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**MOURNING IS BEAUTIFUL: TA'ZIYEH AND GENDER AFFIRMATION IN SOUTH
IRAN**

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Iranian women's presence in Shi'i rituals was noted by travellers in pre-modern era and extensively described since the 19th century. After the Islamic Revolution, whose success was partially decided by Shi'i myths and symbols and by women's contributions, the attention towards gender aspects of Shi'i religious ceremonies increased, and now it is discussed in numerous recent works. So far, scholars have mainly observed and described the rituals performed in the capital Tehran, with the exception of Ingvild Flakerud whose target of research is the female community of Shiraz. However, it is South Iran that presents striking peculiarities in the way women participate in Muharram ceremonies. This paper is based on ethnographic research carried out among women performers in Muharram rituals in South Iran, in particular in the Gulf area; it shows how women, by claiming their right to perform in a public arena, are also asking to be recognized as social, cultural, historical and religious agents.

Key words: Muharram rituals and Gender; Shi'i women in South Iran; women actors in *ta'ziyeh*.

1. Cutting Edge in South Iran

Wasn't Zeinab a woman? Weren't Omm Laila, Sakineh also women? How could a man possibly embody one of these women?

(A woman in Bushehr who regularly performs in Muharram rituals).

The above quotation comes from one of my interviewees in Bushehr, where women perform in *ta'ziyeh* in mixed groups (male and female actors together) and for a mixed audience: this fact has scarce or no precedence in Iran and introduces a new perspective on women's religious activity in the Shi'i world. In my study, I use the data I collected in Bushehr (interviews, images and films taken during the performances) merged with texts on the history and folklore of this area. By comparing my data with the existing literature on women's presence in the

Muharram rituals (mainly Kamran Scot Aghaie 2005; Faegheh Shirazi 2005; Torab Azam 2007; Ingvild Flakerud 2013 and 2015) I want to show how women in Bushehr, by claiming their right to perform in a public arena, are also asking to be recognized as social, cultural, historical and religious agents. My focus is primarily on women's activities and on how local women exert their agency through the Muharram ceremonies. As a matter of fact, the observation of Muharram rituals shows how local women developed both performance abilities and self-confidence. By broadening the observation to the "periphery" of Iran, the paper means to increase the knowledge about Iranian women's role in Muharram ceremonies and, more generally, the way in which they strive in order to occupy more social space.

As a matter of fact, Iranian women's presence in Shi'i rituals was noted by travellers in the pre-modern era and extensively described since the 19th century. After the Islamic Revolution, whose success was also decided by a careful orchestration of Shi'i myths and symbols (Chelkowski-Dabashi, 1999) and by women's contribution, the attention towards the gender aspects of Shi'i religious ceremonies has increased and is testified today by numerous works on the topic, such as those edited by Kamran Scot Aghaie (2005), in addition to the writings by Faegheh Shirazi (2005), Torab Azam (2007) and Ingvild Flakerud (2013 and 2015) to cite only the most recent articles.¹

So far, scholars have mainly observed and described the rituals performed in the Tehran, with the exception of Ingvild Flakerud, whose target of research is the female community of Shiraz. However, it is South Iran that presents striking peculiarities in the way women participate in Muharram and Safar ceremonies.

My paper is based on ethnographic research I have carried out among women performers in Muharram rituals in South Iran, in particular in the city of Bushehr, where women act in public *ta'ziyeh*. The paper shows how women, by claiming their right to perform in a public arena, are also asking to be recognized as social, cultural, historical and religious agents.²

¹ There is also an increasing interest in Shi'a women's participation in rituals such as *ziyarat*: on this topic see Honarpisheh 2013.

² I want to thank the people who helped me in this research: filmmaker Fatemeh Mousavi who was my guide in Bushehr and MarjanJalali-Naini who inspired me in his research; 'Ali Nikraifard and his mothers, grandmother, wife, aunts and relatives who hosted me in their rituals, answered my questions and gratified my curiosity; Seyyed Qasem Yahoseini who provided me with ample bibliography and information; and all the Bushehri people who showed me friendship and helped me during my staying there.

1.2 The place for Women: Theory and Practice

As often observed,³ the Muharram celebrations held among the Shi'i communities, be it in Iran, Pakistan, India or Lebanon, have multiple significances. On the one hand, Shi'i revive the sacrifice of their third imam Hosain, who was brutally killed in Karbala on the tenth ('*ashura*) of Muharram 680 (AH 61). Hosain was killed together with his male relatives, including his sons, and followers, while the women were taken captive to the Caliph in Damascus. This tragic event somehow marks the symbolic birth of Shi'i Muslims in contraposition to their Sunni counterparts. Today, the Shi'is continue to consider themselves as the followers of a martyr (Hosain) who had been the victim of injustice and cowardice.

Besides, the annual elaborate mourning rituals for Hosain's death are meant to be an opportunity to gain merits on Judgment Day when the third imam will act as a mediator. Hosain was defeated by a much bigger army: therefore, the Shi'i remember the struggle of Hosain him and his companions as the paradigmatic actions of the just and right human beings who, no matter how small their number and how harsh the situation may be, nevertheless have the courage to fight injustice and evil. In this sense, Shi'is, who have always represented a minority in the Muslim world, have been observing Muharram ceremonies with the aim to claim solidarity among them. Even in societies where Shi'is constitute the majority, such as in Iran, the paradigm of Muharram events has been used as a weapon against tyranny, as, for instance, it happened during the Iranian Revolution (Chelkowski-Dabashi, 1999).

