

**The Arbaeen March as a Modern Hero's
Journey: Faith, Resistance, and Spiritual
Transformation in the Path to Immortality**

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Abstract

This study focuses on the Arbaeen March as a modern application of Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey. It studies the pilgrimage as an organized story of faith, resistance, and spiritual transformation. The study fills the gap in academic attention to Arbaeen as a literary and mythic genre. Using Campbell's stages of departure, initiation, and return, the study examines pilgrims' experiences using qualitative methods such as observations, interviews, and analysis of speeches and rituals during the march to Karbala. Thematic analysis ties these real-life experiences to the structure of the Hero's Journey. The research uses Campbell's theory, together with cultural and narrative theory, to explain how pilgrims exhibit ideals like as sacrifice, moral growth, and solidarity. The study concludes that the Arbaeen March is not only a spiritual event but also a powerful narrative journey. It mirrors classic heroic patterns and functions as a living myth that deepens cultural identity, collective memory, and moral purpose.

Keywords: Arbaeen, martyrdom, faith, defiance, unity, devotion, sacrifice, justice, loyalty, miracles.

Introduction

The Arbaeen March has become the world's largest religious gathering, attracting more than 20 million pilgrims to Karbala, Iraq, in honor of Imam Hussein's martyrdom. For those who participate, Arbaeen is more than just a ritual; it is an act of devotion, a protest against injustice, and a path to eternal life. While much has been written about its religious and political facets, few academics have explored Arbaeen as a narrative journey that reflects global trends of transition.

This study covers this gap by using Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey concept in the Arbaeen March. The Hero's Journey, also known as the monomyth, is separated into three stages: departure, initiation, and return (Campbell, 2004, pp. 30-36). Although it has widespread application in literature, art, and psychology, this model has rarely been used in ceremonies of faith. However, Arbaeen shares basic traits with epic journeys: pilgrims leave their daily lives, face challenges on the way, and return changed.

Existing research has concentrated on Arbaeen's social and religious impact (Nakash, 1993, pp. 143-146; Al-Nasrawi, 2016, pp. 22-24), with little attention paid to its symbolic structure or emotional resonance. This study suggests that the march serves as a collective narrative in which participants achieve personal and community development. It is based on Halbwachs' theory of communal memory, which proposes that shared rituals enhance moral beliefs and group identification (1992, pp. 38-42).

The central aim is to examine how the Arbaeen March reflects the Hero's Journey and what this reveals about its spiritual and cultural meaning. The main research question is: How does the Arbaeen March reflect the structure of the Hero's Journey, and what does this reveal about its function as a spiritual and cultural narrative?

This approach changes the focus from exterior ritual to inward experience, showing how real people carry out legendary patterns. It also broadens the scope of narrative theory by linking literature with actual experience. In conclusion, this study views the Arbaeen March as more than just a religious observance; it is framed as a powerful, planned journey that follows global story patterns found in myth and literature. Using Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey model, the study shows how pilgrims carry out a common story of moral conflict, sacrifice, and rejuvenation. This perspective not only fills a gap in current scholarship but also highlights the deep narrative and cultural significance of Arbaeen in shaping identity, faith, and collective memory.

Statement of the Problem

Although the Arbaeen March is one of the world's most important religious festivals, with over 20 million participants each year, most academic research focuses on its political, historical, or religious features (Nakash, 1993, pp. 143-146; Al-Nasrawi, 2016, pp. 22-24). Few scholars have examined it as a structured narrative or examined its ability to portray a lived experience of transformation. This gap restricts our understanding of how participants perceive the march not only as a ritual, but also as a personal and collective path of transformation.

Despite significant use of Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey concept in literature, psychology, and cultural studies (Campbell, 2004, pp. 30-36), it has yet to be applied to rituals of faith such as Arbaeen. As a result, nothing is known about the march's narrative structure and symbolic reason. Understanding the Arbaeen March as a real-life retelling of the Hero's Journey may reveal new aspects of its spiritual and cultural sig-

nificance. It could also shed light on how ritual and storytelling shape collective memory and identity (Halbwachs, 1992, pp. 38-42).

This study addresses the lack of research connecting Arbaeen to narrative theory and aims to explore how the march functions as a transformative journey embedded in shared cultural meaning.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of this study is to examine the Arbaeen March through the prism of Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey in order to find its narrative and symbolic structure. The aim is to examine how pilgrims go through a transforming process that resembles ancient renowned patterns of departure, initiation, and return. The study also aims to bridge the gap between literary theory and lived religious practice by demonstrating that the Arbaeen pilgrimage may be interpreted not just as a devotional act, but also as a systematic, meaningful journey of moral awakening and identity development.

