

THE WOMEN OF KARBALA

Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses
in Modern Shi'i Islam

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This book is dedicated to my wife Jackie.

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CHAPTER 6

Sakineh, The Narrator of Karbala

*An Ethnographic Description of a
Women's Majles Ritual in Pakistan*

SHEMEEM BURNEY ABBAS

This chapter consists of an ethnographic account of a women's *majles* (plural *majales*) in Pakistan. The *majles* will be explored here as a communicative speech event where members of a speech community congregate and participate in an event based on common beliefs, values, and attitudes.¹ The *majles* will be investigated as an event where speakers and listeners share the knowledge of rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech.² The purpose of this essay is to provide a sociolinguistic mapping of the women *nowheh*-chanters' discourse in the Pakistani languages using Hymes' model of the ethnography of speaking and how ritual speaking is done in a cultural system.³ Communicative conduct within a community comprises determinate patterns of speech activity wherein the communicative competence of persons constitutes knowledge with regard to such patterns. I will discuss ways of speaking especially in regard to the Sakineh narratives, focusing on the relationships among speech events, acts, and styles, on the one hand, and personal abilities and rules, contexts and institutions, and beliefs, values, and attitudes, on the other.⁴ This is demonstrated through transliteration, translation, and linguistic representation of the order of a women's *majles*. The transliterations represent the social interactional processes of the *majles* and the competence of the female *nowheh khans* (chanters). Because of the transliteration methodology, an analytical discussion of the political aspects of these rituals is not given, though these dimensions are manifest in the *nowheh* texts themselves and the highly politicized opposition that the poetic discourse generates based on the shared rules of performance among the speakers and the listeners. The transliterations are intended to provide the reader with a clearer under-



Figure 6.1. Girl dressed as Sakineh, holding Hazrat Abbas' *alam*, or standard. Abbas is considered the protector of children (Rawalpindi, 2000). © Shemeem Burney Abbas

standing of the basic structure and style of a women's *majles*, which is fairly representative of the rituals analyzed in the other chapters.

This account demonstrates how Sakineh serves as the narrator of Karbala in the *nowhehs*, or mourning songs and chants, at these Shi'i *majales*, which are held during the annual Moharram celebrations in Pakistan. The Sakineh myth is concerned with the structural properties of the Karbala story and how it is narrated in the *majales*.⁵ I focus on the dynamic structure of the Sakineh texts by analyzing the stories in relationship to the

contexts in which they are performed, in terms of the potential for openness of interpretation and in terms of the ways in which this potential is exploited during Moharram performance and the emotions generated therein.⁶ Sakineh is Imam Hosayn's daughter; she survived the tragedy of Karbala along with her paternal aunt, Sayyedeh Zaynab. Sakineh's age is not known with any real certainty, but she was a girl-child whose age was probably between five and twelve years. Many of her discourses in the oral tradition are addressed to her sister Soghra, who, according to some *hadith*, was left behind in Medina due to illness. Thus, while Sakineh is the speaker in the stories, Soghra is sometimes the listener to whom the stories are addressed. The *nowhehs*, a song of lament, can be sung as a dyadic unit in which two parties take turns in advancing the story, or it can be chanted as a monologue. Both women and men have participated in the tradition of chanting *nowhehs*. In a two- to three-hour *majles*, at least an hour is allocated to reciting *nowhehs*. Thus, in the chanting of the Sakineh *nowhehs*, there is a long tradition of mutually understood speech between speaker, hearer, and that which is spoken about, including the political dimensions of the discourse. The mutually shared speech is elaborated in communication theory, linguistics, semiotics, literary criticism, and sociology in various ways.⁷

The *nowhehs* that are transliterated and translated here, along with the photos provided, were collected during fieldwork in Pakistan during Moharram in 2000. Sakineh embodies grief and evokes a sense of tragic empathy in the assembly of mourners when the *nowhehs* are chanted in this girl-child's voice. This is a special emotional feature of a Shi'i *majles*, according to Hymes' model. Sakineh as a survivor of Karbala tells many stories in the aftermath of her father's death. Girl-children are trained to reenact the stories of Sakineh at Shi'i *majales* in Pakistan during ritual Moharram celebrations.⁸ These rituals are characterized by the ritualized speech form of *nowhehs*, which involve linguistic play based on code-switching.⁹ Furthermore, the *nowhehs* have strongly embedded political references: the binaries of a high moral and ethical order versus expediency and moral corruption that led to the Battle of Karbala. Between speakers and listeners in the shared codes of communicative competence the references are mutually shared and interpreted.

