

May Fatimah Gather Our Tears: The Mystical and Intercessory Powers of Fatimah al-Zahra in Indo-Persian, Shi'i Devotional Literature and Performance

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Fatimah al-Zahra, the daughter of the prophet Muhammad, wife of the first Shi'i imam, 'Ali, and the mother of two martyred imams, Hassan and Husayn, is revered as one of the most holy of Muslim women—sinless, spiritually perfected, and most commonly portrayed by her scholarly interpreters as the lady of sorrows and unstinting patience. Fatimah possesses two roles beyond being the witness to the grief expressed by the loyal followers of the Prophet Muhammad's family (Ahl-e Bait): she is a transcendent figure, created before Creation, whose eschatological role is ultimate intercessory authority on the Day of Judgment, and she is venerated for her humanity, with its attendant feelings, emotions, and desires, through which her devotees cultivate feelings of love and respect. Persian and Urdu theological and hagiographical texts from the tenth century and continuing to the present day portray Fatimah as a transcendent figure, whose generative light is the source of prophecy and the imamate, illuminating the heavens on the Day of Judgment. There is also a rich hagiographical tradition that portrays Fatimah in her very human roles of mother, daughter, and wife and as a woman whose material and emotional needs resonate with Shi'i devotees of the prophet Muhammad's family.

For the Shia of the Deccan of south-central India, a region characterized by close relations since the sixteenth century between the Shi'i Safavid dynasty of Iran and the Qutb Shahis of Hyderabad, a rich devotional tradition dedicated to venerating and memorializing the heroes of Karbala has developed. Devotional literature and ritual performances dedicated to Fatimah al-Zahra highlight her piety and suffering, and the Shi'i hagiographical imagination dwells on her role as the "mistress of sorrows." Fatimah's transcendent qualities form an integral aspect of Hyderabad devotion, compelling the Shia to project their individual and collective loyalty to the imams by remembering their sacrifices in the mourning assembly (*majlis*). Devotion to Fatimah's mystical and intercessory qualities orients Shi'i ritual toward an eschatological future-present, in which Fatimah will be transformed from the gatherer of the mourners' tears into the supreme intercessory authority on the Day of Judgment.

In this essay, I focus on four aspects of Fatimah's mystical and intercessory powers in Indo-Persian Shiism. First, through Fatimah's pre-eternal being and generative light (*nur*), prophecy and the imamate are constituted. Second, Fatimah's status as an imitable saint and

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socio-ethical exemplar establishes a compelling model for everyday Shia to cultivate. This is exemplified by Fatimah's endurance of her life of poverty and hardship, which bears the lesson of faith in God, for which one will reap reward on the Day of Judgment. Third, in the Hyderabad context, Fatimah is endowed with a vernacular form of feminine power (*shakti*) that enhances the intercessory grace (*baraka*) that emanates from ritual sacred objects, such as the *'alam* (metal battle standard that is a non-figural representation of various members of Imam Husayn's family) and relics. Fourth, Fatimah is present in every *majlis* to bear witness to the ritual remembrance of the sufferings of her descendents. Fatimah gathers the tears of the Shia, who share in her grief, symbolically demonstrating their willingness to sacrifice their lives for her family and faith. As the gatherer of tears, Fatimah's eschatological role is invoked in the *majlis*, and on the Day of Judgment the denizens of heaven and hell will be determined by her ultimate judgment and intercession.

Al-Zahra: Fatimah's Divine Radiance

Fatimah's divine radiance is like a beacon that guides the Shia in their remembrance of the imams and the Ahl-e Bait. Shi'i theological and hagiographical writings depict Fatimah as a refraction of the divine Muhammadan light (*nur muhammadi*). Fatimah al-Zahra is portrayed as the gleaming crown of the effulgent luminosity of God's pre-eternal light. Fatimah's epithet (*laqab*) al-Zahra (the Radiant One) reflects her mystical-transcendent and intercessory-eschatological roles and is based on her emanation of the *nur muhammadi*, through which the prophets and imams descend.

Mullah Husain Va'ez Kashefi writes in his early-sixteenth-century Persian Karbala hagiography *Rowzat al-shohada* (*The Garden of the Martyrs*) that Fatimah was "born in a state of chastity and purity. [Following her birth] a light was spread in such a manner that the earth became glittering bright and no place was unencompassed by it. No land to either the East or the West did not

become illumined by this [light]."¹ Throughout her life, Fatimah radiated a luminous glow, which the inhabitants of Medina could see day and night. In the *'Uyun al-mu'jizat* (*The Wellspring of Miracles*), the eleventh-century Shi'i historian Husain ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab describes Fatimah's heavenly radiance as a deliberate act of God: "By My power, My majesty, My generosity, My eminence, I will act."² God then created Fatimah's celestial light, which lit up the heavens.

In a tradition based on the authority of the eleventh imam, Hasan al-'Askari, the prophet Adam's encounter with Fatimah's divine radiance sets in motion the beginnings of prophetic history:

It is reported that when the father of humanity, our Lord Adam (peace and blessings upon him) was placed in the trust of the divine Muhammadan light, the world was made brilliant by its pleasingness and beauty. On that blessed right cheek the splendor of the sun, and on the left cheek the radiance of the moon prevailed over it.

In this very manner, God the magnificent and exalted, soothed the unsheltered Eve with pleasingness and beauty.

One time sitting in the expanse of the garden of delight, Adam (peace be upon him), looking in Eve's (may exalted God be pleased with her) direction, declared, "Surely Merciful God has not fashioned a created being as good as us."

As Adam was saying these words, God the magnificent and exalted, instructed Gabriel (peace be upon him) to take both of their hands and bring them to the heavens.