Women too play a significant role in these rituals: they organize many types of *majles* (sessions) such as their own *rowzeh-khanis*, i.e., liturgical lamentations over the suffering of Hosain and his family, usually held at in someone's house or in a special edifice called *Hosainiyeh*.⁴ The *rowzeh-khan* or preacher can be either a man or a woman: in the latter case, the ritual is all female and men are not present. Likewise, women can take part in a mixed-audience *rowzeh-khani* whose preacher is a man, and in this case they will be separated from men by some device such as a tent, an architectural structure or the like.

Women's presence is also attested to in the *dastehs*, i.e., the ritual parades that commemorate the tragic events of Karbala and which present different features (see for example Flakerud 2005). These processions are genderized as they are mostly formed by self-mortifying men, who hit their chests with their hand (*sineh-*

³ See in particular Peter Chelkowski's extensive production on Shii's' rituals: 1979, 1999 (with H. Dabashi) and 2010. I am indebted with Peter Chelkowski who inspired me to research in this field.

⁴ These edifices assume also other names such as *Fatemiyeh* or *Zeinabiyeh*.

zanan) or even strike their back by using a heavy chain (*zanjir-zanan*) amidst the sound of drums and cymbals played by other men, while women generally look on from the sides. However, the typical *dasteh* is less bloody and women may join in by carrying flags and other paraphernalia from the complex Shi'i symbolism. These may include objects, such as pitchers representing the water Hosain was deprived of by the Caliph's troops; or, small tents reminiscent of those inhabited by Hosain's relatives and mates in Karbala; or even stretchers with the simulacra of one of the personalities martyred in that context. The most special *dasteh* organized by the women in Bushehr is the one illustrating the marriage between Hosain's eldest daughter, Fatemeh Kubra, and his own nephew Qasem.⁵ In these processions women carry a replica of the bridal chamber (*hejleh*) containing some typical wedding gifts. Other women in the parade might hold the replica of the cradle of 'Ali Asghar, Hosain's baby child killed by an arrow shot by a Caliph's archer (as it happened in the parades I observed on Muharram 2014).

Shi'i martyrology and its subsequent rituals rest on a number of female characters, mostly belonging to Hosain's family, such as: his grandmother Khadijeh; his mother Fatemeh; his sisters, Zeinab and OmmKolthum; his wife Omm Laila; his daughters, Fatemeh, Sakineh, Roqaiyeh and Kolthum. Though the overall recognized heroes are male (i.e., Hosain, 'Ali Akbar, Qasem, etc.), women are central to the foundation of Shi'i myth. Women are the central figures of the main collection of stories regarding Karbala, i.e., the *Rowzath al-Shuhada* by Hosain Kashefi, and they are paid great respect during the functions Shi'i perform in a territory stretching from Lebanon to the Indian sub-continent. However, though women's role in the Muharram paradigm is far from being marginal, they have always been denied a physical presence in the *ta'ziyeh*, i.e., the passion play that mainly (but not exclusively) enacts the tragedy of Karbala and that is performed solely in Iran.⁶ In this form of liturgical theatre, women's roles have always been interpreted by men with their face covered by veils in order to masquerade their masculinity (Chelkowski 2005: 123). And, though the establishment of the Islamic government has encouraged such performances to the point that they are also played during periods other than Muharram and Safar, women are still banned from performing in *ata'ziyeh*. However, in south Iran, precisely in the city of Bushehr and its surrounding area, women do perform female roles in *ta'ziyehs*.

⁵Qasem is the son of the second imam and Hosain's brother Hasan.

⁶ Sabrina Mervin points to the fact that in South Lebanon there are *ta'ziyehs* in which "women play women's role" (2010: 327)

1.2.1 Bushehr's peculiarities

Before examining women's roles in the *ta'ziyeh* it is necessary to outline a clear picture of the variety of rituals they perform and to contextualize both Muharram traditions and women's role in that region. In addition to the ceremonies spread in other Iranian areas, such as *rowzeh-khanis* and the recitations of elegiac poetry known as *nowhehs* (lyrics devoted to mourning the *ahl-albait's* family and the Karbala events), women in Bushehr used to organize special *dastehs* in which they enacted episodes of the Shi'i martyrology. According to the late Hosain Chali, one of the oldest organizers of *ta'ziyeh* in Bushehr, before the Revolution of 1978-79 local people would not organize public *ta'ziyeh* in the way they do now, but would rather arrange elaborated *dastehs* that constituted an anticipation of the *ta'ziyeh* itself. Women were active participants in these processions, for example by interpreting the roles of the *ahl-albait's* female components brought in chains from Karbala to Damascus. These processions were dramatic, with women tied together with a rope, crying and covered by pomegranate juice squeezed by Chali himself as fake blood in order to increase the pathos.⁷

While taking active part in the street ritual, women had been developing their private ceremonies with a rich repertoire of *nowhehs*. In these sessions, mostly held at someone's house, a lady coryphaeus (*sarkhwan*) sings a hymn and the surrounding women reply with well-memorized refrains. These gatherings are known as *pa-mimbar* (at the foot of the pulpit) like their male counterparts, in reminiscence of the similar ceremonies men perform in the mosque. These get-together occasions multiply in the ten days preceding 'ashura. The *pa-mimbar* represents the static part of the ritual that, after a while, becomes more animated: while some women remain seated and beat their chest and/or their thighs, others stand and gather in a circle to beat their chest with one or both hands while rhythmically swinging their body toward the centre and then retrieving back. This part, called *sar-pai* (standing) turns into a sort of dance, at least in the crucial days, i.e., *tasu'a* and 'ashura.⁸ In the rituals I observed, women put a lot of energy in beating their chest with both hands while singing and turning their body left and right at regular intervals.⁹ The ritual normally lasts more than two hours and is performed on the night before 'ashura

⁷Quoted in Dehqani 2013: 230.

