

## Zaynab: The Heroine of Karbala, the Symbol of Women's Empowerment

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Princeton, N.J., December 2006

Revised: November 2014

The word Karbala brings to mind the great sacrifice of Imam Husayn (peace be unto him), the martyrdom of his brothers, sons, nephews and his companions. But no less is the contribution made to that great event in the formative part of our history by the women and children of Karbala. Foremost among them is Husayn's sister, Zaynab (our salams and Allah's peace be unto her).

Imam Ali and Fatima Zahra (peace be unto them both) had two sons and two daughters: Hasan, Husayn, Zaynab and Umm-e-Kulthoom. Actually, Imam Ali had named both his daughters as Zaynab - this is a composite word 'Zayn-e-Abb' which means 'father's ornament'. This shows the utmost love he had for both his daughters. The Prophet of Islam used to call Fatima Zahra: Ummo Abiha or 'her father's mother'; Imam Ali called both his daughters - 'their father's ornament'. Because both had the same name, they became known as Zaynab-e-kubra and Zaynab-e-sughra, or Zaynab the elder and Zaynab the younger, respectively.

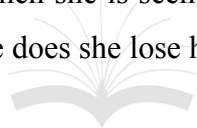
Imam Ali's daughters grew up under the care of their mother, but she passed away while they were still children, so the Imam himself supervised the education and raising of their daughters. What better school is there in the world?

Both of them showed later on the value of that training and education. During Imam Ali's stay in Kufa, they used to teach the women of Kufa both religious sciences as well as worldly manners and morals. Zaynab's true character, though, comes to light at and after Karbala.

The story of Karbala is that of Sabr (patience) and martyrdom by the men until the evening of Ashura. It then turns into the story of Sabr, perseverance, *matam* and vocal expression of Husayn's mission by the women and children.

When the men had been martyred, the tents had been burnt down by Yazid's army, Zaynab took charge of that ravaged caravan. She looks after the children, she gives courage to other women and protects the fourth Imam. Zaynab had lost two sons at the battle of Karbala. But nowhere is she seen lamenting and weeping for them, although she does lament for Husayn's son, Ali Akbar. If anything, she is seen exhorting her sons on the eve of <sup>Ashura</sup> to fight valiantly and sacrifice their lives protecting the Imam of the time. And, they, in turn, live up to their mother's wishes.

Women's *chadars* (cloaks) are taken away by the soldiers of Yazid. Zaynab has lost her sons, brothers like Abbas and Imam Husayn, and nephews like Qasim and Ali Akbar. There are times when she is seen weeping and lamenting, addressing her late father and grand-father. But nowhere does she lose her composure.



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When Husayn, after a fierce fight in the battlefield, has fallen from his horse, Zaynab approaches Umar Sa'ad, the commander of the army and protests to her:

'O Umar, you will watch while Abu Abdullah is being slain?'

When the tents are burning, Zaynab is collecting all the frightened children and taking them from one tent to the other. Finally, it is Zaynab who is seen carrying the ailing Zaynul Abideen in her arms from the burning tent to the safety of open desert.

Perhaps, the most significant act performed by Zaynab in the most perilous moment at Karbala is the introduction of the fourth Imam. As the tents are burning after the massacre, frightened children and women are running from one tent to another, Zaynab approaches the fourth Imam Zayna-ul-Abideen and asks:

“Son!, You are now our Imam. Tents are burning, what is your command? Shall we stay inside the burning tents for Hijab and face death, or save our lives and run outside?”

Imam Zayna-ul-Abibeen responds: “No, Aunt, protecting one’s life is *wajib*, try to save your life, leave the burning tent.”

The question is, didn’t Zaynab know this ruling already? She was the daughter of Ali and Fatima, she had grown up in the household of the Prophet of Islam, she had seen Islam evolving inside her home. Such rulings must be common information for her. Why did she, then, have to ask the Imam? Only to lead a legacy of Imamatus for all time to come. To her, the recognition of the fourth Imam was more important even in such a perilous moment. After all, Karbala had happened to protect the institution of Imamatus – now it was the duty of Zaynab to continue that mission further.