Gabriel (peace be upon him) took them both and opened the door to a palace of red rubies. Inside of the palace were columns of emeralds and there a girl lay upon a sofa and graced it with her presence. Upon her most holy head was placed a bejeweled gold crown. From her resplendent body effulgence and splendor emanated. When Jenab-e Adam (peace be upon him) saw that countenance of divine radiance, he went to the court of God and humbly asked: "God, who is this girl?" "Fatimah, the daughter of Muhammad (May God bless her and grant her peace) . . .

1. Mullah Husain Va'ez Kashefi, *Rowzat al-shohada* (Tehran: Kitab Forushi-ye Islamiyya, 1979), 118.

2. Husain ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, *'Uyun al-mu'jizat* (An Najaf, Iran: n.p., AH 1369/1950), 46, quoted in L. Vecchia Vaglieri, "Fatima," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., eds. Bernard Lewis, Charles Pellat, and Joseph Schacht (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 2:847.

It goes without saying that it is Jenab-e Sayyidah Fatimah al-Zahra's house upon which place the foundations of religion are set in order, from whence the regulations of Islam are issued. From whence the divine rule is set forth. From whence the creatures of the universe obtain the lessons of life. From whence the convoluted road of life obtains direction. From whence the station of the best of humanity is indicated. Moreover, upon which the station of Sharia, religion, and truth, and wisdom is perfected.³

Adam is overwhelmed by Fatimah's radiance. The hagiographic narrative continues with Adam reciting a poem descriptively extolling the qualities possessed by Fatimah and her progeny:

From the house of Fatimah is *wa[i]layat*
 From the house of Fatimah is imamate
 From the house of Fatimah is martyrdom
 [*shahadat*]
 From the house of Fatimah is fidelity
 [*sadaqat*]
 From the house of Fatimah is good fortune
 [*sa'adat*]
 From the house of Fatimah is valor
 [*shaja'at*]
 From the house of Fatimah is guidance
 [*hidayat*]
 From the house of Fatimah is dominion
 [*siyadat*]
 But that is not all:
 From the house of Fatimah is nobleness [*asalat*]
 From the house of Fatimah is vice-
 regency [*niyabat*]
 From the house of Fatimah is munificence
 [*sakhawat*]
 From the house of Fatimah is Koranic
 recitation [*tilawat*]
 From the house of Fatimah is compassion
 [*rahmat*]
 From the house of Fatimah is comfort
 [*rahat*]
 Moreover:
 From the house of Fatimah is intercession
 [*shafa'at*]
 From the house of Fatimah is paradise
 [*jannat*]
 From the house of Fatimah is prophecy
 [*nabuwat*]
 From the house of Fatimah is
 messengership [*risalat*].⁴

Fatimah is a source of the initiatic knowledge with which the imams are endowed. In this poem, Adam describes the qualities with which Fatimah and her progeny are endowed—the exoteric qualities of prophecy and the esoteric secrets of the imamate.

In the *Manaqib Al Abi Talib*, the twelfth-century historian Ibn Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn Shahrashub further develops the cosmic-theological meaning of Fatimah's radiance: "God created paradise from the light of His countenance; He took this light, and threw it; with a third of it He struck Muhammad, with another third Fatimah, and with the remaining third 'Ali and the People of the House."⁵ This creation happened fifteen thousand years before God created Adam and Fatimah and 'Ali, and Muhammad hovered around the Throne of God ('*arsh*) in the form of light. Upon creating Adam, God infused his loins with this special light. Accordingly, "Adam was a mere vehicle [*wu'a*] carrying this substantial light."⁶

A hadith based on 'Ali's authority attests, "The creation of Muhammad's light was prior to the creation of the human race. When Adam was created [God] invested him with light. When Allah allowed the transmission of this light He made Adam and Eve copulate."⁷ After being expelled from the garden, the angel Gabriel instructs Adam and Eve in how to have intercourse with each other. Adam and Eve's fall is necessary in order to set prophetic and imami history in motion. The necessity of Adam and Eve's fall is set in opposition to the absolute purity of Fatimah's divine radiance. According to Uri Rubin, "Some Shi'i traditions lay a special stress on the primordial substance of Fatima as being created from Divine light. A tradition explaining Fatima's surname al-Zahra (the luminous) states that . . . [she] was even believed to be the first origin for the light that was transmitted through the loins of her descendents, the Imams."⁸ This tradition identifies Fatimah as the generative source of prophecy and imamate. Fatimah is the *majma' al-nurayn*, or the confluence of exoteric prophecy, and the esoteric source of mystical knowledge of the Koran and the cosmos.

3. Sa'im Chishti, *Al-Batul (The Chaste Virgin)* (Faisalabad, Pakistan: Chishti Kutub Khaneh, 2005), 355–56.

4. *Ibid.*, 356–57.

5. Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn Shahrashub, *Manaqib Al Abi Talib (The Virtues of the People of Abi Talib)* (An Najaf, Iran: n.p., 1956), 106, quoted in Vaglieri, "Fatima," 2:847.

6. Uri Rubin, "Pre-existence and Light: Aspects of the Concept of Nur Muhammad," *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975): 100.

7. *Ibid.*, 109.

8. *Ibid.*, 102.

Fatimah's luminescence not only animates pre-creation and human prophetic history; her light will also illuminate the Day of Judgment. According to tradition, the angel Israfil will bring three gems made of light that will be placed on Fatimah's head. Then the angel Gabriel will call out to Fatimah: "Rise up, for it is the Day of Judgment." Fatimah will be brought to the plain of Judgment upon a she-camel with a gold and jewel-encrusted bridle. Thousands of houris; her mother, Khadija; Maryam, the mother of Jesus; and other women will accompany Fatimah and flank her on each side of the luminescent *minbar* (a raised platform) given to her by God. Fatimah will be summoned by God to speak, and she will demand vengeance upon her sons' murderers and their descendents. 'Abd Allah ibn 'Abbas (d. ca. AH 68/687–88), a cousin of the prophet Muhammad and an early exegete of the Koran, narrates that the people of heaven will see a light as bright as the sun and they will ask one another what is the nature of this light. Rizwan, the angel of paradise, will tell the inhabitants that there is no sunlight in heaven. The light like the sun is the luminescent smile of 'Ali and Fatimah that illuminates the garden with its flashing.⁹ Fatimah's divine luminosity follows her from pre-creation to post-apocalyptic heaven.¹⁰

