

THE ROLE OF THE WOMEN OF ASHURA

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ABSTRACT: In all the events that occurred before, during, and after the Day of Ashura, the role of the women was especially remarkable as they were exemplars in demonstrating how to resist against oppression. There were wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters in the camp of Imam Husayn who displayed love and self-sacrifice, and fought cruelty, worldliness, and materialism. In the small desert of Karbala, people of all ages displayed facets of religion such as wilayah,² hijab,³ patience, faith, enjoining the good and forbidding the evil, *tawalli*⁴ and *tabarri*.⁵ The following article offers an account of the women's unwavering support of Imam Husayn and his cause before Ashura, in the Battle of Karbala, and after the massacre.

Introduction

What did Imam Husayn really want to change? And what did he require for it? What public relations did he use to publicize the event of Āshūrā?

¹ Holder of Master's in Management

² Mutual friendship and guardianship among all the believers

³ Obligatory covering of the body as specified in Islam

⁴ Following the Imam's friendship for anyone

⁵ Following the Imam's enmity towards anyone

Imam Husayn was far-sighted about all present and possible future problems and aimed to fight the source so as to show that the problems went further than those that occurred on the Day of Āshūrā; that his uprising was a manifestation of his understanding of its influence on the people's lives. Imam Husayn made his system of propagation as he stood against all misbeliefs. In a short time, he showed those who wanted to secularize the society that *wilayah* is the cause of inseparability of religion and politics.

The Day of Āshūrā

Imam Husayn considered all the factors that the enemy deployed to compromise the foundations of religion and eliminate their effect from the people's lives.

Indeed Islam saved women from being held in contempt, yet they were endangered by the enemy's plots of regarding at women as expenses and not as intelligent beings who can independently decide for themselves. That was how women took on their responsibilities after Āshūrā so as to manifest the greatest values of *wilayah*.

Any uprising has two features: 1) The philosophy of an uprising, and 2) the performance of an uprising.

The performance of the Imam's uprising involved 'martyrdom' – when the Imam and his male relatives and companions were murdered – and the 'capture' that occurred to the women during the aftermath. Āshūrā was a manifestation of the Imam's uprising with a small number of women and children; it exhibited the realization of a true human mission in defending truth.

In early Islam, the Prophet was the true guide for all women, particularly the women of Imam Husayn's companions. Lady Fatimah Zahra defended Imam Ali and Lady Zaynab followed the objectives of her mother who was the role model for the wives of the companions. As much as religious leaders cared about the role of women, the other party attempted to revive the ideologies of the Pre-Islamic Era, the time when women were used and not highly regarded. However, the results of those religious efforts in promoting the culture and status of women was manifested in 61 AH in Karbala; consequently, the events during and after Karbala helped less informed women to review their role in society. Lady Zaynab began her mission of public relations in the evening of Āshūrā; it was so powerfully done that afterwards people demanded answers to their questions which eventually led to the disclosure of the truth.

Lady Zaynab made the system respond to what they did, which in fact was a shift of the power structure so that the people found the rulers responsible for what they did.

Lady Zaynab accomplished this through the three strategies:

1. Introducing the true leader by giving people the right information
2. Analysing the oppression caused by Yazid and his agents before and after Āshūrā
3. Enlightening the people regarding the methods in which people must stand against the enemy's plots

The wives of Imam Husayn's companions

Their support before Āshūrā

Resistance: The events on the Day of Āshūrā were manifestations of love, self-sacrifice, and God’s servitude. The women encouraged their male family members to support Imam Husayn, and the women themselves accompanied and assisted Lady Zaynab. Before Āshūrā, there were women who defended him and his family when some men feared to do so.

For example, the lovers of the Ahlul Bayt gathered and discussed in the house of Marīyah bint Sa’d from the ‘Abd al-Qays tribe in the centre of Kufa. She dispatched Yazīd ibn Nabīṭ, her two sons, her servant, Sayf ibn Mālik and Adham ibn Umayyah to Karbala.⁶

Their support of Imam Husayn

1. In Kufa, when the people conspired against or ignored Muslim ibn ‘Aqīl (Imam Husayn’s cousin and delegate), Ṭaw‘ah, the wife of Usayd al-Ḥaḍramī gave him refuge and treated him with generosity.⁷
2. When Dulham bint ‘Amr, Zuhayr ibn al-Qayn’s wife, discovered that her husband rejected meeting with Imam Husayn, she encouraged him by saying, “Does the son of the Prophet call you to himself and you do not accept? Glory be to God! Go to him and listen to what he says and come back!”⁸ After Zuhayr spoke with the Imam, he happily returned to Dulham, packed up his own stuff and broke up with Dulham so that enemy would not hurt her after the Battle of Karbala. She was escorted by his servant to her family, and he returned to the Imam.