More specifically, the study will:

1. Identify and map the key stages of the Hero’s Journey within the Arbaeen experience.
2. Examine how individual pilgrims articulate personal transformation during and after the march.
3. Analyze the communal elements—rituals, symbols, speeches, and slogans—as narrative tools reinforcing the journey.
4. Contribute to the broader field of narrative studies by offering a case study of a living, collective myth in a contemporary religious context (Frank, 2010, pp. 77–81; Denzin, 2014, pp. 109–112).

Methodology

This qualitative study uses a combined technique of online story analysis, semi-structured interviews, and ethnographic observation using digital and local sources. The researcher, who lives in Karbala, Iraq, used internet sources, including media, films, interviews, and personal feedback, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Arbaeen pilgrimage. In addition, around twenty individuals from Karbala and surrounding areas were interviewed face-to-face with open-ended questions. Participants included men and women of varied ages and jobs.

The interviews focused on their motivations, emotional experiences, perceived transformations, and interpretations of the journey. All responses were transcribed and thematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis (pp. 87–93). Special attention was given to patterns that align with Campbell's model of the Hero's Journey.

Textual materials such as banners, slogans, speeches, and symbolic visuals were also collected from online videos and documented local sources. These were analyzed through Barthes' (1972) theory of myth and semiotics (pp. 115–118) to understand how collective symbols communicate cultural meaning. This layered approach integrates personal narrative and shared cultural expressions, revealing how Arbaeen functions as both a spiritual experience and a symbolic performance.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the Arbaeen March represents all key stages of Campbell's monomyth. The "call to adventure" begins with the pilgrim's choices to leave home and make the journey. Along the way, participants face physical hardship, emotional challenges, and moral reflection, all of which relate to the "initiation" phase. Many pilgrims report a profound sense of renewal, inner peace, or heightened awareness after showing up in Karbala, echoing the "return with the elixir" stage (Campbell, 2004, pp. 212-218).

Participants frequently used language associated with rebirth, trial, and sacrifice. Some described the walk as a form of penance or a reenactment of Imam Hussein's suffering. Others spoke of finding a new purpose, reconnecting with faith, or committing to acts of service and justice after the march. These elements underscore the ritual's capacity to function as a transformative journey, one that deeply resonates with mythic and literary structures.

Furthermore, the collective aspects—hospitality stations, communal prayer, shared grief, and collective resistance—add to the journey's narrative force. These shared practices serve as myth-building mechanisms, transforming Arbaeen into a live cultural story in which participants become active heroes rather than passive followers in a moral narrative (Ricoeur, 1991, pp. 21-24).

The discussion confirms that the Hero's Journey offers a productive framework for interpreting Arbaeen, expanding both narrative theory and our understanding of contemporary religious expression.

5.1 Spiritual Transformation :The Call to Faith

The Arbaeen pilgrimage begins with an interior call—a spiritual need that matches the first step of Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey, the “Call to Adventure” (Campbell, 2004). This call inspires millions to leave their comfort zones and enter a region of spiritual testing. The journey isn’t motivated by comfort, luxury, or material wealth. Instead, it is motivated by devotion to Imam Hussein (peace be upon him) and the values he represents: justice, sacrifice, and resistance. For many pilgrims, this initial step symbolizes the start of a more profound shift in which spiritual awakening takes precedence over the physical difficulties of the journey.

“When I first felt the urge to walk to Karbala, it was like a voice inside me telling me this journey would change my soul forever. It’s not just a walk; it’s a calling I cannot ignore.” (Z. Abbas, personal communication, October 12, 2023)

The statement represents the inner call that many pilgrims describe before embarking on the Arbaeen walk. Joseph Campbell’s concept of the “Call to Adventure” initiates the Hero’s Journey, in which the individual leaves the known world to seek a deeper truth (Campbell, 2004). In the Arbaeen setting, this “call” can be spiritual and emotional, leading people down a road of moral clarity inspired by Imam Hussein (peace be upon him). These liminal experiences begin with a threshold moment, which is represented by this quote. The urge described is spiritual rather than logical, connecting the self to a larger narrative of sacrifice and devotion.

Turner’s (1969) concept of “communitas” also supports this stage, in which pilgrims abandon societal positions in favor of a shared spiritual identity. The physical act of traveling to Karbala, often barefoot and over large miles, is more than symbolic; it changes. Pilgrims internalize their

pain as a means of moral cleansing. This stage so represents both the departure from the everyday world and being accepted into a sacred experience that reshapes personal identity.