⁸Respectively, the ninth and the tenth day of Muharram.

⁹ According to a musicologist, sometimes this female ritual can assume the feature of an ecstatic *sama'* (Pahlavan 2014, 192).

continues up until the first sunrise. People symbolically ask the sun to rise later: the meaning of this vigil is to delay the coming of the day of *'ashura* and, subsequently, of the martyrdom of Hosain and his companions.

In the first ten days of Muharram, women (and men) sleep very little and are mentally and physically quite strained. Their faith helps a lot in sustaining them, not to mention the fact that this period represents, socially speaking, a very rewarding experience, as we will see. Nevertheless, the faithful need some comforts, represented by sweets, candies and innumerable glasses of tea offered by the host to her guests. These refreshments are mainly provided thanks to the neighbours' help; for example women bring the cakes they have cooked or bought and/or contribute financially to the host's expenses. Neighbours also help to wash plates and the small glasses in which tea is served.

Another common aid is tobacco, assumed in large quantity through a water pipe (*ghalian*) to give stamina to the smokers. I was actually surprised by the intensity with which women attending the rituals smoked, because not only would they do it in the interval between a *nowheh* and the following one, but also while the others sing and beat their chests. I saw women smoking a great deal and not only during the night ceremonies.

Reports on Muharram ceremonies testify to women's use of water pipe since the Qajar era (among the others, see Serena 1883: 176). Tobacco is not specifically banned or prohibited by the Muslim faith, however the Qur'an bans (or, at least, discourages) intoxicants and addictions of any kind.¹⁰ And in the case of Muharram rituals it is evident that tobacco is mostly used as a stimulant. In the Muslim-Iranian world there are conflicting perspectives about the religious acceptability of smoking and to what degree it is permitted.¹¹ While I was in Bushehr, one day I entered a traditional *qahveh-khaneh*¹² situated downtown and was particularly struck by the presence of a woman wrapped in black chador who was smoking her water pipe peacefully all alone, surrounded exclusively by male customers. I was told that the lady was a habitu  of the place, attended by many other women for the same purpose. For sure, the habit of smoking, though with the traditional water pipe, is gender biased, and women would mostly do it in private or in an all-female ambience. The sight of the woman smoking alone, among men, in a public place

¹⁰ On the topic see Matthee 2005, 135.

¹¹ For a history of the use of stimulants in Iran from 1500 to 1900 see Matthee 2005.

¹² Traditional place in which people would smoke water pipe, once famous for serving coffee but now mainly serving the.

such as a *qahveh-khaneh*, was unexpected and somehow assumed a subversive nature. However, men around her did not look startled or irritated, quite the contrary, they took the woman's presence and actions very naturally, as if they were a daily routine. I had never seen anything like this in more than 20 years of research in different parts of Iran, therefore: the women's presence in the *qahveh-khaneh* as a further proof of local women's assertiveness in the public sphere.

Another peculiarity I observed during the rituals is that women do not cry much. I had previously had other experiences of mourning rituals, especially in Tehran, and the bystanders' intense crying had always overwhelmed me. In the ceremonies I took part in Bushehr, I noted an average of three-four women crying out of fifty-sixty women attending, just sporadically and for a short while. Rather, I was struck by the passion with which women responded to the solicitation of the leader both in terms of singing and of beating their chest with vigour without showing signs of tiredness.

2. Women of Bushehr: a (pre-)history

Bushehr constituted an important town during the Elamite's period, when the town was known as Lian, the name of the locally most worshipped goddess. Many historians have described the Elamite as one of the oldest matriarchal civilizations, mainly because it was regulated by a matrilineal ascendancy (Koch and Hinz 1987; Kock 2007; Edwards et al., 1975; Yahosaini 2012). I am far from affirming that in its prehistory Bushehr was a matriarchal society and therefore far from entering into conflict with the dismantlers of the "matriarchal theory".¹³ It is merely interesting to highlight some pieces of evidence, recalling a strong female matrix in Bushehr's past, such as the vast female presence in the Elamite pantheon; the proved high status of Elamite women in society and in the legal arena (according to which they could dispose of their own assets, appear and act in court); and their high incidence on various works, attested by rock inscriptions and carvings, among other proof (Yahosaiyni 2013, *passim*). Successive developments in history changed the status of Bushehri women who came to share the same problems affecting their compatriots, such as lack of rights, scarce visibility on the public scene etc.¹⁴ But

¹³The most famous being Cynthia Eller, 2000.

¹⁴ However, the "woman question" and the need to solve it came to the fore at least as early as the beginning of the 1900's with a intense series of articles on the matter published by a local newspaper, the *Mozaffari*. This newspaper was a forerunner of the discussions on women's status and roles typical of the Constitutional Revolution period, and clearly shows that the local society was sensitive to gender issues. (Yahosaini 2014)

evidently, women conquered some privileges at least on the religious scene by advocating and maintaining until today the right to publicly perform in *ta'ziyehs* that are open to a mixed audience.

