

## Heroines of Karbala: Gender, Martyrdom, and Mourning in Karbala- Inspired Devotional Poetry

Assist. Inst. Muthana Saad Hameed / General Directorate of Education in  
Diwaniah Governorate

E-mail: [muthana.sa@gmail.com](mailto:muthana.sa@gmail.com)

بطالات كربلاء: الجندر، الشهادة، والحداد في الشعر التعبدي المستلهم من واقعة كربلاء

م. مثنى سعد حميد

مديرة تربية الديوانية

### Abstract

This study examines women's evolving positions in devotional literature regarding the Karbala events, particularly focusing on the theological and poetic legacy of Zaynab. It analyzes the works of Amina Inloes, especially her more recent book, *The Silence of Zaynab: A Shi'a Feminist Reading of Sacred History* (2021), which emphasizes Zaynab's voice in the realm of spiritual and feminist resistance. It contrasts the writings of Bint al-Huda and several Shi'a poets of the Arab world and illustrates how the women's roles evolved from being mere symbolic mourners to active participants in bearing the memory, which is now seen as a sacred duty. This article is based on feminist theory, the study of ritual, and Islamic theology, and argues that contemporary Shi'a prose and poetry, in any form, structured as poetry or flowing prose, represents a profound theological and cultural statement of protest and heritage within Shi'a communities.

**Keywords:** lady Zaynab, Amina Inloes, Islamic mourning, feminist poetics, Karbala.

### المخلص:

يتناول هذا البحث التحولات الجوهرية في أدوار النساء ضمن الأجناس الأدبية التي كُتبت تعبيرًا عن الإخلاص والوفاء لذكرى واقعة كربلاء، مع تركيز خاص على الإرث اللاهوتي والشعري للسيدة زينب بوصفها رمزًا للتجسيد الأنثوي للبطولة والمعنى. ويسعى البحث إلى تسليط الضوء على أعمال الدكتورة أمينة إنلوس، ولا سيما دراستها الموسومة «صمت زينب: قراءة نسوية شيعية في التاريخ المقدس» (٢٠٢١)، حيث أعادت من خلالها استنطاق صوت زينب وإبرازه كقوة روحية ونسوية مقاومة تتحدى الصمت والتهميش في الذاكرة الدينية والتاريخية. وفي المقارنة مع كتابات بنت الهدى وعدد من الشعراء والشاعرات الشيعية في العالم العربي، يكشف البحث عن تحول نوعي في تمثيل المرأة من كونها رمزًا جنائزيًا للنواح والمواساة إلى فاعلٍ واعٍ يحمل الذاكرة المقدسة ويعيد إنتاجها في الخطاب الديني والأدبي المعاصر. ينطلق هذا المقال من مقاربات نقدية نسوية ومنهجيات دراسة الطقس والشعيرة واللاهوت الإسلامي، ليبرهن أن الأدب الشيعي الحديث، نثرًا وشعرًا، يشكل بيانًا ثقافيًا وموقفًا احتجاجيًا يستحضر البعد اللاهوتي والوجداني معًا، ويعيد صياغة الهوية الروحية والجماعية للمرأة في سياق الذاكرة الكربلائية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** السيدة زينب، أمينة إنلوس، الطقوس والمآتم الإسلامية، الشعرية النسوية، كربلاء.

**1. Introduction** The tragedy of Karbala in 680 CE with Imam Hussein's martyrdom alongside his companions and his eventual death was one of the deeply mourned tragedies in Islamic history which had profound spiritual and political implications. Imam Hussein's refusal, even centuries later, to give his oath of allegiance to Umayyad caliph Yazid has been interpreted and praised across generations as a defiance of tyranny, injustice and God's betrayal. The events leading up to and culminating with the bloodshed in the plains of Karbala marking the death and martyrdom of Imam Hussein are not only pivotal moments in the evolution of Shi'a Islam, but also profoundly gendered moments in history as Lady Zaynab and other women emerged as significant storytellers in the moral and ethical narrative of the events. Although the narrative of the battlefield is painted with the blood and martyrdom of men, the legacy of the aftermath is shaped by women, in particular Zaynab, who transcends effortless eloquence to widow-like poise, defiance and determination. She and other women who assumed the