The first ten days of Moharram constitute a period of ritual mourning among Shi'is in Pakistan. *Majales* are held to lament the martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Hosayn in the battle of Karbala in 680 AD. During the Moharram celebrations, *majales* are either held in public Shi'i *emambarehs*, which are supported through community funds, or in the private *emam-*



Figure 6.2. The *zakereh* opens the *majles* with rhetorical discourse in prose (Rawalpindi, 2000). © Shemeem Burney Abbas

barehs that the well-to-do have in their homes in the cities and in rural areas. An *emambareh* is a public or private space in a Shi'i community for performing sacred rituals such as prayers, *majales*, and birth and death rites. The wealthy *sayyeds*, who are descendants of the prophet Mohammed and typically owners of large landholdings, have private *emambarehs* in which rituals are enacted in an elaborate manner.¹⁰ Generally, the pattern of the ten-day celebrations in the Moharram *majales* is as follows:

First to fifth of Moharram: reenactment of events on a day-to-day basis according to the Karbala tragedy, accompanied with ritual lamentations and self-flagellation (*matam*).

Sixth of Moharram: narratives about Karbala and enhanced *matam*.

Seventh of Moharram: new rituals are introduced, such as carrying a replica of Ali Asghar's cradle, Qasem's henna ceremony, and Sakineh's *nowhehs*.¹¹

Eighth of Moharram: Hazrat Abbas' *alam*, or standard, raised with the *panjatan*.¹²

Ninth of Moharram: general intense mourning with narratives from Karbala.

Tenth of Moharram: Ashura—the day of Imam Hosayn's martyrdom. Pakistani Shi'is fast on this day, breaking the fast in the late afternoon after noontime prayers. The final activity is the Sham-e Ghariban ritual, which commemorates the act of trying to find the corpses of the fallen martyrs.¹³

After Ashura and Sham-e Ghariban rituals, the following are observed:

Sevvom: *Majales* are held on the third day after Ashura and Sham-e Ghariban. These *majales* celebrate the martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Hosayn, his family, and his companions.

Chehelom: *Majales* are held for the same reason on the fortieth day after Ashura.¹⁴

In between the Sevvom and the Chehelom, *majales* are held in the *emambarehs* according to the schedule of the caretakers. However, there is no set pattern. The period of mourning during Moharram is called *azadari*.¹⁵ The mourners are *azadars*. During this period a part of the home in a Shi'i household may be temporarily converted into mourning space for the purpose of *azadari*. The mourning area is called an *azakhaneh*.

The women's *majles* rituals this researcher observed at *emambarehs* in Rawalpindi, Wah, and Lahore inform this ethnographic account of speaking as a cultural system. However, the rituals documented here are based on a ritual observed on the seventh of Moharram, 2000, in the Baji Sabira ka *emambareh* in Chowk Marir Hasan in Rawalpindi, which is popularly referred to as the *zaynabiyyeh*.¹⁶ This *emambareh* is named after its owner,

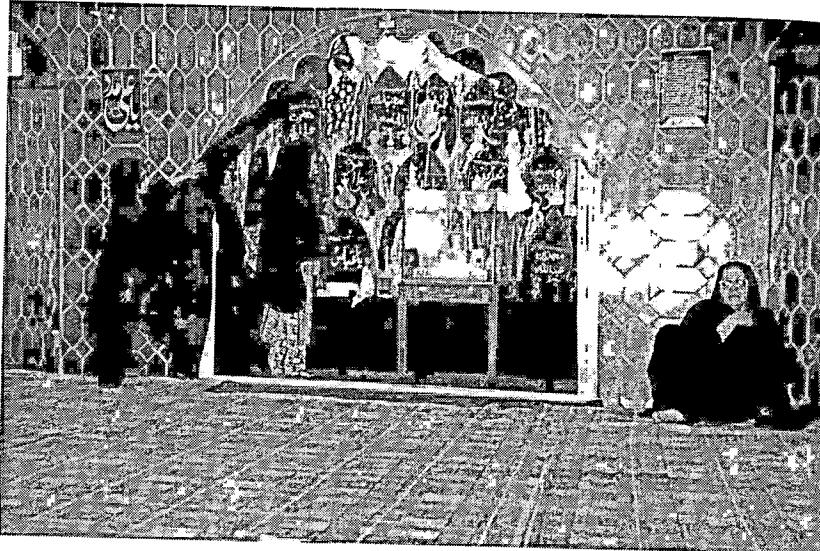


Figure 6.3. Ali Asghar's cradle and Moharram emblems in the *emambareh* at the *zaynabiyyeh*. Rituals are performed around emblems on the seventh and eighth of Moharram (Rawalpindi, 2000). © Shemeem Burney Abbas

Ms. Sabira Zaidi, who is an émigré from North India and who speaks chaste Urdu.¹⁷ The *majales* in this *emambareh* follow the elaborate pattern of Lucknow *majales*.¹⁸