5.2 Communal Experience: Liminality and Belonging

As the pilgrim walks on, he reaches what Turner refers to as the “liminal” phase—a region of transition in which regular patterns collapse (Turner 1969). This stage relates to Campbell’s “Initiation,” in which the hero experiences challenges and joins allies. On the Arbaeen road, communal solidarity replaces social hierarchy. Pilgrims provide food, medical care, and rest spots without expectation of recompense. This temporary society marks a departure from class, country, and sectarian recognition. Everyone becomes a servant and guest of Imam Hussein (peace be upon him).

“On the road, strangers became my family. We shared everything without asking, connected by the same purpose. In that unity, I found a deeper faith than ever before.” (R. Al-Khafaji, personal communication, October 18, 2023)

This authentic account emphasizes the sense of community identification that emerged during Arbaeen. Victor Turner’s theory of liminality discusses how pilgrims enter a phase throughout their journey where social roles are suspended and new forms of brotherhood emerge (Turner, 1969). These moments cross class, nationality, and language. Sharing rituals, meals, and sacrifices fosters a sense of community. Campbell (2004) associates this with the “Initiation” stage, in which the hero receives help from allies. In Arbaeen, fellow pilgrims, mawakeb, and caretakers form a holy network that guides and supports each pilgrim through their difficult times.

Pilgrims often express a sense of solidarity that crosses cultural and political divides. These shared sufferings form a moral and emotional connection, emphasizing the concept of communal resistance and mutual care. The chants chanted during the walk, such as “Labayka Ya Hussein,” reverberate across this liminal area, reminding pilgrims of their common purpose. This section shows how Arbaeen provides a lived feeling of brotherhood and humility, which is commensurate with both Campbell’s universal myth structure and Turner’s idea of ritual *communitas*.

5.3 Symbolic Rituals: Performing Resistance

Rituals during Arbaeen are essential for its role as a heroic narrative. Campbell (2004) observes that legendary journeys use symbols and rites to test, educate, and transform the hero. In Arbaeen, rituals such as chest-beating, reciting *ziyarat* passages, and carrying symbolic things (such as flags or coffins) serve as acts of resistance to tyranny and a reminder of injustice. These embodied actions allow travelers to connect with Imam Hussein’s martyrdom (peace be upon him) on a physical, emotional, and moral level.

Each gesture re-enacts the original event of Karbala, Crumbling time and making the past ever-present. Rituals thus serve as both personal confession and political testimony. The symbolic language of these acts communicates values that are often hard to express in words: grief, defiance, loyalty. They also guide the pilgrim through inner trials, much like Campbell’s stage of “Ordeal” where the hero faces death and emerges changed.

“When I beat my chest with the crowd, I felt I was speaking not just for myself but for all who suffered with Imam Hussein (peace be upon him). It’s a resistance with every heartbeat.” (Interview in Arbaeen Documentary: “Karbala in Our Hearts,” 2022)

This quotation, taken from a television documentary (Al-Forat Media, 2022), explains how physical routines have metaphorical value. Chest-beating and singing resistance slogans are not random acts in Arbaeen; they are rehearsed, embodied statements of political and moral disagreement. Based on Roland Barthes (1972), ritual acts evolve into myths with many cultural meanings. Campbell (2004) refers to these as “trials” that test the hero and define their identity. Here, the ritual takes on a shared language of recollection and resistance, connecting individual sorrow to collective historical tragedy.

5.4 Sacrifice and Endurance: The Moral Journey

The hardships endured during Arbaeen Sores, hunger, heat, fatigue, are not incidental. They are essential to the journey’s transformative power. Sacrifice is the moral thread that binds the Arbaeen story to the original tragedy of Karbala. Campbell’s “Atonement with the Father” phase becomes relevant here, as pilgrims symbolically reconcile with divine justice through their suffering.

“Each step was painful, but I reminded myself: this pain connects me to the sacrifice of Imam Hussein (peace be upon him). It’s through hardship that faith grows stronger.” (S. Al-Hakim, personal communication, October 20, 2023)

This phrase represents both the physical difficulties of the trek and its spiritual aim. Pilgrims endure long distances, terrible weather, illness, and injury not as a challenge, but to remember Imam Hussein’s (peace be upon him) sacrifice. Campbell (2004) describes such pain as a vital part of transformation. The pilgrim becomes a moral agent who chooses sorrow in order to grow his faith. This mirrors Turner’s (1969) concept of sacral suffering, in which ritual pain serves as a bridge between earthly experience and spiritual connection. As a result, the stroll itself works as a moral mirror.