In the streets of Kufa, Zaynab is seen addressing the people of Kufa: 'O people of Kufa, you have killed the best of our men and now you are weeping? O people of Kufa, weeping is your destiny, you will weep for the rest of your lives, you are like that green grass which grows on a heap of rubbish.'

She then appears in the court of Ibn Ziyad, the governor of Kufa and lashes out at him in the strongest words. A few days later, she leads the looted caravan into the court of Yazid.

Yazid is very pleased at his victory over a person who refused to be cowed down by his tyranny. He is reciting poetry:

*'O how I wish my ancestors were here,  
and they would see the way I have avenged Badr and Uhud,  
Banu Hashim had staged a game for their hegemony over the Arabs,  
Neither was there an angel who descended,  
nor was there any revelation .....*

Then Yazid goes on to recite wistfully the Quranic verse meaning: *'Allah gives honor to whomever He wishes and He disgraces whomever He wants to.....'*

Bibi Zaynab confronts Yazid thus: 'O you son of a freed slave! Conspire as much as you can and exhaust yourself with your efforts, by God, you will never wipe out our memory. Disgrace will never leave you. Is your judgement anything but a blunder? Is your congregation anything but a dispersion?'

Yazid has no words to answer Zaynab. All he could do was to ask - Who is this proud woman? She recites poetry in my presence?

His courtiers introduced Zaynab saying: 'This is Ali's elder daughter, this is Muhammad's grand-daughter.'

Zaynab is thrown into the dungeon where she stays for months. But even in prison, she spends her days giving courage to other women, protecting the children and giving support to the fourth Imam and her nights in prayers.

When the prisoners are finally released, the first thing she asks for is a place where she can organize Aza for the martyrs of Karbala. She spends days in Damascus doing this. Women of the city come to her, she speaks of Husayn and Islam and they listen. This is the beginning of °Azadari in earnest. It was not until Yazid realized that Zaynab will bring about a revolution in Syria by her discourses on Karbala that he ordered them to be taken back to Madinah.

Zaynab was not among the martyrs of Karbala, she lived to endure the hardships of the aftermath of Karbala. But it was true to her character that she would die a martyr at the hands of an enemy of Islam, years later in the same city of Damascus. That is where her glorious mausoleum stands today and thousands of devotees flock to visit Zaynab's final resting place.

I visited the tomb back in 1976. In spite of all the devotees visiting day and night and the big crowds congregating there, one cannot fail to notice a universal peace and a unique sense of serenity in the holy precincts of Zaynab's tomb. There are thousands of visitors around. There is a quiet looking man sitting at the main gate with a stick in his hand. (He was actually a deaf and mute, I later discovered). Visitors have to take off their shoes; he lifts the shoes on his stick and places them neatly in a rack. He does not ask nor accept any money. He also has a pile of black *chadars* by his side. If any woman approaches the gate wearing something like a short dress, he picks up a *chadar* on his stick and presents it to the visiting woman. As if telling her: 'Bibi Zaynab lost her chadar at Karbala - but remember, she made that sacrifice so that no other Muslim woman will go out without a *chadar* over her head - ever again.'

The mourners are praying quietly everywhere. But they only whisper and walk with gentle steps. Their quietness belies their presence in great numbers. They are keeping quiet as if the sound of their footsteps or their slightest whispers will disturb Zaynab's eternal sleep.

(There is a mosque in the city center of Cairo in Egypt. It is known as Majid-e-Ras-ul-Husayn. By one account, Imam Husayn's severed head was brought to Cairo and it was buried at that location.)

There is also a shrine in Cairo which is dedicated to Lady Zaynab. The Egyptians believe that lady Zaynab is buried at that location. Nadia Abu Zahra, in her brilliant field study at the Zaynab Shrine in Cairo describes many details, which resulted in a book titled *The Pure and Powerful*, (Published by: Ithaca Press, April 1, 2000,

The book concentrates on the social life at the shrine of al-Sayyida Zaynab in Cairo. As granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad, al-Sayyida Zaynab is regarded by many as the patron saint of women. The book also includes studies on rain rituals in Tunisia, and the rituals performed during the month of Ramadan in Cairo. Throughout the work, the author seeks to break down the assumptions and stereotypes implicit in other studies on Muslim societies and provide us with a more accurate picture of how the Islamic tradition is developed and integrated within these societies.