The *zaynabiyyeh* was a 50 × 50 foot square structure built at the far end of Ms. Sabira Zaidi's home. The *emambareh*, compared with the rest of the house, was a newer structure and was carefully crafted after the design of Iranian mosques with arched windows and a handcrafted wooden door with intricate floral filigree carved on it. Inside the *emambareh* was a large crystal chandelier, perhaps of Turkish or Iranian origin. Outside the *emambareh* was a large courtyard lined with black marble for women *azadars* (i.e., the mourners or ritual participants) to sit when there were more attending, especially on the seventh, eighth, and ninth of Moharram. The courtyard was covered with *catais* (rush mats) or *duris* (thick cotton mats) during the *majales* for the *azadars* to sit on. Across the courtyard was a verandah where there were two bathrooms and a row of faucets for women *azadars* to perform ablution. The *nazr-niyaz* (ritual food offering for the sake of the *emam*), which were distributed after the *majles* and which were typically contributed by the *azadars*, were set up in the verandah.

Ms. Sabira Zaidi, who had been recently widowed, looked after the upkeep of the *emambareh* herself. Ms. Zaidi and her daughters worked to keep

the *emambareh* clean for the *azadars*. Ms. Zaidi called herself the *kaniz*, or the handmaiden of the *emambareh*. This was evident in the well-maintained environment of the *emambareh*, as well as the owner's hospitality toward the *azadars* who had come for the *majales*. Inside the vast space of the *emambareh* there were large white sheets for the *azadars* that covered the carpeting on the floor. The white sheets radiated expansiveness in the space in addition to making the female mourners feel they were welcome in the *majles*. During Moharram, the white sheets were replaced every day.

Women *azadars* who participated in the ritual *majales* were mainly Shi'i. However, there were also Sunni participants, called *molais*, there because they sympathized with Imam Hosayn's cause. Participants at the *majles* consisted mostly of working-class women such as laborers, maids, factory workers, or housewives from low- or middle-income groups. Among the mourners were also some professionals such as doctors, professors, and bank executives. Since the *emambareh* was in the army quarters and was centrally located, wives of Shi'i army officers were also well represented. Ms. Sabira Zaidi's *emambareh* has assumed a high stature due to the sophistication of the *majles* format and its diverse participants.

In this chapter I apply Hymes' mnemonic speaking model to the women's *majles* proceedings as recorded at the Rawalpindi *emambareh*.¹⁹



Figure 6.4. Girls training at chanting *nowhehs* for Sakineh (Rawalpindi, 2000). © Shemeem Burney Abbas

The sociolinguistic, social interactional model involves the following components:

Setting: *emambareh*; public or private; morning, afternoon, or evening.

Participants: *zakereh* (narrator of key sermon), *nowheh-khans* (chanters), hostess, spokewomen, female audience.

Ends: lamentation, communication, messaging, demonstration, protest.

Act sequence: story, narratives, responses-ratification, interpretation.

Key: mournfully, grieving, passionately, seriously.

Instrumentalities: rhetorical Arabic, Persian, Urdu; chanted Panjabi and Urdu *nowhehs*.

Norm of interaction: rhetorical discourse and response; poetic discourse and response.

Genre: *majles*.

The women's *majles* reported here was a mutually achieved, mutually ratified speech event between speakers and listeners, performers and audiences. Various speakers took the floor according to a pattern of turn taking. The forms of speech—rhetorical, lament and *nowheh* chanting, *darud* (prayer for the dead), *salam* (blessings), and *salavat*—were adjacent to each other and within the smaller units of talk, where speakers used the pattern of the adjacency pair as demonstrated in Erving Goffman's work on speech.²⁰ Briefly, Goffman posits that speech constitutes small units of talk; that talk is socially organized, not merely in terms of who speaks to whom in what language, but as a little system of mutually ratified and ritually governed face-to-face action, a social encounter. Accordingly, the performers of this *majles* who enacted the lamentation rituals participated on various levels, the highest being the *zakereh*, who initiated the *majles* proceedings with a well-researched rhetorical discourse about the moral, political, and ethical issues that led Hazrat Imam Hosayn to oppose Yazid.

The *zakereh* initiated her speech with a verse in Arabic from the Qur'an, followed by the *hadith*, which are the sayings of the Prophet Mohammad or his family. The *zakereh* was a trained rhetorician and had been inducted into the discourse traditions from childhood. She patterned her moral and political arguments after Sayyedeh Zaynab, who led Hosayn's family after the Battle of Karbala. Sayyedeh Zaynab is said to have been a highly effective orator in Yazid's court, where she articulated the ethical, moral, and politi-



Figure 6.5. These women are performing *nowhehs*—chants at Qasem's henna ritual on the seventh of Moharram. Women in the background are holding trays of fruits and sweets (Rawalpindi, 2000). © Shemeem Burney Abbas

cal polarities that led to the conflict in Karbala. Thus, the *zakereh* at a Shi'i *majles* often reenacts Zaynab's oratory, reaffirming Levi-Strauss' approach to analyzing myths across societies and his assertion that such myths or stories have an identifiable underlying or abstract structure.²¹ The *zakereh*'s speech invariably referred to the girl-child Sakineh and her infant brother, Ali Asghar, who was martyred in Karbala.²² The discourse of the entire