Toil in This World for Reward in Paradise

Fatimah al-Zahra's hagiographers typically portray her as a pious woman, whose life is one of hardship and poverty. Much as in the stories of other prophets, years of persecution had reduced Muhammad and his family to poverty. When Fatimah married 'Ali, the feast (*walimah*) to celebrate their union was a relatively austere meal of dried fruits and other simple foods. The *walimah* is the wedding feast hosted by the bride's family in the weeks following the wedding ceremony. Some Hyderabad Muslim families host elaborate feasts celebrating the wedding for a month of Fridays. Others in the city critique such lavish feasts as symptomatic of the accumulation of Hindu practices such as dowry and excessive ritual that have caused Muslims

to lose sight of the ideal Islamic example of Fatimah's simple wedding.

Fatimah did not endure her poverty with a smile on her face and the willing acquiescence that this was God's will. As the following story illustrates, a life of poverty and want was not Fatimah's choice, and she often resented the hardships she endured. Many hagiographies tell of how both Fatimah and 'Ali were compelled to work extra jobs to supplement their meager incomes. In the *Beacons of Light (I'lam al-wara bi-a'lam al-huda)*, an important twelfth-century hagiography of the prophet Muhammad, the imams, and Fatimah, Abu 'Ali al-Fadl ibn al-Hasan al-Tabarsi narrates a hagiographical account of Fatimah's ceaseless domestic labor and its eschatological reward:

To relieve their extreme poverty, Ali worked as a drawer and carrier of water and she as a grinder of corn. One day she said to Ali: "I have ground until my hands are blistered."

"I have drawn water until I have pains in my chest," said Ali and went on to suggest to Fatimah: "God has given your father some captives of war, so go and ask him to give you a servant."

Reluctantly, she went to the Prophet who said: "What has brought you here, my little daughter?" "I came to give you greetings of peace," she said, for in awe of him she could not bring herself to ask what she had intended.

"What did you do?" asked Ali when she returned alone.

"I was ashamed to ask him," she said. So the two of them went together but the Prophet felt they were less in need than others.

"I will not give to you," he said, "and let the Ahl as-Suffah (poor Muslims who stayed in the mosque) be tormented with hunger. I have not enough for their keep . . ."

Ali and Fatimah returned home feeling somewhat dejected but that night, after they had gone to bed, they heard the voice of the Prophet asking permission to enter. Welcoming him, they both rose to their feet, but he told them:

"Stay where you are," and sat down beside them. "Shall I not tell you of something better than that which you asked of me?" he asked and when they said yes he said: "Words which Jibril taught me, that you should say '*Subhaan Allah*—Glory be to God' ten times after every

9. Allamah Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar (Oceans of Lights)*, Urdu translation by Maulana Sayyid Husaini Imdad (Lucknow: Nizami Press Book Depot, 1999), 3:45.

10. Chishti, *Al-Batul*, 390

Prayer, and ten times ‘*Al-hamdu lillah*—Praise be to God,’ and ten times ‘*Allahu Akbar*—God is Great.’ And that when you go to bed you should say them thirty-three times each.”

Ali used to say in later years: “I have never once failed to say them since the Messenger of God taught them to us.”¹¹

Poverty, want, and eschatological reward are powerful themes in this hagiographical account of Fatimah and ‘Ali’s petition to the prophet Muhammad to provide them with a servant to ease their domestic burdens. Despite the Prophet’s promise that she will reap great rewards in heaven for her suffering on earth, Fatimah endures her impoverished state, but she does not accept it. As the daughter of the prophet Muhammad, Fatimah is expected to set an example for the Muslim community. Muhammad denied Fatimah a servant, lest other Muslims suffer from her desires. Hagiographical narratives such as Fatimah’s grinding corn until she falls asleep or blisters form on her hands teach the Shia valuable lessons about what God has “measured out” (Koran 54:49). Although she was the daughter of the Prophet, her life was one of poverty and hardship, from which her endurance and faith will be amply rewarded on the Day of Judgment.

Fatimah and ‘Ali are taught the valuable lesson of being grateful for what God has given—no matter how meager it may seem. Although Fatimah may lack material wealth, the hagiographic and theological textual traditions abound in narratives detailing the privileged position she holds with God. This story of Fatimah at the grinding stone finds its way to Bijapur, the capital of the Shi‘i ‘Adil Shahi dynasty, where it inspired a genre of Sufi (and later Shi‘i) poetry known as *chakki-nama* (grinding-stone songs). A pastoral genre of poetry, *chakki-nama* is sung by village women as they make *jowar* (millet) into flour at the grinding stone. Inspired by the Sufi *chakki-namas* of the Chishti saint Khwjah Banda Nawaz Gisudaraz (d. 1422) of Gulbarga, these grinding songs have been adapted by the Shia of Hyderabad for special prewedding rituals

that commemorate ‘Ali and Fatimah’s marriage.¹² The married women (*suhagan*) of the bride and groom’s families perform the Hyderabad *chakki* rituals. First, the bride or groom is garlanded with flowers (*sehra*) and seated before the grinding stone. The married women in the family sing a variety of songs about the joys and tribulations of marriage.

Many songs sung during the *chakki* ceremony invoke Fatimah and ‘Ali’s marriage, offering encouragement to the new couple as they embark on a new life together. The songs’ lesson is that Fatimah and ‘Ali endure their poverty with steadfastness and faith, and they offer compelling inspiration to the young couple, who will surely encounter their own share of challenges and difficulties. The *chakki* ritual replicates this hagiographic narrative, recasting it in vernacular terms. In Hyderabad *chakki* songs, Fatimah is an idealized Muslim who puts the needs of the community of Muslims (*umma*) before her own desires. The *chakki* ritual teaches the bride and groom to put the needs of the family and faith first before satisfying one’s own desires—just as Fatimah learned to do.