Nadia Abu Zahra explains in her work that the famous shrine of Zaynab at Damascus is actually the burial place of Zaynab's younger sister Umme-Kulthoom, also known as Zaynab-the-younger. The elder sister, that is Zaynab the elder, is buried at the location of the Cairo shrine.

Nadia Abu Zahra is not the only person to write about the glorious life of Zaynab bint Ali, the grand-daughter of the Prophet, who has made her mark in the early history of Islam.

Lara Deeb is professor and chair of anthropology at Scripps College, Claremont, Ca, where she teaches women's studies. In her field work in Lebanon studying the social set up and interacting with the local women, she noticed how the local Lebanese women were actively involved in all walks of life. In her curiosity she asks: How could Muslim women take on such a leadership role? She was told that that leadership comes from the role model of Zaynab bint Ali at Karbala.

Based on two years of ethnographic research in the southern suburbs of Beirut, *An Enchanted Modern* demonstrates that Islam and modernity are not merely compatible, but actually go hand-in-hand. This eloquent ethnographic portrayal of an Islamic community articulates how an alternative modernity, and specifically an enchanted modernity, may be constructed by Shi'a Muslims who consider themselves simultaneously deeply modern, cosmopolitan, and pious.

In this depiction of a Shi'i Muslim community in Beirut, Deeb examines the ways that individual and collective expressions and understandings of piety have been debated, contested, and reformulated.

Women take center stage in this process, a result of their visibility both within the community, and in relation to Western ideas that link the status of women to modernity. By emphasizing the ways notions of modernity and piety are lived, debated, and shaped by "everyday Islamists," this book underscores the inseparability of piety and politics in the lives of pious Muslims.

Deeb also looks at the role of Zaynab , the sister of Imam Hussein and granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H), and points to her legacy as the reason for women's public participation and community service in Al-Dahiya. Public participation is seen as a religious duty for the pious modern. Deeb describes the time she spent with women volunteers and women-run social organizations and gives testimonies of many women and their reasons for their involvement in the social sector. Thus in Deeb's study, Zaynab becomes a symbol of women's empowerment in general.

In his interesting work on the observance of the Karbala Tragedy among the Muslims of India and Pakistan, professor Akbar Hyder, of University of Texas in Austin, dedicates a chapter on the Women of Karbala.

The tradition in Azadari has been that when describing the events of the Tragedy of Karbala, usually, the women of Karbala are shown as weak, lamenting and weeping as the men are being massacred and after the massacre the tents are burnt. Hyder shows that, as opposed to that established tradition, the surviving women of Karbala took charge of the situation with great courage and led the looted caravan with a determination to talk about the tragedy publicly and privately. It was that, which has kept the memory of the Tragedy of Karbala alive to this day.

Hyder identifies the first traditional speaker of the Majlis gatherings who started that trend, was the Pakistani Zakir, Allama Rashid Turabi.

Hyder, then identifies some modern Urdu poets, among them Parveen Shakir, who has merged her poetic passion to tell the story of today's woman and her plight in the society with a view to the women of Karbala.

This is a collection of essays written by a number of authors. In these essays the contributors have looked at women as participants in and observers of the Karbala rituals in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, India, Pakistan, and the United States. They find that women's experiences in the Shi'i rituals vary considerably from one community to another, based on regional customs, personal preferences, religious interpretations, popular culture, and socioeconomic background.

The authors also examine the gender symbolism within the rituals, showing how it reinforces distinctions between the genders while it also highlights the centrality of women to the symbolic repertory of Shi'ism. Overall, the authors conclude that while Shi'i rituals and symbols have in some ways been used to restrict women's social roles, in other ways they have served to provide women with a sense of independence and empowerment.



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## Citations

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