Figure 6.6. The hostess of the *zaynabiyyeh* leading the *matam* ritual in the center while *nowhehs* are being chanted (Rawalpindi, 2000). © Shemeem Burney Abbas

majles, both the prose of the speakers and the poetry of the *nowheh* chanters, was loaded with political metaphors; the outcome of Hosayn's moral stance was the martyrdom at Karbala. The transliterations demonstrate the political tensions of the conflict: Hosayn's rejection of accepting Yazid's caliphate on moral grounds leading to his own death and the death of his supporters, who were male family members and loyal companions. Here one may also draw on Levi-Strauss' symbols of life and death, young and old, and men and women.²³ Each *nowheh* narrative was immersed in po-

litical protest articulated through the subtle chanting of the *nowheh-khans*. The participants were assumed to know the underlying nuances of the discourse, the deeply rooted metaphors that a *nowheh* pointed toward, such as a male member like Qasem or Ali Asghar. The participants had grown and matured in the oral Shi'i traditions; they understood the signification. Thus, while chanting with the *nowheh-khans* or chanters, the participants were able to infuse an emotion into the assembly that resulted in intense lamentation, expressed through chest beating, or *matam*. The *matam* is a form of political protest.

During the *majles* proceedings at the *zaynabiyyeh*, the *zakereh*'s speech was prompted by the hostess, Ms. Sabira Zaidi, who sat close to the *menbar*, or pulpit, at the feet of the *zakereh*. The hostess continuously ratified the *zakereh*'s speech. Sometimes she ratified it with the *salavat*, or blessings upon the Prophet Mohammad and his family, in Arabic; sometimes she ratified the speaker's discourse with continued lament through her own weeping and utterances like "hai, hai." This was particularly so during emotionally expressive outbursts devoted to Sakineh and the theme of Ali Asghar's thirst at Karbala. Again, one may draw upon Levi-Strauss: historical events or fables are transformed through abstract structures. The performers and participants themselves "posit underlying structures or meanings in the



Figure 6.7. Children reenacting performances related to Sakineh (Rawalpindi, 2000). © Shemeem Burney Abbas

form of interpretations of the symbolism of the text and its message and—the most important point—they do so as part of its very performance, for an audience to hear, learn from and criticize.” Lamentation was communicated at many levels in the *majles*.²⁴

In addition to the *zakereh* and the weeping hostess, the key performers of this *majles* were the *nowheh-khans*, whose communicative competence was demonstrated in their ability to chant the *nowheh* with an emotion that brought their listeners to tears. The chanters accomplished this through ritual speech, drama, and vibrant body language, beating their chests in rhythm as they chanted the poetry of the *nowheh*. The chest beating had percussion qualities that brought out the emotion in the assembly; these elements, put together as text and context, created the *majles*. The assembled listeners, too, performed their function by ratifying every utterance, every move; they were the ones who understood the ritual-ceremonial discourse of Karbala and who understood the linguistic variety involved.²⁵

The women’s *majles* ritual at Ms. Sabira Zaidi’s *emambareh* lasted for more than two hours. The speech event constituted the speakers, listeners and participants, and rhetorical and poetic narratives about Karbala. The speech event was a mutually ratified, social interactional context that used text and narratives and the relationships of the linguistic and emotional components. Its basic linguistic and communicative structure was as follows:

Salavat. Opening of the *majles* with recital of the *darud* by Ms. Sabira Zaidi, the hostess of the *majles*: “Allah homma salli ala Mohammad va al-e Mohammad.” (O God, may thy blessings be on Mohammad and his family). The participants repeated the *salavat* after the hostess.

Zakereh. Rhetorical prose *majles* discourse or sermon, which lasted for thirty-five to forty minutes. It started with an Arabic quote from the Qur'an. The *zakereh*'s speech was patterned on philosophical discourses related to religious, ethical, social, and political issues.

Salavat. “Allah homma Salli ala Mohammad va al-e Mohammad.”

Darud. “O God may thy blessings be on Mohammad and his family.” The *darud*, which was frequently repeated at key points in the discourse, was led by the hostess throughout the *zakereh*'s speech.

Nowhehs. Panjabi or Urdu chants about Karbala, often in Sakineh's voice.²⁶

Matam. Passionate chest beating for lament, accompanied by *nowhehs*.²⁷

Salam. Prayers and eulogy in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Panjabi for the Prophet Mohammad, his family, and the martyrs of Karbala. There was always a reference to Sakineh.

Ziyarat. Invocation and closure in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Panjabi for the Prophet Mohammad, his family, and the martyrs of Karbala, again with a reference to Sakineh.