Fatimah and ‘Ali’s desire for a servant to help ease their burden indicates that they did not choose to live in poverty. Fatimah endured her impoverished state but she did not accept it.¹³ There is another story recounted by Ibn Shahrashub in the *Manaqib Al Abi Talib* that Fatimah lamented her poverty and desired beautiful objects. One day she told her father that she yearned for a beautiful ring. The Prophet told her to pray and surely God would grant her wish. The next morning, she awoke to find a beautiful sapphire ring underneath her pillow. She was delighted with her beautiful bauble and wore it with pleasure. The next night she had a vivid dream of paradise in which jewels were strewn everywhere and she was told that this is the abode of the Prophet’s daughter. She saw a sapphire-encrusted couch (*sarir*) that was missing a leg. She asked about the missing leg and was informed that it was used to make her ring. The next morning she described this strange

11. “Fatimah bint Muhammad,” is an anonymously composed biographical sketch of the prophet’s daughter, which is found on many Islamic Web sites, including www.islaam.org.uk and www.islamicboard.com. See also Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, 108–10.

12. Iqbal Jahan, “Dakhani kulchur, Dakhani adab ke a’ineh mein” (“Deccani Culture Reflected in Deccani Literature”) (PhD diss., Osmania University, 1994), 375.

13. Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of ‘Ashura in Twelver Shi’ism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), 49–50.

dream to her father, who told her to return the ring under her pillow so that it might be restored to paradise, and he promised that the reward for her life of privation in this world will be eternal reward and bounty in the afterlife.

Fatimah's endurance of her poverty provides a compelling model for everyday Shia, who are encouraged to face their own tribulations with faith in God. Fatimah's status as the prophet Muhammad's daughter meant that she must endure hardships for the benefit of other Muslims. Fatimah is set up as the idealized Muslim who puts the needs of the *umma* before her own family. A paucity of baubles or the ease provided by household servants matters little; the message of these hagiographical narratives is that patience in this life will be duly rewarded in heaven.

The Best of Women: Sharing in Fatimah's Grace in Hyderabad Shi'i Ritual

When the sun rises over the Old City on 10 Muharram (Ashura), thousands of men gather at the Bargah-e 'Abbas (an important *'ashurkhana* [a ritual space where *'alams* are displayed and the *majlis* are held] dedicated to Imam Husayn's half-brother 'Abbas, who was martyred at Karbala) to perform bloody *matam* (self-flagellation) with blades, knives, and flails. The men strip off their shirts and whip their chests, backs, and heads to the rhythm of the poems of lament recited by the *nauha-khwans* (reciters of rhythmic mourning poems). This public act of self-mortification is a powerful, masculine affirmation of the Shia's willingness to sacrifice their lives for religion and Imam Husayn's family. Along the rooftop surrounding the *'ashurkhana* courtyard, women gather to watch this masculine display of faith. As the hours pass, blood flows from the devotees' bodies, mixing with the heady floral scent of rose water sprayed on their bodies by volunteers of the Muharram association (*matami guruh*). At the event's climax, many men strike their heads with sharp knives (*qameh zani*), causing even more blood to flow onto the courtyard's stone tiles. As dramatically bloody as this event is, it is not the most important ritual activity of the day.

14. Sadiq Naqvi, *Muslim Religious Institutions and Their Role under the Qutb Shahs* (Hyderabad: Bab-ul-Ilm Society, [1993] 2006), 187.

On 10 Muharram, Imam Husayn was killed on the battlefield of Karbala. This tragic event marks the climax of Shi'i mourning throughout the Islamic world. In Hyderabad, however, Imam Husayn is remembered through his mother, Fatimah. From late morning through the afternoon, a massive procession (*julus*) of men and boys carrying *'alams* and performing *matam*, makes its way through the narrow lanes of the Old City. Tens of thousands of people line the streets to watch the black-clad mourners pass by as they whip their backs with flails and chains. Most observers and participants are Shia, but many Sunnis, Hindus, and Christians also come to see the *bibi ka 'alam* and share in Fatimah's intercessory power.

The procession of the *bibi ka 'alam* is the most important event in the Hyderabad Muharram cycle. When the new moon is sighted on 1 Muharram, the *bibi ka 'alam* is installed in the Bibi ka Alava, one of Hyderabad's most popular *'ashurkhanas*, located in Dabirpura in the Old City. The *bibi ka 'alam* is a large golden battle standard, containing a wooden piece of the platform upon which Fatimah received her funerary bath. This relic was long held in Karbala, although it found its way to Golconda, where it was bestowed upon 'Abdullah Qutb Shah (r. 1625–72). As a sign of devotion to Fatimah, Hayat Bakhshi Begum (popularly known in Hyderabad as "Ma Sahiba"), the mother of 'Abdullah Qutb Shah, commissioned the installation of this special *'alam*. During the reign of Mir Osman 'Ali Khan, Asaf Jah VII (r. 1911–48), the *bibi ka 'alam* was installed in its present location at the Bibi ka Alava *'ashurkhana*, commissioned by the Nizam in the 1940s.¹⁴ During the first ten days of Muharram, thousands of devotees come to the Bibi ka Alava to pay their respects to Fatimah, give offerings and make votive requests (*mannat*) to the *'alam*, and seek Fatimah's intercession.