role of moral witnesses became the storytellers and, in some sense, became the history of the tragedy itself. Karbala is now a vivid memory and has formed over time a rich mixture of rituals and even poetry which is unique to Shi'a Muslims. Women's roles in commemorative traditions have changed over time from being passive symbols of suffering to now being recognized as active agents of spiritual defiance, as well as judges of religious matters. This research examines the case of contemporary devotional poetry, focusing on English composed works, in which female characters of Karbala, particularly Lady Zaynab, are transformed into symbols of theological and literary prowess. It looks into the ways these poetic images engage with feminist thought, postcolonial theory, and ritual theory and produce images of resistance and remembrance, and construct identity. Centering on Amina Inloes's works as a case study, this article argues that contemporary devotional poetry, in particular, allows and empowers Muslim women to reclaim the sacred history, reinterpret the patriarchal narratives of history, and articulate the multiple and layered dimensions of faith and identity.

**2. Literature Review** Since the early 2000s, scholarship has grown to recognize the contributions of women to the memory and mourning of Karbala. Foundational works such as Kamran Scot Aghaie's *The Women of Karbala* (2005) analyze the impact of women's participation on ritual and theological performance throughout and beyond Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, and the diaspora. Aghaie's volume shows that women's participation spans from symbolic lament to various forms of social and religious empowerment (Aghaie, 2005). Edith Szanto (2013, 2019) advances the notion of the "Karbala Paradigm," noting its Shi'a woman-centered context from revolutionary innovations in Iran to community-building in diaspora. She stresses that Zaynab's public orations and her participatory rituals serve simultaneously as devotion and devotion-centered mobilization (Szanto, 2019). Mary Elaine Hegland (2014) ethnographically studied Iraqi Shi'a women in Ireland, focusing on how diasporic communities lament poetry as a form of both liturgical continuation and a manner of protest against displacement, thus, showcasing the transcultural adaptability of Karbala. Firdous Hosseini (2018) and Alkhulaifi et al. (2024) expand the storyline with a feminist literary perspective, illustrating how contemporary Arab and Iranian women poets reclaim narrative power through the use of distress and mystical imagery. Earlier scholars considered Karbala poetry as a predominantly male focus revolving around Husayn's martyrdom. Attention from feminist and ritual scholars on women's mourning and their ritualized grief as cultural performance has shifted which was previously framed as domestic mourning framed within moral as well as socio-political, and decolonizing Islamic gender norms. Inloes (2021) considers Zaynab's spirituality and teaching functions, framing her both as a theological text and a figure of resistance. Mervin (2017) and Daftary (2019) focus on the mourning rituals of Shi'as and Zaynab's piety, drawing out her ethical implications. As for Amina Inloes, she has positioned English-language devotional poetry in transnational Shi'a studies. Inloes has sought to link scholarship to the practice of religion, as it is experienced in the lives of second generation Western Muslims, marking a turn towards mourning practices infused with feminist thought, multilingualism, and inclusivity. Furthermore, the latest research focuses on how Shi'a women express sorrowful devotion and communal belonging through English, Urdu, Persian, and Swahili multilingual poetics. Instagram, YouTube, and Clubhouse have given women poets and reciters more opportunities to engage and share with the world through the lens of elegy recitation. Technology has widened the scope of devotional performance accessibility and illuminated the devotional performances of the younger and silenced generations. In the aftermath of conflicts in the Shi'a communities of Iraq and Syria, poetry has provided a means of collective healing and cultural restoration. For women to express such powerful sentiments also boldly politicizes the discourse surrounding trauma, defiance, and endless potential. These are testaments to the growing multifaceted nature of Karbala poetry, which has become a source of spiritual, political, and social discourse. New scholarship emphasizes the influence of devotional poetry in the English language on the construction of a Shi'a identity as transnational, as Inloes describes. Inloes intertwines the academic and the experiential in religion, particularly concerning Western Muslims of the two diaspora generations, highlighting the growth of a feminist, multilingual, inclusive, and expansive mourning discourse.