In this respect, women in Bushehr are quite unique. At least from the early Qajar times travelogues and memoirs demonstrate that women in Iran (especially in Tehran) would organize many rituals inside the royal palace, including *ta'ziyeh* that consisted of two different kinds: the most usual pattern was animated by all male actors playing for an exclusively female audience.¹⁵ In addition, according to some ladies from Naser-od-Din Shah's entourage, there was also an all-female version of *ta'ziyeh* (*ta'ziyeh -ye zananeh*) in which women alone covered the role of both actors and musicians. In this case the text was chosen from one of the *Rowzat al-Shuhada* all-female stories. The audience was made up exclusively by women and it was impossible to see boys older than ten years around. The only exception was represented by eunuchs who were also in charge of instructing the royal ladies to sing, recite and play (Munes od-Dowleh 2011, *passim*).

As reported by the most famous historian of Muharram rituals in Bushehr, i.e., Hosain Dehqani, women's presence as performers in *ta'ziyehs* side by side with men is due to both local "women's effort in building culture (*farhangsaz*) and the blue presence of the Persian Gulf" (Dehqani 2013: 297). Dehqani's affirmations are of double relevance. On the one hand, he underlines the importance of the environment for women's status: peoples living by the sea are -generally speaking- more open to alien ideas or, at least, more likely to be contaminated by them. In the case of Bushehr, the proximity to the sea and the consequent contact with foreign peoples and realities proved to be useful and stimulating. Significantly, women identified religious rituals as the most accessible arena in which to claim their right to agency and visibility. Dehqani also invokes agency when he mentions women's role as culture-makers rather than as mere preservers of culture. In other words, Bushehr women succeeded by exerting in practice that role that Shi'i patriarchs have always granted them but only in theory. Consequently, they claim to act in the *ta'ziyehs* as Zeinab, Fatemeh, Laila, Sakineh and the other *ahl-albait's* women.

The sea was also probably crucial because it carried in Bushehr many freed female slaves who migrated from Africa to the south Iranian coast, together with their music and singing. Some of them became professional singers and were invited

¹⁵ Women also had the opportunity to watch *ta'ziyeh* recited by an all-male troop in public space such as the *tekiyeh*, covered by their *chador* and in secluded areas: see, among the others, Lady Sheil 1856 and Taj os-Soltaneh 1993)

to celebrations, weddings and funerals. Their participation in musical sessions with local women produced an original combination of tunes and traditions. African flavour traces are still detectable in women mourning ceremonies of Bushehr, not only in those performed for private funerals but also in the Muharram rituals such as the *sar-pai-nowheh* (standing laments). Likewise, the presence of two ladies coryphaei who sing to each other in the morning rituals is due, with much probability, to this African heritage (Sharifian 1996: 174-175).¹⁶

There is not a precise chronological history indicating when and how women's role in rituals developed, but there are still living testimonies who recollect women audaciously playing instruments, such as the special drum called *dammam*, in two mosques located in town (ibid).¹⁷ This practice seems to have been abandoned, as well as the *sineh-zani* practiced by women up to fifty years ago in which they would gather in circle and turn while holding each other's shoulder, as men still do nowadays.¹⁸ Women now perform other types of *sineh-zani* as we will see.

So, according to historical sources and to my interviewees women's expanded roles in public rituals are quite recent. I argue that an important fact in local life and especially in women's life was constructed by the Iraq-Iran war, that has been particularly obnoxious in the Bushehr area: women have paid an enormous tribute to the war but, at the same time, they have been catapulted by it in society as substitutes of their male kinfolk both at work and in the family arena. In this respect, they properly represent the allegory of the *ahl al-bait's* women who survived in the Karbala battle and allowed Shi'i to continue and thrive. "Veteran" Bushehri women have been of much help during the conflict with Iraq: now, they claim their role both in the complex iconography of Muharram rituals, as well as with their society.

2.1 Approaching the climax

In Iran, the *ta'ziyeh* is the ritual par excellence. Its importance, among other things, lies in the fact that it is a complex structure, i.e., it has "a beginning and an end that is recognizable to actors and spectators" (Burkhard 2006: 483). *Ta'ziyeh* represents Shi'i Iranian's "total drama" (Chelkowski 2010) and it is extremely important to play an active and crucial role in it. Therefore, it is natural that women

¹⁶ The importance of the sea in the local culture is also testified by some ritual performed during the fete of the sacrifice's night (*'eid-e ghorban*), when people pay their homage to the sea by throwing some herbs in it or - in case they are sick - by sprinkling sea water on themselves (Darali 2014, 47).

¹⁷ Sharifian mentions a lady called Mishti Zahra playing *dammam* in the mosque of the Khizmiha neighbourhood and Mrs Dei Hassan Mohini playing cymbal in a Jofreh mosque (p. 175).

¹⁸ In the male *sineh-zani* in circle, men usually hold each other by clinging a hand on a shawl wrapped around the companion's belt.

claim their presence in the *ta'ziyeh*, not only in the more traditionally "female" rituals such as the *rowzeh-khanis* and/or the all-female representations.

In Bushehr, as in other parts of Iran, the apex of Muharram rituals, i.e., the *ta'ziyeh*, is accompanied by other observances. The women's rituals in which I took part were quartered in a private house courtyard. The court was accessible through a corridor totally covered by tapestry decorated with Karbala's events, while a huge panel representing the twelve imams hid the wall opening towards the court. The hostesses would mostly stay in the inner part of a patio, close to the kitchen, ready to bring out food and beverages. On that side they had also placed a speaker with the microphone chiefly used by the main singer. Women and children of all ages would sit along the outer walls, but as the guests became more numerous, they sat almost everywhere. The crowd increased on the nights of *tasu'a* and *'ashura*, so much so that it became difficult to perform the *sar-pai*, especially because the centre of the courtyard was occupied by a replica of 'Ali Asghar's cradle and of the *hejleh*.