⁶ Abu Mikhnaf, *Maqatal al-Husayn (a)*, p. 18.

⁷ Ibid., p. 45.

⁸ Ibid., p. 74.

3. In Nakhīlah, (the camp of the Kufan army), the wife of ‘Abdullah ‘Umayr Kalbī saw the army of Ibn Zīyād moving out of Kufa. She asked her husband, “Where does this army go?” Abdullah answered, “To fight Husayn ibn Ali.” She wished her husband’s martyrdom [in support of Imam Husayn]. Abdullah himself also wished martyrdom, so he told her wife about it. She was overjoyed, and told him, “What a good wish you have! May God guide you. Please, take me with you.”⁹

Their support after Āshūrā

1. In the army of Ibn Sa‘d:
 - a. The first helmet of Imam Husayn was made of fur. A man from Kendeh tribe took it after his martyrdom, went to his wife Umm Abdullah and washed it from blood. His wife asked him, “Have you snatched the helmet of the son of the Prophet and brought to my house? Go away! I remember your friends used to say that you are wretched and miserable!”¹⁰
 - b. When Khūlī ibn Yazid took Imam Husayn’s head to Kufa, the doors of the palace of ‘Ubaydallah were closed, so he took the head to his house and put it under a large basin. Then, he went to his second wife, the daughter of Malik ibn ‘Aqrab from the Bani Asad Ḥaḍramī tribe. She asked him about any news he had. He answered, “I brought a valuable gift to make you happy forever! The head of Husayn is now in your house!” His wife angrily replied, “Damn you! Other men take gold and silver to their wives and you have brought the head of

⁹ Sheikh Abbas Qummi, *Nafs al-Mahmūm*, Beirut, Dār al-Maḥajjah al-Bayḍā’, 1992, p. 132.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 192.

the son of the Prophet? I swear to God, I will not stay with you in this house!”¹¹

When Mukhtār seized the power, he sent Ma‘ādh ibn Hānī and Aba ‘Umrah, the chief of special guards to kill Khulī who had hid in the toilet. Ma‘ādh ibn Hānī commanded Aba ‘Umrah: “Khulī is in the house. Find him!” Khulī’s wife came out. They asked her, “Where is your husband?” She said, “I do not know!” and pointed to the toilet, where they went and found him hiding under a big basket. They took him out and killed him.¹²

c. When Ka‘b ibn Jābir, one of Ibn Sa‘d’s soldiers, returned home, his wife and sister told him, “You helped the enemies of the son of Fatimah Zahra! I Swear by God, we will not speak with you anymore!”¹³

d. During the evening of Āshūrā when the army of ‘Umar ibn Sa‘d attacked the tents of the women and children of Imam Husayn, a soldier reported: “I saw a woman from Bani Bakr ibn Wā’il was with her husband in the army of ‘Umar ibn Sa‘d. When she saw the soldiers attacking the women in the camp of Imam Husayn and looting their tents, she took a sword, marched towards the tents, and said, “O Men of the Bani Bakr ibn Wā’il tribe! Do you stay indifferent while you see that daughters of the Prophet are being looted?” She then said, “No rules other than God’s! O avengers of the

¹¹ Ibid., p. 207.

¹² Ibid., p. 364.

¹³ Ibid., p. 134.

Prophet's blood!"¹⁴ This slogan later came to be the slogan of the future avengers of the tragedy of Āshūrā.

2. *Their support in Kufa*

a. When Ibn Sa'd arrived in Kufa with the captives, the people came to watch them. It is reported: "A faithful woman from the people of Kufa called from a high place where she could watch the entire scene. She asked, 'Captives, of what tribe are you?' They answered, 'The captives of the family of Muhammad.' She came down and brought them head coverings (chadors) and other pieces of garment to cover themselves with."¹⁵

b. When in the Mosque of Kufa, Ibn Zīyād spoke against the family of the Prophet to strengthen Yazid's position and called Yazid a liar who is the son of a liar. Abdullah ibn 'Afif, who had lost his right eye in the battle of Siffiyn, and his left eye in the battle of Jamal in the army of Imam Ali, stood up and defended the family of Imam Husayn. The agents of Ibn Zīyād wanted to arrest him, but his tribe did not let them do so although they attacked his house at night. His daughter then shouted and called her father, who took the sword from her and fought them using her guidance until they caught and killed him. His daughter shouted, "I wished I was a man to fight with these wicked killers of the family of the Prophet in front of you."¹⁶

3. *Their role in meeting with Yazīd*

¹⁴ Sheikh Abbas Qummi, *Bayt al-Aḥzān*, p. 201.