On Ashura, the *bibi ka 'alam* is taken out in a procession, atop an elephant. From Dabirpura, to Yakutpura, Kaman-e Shaikh Faiz, Alijah Kotla, Charminar, Panjeshah, and Darul Shifa, the *'alam* slowly makes its way to the banks of the Musi River. The *julus* concludes at the Naya

Pul bridge, where the *'alams* and other ritual objects are immersed in the river's waters to "cool" the potent *shakti* that radiates.¹⁵ The symbolic immersion of the *bibi ka 'alam* in the Musi is a powerful symbolic act, for rivers in South Asian religions are venerated as potent symbols of feminine power. Immersing the *bibi ka 'alam* in the Musi cools the *'alam*, reappropriating its potent power, which sustains and protects Fatimah's devotees for another year.

The *bibi ka 'alam* is not the only Fatimah relic in Hyderabad. Although the Nizams of the Asaf Jahi dynasty (1724–1948) were Sunni Muslims, they were great patrons of Shi'i religious institutions and were poets and faithful participants in the *majlis*. The last Nizam, Mir Osman 'Ali Khan, was deeply devoted to the Ahl-e Bait, sponsoring the renovation of many of the Old City's *'ashurkhanas* that had fallen into disrepair and engaging in an ambitious construction program that added many new *'ashurkhanas* to the city. When his mother, Amtul Zehra Begum, died the Nizam commissioned the construction of the 'Azakhana-ye Zehra in 1941. Sitting on the banks of the Musi River, the 'Azakhana-ye Zehra is an elegant building, having recently undergone renovation to restore its original grandeur. The main *'alam* in the 'Azakhana-ye Zehra is dedicated to Fatimah, Amtul Zehra Begum's namesake. This Fatimah *'alam* is unlike any other in Hyderabad, for it is composed of five metals: gold, silver, copper, bronze, and lead.¹⁶ The Fatimah *'alam* remains installed throughout the year, so devotees may seek Fatimah's intercession at any time.

Mir Osman 'Ali Khan's devotion to Fatimah extended beyond the 'Azakhana-ye Zehra, a monument to his biological and spiritual mothers. Soon after construction was completed on the 'Azakhana-ye Zehra, he commissioned the construction of a complex of twelve *'ashurkhanas* in the Khilwat Mahal, located to the west of Charminar and adjacent to the Chowmohalla Palace. The Khilwat *'ashurkhanas* are closed to the public, and the wealth of relics, artwork, and

other sacred objects contained in this complex remains virtually unknown and undocumented. The Bibi Batul *'ashurkhana* is also dedicated to Fatimah al-Zahra, but it is not the most important symbol of the Nizam's devotion to the prophet Muhammad's daughter. The building that is known as the Imambara contains Hyderabad's second Fatimah relic, a 2 ½-inch square piece of her veil (*ghungat*), brought from Karbala by the Mogul emperor Timur, following his conquest of Baghdad in 1393. From Baghdad, Timur went on a pilgrimage to Karbala, where he took this fragment of Fatimah's veil from the grave of Hurr ibn Yazid al-Riyahi.¹⁷ This piece of Fatimah's veil remained in the Mogul treasury until it was passed from the emperor Aurangzeb into the possession of the Nizams of Hyderabad. The veil fragment is kept in a small wooden box with a convex lens set in the top, so that people may view this holy relic.¹⁸

This profusion of relics, rituals, and sacred structures highlights the deep tradition of devotion to Fatimah's intercessory powers as a saint endowed with the grace to intervene in the affairs of this world. People pray to Fatimah, make votive offerings, and weep in memory of her family's suffering at the battle of Karbala. Garlands, red strings (*lal nara*), locks attached to the grille of the Bibi ka Alava, and the poems of mourning chanted to the accompaniment of tears and hands pounding upon breasts, all are a method for the devotee to channel Fatimah's intercessory mediation with God, so that all manner of petitions and complaints may be heard and alleviated.

Victorious through God:

Fatimah and the Day of Judgment

Even in mourning, Fatimah's presence and participation in the spiritual affairs of the world is palpable. One of Fatimah's epithets is *sayyidat nisa al-'alamain*, "mistress of the women of the two worlds," and she is considered by all Shia to be the patroness of the *majlis*. The Shia believe that Fatimah is present in every mourn-

15. Rahat Azmi, "The Holy Relics at Hyderabad," in *Hyderabad ki Azadari (Hyderabad's Rituals of Mourning)*, ed. Syed Taqi Hasan Wafa, trans. Syed Mohammed Taher Bilgrami (Hyderabad: Idara-e-Jaferia, 2000), 39.

16. Sadiq Naqvi, *The 'Ashurkhanas of Hyderabad City* (Hyderabad: Bab-ul-Ilm Society, [1982] 2006), 56.

17. Sayyid Athar 'Abbas Rizvi, *A Socio-intellectual History of the Isna 'Ashari Shi'is in India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1986), 2:295.

18. Naqvi, *'Ashurkhanas of Hyderabad City*, 62.

ing assembly, where she gathers the tears of the mourners for the Ahl-e Bait. In one interview, M. M. Taqui Khan, a retired professor of chemistry at Osmania University and a popular *majlis* orator (*zakir*), once explained why the Shia weep in the mourning assembly: "In the *majlis*, we offer condolences to Bibi Fatimah because she has suffered the most of anyone."¹⁹ Although Fatimah is portrayed as the eternal mourner, there is a deeper eschatological significance reflected in her tears. Fatimah not only cries, but she bears witness to those who express their loyalty to her family through weeping and participating in the ritualized remembrance of the battle of Karbala in the *majlis* mourning assembly. Fatimah's epithet al-Mansurah (one who is Victorious in God) attests to her role as the supreme intercessor for the Shia on the Day of Judgment.