Though the hosting family had invited a professional singer (who, as we will see, was also the protagonist of other events) she was not the only chorus leader. Other ladies among the women gathered in the assembly were from time to time solicited to take the lead of the chanting. While the qualified leader would consult her notebook to choose the proper song and to check the words every now and then, the others sang what they knew by heart. Naturally, the chants were all grieving for the fate of Hosain (similarly to what happens in men's rituals); however, since women have a special affection for the ladies of the imam's family such as Zeinab, Fatemeh, Laila and Sakineh and for his small children, in particular for 'Ali Asghar murdered in Karbala when he was only six months old, many lyrics were devoted to these figures. The chants devoted to 'Ali Asghar are locally called *laiehlaieh* (Persian: *lalai*) as they are actually sung as lullabies. The chorus leader pays special care in order to modulate her voice in the most motherly and moving way possible singing some heart-breaking verses, while the others respond with the refrain "*Asghar lala, Asghar lala*" (Hush Asghar, hush). The first words of the *nowheh* make us understand that it is 'Ali Asghar's mother, Rubab, who asks her daughter Sakineh to cuddle the little one:

Oh Sakineh, sit down and sing a lullaby to him

Asghar lala, Asghar lala

Put his arm around your neck, pat him

Asghar *lala*, Asghar *lala*

Lit a votive light, so that Asghar won't die

Asghar *lala*, Asghar *lala*

The new gold anklet chained around his foot has gone

Asghar *lala*, Asghar *lala*

Think about camphor and shroud, Asghar has left this world

It's my destiny, Asghar *lala*.¹⁹

Another type of *nowheh* for 'Ali Asghar is sung exclusively by a soloist: though the words are reminiscent of a lullaby (e. g., "Why do not sleep my dear, *lai la lai*"), the singer modulates her voice in a high and grievous pitch. This technique is very old and also used for mourning other members of the *ahl-al bait's* family, also in the *ta'ziyeh*.

While these and other lyrics for 'Ali Asghar are sung, women would often touch the cradle that symbolizes imam Hosain's youngest son himself. In the rituals I observed, the cradle²⁰ was very colourful and nicely bedecked: the wooden structure was a replica of a traditional, old-fashioned crib and totally covered by a black textile embroidered with golden flowers. From the top of the structure red, green and pink glittering draperies fell softly down. The cradle was enriched by girdles of colourful seeds and beads and by mobile decorations. In addition, on one side of the structure a round mirror was hung in order to reflect the faithful's mourning faces. The cradle is annually prepared by one of the neighbourhood women and displayed in the nights of *tasu'a* and *'ashura* when it becomes the fulcrum of the lullabies sung for 'Ali Asghar.²¹ Though heavily decorated, the cradle was light enough to be carried by a single – yet quite strong – woman the following morning during the procession leading to the area prepared to stage the *ta'ziyeh*.

Even though many of the *nowhehs* for 'Ali Asghar are sung in a softening tone, just like an appropriate lullaby, there is also space for a more energetic tribute to the imam's little son. One of the songs played during *tasu'a* night had a refrain that moved women to swing their bodies with great energy. The song was articulated in three parts: in the first one, the solo singer intoned a sad lyric (e.g., "you died because of the blood in your tongue, the cradle became your tomb"). In the second

¹⁹ This lyric is also sung when a child dies and women pay visit to his/her family.

²⁰ In this context, the cradle (*gahvareh* in Persian) is called *tovit* or *makhtak*, depending on the neighbour that organizes the ritual: both are ancient (Sassanid) terms.

²¹ I was told that in some neighbourhood women pass their little children under the cradle arch in sign of vow. Or they themselves turn around the cradle and take a vote.

one, the choir replied: "Oh my little Asghar, oh my child who didn't drink milk, oh Asghar, *lailai*, oh crown on my head, *lailai*"). This refrain was sung by women who kept the right hand on their bosom while gently swinging the body from one side to the other. While chanting and beating their chests, women would pass around a replica of 'Ali Asghar, i.e. a ragdoll wrapped in green and gold fabric.

However, after the singer's second stanza, the choir repeated the refrain more vigorously and the standing women started to rhythmically beat their chest and shoulders with crossed arms as if they were vehemently embracing themselves. From time to time, some woman would ululate (*kel*) in sign of honour. This pattern was repeated several times. I was told that barren women take part in this ritual with the hope to become pregnant; in case their wish is satisfied, on the following Muharram they will offer some money or a piece of gold for 'Ali Asghar's cradle.