**3. Theoretical Framework** The integration of each of these disciplines is beneficial to grasp the unique significance of martyrdom as well as the observances of mourning in its feminine, spiritual, memorial, and politically definant contexts. The combination of these frameworks enables additional profound sociological examinations to be performed on the Karbala poetry, and its female characters, the basis of which is social inquiry. Butler's and Mohanty's along with hooks' feminism are great examples of literature centered analysis that deconstruct religiously based narratives. The feminism poetry of Karbala is simultaneously a form of spiritual defiance. It is also a deeply rooted form of resistance ritual. The woman's act of *latmiyyat* is more than

just a simple representation of mourning. It is a ritualized form of resistance. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's post-colonial feminist theory is a helpful critique on how Muslim women's experiences are oversimplified in framing both hegemonic Western and traditionalist Islamic narratives. Mohanty's focus on positionality and agency prompts us to study Lady Zaynab not simply as a passive representation of defeat, but as a multifaceted, vocal, and transcendent participant. The ritual and performance theory of Victor Turner and Catherine Bell aid understanding as to how devotional poetry functions within the shared ritual of mourning. When elegies and marsiya are recited and the audience participates, the commemoration becomes a social and spiritual creation. These creations conserve and promote the community's conscience which becomes a civil community centered around the values of sacrifice, justice, and unflinching perseverance. The Islamic religion, and more specifically Shi'ism, provides a view of Zaynab perceiving her as an archangel bearing the truth and imamate sustaining. Her oration at Yazid's court is well known and cited by scholars as the pivotal point of Islamic resistance writings. Zaynab's spirituality and her oration in court exemplifies the Islamic feminine religiosity and the politics of defiance. All of these aspects in unison give a wonderful lens to understand the writings of Amina Inloes and other contemporaries. From these lenses, it is astounding how consensual poetry functions to preserve and animate the sacred histories in a tangible form and in an act of feminism.