In their account of Hyderabad women's Muharram rituals, Riaz Fatima and Rasheed Moosvi describe a visit paid by Fatimah al-Zahra to the annual 7 Muharram *mehndi ki majlis* (henna mourning assembly) commemorating the brief wedding of Imam Husayn's daughter Fatimah Kubra to her cousin Qasem, who was martyred on the battlefield of Karbala. In the course of ethnographic fieldwork in Hyderabad, I heard numerous stories of Fatimah's supernatural visitation to mourning assemblies throughout the city. Moosvi and Fatima describe Fatimah's mystical appearance at the Khan family's *mehndi* mourning assembly. Still vivid in the memory of many Shia, the identity of a woman unknown to the *majlis* participants was realized only when she vanished after being offered her share of the consecrated food (*tabarruk*), which is distributed after the mourning assembly. Fatima and Moosvi write:

It is the custom that after the completion of the last *nauha* [the mourning poem chanted as an accompaniment to self-flagellation], one first goes outside and, closing the gates, padlocks them so that no one who hasn't attended the *majlis* may receive the *tabarruk*. In addition to the food (for example, savory dishes such as biryani), *tabarruk* such as *malidah* (a sweet cake

made with white flour, sugar, and butter) . . . is given. It is a wedding custom that *malidah* must be served, and, accordingly, some money is also given along with *malidah* as a blessing. One year, according to tradition, the door had been closed [following the recitation of the final *nauha*]. There was a lady, whose face gleamed like talc; she was leaving and the members of the household asked her, "Have you eaten your *tabarruk*? Has your companion, too, taken this consecrated food?" Then, that lady replied, "My companion was ill and now the sick people in your house will also become well."²⁰

This story is extraordinary for a number of reasons. Several other people who witnessed Fatimah's mystical visit to the Khan family's *mehndi* mourning assembly corroborated this story recounted by Moosvi and Fatima. The Shia believe that Fatimah is present in every *majlis*, where people are loyal to her faith and family, where they weep, and she collects their tears. She gathers the tears of the mourners, shed with purity of intention (*niyya*) and grief, which will save them from hellfire on the Day of Judgment. The mourners' tears alleviate Fatimah's grief and pain, because the *majlis* is proof that she is not alone in remembering the violence that has been committed against her family and religion. These tears are Fatimah's sustenance. The *tabarruk* distributed at the end of each *majlis* takes the form not of food but of the catharsis of tears, which animates Fatimah until the Day of Judgment.

Members of the Ahl-e Bait often appear to Shia in dreams and as apparitions, providing solace, advice, and information about the future. On one occasion when I was meeting with Taqui Khan, he described a vivid dream that he had in which Fatimah appeared and praised him for his loyal faith to Imam Husayn: "Fourteen hundred years have passed and you are still crying for my son."²¹ Dreamtime communications from the imams and other members of the Ahl-e Bait are not at all unusual, and in the course of field research in Iran and India, many of these experiences proved prophetic for the dreamer. Such visitations reinforce the Shi'i

19. M. M. Taqui Khan, interview by the author, Hyderabad, 31 May 2005.

20. Rasheed Moosvi and Riaz Fatima, *Haidarabad ki 'azadari mein khwatin ka hissah (Women's Role in Hyderabad Mourning Rituals)* (Hyderabad: n.p., 2003), 127.

21. Taqui Khan, interview.

belief that on the Day of Judgment, Fatimah will bear witness and intercede on behalf of every single person who has genuinely wept for the sufferings of her family. According to a tradition related by the fifth imam, Muhammad al-Baqir,

On the Day of Resurrection, Fatimah will stand at the edge of the gate of hell, and on the forehead of every man will be written “*mu'min*” [believer] or “*kafir*” [unbeliever]. A lover [*muhibb*] [of the Holy Family] whose sins were too numerous would be ordered to the fire. Fatimah would read between his eyes the word “lover,” and so she would say, “O my Lord and Master, Thou hast called me Fatimah and protected me [*fatamtani*] and those who accept my *walayah* [sanctity] and that of my descendants, from the fire, for Thy promise is true and Thou wouldst not revoke Thy promise.”²²

Fatimah can save those who have expressed genuine loyalty and devotion to the Ahl-e Bait—even if their other sins are too numerous to count. She is the supreme intercessor who can save someone from the fire or consign him or her to the torments of hell.

A dramatic example of Fatimah’s role as the guardian of the Ahl-e Bait can be seen in the mid-sixteenth-century Persian poet Mohtasham Kashani’s twelve-stanza *Karbala-nameh* (*The Chronicles of Karbala*).²³ In this lengthy *marsiya* (a narrative poem eulogizing Imam Husayn and the battle of Karbala), Mohtasham employs a strategy of narrative engagement in which Zaynab’s voice tells the tragic events of Karbala. At the emotional climax of the *Karbala-nameh*, Imam Husayn’s sister Zaynab, often referred to in Urdu hagiographic literature as *sani-ye zahra* (the second Zahra), turns in the direction of the Everlasting Cemetery (Jannat al-Baqi’), where her mother, Fatimah, and grandfather, Muhammad, are buried, and gives her testimony of what happened to their family. Zaynab’s apostrophic speech to her mother establishes Fatimah’s role as witness to her family’s suffering:

When she turned to address Zahra in the
Everlasting Cemetery,
She roasted the beasts of the earth and the
birds of the air:

“O! Intimate friends of the brokenhearted,
behold our state,
Behold us, exiled, forlorn, and without
companion.

Your children, who are intercessors at the
Resurrection,
Behold them in the abyss of the torment of
the People of Oppression.

That body which was nurtured in your
embrace,
Behold it wallowing in the dust of the
battlefield of Karbala.

Oh! Offspring of the Prophet, give us justice
from Ibn-e Ziyad,
For he destroyed the People of the House and
cast them in the dust.”²⁴

In Mohtasham’s *marsiya*, Zaynab truly embodies her epithet *sani-ye zahra*, because she is the earthly witness to the atrocities committed against her family. Zaynab’s speech amplifies her heroic defiance against the enemies of her family and religion, and she understands the cosmic importance of the battle of Karbala and her role as the messenger of Imam Husayn’s martyrdom. According to the Indo-Persian hagiographic narratives, it was Husayn’s role to die for the dual causes of familial justice and religion and Zaynab’s responsibility to preserve the institution of the imamate by spreading the message of martyrdom. Zaynab’s testimony to her mother in the grave is a clever narrative strategy on Mohtasham’s part, as the Shi’i hagiographic tradition is saturated with foreshadowing the inevitability of Karbala. What is significant is that we can see the complementary roles of Fatimah al-Zahra as the witness and her daughter Zaynab as the recorder and messenger of the sufferings of the Ahl-e Bait. Zaynab keeps the message alive, and Fatimah will reckon the loyalty of Muslims at the Day of Judgment.

22. Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, 214.

23. Mohtasham’s *marsiya* is most popularly known as the *Haft Band*, although elsewhere I have ascribed the alternate title *Karbala-nameh* to indicate to the reader or listener what the poem is about. See Karen G. Ruffle, “‘Verses Dripping Blood’: A Study of the Religious Elements of Muhtasham Kashani’s *Karbala-nameh*” (MA thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2001).

24. Mohtasham Kashani, *Diwan-e Mohtasham Kashani* (*The Book of Mohtasham Kashani*), ed. Maher ‘Ali Gorgani (Tehran: Kitab Forushi-ye Mahmudi, 1965), 283–84.

For some Shi'i theologians, most notably Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari (a comrade of Ruholla Khomeini and an ideologue of the 1979 Iranian revolution), Fatimah al-Zahra's intercessory powers are highly problematic and have been subject to critique. In one of my interviews with Taqui Khan, it was perhaps inevitable that one of our conversations would turn to Motahhari's ideological Shiism. Although Deccani Shiism has a long, deep connection with Iran dating back to the establishment of the Safavid dynasty in the early sixteenth century, since the 1979 Iranian revolution, there has been a degree of resistance to the hegemonizing efforts of the Islamic Republic to define Shi'i orthodoxy and orthopraxis. One critique of Iranian Shiism leveled by Indians and Iranians alike is the infiltration of political ideology into theology and devotional practice. In Iran and India, I often heard people define Iranian Shiism as too political. With the Iranians, most expressions of religious activity are political. Many of the criticisms of Shi'i religious practices coming from within the tradition have emerged as a result of the encounter with Wahhabism and reformist Sunni ideology.

Even 'Ali Shari'ati, one of Iran's greatest intellectuals of the prerevolutionary period, used Shiism for political ends. In a series of lectures, collectively known as *Fatimah Fatimah Ast (Fatimah Is Fatimah)*, delivered in 1971 by Shari'ati at Tehran's Hussainiyyah Irshad, Fatimah was transformed into a revolutionary figure, a symbol, and a means for Iranians to liberate themselves from Western domination. Shari'ati's ideology is not the result of an Iranian encounter with Wahhabism and Sunni ideology but rather the perception of religious ideologues and intellectuals that Iran had lost its autonomous identity in the encounter with the West, causing a malaise that Jalal Al-e Ahmad identified as *gharbzadegi* (variously translated as Westoxification or Weststruckness).²⁵ Reflecting on this Iranian encounter with the West, Shari'ati iden-

tified three principal models available for Iranian women to follow: the traditional way, the modernized way, and the "way of Fatimah."²⁶ Shari'ati's Fatimah is in a perpetual state of "becoming" the ideal woman. Fatimah is "the perfect model of a responsible, fighting woman when confronting her time and the fate of her society."²⁷ Moreover, Shari'ati considers Fatimah to be "a guide—that is, an outstanding example of someone to follow, an ideal type of woman, one whose life bore witness for any woman who wishes to 'become herself'—through her own choice."²⁸

Shari'ati's devotion to Fatimah is palpable and deeply political. Fatimah is a religious and political role model for the Iranian woman who chooses to "become herself," casting off the outmoded, superstitious practices and beliefs that have weakened Shiism and renouncing the shallow consumerism and loneliness of Westernism. Shari'ati's Fatimah reflects the historical and political contingencies of prerevolutionary Iran, and although he portrays her in a romanticized fashion, she is nonetheless a political figure.

Indian Shiism, in contrast, is romanticized (especially by Iranians) as the untainted site where the "true" and "original" tradition of Karbala hagiography and devotional ritual is preserved.²⁹ The subtext of this romantic vision of the purity of Indian Shi'i hagiographic literature and ritual is its Iranian origins. Beginning in the fourteenth century, large numbers of Persian scholars, theologians, mystics, and poets migrated to the Deccan to seek their fortunes in the courts of the Shi'i 'Adil Shahi and Qutb Shahi kingdoms. However, just as sixteenth-century Persian writers in Safavid Iran translated hagiographic texts and ritual performances commemorating Karbala into an Iranian idiom, so, too, were these texts brought to the Deccan by migrant scholars, where they acquired distinctive South Indian cultural, ecological, and linguistic forms. The romanticizing impulse to declare India and the Deccan as the

25. Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi (Weststruckness)*, trans. John Green and Ahmad Alizadeh (Lexington, KY: Mazda, 1982). For an analysis of Al-e Ahmad's polymethodic "cure" of *gharbzadegi*, see Karen G. Ruffle, "Curing Iranian Occidentosis: Jalal Al-e Ahmad's Polymethodic Prescription," *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 8, no. 1 (2002): 59–66.

26. Marcia K. Hermansen, "Fatimah as a Role Model in the Works of Ali Shari'ati," *Women and Revolution in Iran*, ed. Guity Nashat (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1983), 89.

27. Ali Shari'ati, "Fatimah Is Fatimah," in *Shari'ati on Shari'ati and the Muslim Woman*, ed. and trans. Laleh Bakhtiar (Chicago: ABC International Group, 1996), 211.

28. *Ibid.*, 212.

