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Reflections on Ashura-oriented Literature

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Abstract

The Battle of Karbala is one of the most significant events in Shi'a history. Since the purpose of literature is to allow one to empathize with the lives of exemplary people and perceive significant historic events, there have been countless poets who strove to illustrate the persona of Imam Husayn and the battle of Karbala. This paper seeks to describe genera within Shi'a poetry pertaining to the tragic experience of Imam Husayn and his family members and companions on the plains of Karbala. The specific genres include Husayni, Karbalai, Ashurai, and Ashura-oriented literature.

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Within the Shi'a literary history and traditions, there have been several epoch-making events, the Ashura Battle of Karbala (61AH/680) being one of the most prominent. The significance of the Ashura Battle of Karbala lies in the fact that it showed, among other things, the true, hypocritical face of Umayyad caliph Yazid son of Mu`awiyah and the righteousness of the Chief of Martyrs, Imam Husayn (a), who was martyred triumphantly along with over 70 of his thirsty companions in a battle imposed on him alongside the Euphrates on the plain of Karbala, Iraq.

With the occurrence of this tragic event in early Islamic history, a plethora of poets composed numerous poems in commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and his family members and companions. More importantly, the devotees of Imam Husayn who have expressed their sincere feelings and reflections in this regard are by no means limited to Shi'a Muslims. Several Sunni Muslims and Christian and Hindu poets expressed their thoughts on the event of Ashura.

Thus, Ashura poetry is not limited to written pieces in the Arabic language[2]: there are countless poems on Imam Husayn and his martyred companions in Persian, Urdu, Turkish, English, etc.[3]

The present paper seeks to delineate specific genres of Shi‘a poetry pertaining to the tragic event of Ashura. It is meant to fill a serious research lacuna in Shi‘a religio-historical literature.[4]

To begin with, Shi‘a literature cannot be restricted to any language; it is free from linguistic boundaries in that it can be produced in virtually any language on the condition that it is conceptually in harmony with Shi‘a Islamic articles of faith and doctrines.[5]

Viewed from this perspective, the scope of Shi‘a literature covers a vast array of subject matters and themes reflecting its history, doctrines, and the struggle to survive throughout history.

Husayni literature, deals with that which pertains to the life and times of Imam Husayn. As such, it covers both joyful and tragic events. One the one hand, Imam Husayn's promising birth and its anniversary is commemorated by his devotees. As for the tragic events in the life and times of Imam Husayn, one may focus mainly on the horrible and heart-rending scenes of Ashura. Although the Ashura Battle of Karbala lasted less than a day, its tremendous effects have been stamped in Shi‘a history.[6]

It is in the latter category that a greater portion of Husayni literature finds its place.

Karbala literature pertains to anything relevant to the sanctity of Karbala and the scenes witnessed. As such, Karbala literature is expected to deal with the sanctity of the city of Karbala due mainly to two sacred sanctuaries of Imam Husayn and his step- brother `Abbas b. `Ali[7].

It may also relate to the sacred soil of Karbala (again due mainly to the sacred shrines) of which it is highly recommended in Shi‘a Islam to make special clay tablets for prostration while performing the daily prayer (salat).[8]

Yet, personified in literary texts, it may recount a report of the horrific events that occurred on the plains of Karbala.[9]

Ashura literature can be applied to whatever focuses on the events of the eve and day of Ashura. However, the term may be applied to material that relates to the events the preceded that imposed Ashura Battle of Karbala and its tragic consequences, such as the Umayyad forces' dragging the survivors of the battle from Karbala to Kufa, then to Damascus, and finally returning them back to Medina.

Ashura literature, in this sense, must be kept separate from Arba‘in literature, which is for the fortieth day after Imam Husayn's martyrdom, and it receives commemoration on par with that of Ashura.[10]

Ashura-oriented literature broadly deals with the sorrowful episodes in the life and times of Imam Husayn, Karbala, and the tragic events of Ashura. It reflects a sequence of the events as they took place, portraying all the major events in a long poem, starting from the graceful birth of Imam Husayn through his tragic but triumphant martyrdom[11].

Moreover, any poem whose focus may have something to do with the entire movement of Imam Husayn can be regarded as a piece of Ashura-oriented poetry.