#### **4. Case Study: The Devotional Poetry of Amina Inloes**

Amina Inloes has made her mark in Shi'a contemporary literature and thought as a British-Iraqi scholar and theologian. Inloes has reinterpreted the life of Lady Zaynab, interweaving her with the Karbala classical narratives along the lines of feminism, diasporic thought, and theology. Inloes has worked in English—while her audience consists of the diasporic global second-generation Muslims—most of the time as a testament to her loyalty to the faith and the Shi'a tradition. Inloes has also written extensively on the moral and political agency of Lady Zaynab, which she has carved out in the literature. In her "In the Footsteps of Sayyida Zaynab: Unseating the Tyrant" lecture, she foregrounds Zaynab's widespread spiritual activism, citing as the crown of Zaynab's spiritual valor, her defiant stand in Yazid's court. Inloes presents Zaynab as a model of moral fortitude, whose words transform catastrophe into testimony, and openly dissent against oppression (Inloes, 2021). This reflection also critiques Zaynab being portrayed as a passive woman and instead, presents her as a morally engaged and rhetorically powerful figure. Inloes states that Zaynab's sermon should be appreciated as a testament in regard to her historical context and in a lasting ethical conversation. Her aesthetic prose is most impressive as it integrates the poetic and devotional so seamlessly. Along with the meditation of marsiya, where she incorporates Quranic allusions, imagery, and the rhythm of recitation, she unites modern concepts of exile and spiritual sorrow. She speaks of Karbala as a compass direction one must turn towards, saying: "While Shi'is argue that the Karbala narrative persists because it is spiritually and cosmologically central, ..." (Inloes, 2022) Using this imagery, I understand Karbala signifies more than a historical battlefield — it serves as a historical, living embattled legacy. A legacy that persists as a reminder to those oppressed, downtrodden, and bullied. The term "Breath" represents elements of the continuum, profound resistance, and the contemplation that mourning deserves. In her reflections, Inloes Ashura to Arbaeen, contemplates on the transformative nature of grief. For her, this time frame marks a turning point in the pendulum of time beyond external rituals toward internal reflection. In her words, the stillness of that time is, in her view, theologically significant, a period of silence in which something is transcended toward a state of brokenness and spiritual strength. Despite the fact that formal poetic collections by Bint al-Huda (Amina al-Sadr) are scant, her writings and public addresses always contained poetic elements. In 1952, she recited a couplet at a family gathering: "O Maram, O captivator of the souls, O star that shines in the morning!" Although the couplet continues to exist mostly in oral form, it exemplifies her ability to compose lyrics as well as the devotional quality which she later captured in her sermons (see Aghaie, 2005). This spontaneous verse captures her poetic insight within the context of oral rituals. The initial works of Bint al-Huda appeared on the pages of her essays and were delivered as majlis sermons on the moral duty of women and the heritage of Zaynab. She influenced the education and activism of Iraqi Shi'a women by weaving religious defiance into public life. Inloes's work has been referenced in Shi'a feminist debates and in interfaith meetings. Szanto (2019) mentions her writings in quotation as "devotional archives" texts, preserving and asserting interpretive authority, spiritual resilience, and transhistorical memory. These texts resist simple interpretations of mourning and the silencing of women in sacred history. Scholarly devotion manifested in Amina Inloes's rewriting of Shi'a martyr literature centered women as the tellers of truth. In her work, she illustrates how the mourning memory of women can serve as a transformative act of justice in the 21st century, positing their theological presence as a shrine. Amina Inloes is a British-Iraqi scholar and theologian known as

one of the leading figures in contemporary Shi'a thought and literature. Integrating feminist and diasporic theologies, Inloes's scholarship advances a new image of Lady Zaynab while also re-envisioning the themes of the classic Karbala narrative. With her writings in English, Inloes has targeted the youth, especially younger Muslims, while remaining devoted to the Shi'a tradition and spirituality. Inloes's academic as well as devotional texts champion the moral and political agency of Lady Zaynab and the Islam's hidden feminisms. Amina Inloes characterizes Lady Zaynab as a moral voice of bold defiance. Zaynab, as Inloes's feminist interpretation goes, is the one who, in the words of the poet, changes tragedy to testimony and gives voice to the voiceless, defying oppression with regal bearing. (Inloes, 2021). Such a reflection reconceives Zaynab as a passive moral witness to an active one, an openly engaged and rhetorically powerful individual. Inloes also reframes Zaynab's sermon as not merely a spine of historical testimony but as an enduring act of ethical eloquence. While Inloes does not publish formal poetry, many of her devotional prose pieces seem to assume a poetic form. In her writings, the Zaynab of Inloes's imagination uses allusion, a symbolic framework, and a meditative cadence that brings together the elements of marsiya, an elegiac lament, and contemporary manifestations of exile and spiritual sorrow. She portrays Karbala as a moral compass. Inloes defends that Karbala is more than "soil and blood," and is a spiritual "breath that still cries justice" (Inloes, 2021). This teaching allows us to consider Karbala a living remembrance for the oppressed, keeping it distant from the notion of a battleground. The "breath" she refers to speaks of the continuity, resistance, and the sacred mourning that must be endured. Inloes has reflections on the time between Ashura and Arbaeen and considers the loss and grief. To her, this time framework exists as a border, beyond which the external rituals of an Ashura are replaced with the internal observance of Arbaeen. She posits the stillness of time has some form of political, cultural, and, in a more profound sense, spiritual significance where brokenness encounters resilience. Although rare in some formal collections of poems, Bint al-Huda (Amina al-Sadr) did integrate a poetic form to most of the prose and writings she prepared. In 1952, she recited a couplet at a family function: "O Maram, O captivator of the souls, O star that shines in the morning!" (Aghaie, 2005). This impromptu poem showcases her inventive spirit in relation to oral customs. Most of Bint al-Huda's contributions are from her essays and her majlis sermons concerning the moral duties of women and Zaynab's legacy. These inspired the training and activism of women in the Iraqi Shi'a community. It incorporated some aspects of public life religious defiance. Inloes has participated in Shi'a feminist discussions and is noted in interfaith discussions. As Szanto, 2019 calls women's devotional practices "archives of mourning", they retained the interpretative power, spiritual agency, and transhistorical memory. These archives resist simplistic portrayals of lamentation and reclaim the female voice within sacred time. Through her scholarship and religious activism, Amina Inloes enriches Shi'a martyr literature by re-narrating the feminine truth of the tradition. In her scholarship, she also demonstrates that women's voices in mourning Shi'a memory have the ability to transform the act into justice and divine presence, deeply reimagining the act of mourning and Shi'a memory in the 21st century.