On this particular occasion, which was the seventh of Moharram, 2000, Baji Sabira Zaidi had chosen to dedicate the *majles* to Qasem, Imam Hassan's adolescent son who was about to be married. Thus, on 7 Moharram, the groom's (i.e., Qasem's) henna ceremony was celebrated. The ritual was a celebration as well as a lament for Qasem. After the *zakereh* completed her rhetorical speech and the recitation of the *salvat* and *darud* that the hostess initiated and that the participants repeated after her, the *nowheh-khans* moved to the center of the *emambareh*, creating a little circle for themselves with the hostess among them. The assembly of participating mourners stood around the group of chanters, ready to join the ritual chanting and the *matam*. The *nowheh-khans* chanted the key lines and the assembly repeated the lines after them, establishing the communicative mode. The following Panjabi *nowhehs*, which have been transcribed and translated, demonstrate the communicative competence of the *nowheh-khans*, who are inducted into these oral linguistic traditions from childhood. Girl-children chanters took the floor immediately after the women *nowheh-khans* as a part of their training. The group of women who chanted these *nowhehs* spoke in the voice of a scribe, probably Sakineh, who writes a letter from Karbala to her sister Soghra in Medina:²⁸

- | | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | <i>Karbal tun peya likhda</i> | from Karbala the scribe writes |
| 2 | <i>hun vaqt reha koi nahin</i> | now time left none there is |
| 3 | <i>men keya, men likhan</i> | I what, what can I write? |
| 4 | <i>mere Awn-o Mohammad te</i> | my Awn and Mohammad ²⁹ |
| 5 | <i>Asghar te javan jeha koi nahin</i> | and Asghar's youth none matches |
| 6 | <i>men keya, men likhan</i> | I what, what can I write? |
| 7 | <i>Karbal tun peya likhda</i> | from Karbala the scribe writes |
| 8 | <i>mor vaqt reha koi nahin</i> | return, time will not |
- (Next, lines 6–8 are repeated; followed by lines 3–5; followed by lines 6, 8, and 6)

The *nowheh*-chanters continued to beat their chests to create rhythm with the poetic text:

- 9 *Qasem da je nahin likhiya*
(Repeat line 9)
10 *hun banara bana betha*
11 *khod sehre saja betha*
- 12 *khod sagan manan betha*
(Repeat lines 11–12)
13 *mere hun hathan te*
14 *hun rang reba koi nahin*
(Repeat lines 6–8)
15 *hun ki men likhan*
- Qasem's news none is written
now has adorned himself the groom
himself a crown of flowers has
festooned
himself celebrated his own ritual
mine now on the hands
now henna there is none
now what I can write?

The *nowheh*-chanters continued to sing the elegy, in Sakineh's voice in Panjabi, thereby symbolically becoming Sakineh themselves. The audiences ratified the chanting by repeating the *nowheh* text, line by line after the chanters. The girl-children in the assembly chanted significantly as they beat their chests in harmony with the women, taking the floor independently as performers during a part of the chanting. They sang in Panjabi, leading the performance:

- 16 *jag nagar gai ujri*³⁰
17 *hun kiyun dukh khani*³¹ *tun*
(Repeat lines 16–17)
18 *ommat ne hai aj lutiya*³²
19 *Akbar di javani nun*
(Repeat lines 18–19)
20 *phupian te mavan vala*
21 *churche de siva koi nahin*
22 *men kiya men likhan*
(Repeat lines 20–22)
23 *meri behnan de hatan hun*
24 *rang koi reha nahin*
25 *hun ki men likhan*
26 *Karabal tun peya likhda*
27 *hun vaqt reha koi nahin*
28 *hun ki men likhan*
- in the world destroyed
now why grief you swallow?
the followers have today looted
Akbar's youth³³
paternal aunts and mothers him to
claim
publicity only there is and nothing
else remains³⁴
I what, what can I write?
on my sisters' hand now
henna none remains
now what can I write?
from Karbala the scribe writes
now time left none there is
now what can I write?

The chanters at the *zaynabiyyeh* sang another *nowheh* in Panjabi using Sakineh's voice:

- 29 *manzur kiyun na hoiyen*
30 *ujri*³⁵ *di an do'avan*
(Repeat lines 29–30)
31 *kuch bol munh hon Akbar*
- 32 *Soghra nun ja bulavan*
(Repeat lines 29–30)
33 *Sarvar de dil di halat*
34 *bas rab hi janda he*
35 *manzur kiyun na hoiyen*
36 *Zaynab da dil he aza*
37 *qutbe men parh sunavan*
(Repeat lines 29–30)
38 *Saidanian te barish*
39 *pathran di ho rabi he*
(Repeat line 36)
40 *Ghazi nun ja bulavan*
- 41 *gesmat ne jad milaya*
42 *Soghra gila kare gi*
(Repeat line 36)
43 *Akbar nun sehra lavan*
(Repeat lines 29–30)
- Why were they not accepted?
My prayers, I the shattered one
Move thy lips and say something
O Akbar!
Shall I go and call Soghra?
The state of Hosayn's heart³⁶
Only God alone is aware of
Why were they not accepted?
Zaynab's heart is in lament
Shall I read an elegy of it?
On the *sayyedanis*³⁷ is wreaked
The thunder of stones
Shall I go and call Abbas the
Ghazi³⁸
If fortune favors us and we meet
Soghra will complain
Shall I put the crown of flowers on
Akbar?