Literature fulfills our yearning for non-material goals. It paves the way for us to perceive those who held honorable lives. It teaches us virtues of compassion and bravery, and deepens our knowledge of past events. It is no surprise that various poetic genres have been used to illustrate the great personalities and events surrounding the tragedy on the plains of Karbala. These poems and prose take a number of forms:

1) Husayni literature, which pertains to the Imam's life,

2) Karbala literature, relating to the sanctity and scenes of the tragic event,

3) Ashura literature, the events surrounding the eve and day of Ashura, and

4) Ashura- oriented literature, an extended sequential account of Imam Husayn, from his birth until his martyrdom.

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2. Granted that the earliest pieces of Ashura poetry were composed on Ashura by the survivors of the Ashura Battle of Karbala in Arabic, the 6th Infallible Imam Ja`far al-Sadiq played a decisive role in encouraging Arab poets to compose poems, especially elegies, to mourn Imam Husayn's tragic martyrdom. Therefore, he must be regarded as a pioneer of Husayni and/or Ashura literature in Arabic.
3. For a collection of Ashura poems in English, see Fakhr-Rohani, ed., Ashura Poems in English, Explained and Annotated (2 vols., Karbala: Imam Husayn's Sacred Sanctuary; and Qom: Al-Mustafa International University, 2011).
4. In the same vein, the Iranian scholar Mr. Muhammad-Reza Hakimi echoed this shortcoming in that nobody had ever embarked on developing a literary history of the Shi'a. See his seminal article in Persian in Kheymeh, No. 62 (Esfand 1388 Sh [/March 2010]), p. 32.

5. In this paper, the focus is on Twelver Shi'a; however, other sub- denominations of Shi'a Islam, although not dealt with in this paper, may have their own literatures that generally pertain to Ashura and Imam Husayn.
6. It is timely to point to the efforts of the Infallible Imam Ja`far al-Sadiq to eternalize the memory of the Ashura tragedy in the historical memory of the Shi'a by recommending one of his followers by the name of Dawud b. Kathir al-Riqqi who paid a salaam unto Imam Husayn after each instance of drinking water. Hence, so long as the mankind needs water for survival, the memory of Imam Husayn will be reinforced in the collective and historical memory of the Shi'as.
7. The sacred sanctuary of al-`Abbas b. `Ali lies around 350 meters away from that of Imam Husayn to the east. Facing the direction of Qiblah, that is, toward Mecca, the sanctuary of al-`Abbas b. `Ali is located a bit behind that of Imam Husayn on the latter's left hand. Metaphorically, this implies that even after martyrdom al-`Abbas b. `Ali's body has proven to observe religious politeness toward Imam Husayn as the Infallible Imam of the time.
8. There are several good books that deal with prostration upon the soil of Karbala, e.g., Sayyid Muhammad-Mahdi al-Musawi al-Khirsan, Al-Sujud 'ala al-Turbah al-Husayniyyah (Karbala: Imam Husayn's Sacred Sanctuary's Library, 1426 AH/2005); Sayyid `Abd al-Rida al-Shahrestani, Al-Sujud 'ala al- Turbah al-Husayniyyah, ed. Haydar al-Jid (Karbala: Imam Husayn's Sacred Sanctuary, 1431 AH/ 2010); and Amin Habib Aal Darwish, Turbah Husayn (Beirut: Dar al-Mahajjah al-Bayda',1430 AH/ 2009). That prostration on the soil of Karbala is highly recommended is another effort to eternalize the memory of the oppression Imam Husayn endured for safeguarding Islam.
9. The contemporary Iraqi scholar, Sayyid Salman Aal Tu`mah, uses the term "Karbalayi poetry" for the poems composed by those Iraqi-cum-Arabic- speaking poets who are regarded as citizens of Karbala; see his book Husayn fi al-Shi'r al-Karbalayi ([Beirut: Mu'assisah al-Fikr al-Islami, 1422 AH/2001], p. 6). This usage stands in opposition to what is termed here as "Karbala poetry", for the latter concerns the poems that have something to do with Karbala, its events, and/or its glories whether or not they are composed by citizens of Karbala, irrespective of the language used.
10. The number 40 is regarded as a sacred number in Islam. The Arabic word Arba`in means 40, hence it signifies this association. Furthermore, there is a special Ziarat-text to be read out on such a day to express one's veneration toward Imam Husayn.
11. One such poet who succeeded to render a full portrait of Imam al-Husayn's life and times was the renowned Urdu-speaking poet Mir Babr Ali, better known as "Mir Anis". Although a prolific poet in Urdu, some of his elegies in favor of Imam Husayn are available in English translation.

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