a monolith or homogenized form of being, it is important to recognize that Abrahamic religions do have a certain kind of gender division. In the Islamic context, a distinct concept of masculinity is explained through al-futuwwa, or a "code of conduct" that is related to chivalry. This code differs historically over time and space, and means different things in particular contexts (Jacob, 2007)³, but can be largely understood as a social reality most young Muslim men experience in some form. The fata is a young man of virtue, and "young" here means anyone under the age of 40. Some scholarship indicates that the futuwwa was a pre-Islamic Arab masculinity, "group solidarity (asabiyah) and valor" that has little to do with religiosity (Abdullah, n.d, p. 2), but this is widely contested by other scholarship that emphasizes the "futuwwa's essentially religious character" (Yildirim, 2013). The motifs of the fata can be seen saturated in Arab society generally during Prophet Muhammad's time, which then accompanied the spread of Islam, especially in the East. This is visible through the Persian variation "javanmardi" and the concept of the Islamic "holy warriors" and Sufi orders

² For example, women of the Shi'ite faith in Pakistan perform Hajj and Umrah without an accompanying mahram, whereas in other sects this is a matter of greater debate (Irwin, 2004).

³ In Egypt, for example, there are interesting aspects of futuwat based brotherhoods that play on an honor code system amongst gangs, or even in guilds - and that is itself an interesting evolution in the concept (Momen, 1985).

in 10th century in Persia as well. The futuwat is therefore considered valid either way, even if its continuation as a code is not formally recognized (Abdullah, n.d.).

The first mentioning of such a concept is found in surah Al-Kahf⁴ in the Quran that highlights the idealities of the futuwwa. These were prophets (but essentially young men) who faced persecution and endured hardship, who rejected oppressive rulers and did not tolerate tyrants – and of course, did all this because of a pure love for god (Sabzawari & Crook, 2000).

This is the origin of a masculine identity and aspiration, beginning with the Prophet Abraham, who was the first to challenge a large social order. Abraham's character and masculinity are defined through his smashing of the idols in the old Kaaba, and fearless owning of the act due to incontestable faith. His intention to sacrifice his most beloved son is also within the same narrative. It is through Abraham that the characteristics of the fata come to be defined and a model of virtue and chivalry for the Muslim man was established.

While the futuwat did not come up as a term used by my interviewees, it was apparent as a concept and theme in their answers. When questioned about what they perceived their duties to be as men, three respondents mentioned familial responsibilities in passing, but societal responsibilities as primary. These responsibilities were of a classical nature, such as being “just and fair” to their “fellow men”, but also “standing up to injustice and oppression”. Being a man here is synonymous with being an assertive force for a righteous cause and it is also in relation to other men. I will elaborate further on the futuwat in the context of Shi'ism in the following sections, as research indicates that the futuwat underwent a “Shi'itization” and the concept of Shi'ite masculinity was therefore affected immensely by it (Yildirim, 2013). It has served as a useful touchstone and framework to understand this distinct imagining of masculinity. While other sects of Islam are not necessarily removed from this specific kind of masculinity, the political divide of the past few decades have rendered a difference in the valuing of Imam Ali and Hussain between sects and therefore translated a cogent difference in consciousness.

Masculinities are therefore recognized within men, by all genders, and have a different expectation from different men and the communities they belong to. Marginalized masculinities will be performed in a different way within the community and are liable to misunderstanding by those observing through a lens that does not account for nuance. The way that Shi'ite men understand their own masculinity is through the rituals they engage in. These rituals are formulated through a spiritual meaning that does not necessarily conform to a hegemonic ideal, or ostensibly or dramatically deviate from it. The imagination of masculinity is enlarged by the multiplicities of performance and meaning created.

⁴ “They were young men who believed in their Lord and We increased them in guidance.” 18:13.

It is my hypothesis that Shi'ite men experience masculinity within a frame specific to them, and while that frame may constitute of dynamics of power, it is also a space of catharsis.

4.1. Ali Un Wali Ullah

The Nahj al-Balagha or The Peak of Eloquence is a book containing the sermons, and every kind of recorded saying by Hazrat Ali. It is a book every Shi'ite believer seemed familiar with and possessed a copy of. Tales of Ali are known by all Shia's and sedimented as a collective experience. "Live like Ali, die like Hussain" is a popular slogan used in Shi'ite circles, with the essence of the sentiment featured in multiple poetic texts and religious sermons as well. Ali's personality is an internalized aspiration and it hosts a distinctly – and distinct – masculine culture. While female Shi'ite believers occupy an important role in the faith and how it operates in society today, it is understood that while they seek inspiration from Ali, the aspiration is more male oriented.