The Panjabi *nowhehs* at the *majles*, accompanied by the *matam*, were followed by another general *matam* led by the hostess, Ms. Sabira Zaidi. The communicative patterns of the speech event are illustrated through the following transliteration. This second *matam* was in Urdu and was characterized by a call-and-response pattern:³⁹

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| H: Hosayn Hosayn | P: Hosayn Hosayn |
| /th /th /th th/ (repeating pattern) | /th /th /th th/ (repeating pattern) |
| H: Hosayn Hosayn | P: Hosayn Hosayn |
| H: Ali Mowla | P: Ali Mowla |
| H: Ali Mowla | P: Ali Mowla |
| H: Vali Mowla | P: Vali Mowla |
| H: Ya Abbas | P: Shir Abbas ⁴⁰ |
| H: Hai Sakineh | P: Hai Pias ⁴¹ |
| H: Hai Sakineh | P: Hai Pias |
| H: Hosayn Hosayn Hosayn | |

The communicative dimensions of the *majles* were evident as I could hear the voices of the girl-children in the background repeating "Hosayn" after the hostess. The text and context established its own relationship on many levels within the same time frame. The ritual chanting with lamentation, like jazz, was cyclical and not linear; there was much in the performance that was repetitive and generated emotion through linguistic play and verbal art on several simultaneous levels. Following the general lament trans-literated above, the participants chanted another *nowheh* in Urdu, this time using Sayyedeh Zaynab as the mythical narrator. The passion was at its peak in the assembly and weeping could be heard in the background; the hostess, Ms. Sabira Zaidi, wept the loudest, her face covered with a white handkerchief. The social interactions were within the established frames of speech and the speech event.⁴²

ro ro karti⁴³ Zaynab beyn piyasa mar lia
 (Zaynab wept and lamented, "Thirsty they killed,")
ro ro kati Zaynab beyn piyasa mar lia
 (Zaynab wept and lamented, "Thirsty they killed,")
ya Nabi Kufion ne Hosayn piyasa mar lia
 ("O Prophet, the Kufis killed a thirsty Hosayn,")
mera bhai Hosayn piyasa mar lia
 ("My brother Hosayn, thirsty they killed")

Intense, emotional *matam* followed the chanting of this *nowheh*, which was led by the hostess. Then there was a liturgy of Hosayn *matam* in which the participants chanted: "Hosayn Hosayn Hosayn" for several minutes, beating their chests in a group self-flagellation ritual. Throughout this *matam*, I could hear the loud lament and weeping of the hostess, now in the background. She was exhausted and had moved to the back of the assembly; she sat with her back resting against the wall. A different *zakereh* took over the proceedings in order to recite the *salam* (blessings), which was a prelude to the end of the *majles*. A calm descended on the participants as the *zakereh* recited the following *salam* in poetic narrative in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu.⁴⁴ Below are excerpts from this *salam*, or *ziyarat*.⁴⁵

| | |
|--|---|
| <i>al-salam-o alaykom ya Fatema</i> | Peace be upon you O Fatemeh, |
| <i>al-Zahra</i> | the bold |
| <i>al-salam-o alaykom ya ebn-e</i> | Peace be upon you O son of Ali |
| <i>Mo'meneen</i> | |
| <i>al-salam-o alaykom shams o shakur</i> | Peace be upon you o sun and sunshine |

al-salam-o alaykom al-aman
al-aman
al-salam-o alaykom Ahl-e Bayt-e
Haram

Peace be upon you, may there be
peace, grace and mercy
Peace be upon you O family of
Mohammad

The *zakereh* recited the *salavat/darud*:

Allah homma Salli Ala Mohammad
va al-e Mohammad
Ya Nabi asl-salam-o alaykom

O God, may thy blessings be on
Mohammad and his family
Peace be upon you, O Prophet

The *salavat* was followed by a recital of the opening chapter of the Qur'an.⁴⁶ The *zakereh* led the *ziyarat* and *do'a* for the assembly in Urdu:⁴⁷

Ya Khoda
Is qown ka daman gham-e Shabir
se bhur de
Valvala Awn o Mohammad de

Maon ko mile sani-e Zahra ka
saliqah
Behnon ko Sakineh ki do'aon ka
asr de
Mowla tujhe Zaynab ki asiri ki
qasam he
Be jorm yatinon ko rebai ki
khabar de
Mowla koi gham na dena de seva
gham e Shabir