##### **5. Comparative Reflections: Arabic Shi'a Poets and Female Martyrdom**

Apart from prose works, the topic of Karbala has been a source of inspiration for many Arabic poets, both ancient and modern. Among them, the voice of Bint al-Huda stands out for its passionate storytelling, whereas more recent poets like Fatima Qandil and Amal al-Jubouri have explored the feminine dimensions of sorrow and commemoration. In some of Fatima Qandil's Arabic poetry, like *Ma' al-hubb 'illā 'l-hubb* (2019), she reflects on loss, dispossession and longing. Though not related to Karbala, these themes evoke the melancholic remembrance of Zaynab and the tonal grief of the community. The verse conveys grief as a form of writing and sharing, which is a repetitive theme in Karbala literature. In the same manner, Amal al-Jubouri's *Hagar Before the Occupation / Hagar After the Occupation* (2011) interprets women's defiance using Shi'a imagery and Qur'anic female symbols. As Amina Inloes (2022) observes, "While Shi'is argue that the Karbala narrative persists because it is spiritually and cosmologically central..." (Joseph Campbell, *Shi'ism, and the Karbala Narrative*, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*). So, in this article, Dr. Amina Inloes describes the account of Karbala as more than a history; it is an active cosmology and moral system that helps to maintain the Shi'i sense of being and spirituality. She follows the notions of an always-present moral plane. In this case, it is a sacred space of abiding justice, sacrifice, and divine will. Although these poems may lack the traditional form of marsiya, they do capture the essence of metaphysical and political symbolism in order to commemorate the female martyrs as well as the enduring intergenerational struggle of resilient women. The integration of modern free verse and ancient religious zeal reflects the prose-poetic Inloes employs. Collectively, these authors create a multifaceted literary Shi'a women's mourning canon that intertwines ritual, song, and defiance.