The other symbolic object occupying a large space in the courtyard was the *hejleh*, i.e., the replica of the nuptial bedroom prepared for the wedding of Hosain's nephew Qasem with his cousin Fatemeh Kubra. This wooden structure, about 1.50 meter high, was shaped like a tent and covered with green, purple and pink sheer fabric draped on the four corners with metal yarns (like the ones used for Christmas trees), so as to leave the inner part visible. The *hejleh* is another pivotal focus of Muharram ritual, especially for women, who gather around it to sing and beat their chest. The wedding celebrated between the two previously promised teen-age cousins, whose bridegroom is destined to be killed in the last assault against Hosain and his party, though generally agreed to be historically baseless, is an important chapter of the Muharram epic, so much so that Iranian Shi'i commemorate it with a special *ta'ziyeh* (*Ta'ziyeh-e Qasem*). The event and related rituals are particularly saddening for women who identify themselves with the female figures close to the two adolescents, especially their mothers and Fatemeh's aunt (i.e., Zeinab). This episode and its cult well epitomize the great enthusiasm that makes the Muharram rituals so sought after and beloved. In particular, as already observed (Humayuni 1979), it is women who potently come out of this narrative. For instance, Fatemeh Kubra first objects to her own wedding, as she has just lost her brother 'Ali Akbar, on Karbala's camp, but then accepts the marriage in order to allow her father's ideals (and therefore the Shi'i version of Islam) to survive. Besides, she endures the joyful-sorrowful ceremony with the harrowing knowledge that she is bound to become a widow from her very wedding day. Thus, she turns into an emblem of sisterly love, of daughterly obedience, of womanly sacrifice, all for a higher cause. In the same

way, Qasem's mother begs the imam Hosain (who is reluctant to allow Qasem to take part in the last battle) to participate in the action, though she is aware of the fact that her son's death is ineluctable. By the same token, Omm Laila and Zeinab, though grieving for their dears, accept to put their mourning dress aside; Zeinab, in particular, has to prepare the *hejleh*. All these ladies proved to be capable of self-abnegation and therefore they are very dear to Shi'i, especially to Shi'i women.

Women of Bushehr not only remember Qasem's event with a *ta'ziyeh*, they also dedicate to his saga the *nowhehs* they chant in the seventh, eight and ninth evenings of Muharram. The objects used in these celebrations convey a mix of revel and melancholy; for example, the candies (*noql*) exhibited in the *hejleh* are not of the typical white colour but rather greenish, to symbolise the fact that the wedding takes place in mournful circumstances. Usually, inside the *hejleh*, women lay trays with fruit, sweets and candies.

The night of *'ashura*, at the conclusion of the all-female part of the ritual, women emptied the *hejleh*; then four young men came to lift it, and everybody set off. Behind the *hejleh*, other women carried on their heads the trays with fruit and candies, and another one carried 'Ali Asghar's cradle. The procession started, heading towards the local mosque. Essential parts of this procession were two kids, a girl and a boy, dressed as Fatemeh Kubra (with her face covered by a bridal veil) and Qasem (in green). One of the women personified Omm Laila and another one, Zeinab. While slowly walking, a woman intoned: "Let's close the bridal chamber of pleasure because the groom has come!"

The other women repeated the verse that would become the refrain and the choir leader continued:

Oh Fatemeh, may I become your sacrifice, Qasem has come!
Let's close the bridal chamber of pleasure because the groom has come!
Let's grieve tonight, alas the groom has come
Let's close the bridal chamber of pleasure because the groom has come!
Oh dear Fatemeh, alas the groom has come!
Let's close the bridal chamber of pleasure because the groom has come!
Like a flower fallen on the earth, alas the bridegroom has come!

This *nowheh* was followed by others *nowhehs*, some of which had already been sung before on the previous nights, such as: "Woe to this bliss and to this marriage. Hundred woes to this bliss and to this marriage".

The *nowheh* lyrics create an extraordinary contrast with the glittering *hejleh*, with the would-be spouses' beautiful clothes and with the rich gifts carried on the trays. As a matter of fact, women's words underline the pain their ancestors had to bear, i.e., to get prepared for a joyful event -the wedding- in the midst of mourning and on the eve of their own death. By so doing, they stage the perennial trouble women are set to face, that is to set aside their own aspirations and sorrows and be ready to sacrifice themselves for a superior cause. In this sense, Omm Laila and Zeinab sing an eloquent duet:

Omm Laila: Alas, Qasem's pleasure is in the elected harem

Zeinab: Oh his aunt would like to be dead

Omm Laila: Oh my daughter, oh my flesh, I'll close you nuptial chamber with a flower

Zeinab: Oh aunt's darling, I'd sacrifice myself for your happiness. I haven't closed your nuptial chamber.

These *nowhehs* echo the *Ta'ziyeh of Qasem*, in which the *ahl-e al bait'* s women, though still obeying imam Hosain's orders, manifest their dissent. In this representation, in fact, the would-be bride Fatemeh articulates her unwillingness to become a spouse on several occasions: first, to her aunt Zeinab who comes to explain Hosain's wish, Fatemeh declares that she has just dressed in black to mourn her brother 'Ali Akbar's recent death, thus she cannot be ready for celebrating and rejoicing. Second, once persuaded to get married, Fatemeh refuses to mount on 'Ali Akbar's horse that should lead her to the bridal chamber, as the custom would require: this time she succeeds, her father Hosain is moved by her attachment to the dead brother and sends his own horse, Zuljanah, to escort Fatemeh to the wedding tent.

Likewise, Qasem's mother first rejects the idea of her son's wedding that becomes possible only because Zeinab, though pain-stricken by her beloved family's fate, persuades the other women to accept the wedding. Certainly, women's reluctance to comply with everything Hosain orders turns to be a pretext to underline Hosain's humanity and love for his family: the wedding is only dictated by the

imam's desire to comply with his brother Hasan's last wish, i.e., to have the son Qasem married to Fatemeh. Besides, Hosain shares his women's pain, especially Fatemeh's and therefore does not compel her to mount on 'Ali Akbar's horse.