The endurance shown is not Self-denying but meaningful. It reflects a commitment to moral clarity and truth. By walking in the name of Imam Hussein (peace upon him), pilgrims declare allegiance to a higher ethical code. They reject comfort in favor of meaning. This sacrificial ethos builds a sense of moral resilience that outlives the pilgrimage itself. Participants often return home changed—not just spiritually awakened, but ethically sharpened.

5.5 Return and Integration: Rebirth Through Resistance

Campbell’s last stage the “Return with the Elixir” sees the hero return to the regular world, bringing wisdom or healing. For Arbaeen pilgrims, the return entails incorporating the journey’s moral insights into daily life. The wisdom gained on the trek to Karbala compassion, courage, and dignity don’t stop at the shrine. They escort the pilgrim back to their homes, villages, and society.

This return is not always easy. Many pilgrims report a deep sense of disconnection from the everyday world upon their return. Yet this discomfort signals transformation. The being has seen a different world—one shaped by sacrifice and truth—and must now live by that vision. In this way, Arbaeen fulfills the cycle of the Hero’s Journey: departure, trial, and return with purpose (Campbell, 2004).

“Coming back home, I saw things differently. The world seemed harsher, but I carried the light of Karbala inside me. My faith is now an action, not just words.” (H. Al-Tamimi, personal communication, November 2, 2023)

The quote symbolizes the final stage of the Hero’s Journey, “The Return with the Elixir.” After going through tribulations, the pilgrim returns altered. According to Campbell (2004), true heroes do more than just return; they bring something with them as well: a lesson, a new perspective, or healing for others. In this case, the “elixir” is the moral clarity that now

governs daily life. The world after Karbala is not easier; rather, it becomes more meaningful. Resistance, justice, and spiritual purpose now guide the individual's actions, words, and beliefs. This is the point at which myth becomes fully integrated into reality.

Analysis of the Findings

The data gathered—via interviews, papers, papers, and recorded testimonies—shows that the Arbaeen pilgrimage is a strong system of moral, spiritual, and collective changes. Pilgrims aren't passive spectators. They actively interact with Imam Hussein's (peace be upon him) values of resistance, recalling, and service. Several interviewees regarded the travel as a chance to "reset" their life's purpose or to "feel alive again" following emotional hardship. These statements reflect Turner's (1969) concept of *communitas*, in which social roles disintegrate and a common meaning arises. The stroll itself becomes a rite of liminality, a gap between the mundane and the sacred.

Scholarly research (Campbell, 2004; Barthes, 1972) supports this reading. Arbaeen follows the structure of the hero's journey: escaping comfort, undergoing challenges, gaining knowledge, and returning with a renewed identity. The suffering of the path is not useless; it is transformative. Every mile walked, every act of generosity given or received, supports spiritual principles founded on sacrifice and dignity.

Miracles noticed by some pilgrims reinforce the spiritual nature of the encounter. While not scientifically measurable, these accounts are real to the people who report them, and they enhance their faith and sense of divine closeness. As one pilgrim stated in an interview, "When I reached Karbala, I felt my heart had arrived before me." Such testimonies reflect a deep personal connection to Imam Hussein (peace be upon him) and a belief in spiritual healing through sincere devotion.

Conclusion

The Arbaeen pilgrimage is more than a religious tradition work it is a complete spiritual, ethical, and human experience. Each step toward Karbala brings the pilgrim closer not just to a physical destination, but to the moral path of Imam Hussein (peace be upon him). This journey renews faith, strengthens community, religion, and reminds each participant of their responsibilities toward justice, truth, and compassion that all human beings should follow.

Arbaeen creates both personal and communal identities through themes including challenges, service, remembrance, and resistance. It converts memory into action, passion into movement, and belief into transformation. Physical endurance demonstrates spiritual dedication. Hussein’s empathy reflects his principles. The prayers muttered on the way represent profound personal hope and a universal desire for equality.

Miracles reported by many pilgrims—whether physical or emotional—reflect the sacred power of sincere intention and divine Neighborhood. These stories reaffirm the spiritual depth of the march and its capacity to inspire awe and faith even beyond religious boundaries. Ultimately, walking to Karbala is walking toward the truth to justice. It is a living expression of ethical memory, moral clarity, and spiritual growth. The legacy of Imam Hussein (peace be upon him) continues not just in books and rituals but in the footsteps of millions who choose to follow his path every year, gaining nothing material but everything eternal.

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