¹⁵ Sheikh Abbas Qummi, *Nafs al-Mahmūm*, p. 214.

¹⁶ Abu Mikhnaf, *Ibid.*, p. 208.

- a. At the court of Yazid, when Zaynab saw the head of his brother, she grievingly cried, “O Husayn! O the Friend of Allah! O the son of Mecca and Mina! O Son of Fatimah Zahra, the chief of all women of the worlds! O Son of Muṣṭafā!” Everyone cried while Yazid was silent. There was also a Hashemite woman at the court who cried out, “O Husayn! O Master of the Family of the Prophet! O Muhammad!”¹⁷
- b. After the speech of Lady Zaynab, when they hung the head of Imam Husayn at the doorstep of the court of Yazid and brought the captives towards it, Abu Sufyān’s wives went forth and kissed the hands and feet of the daughters of Imam Husayn and held mourning sessions for three days. Upon seeing the head of Imam Husayn, Yazid’s wife, Hind, tore her clothes, rushed out from behind the curtains and ran towards Yazid with bare feet, crying out, “O Yazid! Did you order to hang the head of Husayn at the doorstep of my house? Yazid jumped up, covered her, and said, “O Hind! Are you crying for the son of the daughter of the Prophet?”¹⁸

Their role during the Battle of Karbala

There are names of twenty women recorded in the Battle of Karbala; ten of them seemingly from the family of the Prophet while the rest were wives and daughters of the companions of Imam Husayn. Karbala contained the result of the uprising of Imam Husayn in the events of the morning until the evening of the tenth day of Muharram 61 AH. God wanted a new manifestation of the greatness of people to be seen. The women present in Karbala were chosen to show self-sacrifice.

¹⁷ Sheikh Abbas Qummi, *Nafs al-Mahmūm*, p. 13.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 265.

1. Their aspiration for martyrdom

On the eve of Āshūrā, after Imam Husayn gave permission to his companions to leave the battlefield, he said, “Anyone who has brought his wife with himself should take her to a safe shelter. Tomorrow, the men of our camp will be killed and the women will be captured.” The Imam did not want other women endure the same suffering as the family of Imam Husayn. It is reported: “When Ali ibn Muḏahhar entered his tent, his wife said, ‘O Son of Muḏahhar! You are not treating me fairly. You want to enter paradise alone.’ Ali ibn Muḏahhar came to the Imam and said, ‘My wife [who is] from Asad tribe does not accept that I take her to a safe shelter.’ Before the Imam answered, Ali ibn Muḏahhar’s wife, visibly upset, addressed the Imam from inside the tent, saying, ‘O Son of Zahra! Are not we worthy of serving your daughters and sisters?’”¹⁹

The camp of Imam Husayn in Karbala was a camp of love for God, and one needed certain qualities to become a member of it. The permission to leave was announced by the Imam to be a quality check for those who had enough faith to stay with him and create the heroic scenes in Karbala and in front of the enemy’s large army. The women highly encouraged their husbands, brothers, and sons to defend the family of the Prophet while simultaneously taking care of Lady Zaynab. They had predicted being in chains, though they deeply wished for martyrdom and visiting Lady Fatima afterwards.

A. Throwing back the heads of the martyrs

The women created great legends in the desert of Karbala. Seven of the mothers of the martyrs dressed the armour over their sons, and watched

¹⁹ Muhammad Wāṣif, *Inqilāb Muḏaddas Husayn*, 1386 AH, p. 153.

their martyrdom as they were beheaded. Their sons' heads were then thrown in their direction. However, they all returned their sons' heads towards the enemy and cried out, "We do not take back what we have given in the way of God."²⁰ Three of those martyrs were among the companions:

1. 'Amr ibn Junādah – or in other reports, son of Muslim ibn 'Awsajah – was a young man whose father was recently martyred. His mother told him, "O my son, go and fight beside the son of the Prophet." Later Imam Husayn said, "The father of this young man has recently been martyred and maybe his mother is not content with him going to the battlefield." The young man said, "My mother ordered me to go." Then he went to the battlefield in support of Imam Husayn and his family and was eventually martyred. The enemy then threw his head towards his mother. His mother embraced the head and said, "My dear son, well done! O the delight of my heart!" Then, she threw it back towards a soldier of the enemy and killed him. She took the tent column and attacked the enemy, killing two soldiers. Then Imam Husayn ordered her to return to the tents.²¹
2. Abdullah ibn 'Umayr attacked the enemy, killing some of them and returned to his mother and wife saying, "O Mother, did I make you happy?" His mother said, "I would not become completely happy unless you are martyred for Husayn."²² He then fought and was martyred. His head was thrown towards his mother afterwards. His mother picked the head, kissed it, and threw it back to the enemy

²⁰ Muhammad Samāwī, *Abṣār al-'Ayn fī Anṣār al-Husayn*, p. 132.

²¹ Sheikh Abbas Qummi, *Nafs al-Mahmūm*, p. 152.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 147.

which killed one of them. Then, she took the column of the tent, attacked the enemy and killed two soldiers of the enemy! Imam Husayn ordered her: “Come back! You and your son are close to the Prophet! Women are not required to do [the lesser] jihad!” She returned while she was saying: “O God! Do not let me lose my hope!” Imam Husayn said: “God will not let you become hopeless!”²³

Thus, the women gladly seized the opportunity to be included among the captives of Husayn whom were destined in the will of God to be glorified.

B. Yearning for martyrdom

Umm Wahab took a spear, gave it to her husband, and said, “Fight for these righteous, the children of the Prophet.” She then followed her husband. Her husband told her, “Go back!” to which she replied, “I will not return until I am killed with you.” She grasped her husband’s armour and said, “I will not leave you until I am killed with you!” The Imam called the woman and said, “May God bless you, the family of Wahab. Go back to women. May God bless you! Stay with them for war is not for women.”²⁴

Umm Wahab’s aspiration for martyrdom and support for the Imam reminds us of Naṣībah’s acts of bravery in the battle of Uḥud. She defended the Prophet even when men escaped, and the Prophet had prayed for her and her family.²⁵

²³ Ibid., p. 148.

²⁴ Abu Mikhnaf, Ibid., p. 124.

²⁵ Ibn Sa’d, *Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, vol. 8, p. 414; Muhammad ibn ‘Umar Wāqidī, *Maghāzī*, vol. 1, p. 270.

During the battle, only five women felt sympathy for the Imam; they had come forth in the face of the enemy and consoled him.²⁶

Except for Lady Zaynab who approached the Imam to soothe him during the martyrdom of Ali Akbar, there were three other sisters and mothers of the martyrs who came to Imam Husayn, the fifth of whom was the wife of Abdullah ibn ‘Umayr Kalbi who later became a martyr.

C. The women’s martyrdom after their husbands’

The wife of Abdullah ibn ‘Umayr Kalbi came out of her tent and rushed to her martyred husband, sat beside his head, wiped the dust from his face, and said, “May Paradise be sweet for you.” Then with the orders of Shimr, Rostam, his slave, killed her by hitting her head with a club.”²⁷ Shimr then attacked the tents of Imam Husayn.

The women left the deceased to serve and defend the family of Imam Husayn. They accompanied them in captivity with the heads of their martyrs to manifest the best historical evidence of oppression. They considered the companionship of the children of the Prophet an honour and expressed their gratitude to God. Although they did not accompany Lady Zaynab until the end [of the journey], they displayed a great manifestation of love towards the Imam and his family.

D. Their spiritual magnitude on the Day of Āshūrā

From the evening of the day of Āshūrā, the women supported their Imam with silence. They actualized their potential of endurance when a few people were able to do so.

²⁶ The sister of Muslim ibn ‘Awsajah, the mother of Abdullah ibn ‘Umayr Kalbī, the mother of ‘Umr ibn Junādah or Umm Wahab in some other reports.

²⁷ Sheikh Abbas Qummi, *Nafs al-Mahmūm*, p. 139; Abu Mikhnaf, *Ibid.*, p. 141.

They did not show too much distress when giving farewell to their husbands, brothers, and sons and encouraged the children to be patient when facing hunger and thirst and keep them away from the battle so as not to emotionally interfere with the soldiers. When the slaughtered bodies of martyrs were brought back to the camp from the battlefield, the women would not sob uncontrollably so as not to not distress the Imam. Even when Imam Husayn's baby, Ali Asghar, was martyred by a three-pointed arrow, Rubāb, the mother of Ali, did not come to the Imam. The Imam approached Lady Zaynab and gave the baby to her.²⁸ Also, when the body of Ali Akbar was brought, none of the women went forth. Moreover, when the bodies of the companions were brought back, their mothers and wives would not come to them.