Nevertheless, in the *nowhehs* sung in the *majles* and the parades, women vindicate their own sorrow by emphasizing the pain suffered by their ancestors (i.e., the women of Karbala) who were compelled to accept a conjugal union bound to end without being consummated. Indeed, immediately after the ceremony, Qasem leaves for the battlefield in which the cruel Shemr kills him.

Eventually, the women's *dasteh* reached the mosque patio, whose three sides were completely covered by green and black flags and by wall hangings painted with Muharram images. Here, about a hundred men were performing their *sineh-zani*, arranged in concentric circles, responding to the lyrics chanted by a young but professional singer standing on a podium. When women arrived, the men's chorus stopped and a band began to play the typical music used during wedding displays; as a matter of fact, women's *dasteh* proceeded as if it were a wedding parade, it flanked the men's outer circle and reached the core of the ritual, close to the podium, at the foot of which both the *hejlehand* 'Ali Asghar's cradle were laid down. At that point, the singer and one of the women started a duet:

Male singer (acting as Qasem): Dear Aunt Zeinab, alas, I would sacrifice myself for you.

Female singer (acting as Zeinab): Shall I prepare you the bridal chamber or shall I cry for losing you my dear child? Shall I bring shroud and camphor, shall I cry for you?

After a few minutes, the male singer came down from the podium and left the *majles* in which women continued their performance. The solo female singer continued for a while by lamenting the miserable fate of the *ahl- al-bait's* newlywed couple; then, she solicited the other women to a *nowheh* in which they would repeat the refrain: "Let's close the bridal chamber of pleasure because the groom has come!" At this point women had formed a circle and were beating their chest more and more vehemently. Much of the crowd had gone, but many men, especially young ones, had remained and circled the performing women – though at a certain distance and looked on. Next, the choir leader switched to a series of litanies to the *ahl- al-bait's* components, moulding her recitation in a tone similar to that which Catholic

people use in reciting the rosary.²² Each litany was followed by the invocation "oh you wronged"! (*yamazlum*) pronounced by women who steadily increased the intensity of their *sineh-zani* swinging their body almost in a frenzy. After about ten minutes, the circle had dissolved and the women returned to their courtyard, to continue with more *nowehs* and prayers until first lights of the following day.

2.1.2 Women on the stage: the day of 'Ashura

The following morning, the women of the family hosting the previous days' rituals started off carrying the *hejleh* and 'Ali Asghar's cradle. They passed the mosque, in whose court young men were fastening a thick leather belt around their hips, in which to fix the pole holding up a huge 'alam²³ to be carried to the *ta'zīyeh* field. Here other women gathered and the procession grew; along the road, it converged with people going to the *ta'zīyeh* both as actors and as spectators. A rope fenced the field prepared for the performance. Inside, two main and opposite spots had been created, one occupied by the Caliph's men ("the bad") and the other by the *ahl al-bait's* people. In the latter stood the tents of Hosain and his family and in front of them were seated his women and children. The *ta'zīyeh* unfolded according to the tradition, as it does in all the other Iranian towns and villages, but the stark difference is that in Bushehr it is women who perform the role of the *ahl al-bait's* ladies. All dressed in black, with gloves and *niqab* they play and sing through the microphone: as Omm Laila, who sings to her son 'Ali Akbar who is going to die in battle "I'd have liked to see you with the bridegroom dress, but this desire will remain in my heart"; as little Sakineh Roqaiyeh who moves the audience by singing out aloud to her uncle 'Abbas²⁴ her need of water and her childish desperation for the severe situation faced by Hosain's party:

[...] I am a child who never saw any sufferance
My dear brave uncle
When will you have pity of my dried lips?

²² Interestingly enough, the recitation of the rosary is today considered as a relic of the past in most of the Catholic world.

²³ An iron standard with a horizontal metallic bar with various metal objects; in the present case, it was shaped like peacock feathers representing the twelve imams.

²⁴ Hosain's half brother who dies trying to get some water from the river controlled by the enemy's troops. As it is known, Hosain's people were left thirsting by the Caliph's army.

"The lioness of Karbala", as Zeinab is called, plays the principal role by galvanizing her companions in the harem, assuring her deepest affection and loyalty to her brother Hosain, and gathering the harem at the end of the terrible defeat when all the ladies and the surviving children are taken to Damascus.

In Bushehr, women do sing aloud in the *ta'ziyeh* field in which they walk, circumambulate around the male heroes, touch them and get touched by them. The actors' body language is spontaneous and natural, showing the profound and innocent love between mother and son, sister and brother, niece and uncle. Significantly, women have the last word by singing in Karbala while the camp is set on fire: Karbala is the source of any future development for the Shi'i, therefore women symbolically claim the recognition of the role they have been playing in keeping the community alive. Similarly to their ancestors, they do not walk in the shadow of their male relatives, but claim their right to self-expression and leadership.

With Hosain's slaying and his camp set on fire, the first decade of Muharram ends, but the "mournful festival" continues. And, for what concerns women, they are engaged in *majles* until the end of the Safar month. Karbala is not the end of everything but the beginning of the Shi'i community and it is now that Zeinab plays her role of custodian of the Shi'i heritage by protecting her brother's orphans and thus consenting the *ahl al-bait's* perpetuation. No wonder she remains the undisputed protagonist of the elegies recited in the post '*ashura* period.