O God
 Fill this nation's lap with grief for
Hosayn⁴⁸
 Give this nation the valor of Awn
and Mohammad
 May mothers have the skills of
Zaynab⁴⁹
 May sisters have the powers of
Sakineh's prayers
 O God for the sake of Zaynab's
imprisonment
 To innocent orphans in prisons,
may there be news of freedom⁵⁰
 O God give no other grief except
grief for Hosayn

For three minutes, the *zakereh* recited the prayers in Urdu. After the closure of the *majles*, *nazr* (food offerings) was distributed among the participants. The Pakistani *majles* described in this chapter reveals that much of the oral history of Karbala tragedy is reenacted in Sakineh's voice. The *nowhehs* sung in Sakineh's voice at this *majales* created "riqat," or ritualized grief, among the female participants. *Riqat* was created through descriptions of the events at Karbala, from this girl-child's perspective, and in her voice. Both male and female *nowheh-khans* commonly use this method for emotional effect. Sakineh therefore is a metaphor of grief in the folklore built around Karbala. As a vulnerable young girl, Sakineh serves as a highly sympathetic character in the context of the ethical and political issues that led

to the Karbala tragedy. Thus, in accordance with Hymes' model, Sakineh serves as the frame for the ethnography of speaking at a Shi'i *majles* during the Moharram lamentations.

Notes

1. Dell Hymes, *Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974), 45–46.
2. Ibid., 51.
3. Dell Hymes, "Toward Ethnographies of Communication: The Analysis of Communicative Events." In *Language and Social Context*, ed. Pier Paolo Giglioli (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 21–44.
4. Ibid., 45.
5. Adapted from Joel Sherzer, *Language in Use: Readings in Sociolinguistics*, ed. John Baugh and Joel Sherzer (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984a), 195.
6. Ibid.
7. Hymes, *Foundations in Sociolinguistics*, 54.
8. Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 21–26. The training of *nawbeh*-chanters in Shi'i *majales* is similar to the one that Lord describes among the Muslim *guslars* in Yugoslavia during Ramadan.
9. Collected during a Moharram *majles* in Pakistan. I apply theoretical and methodological approaches from Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), and Hymes, "Toward Ethnographies of Communication."
10. For instance, the Gilani and Gardezi *sayyeds* in Multan and the Makhdooms in Sind.
11. Ali Asghar, infant son of Imam Hosayn, was slain at Karbala. Ali Asghar's cradle becomes a focal point of lament during Moharram rituals. Qasem was the adolescent son of Imam Hasan and a nephew of Imam Hosayn. Qasem was about to be married when he was killed at Karbala. Qasem's henna ceremony is celebrated among Shi'i female mourners in the subcontinent during Moharram *majales*. All *nawhebs* may not necessarily be in Sakineh's voice, but a large majority of them are sung as if she were the narrator. Sakineh's narrative creates a passionate lament in the *majles* assembly.
12. Hazrat Abbas, a half-brother of Imam Hosayn, is believed to have inherited Ali ibn Abi Talib's valor. Abbas was martyred at Karbala as he carried the standard of Hosayn's forces while attempting to bring water back to the camp from the Euphrates. The flags were green. At the top of flagpoles, there were metal replicas of a human hand, called a *panjatan*, with each finger representing one of the five most holy persons for Shi'is. The *panjatan* include Mohammad the Prophet; his son-in law, Ali; the Prophet's daughter, Sayyedeh Fatemeh Zahra; and the Prophet's grandsons, Imams Hasan and Hosayn. Hazrat Abbas is called upon as a protector of children in the Moharram *majles*.
13. W. and P. Japp Beach, "Storyfying as Time-Travelling: The Knowledgeable Use of Temporally-Structured Discourse," in *Communication Yearbook 7*, ed. R. Bo-strom (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books-ICA, 1983); and A. L. Ryave, "On the Achievement of a Series of Stories," in *Studies in the Organization of Conversational Interaction*, ed. Jim Schenkein (New York: Academic Press, 1978). Accordingly, in time travel, it was at *zohr*, the late afternoon, when all of Hosayn's forces were eliminated. Hosayn's horse, Zuljenah, returned riderless to the camp. Thus, as part of lament rituals in Pakistan, Zuljenah processions are led by Shi'i mourners to a local Karbala in the city on Ashura. The evening of Ashura is when the women and children were left alone in the camp with Hosayn's ailing son, Ali Zayn al-Abedin. The women's camps were said to have been looted. The evening of Ashura is called the Sham-e Ghariban, or Evening of the Oppressed. According to *hadith*, Imam Hosayn's sister, Sayyedeh Zaynab, was left to assume responsibility for the survivors, including the girl-child Sakineh.
14. In Shi'i households in Pakistan, Karbala is mourned for fifty days.
15. From the word *aza*, which means "to mourn." The word can also mean "condolence."
16. Named after Sayyedeh Zaynab.
17. Out of respect for her grace, the *azadars* address Ms. Sabira Zaidi as "Baji," an intimate term for an elder sister. "Baji Sabira ka Emambareh" means "emambareh belonging to Baji Sabira."
18. Meer Hasan Ali, *Observations on the Mussalmans of India* (Karachi: Civil and Military Press, 1973 [1832]), and Abdul Halim Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, trans. E. S. Harcourt and Fakhru Husayn (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1975).
19. Hymes cited in Joel Sherzer, "Strategies in Text and Context: Kuna kaa kwento," in *Language in Use: Readings in Sociolinguistics*, ed. John Baugh and Joel Sherzer, 183–197 (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984b).
20. Erving Goffman, "The Neglected Situation," in *Language and Social Context*, ed. Pier Paola Giglioli (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 61–66. Goffman's theory is that talk is based on small units of speech; utterances and sentences are placed adjacent to each other as speakers take turns to talk. This is demonstrated in some of the transliterations here, e.g., the hostess leading the *matam* and the assembly of mourners responding with chants of "Hosayn, Hosayn." It is also evident in the photograph of the hostess, Ms. Sabira Zaidi, leading the *matam* proceedings. This is also observed in the "hai, hai," utterance that the hostess prompts during the narration of a Sakineh story.
21. Levi-Strauss, cited in Sherzer, "Strategies in Text and Context"; Aisha Bint al-Shati Mistri, *Karbala ki Sher Dil Khatoon*, trans. Muhammad Abbas (Lahore: Maktaba-e Imamia Trust, 1996).
22. The *zakereh* uses texts like the following to write her narrative, which she delivers from memory at the *majles*: Ayub Naqvi Abadi, *Tarjuman-e Karbala: Zaynab Bint-e-Ali* (Karachi: Aliya Publications, 1999), and Ibrahim Amene, *Fatima Zebra: Islam ki Misali Khatoon*, trans. Akhtar Abbas (Lahore: Shafaq Publishers, 1405 AH).
23. In Sherzer, "Strategies in Text and Context," 195.
24. I adapt this argument from Joel Sherzer's study of the Kuna Indians of Panama; "Strategies in Text and Context," 195.
25. Ibid., 189.