Apart from the aspect of the bloodline, the love for Ali also stems from Ali's own character. Ali is given immense prominence in Islamic history and imagination due to his relationship with the Prophet, but also on his own merit. Ali was intelligent and known for his eloquence and patience. All Islamic sources, regardless of sectarian differences, contain multiple accounts of Ali's "bravery, equity and valor, particularly during times of war" (Abdullah, n.d., p. 3). He is known for being a gifted warrior, famous for his courage and strategic brilliance in warfare (Abbas & Hassan, 2013). He was awarded the title of Asadullah, meaning the Lion of God, and was known as the "sword of Islam". The name "Haider", a common name in Shi'ism is a derivative of this as well and means "lion". To this day, the image of the lion is used as a symbol to represent Ali and is a deeply embedded metaphor in Islamic realities.



Image 1. All Islamic calligraphy that impressions a lion represents Ali.

Image source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shiite_Calligraphy_symbolising_Ali_as_Tiger_of_God.svg

Due to his emotional and physical proximity to the Prophet, Ali is believed to have been privy to sacred knowledge. This is where many Shi'ite followers attribute esoteric qualities and miracles to Ali and hold him in an esteem almost parallel to Muhammad. The Prophet is reported to have said "if I am the city of knowledge, then Ali is its gate" (Sabzawari & Crook, 2000, p. 14). This aspect of mu'jizah, or miracles, was expressed by at least two of my interviewees as a normalized fact. Tales of Ali's strength are therefore historic, but also esoteric. More than anything, they are an aspiration and model for all men, especially Shi'ite men. It is for all these reasons that the futuwwat as it exists historically is based around Ali, "the supreme model of manliness, a fata imbued with virtues of spiritual championship" (Loewen, 2003, p. 544). If one were to seek only the narratives and tropes of Islamic heroism, most would be attributed to Ali (Renard, 1999).

What is important to note about this kind of manliness rooted in courage and associated with war is that it is devoid of conventional attributes of machismo heroism. This is not aggressive or chauvinistic, but chivalrous in that it is spiritual and noble. The war is not seen to be one for personal victory, but a larger cause of Islam. The ultimate war in this context is against one's nafs (ego) and this is a recurring motif in Shi'ite and futuwwat discourse. There is an instance iterated to me by my interviewees about a man Ali spared in battle just before Ali was about to deliver the fatal blow. This is because the man spat on Ali's face, thereby transforming the moment by arousing the anger of Ali's nafs. Ali spared him by saying if he were to kill the man, it would have been for his own ego and not for Allah. An entire genre of Islamic literature is built on such narratives and present in the collective consciousness of the community.

It would be difficult to come across a Shia in Karachi who is not familiar with tales of Ali's heroism and patience. In conversation about anger regarding targeted killings and the State's indifference to Shia deaths, many informants alluded to this particular kind of jihad e nafs as a reason for not resorting to violence and vengeance. The concept of mu'jizah as a normalized phenomenon is important here as it provides an understanding for many of the reasons why some Shias engage in excessive forms of worship like matam (Bard, 2015). They believe in the protection they are offered or how a higher form of spirituality can be achieved through such acts because Maula is looking after them, but also looking at them.

Ali is a strong but benevolent man and he is a constant presence in the lives of Shias who call to him for help every day for worries small to big (ya Ali madad – o Ali, help me). He is the touchstone for all

Shi'ite masculinity and the aspiration of all Shi'ite men. For women, he is their protector, and while he is a guardian for men too, he is first a guidance.

The Matam and the Majlis

The discursive body is used as a means of gendered performance but also remembered as a vessel of emotional significance that indicates a political and spiritual meaning. Matam is a form of self-expression and an act of performance that creates meaning through ritual. Despite the involvement of women in some form, it is highly gendered.

It is a space of brotherhood, where men engage in matam around other men who keep a check on them to make sure their spirit is high but that they do not end up fatally wounding oneself. Men take care of men in this space by cleaning up wounds after the matam and also handling other affairs for men.

An informant mentioned that much of his passion during majales and jalus came from such a frustration. He would beat his chest harder with each mentioning of the cruelties at Karbala, desiring nothing more in his life than to have been alive when Imam Husain was so he could have been a soldier in his army – the fata. It is thus a deep-seated desire in the male Shi'ite imagination to be of service to Husain and therefore also any parallel that can be drawn with Karbala. A friend of mine once joked that the inspiration others gained from Marvel superheroes⁵, he had gained from stories of Karbala.