The role of hijab

In Āshūrā, the women were directly involved in politics; they represented the lessons learned from the efforts of Lady Fatimah during the events of Fadak and her support for Imam Ali. They also did not forget their duty to protect their hijab during the tragedies. When all the companions of Imam Husayn were martyred and he himself was about to go to the battlefield, he came to the tents to give farewell to the women and tell them about their future duties. He said, "Be prepared for the tragedy. Wear your overgarments tightly. Know that God supports, protects, and saves you from your enemy and will create a good destination for you."²⁹

Imam Husayn gave his first advice to women about their hijab. And because the women knew that the battle was for material purposes, they

²⁸ Sayyid ibn Ṭāwūs, *Luhūf*, p. 158.

²⁹ Hadith Group of Baqir al-'Ulūm (a) Research Center, *Farhang-e Jāmi' Sokhanān-e Imam Husayn* as the translation of *Mawsū'ah al-Kalimāt al-Imam al-Husayn*, p. 549.

took off their jewellery and extra garments and threw them at the enemy to avoid the attack. When the enemy was taking the captives into Damascus (Shāam), Umm Kulthūm asked the soldiers to keep the heads away from women so that people of the city would look at the heads and not at the women and girls whose head coverings were snatched away from them. But Shimr did the contrary and moved the women to the city first.

After Imam Husayn's warning, the women chose two kinds of clothing for themselves, the first of which were lost in the attacks of the soldiers. When Yazid asked Imam Husayn's daughter Sukayna why she was crying during the meeting, she replied, "Why would a person who has no face covering in this gathering not cry?"

Like her father, mother, and brother, Lady Zaynab discredited the enemy and belittled Yazid due to his maliciousness to render the tragedy of Āshūrā a good example of how women's hijab is the most powerful weapon.

The tragedy of Āshūrā showed that women were the enemy's primary target with the aim of emotionally breaking them after the death of their men. The tragedy also showed that if women defend religious leadership, they become the most powerful and resolute people against the enemy.

The enemy saw women's hijab as the most powerful weapon in supporting religious authority, thus forcibly pulled off their hijab, unaware of the fact that although hijab gives value to women, what makes hijab more effective is acting like Lady Zaynab. Thus, the enemy unintentionally reinforced this idea that hijab has two positive consequences: a) to cover, and b) to emulate Lady Zaynab.

Sahl ibn Sā'idī reported: "I went to the gate of Damascus where I saw flags coming after each other, and a horseman carrying a flag. There was a head placed on top of it which was most similar to the Prophet than anyone else. Suddenly, I saw women following him on camels without any saddle or covering. I approached the first woman and asked, 'Who are you?' She answered, 'Sukaynah bint al-Husayn.' I asked, 'What can I do for you?' She answered, 'O Sahl! Please tell the bearer of this head to go forth so that people are occupied with watching it and not look at the women of the family of the Prophet.' Then I gave four hundred dinars to that man to do so."³⁰

The importance of the duty of women in protecting their hijab was manifested in the tragedy of Āshūrā; and the message of that tragedy will continuously include the concept of hijab.

Mourning in the tragedy of Āshūrā

Revealing the hardships of the Ahlul Bayt targets women's souls; they are the most fervent grievers of this tragedy, mourning to accompany the captives and desiring to support them with their faith.

Imam Husayn chose Lady Zaynab to present the truth about the martyrs throughout history until today. Commemorating Āshūrā is a reminder for all women to review their value and strengthen their relationship with Lady Zaynab. The women of the companions were legendary defending the Imam and his family; the women of the family made miracles in disclosing the events of Karbala to all people, Lady Zaynab having created all the legends. She sent her sons to the battlefield, received her slaughtered brothers, and witnessed seventeen of her closest kin martyred.

³⁰ Sheikh Abbas Qummi, *Nafs al-Mahmūm*, p. 241.

She gathered the people left from the camp and did not fear the physical tortures of the enemy; she then spoke in captivity similar to father Ali who was the master of speech and did not neglect her midnight prayers throughout the event.³¹ She did so by following the political trend of Lady Fatimah in defending Imamate. This rendered her the ultimate example of patience to teach all women how to spiritually elevate themselves to gain proximity to God.

³¹ So that in his last farewell, Imam Husayn told Lady Zaynab: “O My sister! Do not forget me in your midnight prayers.” (Dhabīḥullah Maḥallātī, *Rayāḥīn al-Sharī‘ah*, vol. 3, p. 62)