29. For more in-depth analysis of the tension between the hegemonizing, cosmopolitan impulse of Iranian Shiism and the vernacular beliefs and practices of Deccani Shia, see Karen G. Ruffle, "Who Could Marry at a Time like This? Debating the *Mehndi ki Majlis* in Hyderabad," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 29 (2009): 502–14.

repository of the pure essence of Iranian Shi'i hagiographic literature and ritual is valid to a certain extent. Certainly, the Iranian imprint on Deccani Shi'i devotion is significant; however, the intervening centuries have thoroughly vernacularized the Ahl-e Bait.

Whether Fatimah al-Zahra is portrayed as a romanticized version of an authentic, yet displaced, Iranian Shiism or as a vanguard of political and social revolution, for the Shia of Hyderabad, she has a central role in their spiritual and devotional lifeworlds. Like the other members of the Ahl-e Bait, "Bibi" Fatimah is venerated as an imitable saint, whose piety is to be emulated, and her ethic of sacrifice and commitment to social justice provides a powerful model for everyday Shia to cultivate an idealized self.

Conclusion

Compared to the examples that I have provided of the pre-eternal generative role of Fatimah's radiance, Seyyed Hossein Nasr's observation that Fatimah is endowed with a partial *walayat-e fatimiyyah* (the transcendent, God-bestowed sainthood that is unique to Fatimah) underestimates the pivotal and cosmologically important role God has bestowed upon her.³⁰ Fatimah connects prophecy with the imamate—she links the seal of prophecy with the divine guides who will lead humanity until the *qiyamat* (day of resurrection). It is possible to argue that it is Fatimah's peculiar *kunya* (honorific title) *umm abiha* (the mother of her father) that confirms her embodiment of a form of complete transcendent and inimitable sanctity. Many hadiths attest to Fatimah's extraordinary status as a woman, and her epithets al-Batul (the chaste) and al-Adhra (the virgin) reflect her chastity and permanent state of virginity. Fatimah is the source of the imamate, yet she was a virgin. Fatimah's sons trace their descent through her and not through their father 'Ali, as is customary according to the patriarchal system of patrimony. In one hadith,

the prophet Muhammad said, "All the children of a mother are attributed to their father, but not the sons of Fatimah."³¹ Without Fatimah, the imams would not be born and God-given *walayah* would not be transferred. Without Fatimah, transcendent sainthood and the imamate (*walayah-imamah*) are ontologically impossible.

As the mistress of paradise, Fatimah possesses the supreme powers of intercession and condemnation. It is Fatimah who will avenge those who were at the battle of Karbala, and she will intercede on behalf of all who support the Ahl-e Bait. The rich devotional tradition that has developed in Hyderabad around Fatimah's mystical and intercessory powers reveals the enduring power that the battle of Karbala and the charismatic qualities of the prophet Muhammad's family have in the spiritual and imaginary worlds of the Shia. Fatimah has been thoroughly vernacularized in the South Indian context of Hyderabad, where the feminine is venerated for its life-giving and destructive powers. In the *'alam* and the relics, the Shia can access Fatimah's intercessory powers, which offer succor in times of distress and hardship. Fatimah's endurance of her life of poverty gives hope to the Shia, the majority of whom live in the Old City, where resources are limited and many live in hardship. The tears that the Shia shed in the mourning assembly offer eschatological hope, because Fatimah's eternal presence and witness to their faith and loyalty will bring endless reward in paradise.

In her mystical and intercessory-eschatological roles, Fatimah does possess complete *walayah*, and although she is not an imam, it is through her bloodline that the imamate descends: she is the source of the imamate and the mistress of Judgment. The extraordinary spiritual knowledge and charismatic authority that God bestowed upon Fatimah in the form of *walayah* is embodied in her male progeny in the imamate. Fatimah's *walayat-e fatimiyyah* Fatimah is complete—through her, Islam is ren-

30. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Shi'ism and Sufism," in *Shi'ism: Doctrines, Thought, and Spirituality*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hamid Dabashi, and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 104.

31. Sheikh Mu'min al-Shiblanji, *Nur al-Absar (The Light of the Mystery)* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, n.d.), 144. There are a number of Internet collections of hadith relating to Fatimah. These are generally gathered into collections of 40 hadith relating to Fatimah's exemplary status vis-à-vis Muhammad, God, and humanity. Please see, shiaobook.blogspot.com/2009/02/blog-post_6473.html.

dered theologically complete, connecting pre-eternity to eternal paradise or hell. In several hadiths, the prophet Muhammad avows to the Muslim community that “Fatimah is the head of the women of paradise.” In *Rahat al-Arwah* (*The Tranquility of the Souls*), Abu Sa‘id Hasan ibn Husain Shi‘i Sabzevari’s hagiography of the prophet Muhammad and his family, Fatimah’s heavenly origins are described:

In another tradition related by Sadiq (peace be upon him), he stated that her father the Prophet (peace be upon him), used to give her many kisses on the mouth. ‘A’isha said: “O Messenger of God! I see that you give Fatimah so many kisses on her mouth and that you place your tongue on her mouth?” He replied: “‘A’isha, it is because I am transported to the heavens. When Gabriel transported me to the heavens, he brought me near to the branches of the Tuba tree, and of the heavenly fruits, he gave me an apple. That apple, I ate that apple and it became a sperm in my back. Then I returned to earth and I spoke with Khadijah and she became impregnated with Fatimah. Now, any time that I yearn for paradise, I give her a kiss and from her [body] I experience the fragrance of heaven. She is both human and a celestial houri.”³²

Fatimah al-Zahra constitutes a human form of the Divine will exhibited through her embodiment of transcendent God-given *walayah* (sainthood), and she is made human and *real* through her enactment of *wilayah* (socially recognized and sanctioned sainthood)—thus she is the Mistress of the Two Worlds. ∫

32. Abu Sa‘id Hasan ibn Husain Shi‘i Sabzevari, *Rahat al-Arwah*, trans. and ed. Mohammad Sepehri (Qom: Ahl-e Qalam, 1996), 71. The reference to Sadiq is to the sixth imam, Ja‘far as-Sadiq.