The initiation starts young with participation in rituals. It a rite of passage that begins at no fixed age but is something the older male members of the family may organize. My focus on questions about the matam elicited interesting responses that alluded to childhood and socio-economic background. Most male informants were reluctant to admit they felt anything other than religious and spiritual significance when they performed matam, whether it was sinehzani or zanjirzani. “It is only the love of Husain,” they said. The act of matam is a compulsive act as much as it is a systematic one. When in intense emotional pain or fervor, it is only natural for the body to express it⁶.

However, while this is true, when I pressed my informants, most interviewees eventually admitted that matam was a visible means of performing masculinity. There are large male Shi'ite demographics within Karachi where young boys make matam an intensely competitive act for social dominance. He who

⁵ It is interesting that this parallel was drawn. As mentioned earlier about the mujazah or miracles associated with Hazrat Ali, it would not be too much a stretch in contemporary imagination to understand this superhero idealism – especially considering the Marvel superhero trope.

⁶ The form of expression may not be universal, however. It can be seen to differ from region to region and if it was ever truly “natural”, it seems to be changing with time as most bodies become subjugated to homogenized socialization through globalization.

withstands most pain and has the most scars is the most devoted – and the manliest. Adults who engage in matam in jalus wear white shalwars and bear their backs. The white shalwar is a contrast to their black kameez and it is worn because it displays the blood that runs down one's back. This appeared to be an aspect of outright performance and exhibition of their matam. However, when asked, the men said that the white shalwar was not to show off, but to alert others in the jalus not to get too close as they were wounded. Some men gave this aspect the benefit of the doubt, others were more cynical.

One male informant who happened to be a twin mentioned how he and his brother would compare scars after each matam in an active competition. The winner would be the one with a bloodier back, or in other words again, he who could withstand more pain. To increase one's frequency or intensity of flagellation as they looked at the scars of other boys around them was an act most young men seemed familiar with. To take one's shirt off outside a private environment to display scars seems almost a power play. These were the young men who established themselves as dominant in the group. However, the aspect was not just of machismo, but also who loved Husain the most in order to feel pain like Husain may have felt.

This dominance meant multiple things. It signified their pride and unflinching loyalty to Husain as matam scars are also identity markers. It was a way to let people know that you are Shia and also that you are not afraid of the potential consequences of announcing your identity. With either motive, it is definitely an act done for performative purposes. An informant mentioned that he was once accidentally caught in an opposition procession led by anti-Shia factions and he was thankful for his decision as a child to never carry the scars on his back. These markers are deathly in the sectarian tensions that exist in Pakistan. Shi'ite Muslim leadership discourages putting oneself in harm and allows a pass on such rituals if your life may be at stake. In such situations, the bravado of masculinity either tends to fade, or is increased as testament to their resistance.

Yatzih Nakash, who has studied majales gatherings extensively, stated that the majlis is the "oldest vehicle for creating and transmitting the memory of Karbala" (1993: 163). Majales today exist in continuity with the first majlis held by Zainab right after the martyrdom of Husain, the purpose of which was to spread the tale and message of Karbala and mourn the Ahl al-Bayt. The majlis is a "mourning assembly for the chanting of elegiac and commemorative poetry in Urdu or Farsi" (Burckhardt Qureshi, 1981, p. 44). While it occurs mostly in Muharram, it is held throughout the year to always keep the tragedy of Karbala relevant in everyday life. Therefore, mourning and the recollection of Karbala is a concept permeated deeply in all spheres of life, even if only through sheer repetition. All those participating in the majlis are part of a shared sacred space for reflection and mourning. Everyone's participation varies, but all add to the creation of an ambiance that exudes an air of gravity.

When I asked an informant if he cried during majales, he answered “yes, inconsolably”. Most informants replied in the affirmative to crying during majales, but the nature of their expression varied. From both my ethnographic observations and informant accounts, crying during majales can be loosely categorized into two major forms. One is to cry loudly, which would include any form of expression that does not limit the exhibition⁷ of grief. This includes howling, beating the chest or head, or an uninhibited display of tears. The other is one which while not soft, does indicate a reluctance to express grief as publicly. These can include but are not limited to the bowing of the head, crying silently, or putting a hand or scarf on the face in order to obstruct view to their tears.

Is this really such a divide that necessitates categorization? What are the implications of surgically packaging grief into different containers for social examination? We must analyze this question in light of the social order that dominates. It is a fact that men are not able to express their emotions openly in society. The space that usually exists for the emotions of men allows for instances of anger or violence to leak, but not the soft sadness of everyday life. Certain circumstances must exist for an environment to be created that allows for an openness of expression. If it takes a tragedy like the one in Karbala to allow men to weep and grieve openly, then this is a space worth meticulous examination and analysis. This is especially to test the parameters of this space. How wide is the breadth for breath? What are its norms and what is transgression?