26. In Pakistan, *nouwhehs* are sung in languages such as Pashto, Balti, Sindhi, Siraiki, Baluchi, and regional dialects according to the speech communities.

27. Catherine Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod, eds., *Language and the Politics of Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). Theoretical approaches from these authors are used to interpret the data.

28. According to belief, Soghra, a daughter of Imam Hosayn, was left behind in Medina because she was ill and could not travel. The women who chanted the *nouwheh* beat their breasts as they sang. The *nouwheh* can be sung as a dyadic unit in which two parties take turns in the storytelling process. The *nouwheh* can also be chanted as a monologue. The participants stand in a circle for chanting *nouwhehs* and doing *matam*.

29. Sons of Sayyedeh Zaynab killed in the Battle of Karbala.

30. This is the feminine form of the word meaning “one who is devastated.”

31. This is the feminine form of the word meaning “one who swallows.”

32. *Ommat* means “sect, people of the same religion.”

33. Akbar was Imam Hosayn’s adolescent son.

34. Could also mean “notoriety” in terms of the opposing forces of Yazid.

35. The repetitive use of “*ujri*,” or the devastated female Sakineh, is significant.

36. Imam Hosayn is called Sarvar here. *Sarvar* means “leader” or a “chief.”

37. Female descendants of the Prophet Mohammad’s family.

38. One who fights against infidels, a conqueror, a living hero. Ghazi is embedded in the Islamic concept of jihad, or fight against falsehood.

39. Jim Schenkein, *Studies in the Organization of Conversational Interaction* (New York: Academic Press, 1978), and Harvey Sacks, Emmanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson, “A Simplest Systemics for the Organization of Turn-Taking in Conversation,” *Language* 50:4 (1974), 696–735. The transcription is based on an adaptation of the conversational analysis system of Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, also documented in Schenkein.

40. Abbas, the Lion, known for his valor.

41. A reference to Sakineh’s thirst.

42. Goffman, *Frame Analysis*.

43. Feminine verb form of “to do.”

44. The terms are intralingual.

45. Framing of the *majles* proceedings in this part by the weeping of the hostess in the background.

46. The opening verse of the Qur’an is also recited for the dead.

47. *Ziyarat* is a pilgrimage or visit. The hostess continued to weep as the *majles* was reaching closure through the prayers. The entire ritual was framed in the hostess’ weeping and lament, which the participants responded to. *Do'a* is a prayer that can be said in Arabic, as well as in an indigenous code such as Urdu or Panjabi.

48. Fondly called “Shabir,” which means a tiger or lion.

49. Also called “Zahra” or “Fatemeh the second” for her boldness and oratorical skills.

50. A political reference to current prisoners of conscience in the country.