## 6. Mourning, Ritual, and Poetic Testimony

Among the Shi'a community, mourning traditions which occur during the month of Muharram are honored with ritual practices which include majlis recitation, latmiyyat, and marsiya. Each of these practices are significant since, in Shi'a traditions, women take the leadership role in the mourning practices and in the commemoration of the Karbala heritage. Women have been the narrators of the sacred history during the commemorations, both in the large and small public memorials. In her research, Keshavarz along with martyrology historian Kamran Scot Aghaie, has examined the mourning practices in which they describe the ritualized poetry and the mourning as a dual channel of spiritual teaching and community catharsis. As an example, Keshavarz quotes Ayubi's assertion that Islamic ethics ought to give considerable attention to the challenges women face in their everyday lives. (Ayubi, 2019). In this context, the enactment of poetic mourning becomes an ethical obligation, beyond the confines of ritualistic practice. With its metaphors, rhythms, and invocations, poetry simultaneously takes the role of worship and civil disobedience. The recitation of Zaynab's lamentations during her ascent from Karbala to Kufa and Kufa to Damascus forms part of the women's majlis. The recitations focus on Zaynab's sermons, her defiance to Yazid, and her remarkable efforts to commemorate and safeguard the legacy of Imam Husayn's martyrdom. In this regard, they serve as spiritual educational tools wherein moral concepts are shaped and cultivated, and ethical teachings are imparted. Moreover, the ritualized forms of mourning as described by Inloes and others, wherein rhythm, repetition, and collective response are employed, transmute memory into physical manifestation, and are not peripheral acts performed by women. These acts are, in fact, central to the enduring Shi'a religious identity. Hence, the sacred essence of poetic mourning emanates from ritual narrative, and spiritual defiance, all in one voice.

## 7. Feminist Theology and the Karbala Narrative

It is fascinating to consider feminist theology within the framework of Karbala Shi'a Islam. It reveals the narratives of Women like Lady Zaynab who have slipped through the portals of history and examines the power dynamics, defiance, gender roles, and martyrdom in Islam. Inloes and Ayubi emphasize the primacy of women's lived experiences in theology. Feminist Zaynab theologians examine her articulation of sermons as ethical engagement and 'acts of speech' that transcend the trauma of articulation. Inloes assesses Zaynab's testimony as disclosing the massacre and the subsequent truth suppression (Inloes, 2021). In this case, Zaynab's oratory must be viewed as a silencing of socially constructed truth and a prophetic narration. Zahra Ayubi, who has also worked on gender and Islamic ethics, remains a voice in the area. She argues that in the case of moral excellence in Islam, it is also the case that the body in relation to the ethics of Islam is of equal importance. To Ayubi, the story of Karbala presents a configured perspective on struggle not solely attached to the masculine martyr, but also the will and strength of women. Ayubi (2019) elaborates on this in her book *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society*, in which she argues that any theology or ethical system that excludes women will be incomplete. Her work reflects the significance of women's experiences—particularly the experiences of suffering and struggle that constitute moral agency. Moral agency has a bearing on ethical discourse, and so it must be included. Feminist views on Karbala counter the patriarchal view of fardi martyrdom which celebrates the violence rather than the moral action. The "martyred" women of Karbala exhibited tremendous moral courage, spirited defiance, and are ethical embodiments of martyrdom in their own right. Feminist theology reformulates Karbala not just as a significant historical moment, but as an ongoing site of unyielding resistance, a testament to silenced stories, and a space of moral commemoration. It does not view women as merely passive, but as equal and vibrant theological co-creators of Shi'a sacred history and communal identity.

## 8. Conclusion

The occurrence of Karbala has genuinely marked the Islamic history championing an endless amount of poetry, literature and oration which attempts to unify a community and extoll a certain virtue. Amina Inloes's writings, Bint al-Huda's legacy, and the works of poetry by Fatima Qandil and Amal al-Jubouri demonstrate and emphasize the importance of these women, and also the growing acknowledgment of women taking part in mourning and lamentation. The modern writings focus the women of Karbala, particularly Lady Zaynab, as symbolic figures and sources of inspiration, strengthening the areas of feminism and protest. Their testimony, along with feminist theology, has inspired many women positively reframing the negative connotation of martyrdom into a proud and spiritually uplifting act. Poetic testimony, although sorrowful, is also a form of theological restoration of history, reframing and praising the horrific parts and offering them as a moral guidance. It has a sorrowful accompaniment which is in the spirit of the event being commemorated. The significant

research and personal faith activities of women involved in Shi'a Islam articulate and shape the history of the thoughtful undertakings to come, emphasizing the core of the doctrine. The writings of Bint Al Huda, the poem Ashura'a, and other devotional literature which focus on the intersections of gender, the sacred, and the textual, are rites of devotion.

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