In the Bazm e Aqeedat, marsiya gois and majales that I have attended, there is a noticeable crescendo reached each time when Sakina’s or Ali Asghar’s (the youngest child in the camp at Karbala) name is mentioned. The cries of grown men become unbearable when the violence suffered on the children is mentioned. The delivery of the speaker or nauhakhwan matters, but each time I witnessed such a moment, it seemed that the speaker themselves arranged for lecture or nauha to be most powerful at this point.

Crying, here, is encouraged in all Islamic discourses (“Crying and wailing for Imam Hussain (as),” n.d.). It is considered sunnah and an act worthy of immense blessing to cry for the Ahl al-Bayt. Even in daily prayer, children are taught from a young age that Allah is pleased with the tears of his believers as it shows devotion and true sincerity. Maulvis reciting the khutba on jummah or special occasions always break down sobbing when making the dua (on speaker, so that everyone knows). While an act of uncontrolled expression, in the context of men and the majlis it can also become one of performance.

I asked my interviewees if their behavior during majlis and outside the sphere of Muharram was different in regards to crying. Some said that yes it was, while others said no. Those who said no implicitly or

⁷ I use the word “exhibition”, but do not imply that it is the necessitated intention of those crying. The word exhibition here is intended to demonstrate the absence of an attempt to make the act of crying a private or hidden one.

explicitly expressed that due to such an upbringing and participation in rituals that normalized it, tearing up in public did not feel like an act that compromised on their masculinity. They were used to crying to express grief – this did not end outside Muharram.

However, those who answered in the negative indicate multiple aspects of inquiry. What makes it all right for a man to cry during majlis, but not otherwise? The fact that all men do so together. The security afforded through community is an active validation of one's personhood. This is an instance where the psychosocial meaning of expression is highly gendered. Some informants provided a romanticized reason that stated the reason for crying during majlis only was because there was no other tragedy or reason for sadness like Karbala. Even those to have experienced the loss of loved ones stated that the grief of this world could not match that of Karabala, therefore tears like that can only be evoked by the sacred.

Conclusion

This research is a contribution to the field of gender and masculinity studies and adds value to the genre with its consideration towards a more intersectional approach to analysis. While the language of feminist scholarship is inherently Western, there exist possibilities of a scholarship that can be simultaneously specific with its focus and broad with its understanding. This has been an attempt to gain knowledge and insight, deciphered through a responsible marriage of epistemologies. No one identity is shaped in isolation, therefore no one epistemology would be enough on its own to uncover truth.

Contemporary realities of men are shaped by their socio-economic background and political context. While some of my subjects may have wished to deny or isolate aspects of masculine performativity from rituals like matam, the reality is that the everyday is not always directed by a superior sense of spirituality. This does not mean that spirituality is isolated from the matam in such instances, but it does reveal gender identity and performance to be primary drivers of desire and expression. Gender is internalized in the body and displayed as a second skin, whether consciously or not. However, it is the form of gender that adds nuance and presents an analysis closer to reality.

This form of gender is one that exists in a situational context through the rituals of Muharram, but also in a broader everyday lived reality. The matam is an expression of grief and self-denial related to chivalry, but in the particular case of qamah, also an assertion of a dominant manliness that carries traits of machismo showmanship. Shi'ite masculinities are infused with passion and provide space that encourages its expression in all forms – even those actions associated with femininity outside that space. All of these exist symbiotically and while they may seem contrasting emotions, they are only complementary, one “naturally” following the other. The binary of gendered emotions exist within a larger hegemonic (usually Western) paradigm, one while relevant, is not necessarily the best medium to understand this particular

context. The historic absence of shame in expressing grief through crying and feeling as much as the heart can take is testament to the existence of a less toxically constructed masculinity.

Within this research I have mentioned multiple tales of the Ahl al-Bayt that are commonplace in Shi'ite imagination to emphasize on a shared consciousness that idealizes a particular concept of masculinity. The men and women in Islamic history that have been referenced provide a blueprint of performance and personality to internalize for the rest of the ummah. While these ideals may not be met in everyday life, it is the aspiration of those ideals that define what is understood to be the epitome of manhood for both Shi'ite men and women.

Everyday interactions even regarding the mundane reveal that there is a consciousness that exists framed around the tragedy of Karbala, which is extended to the context the individual belongs to. If this individual is in Karachi, Pakistan, then they understand the politics of their identity to be constructed within a larger oikos of Karabala and are thereby motivated to act accordingly.

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