3. Religion in practice and the right to visibility

In the whole Shi'i world women want to live Muharram and Safar rituals actively, and they are mostly allowed to do it by the local authorities, both religious and/or stata. However, when it comes to sharing activities with men in the public sphere, especially if women claim to be protagonists, the religious establishment shows ambiguity about the legitimacy of women's pretences. In other words, there is no problem if women want to organize a *rowzeh-khani*, to cook votive food or to sew the *ta'ziyeh's* actors clothes, as far as they do not ask to sing with men in a public *majles* or to perform in a passion play. The only place in which women have access to the public and gender-mixed arena is in Bushehr and its surrounding area, though this achievement is not altogether accepted. I have spoken at length with 'Ali Nikraifard, a community leader in a Bushehr mid- town quarter and a staunch promoter of women's presence in Muharram rituals, including the *ta'ziyehs*.

According to 'Ali, there are people who have been trying hard to prevent women from singing publicly in Bushehr, and explicitly asked him to ban the ceremony of Qasem's wedding (*majles-e hejleh-ye Qasem*); however, "Bushehri refused because they are attached to their traditions."²⁵ 'Ali seemed to hint that the opposition would come from outside Bushehr. 'Ali also added that one day during a Muharram ritual led in the local mosque courtyard in which women were singing, a man who had come to Bushehr to visit his relatives in a nearby house, summoned him. "I heard a woman singing – said the man – don't you know that it is a sin (*gonahdareh*)?!" All the mourners were ready to support 'Ali but one of the female solo singers came out and attacked her censor: "Who are you to criticize me, I am an adult woman, I have husband and children, you cannot blame me!" However, 'Ali added, some local men too are against women's singing, though they appear to be a minority.²⁶ Evidently, someone sees women's massive and unusual presence in the rituals as a potential threat to the social and religious status quo.

All in all, Bushehri men and women seem to be very proud of their peculiarity. On the one hand, women practice an interesting generational passage by teaching girls so that they can perform the role of *ahl al bait's* daughters in *ta'ziyeh* now, and take their masters' place as adult actors later on. On the other, there are men who are dedicated to develop women's performing abilities. The male instructors²⁷ share many hours of work and exert a lot of effort in teaching women and rehearsing with them.

Many of these men's female kinfolk sing and recite in Muharram rituals. In this respect, 'Ali Nikraifard's family is proverbial: each female component of his family is somehow involved in the ceremonies with different tasks. One of his aunts even acts as the women's spokesperson in charge of arranging the interaction between men and women in the common rituals.

Muharram rites represent a much sought-after moment in Bushehri life and involve the community across lines of gender, class and age. In the ceremonies I observed, women of all ages were involved women and for many of them it was a festive occasion in which to dress with special clothes, to show jewels and to wear make up. Many were clad in black chador, but many wore *roupush* and *rousari* leaving locks of blood-dyed hair outside. There have been moments of deep

²⁵ Interview led on 4 October /Muharram 2014.

²⁶ And perhaps they are ashamed to publicly declare their disapprobation: in the documentary "My Heritage Singing" (*Mirath-eman avaz*) shot in 2013, the director Fatemeh Mousavi interviews a man who disagrees on women's singing but he does not allow his face to be shown.

²⁷ Some of them are professional actors.

commotions, and flowing of tears, but there have also been many smiles amongst friends, tenderness towards children, exchange of compliments and cordiality. The atmosphere remained always very relaxed and friendly with a touch of excitement such as is normal during a most welcome event. In particular, the night of *'ashura* a group of ladies coming from another neighbourhood joined the local gathering: each of them carried an elegant sash hemmed in gold and embroidered with greetings to the *ahl al-bait's* family that signalled their being guests from another area. They are part of the *did-o-bazdid* (return visits) system that operates in Muharram too and that implies that sooner or later the hosting ladies will reciprocate the visit. On the day of *'ashura* too, the saddest day of the Muharram and Safar period, after the *ta'ziyeh* one could see whole families picnicking or strolling along the seaside, in holiday attire and hugging babies dressed like little 'Ali Asghars- clad in green with a headband praising the little martyr. The atmosphere was closer to that experienced on a tranquil and serene holiday day than to that expected on the anniversary of a momentous catastrophe.

By keeping the practice alive, women show their capability of organizing elaborate rituals, thus acting both as preservers of the tradition but, simultaneously, as agents of innovation. In fact, by claiming the stage, i.e., their social role, they establish a new discourse on gender. The women of Bushehr claim that it is their religion that gives them the legitimacy to perform in public, as this is a laudable act of piety: *omnia munda mundis*, to the pure all things are pure. At the same time, women represent a challenge to the orthodoxy similar to that launched by the so-called "Islamic feminists" who reread the religious message and challenge patriarchal interpretations of religion.²⁸ The potentialities of this female epiphany in Muharram rites scare the defenders of the *status quo* and even embarrass them; on the one hand, they cannot accuse women of immoral behaviour because religious feelings and pietas are what move them. On the other, the patriarchy is alarmed by the subversive potential of women's presence. This explains why, apart from local scholars, almost no one in Iran has so far paid attention to Bushehri women's rituals: on the Persian web one may find traces of these activities but no picture or sound is reproduced. It is also amazing that, so far, foreign scholars have not taken into consideration this phenomenon that broadens our conception of Iranian women's activities and status. Most ethnographic studies of Iranian women and society tend

²⁸ It should also be noted that frequently the way the Karbala narrative is told enforces strongly patriarchal values; for example, by women being portrayed as sacrificing for their beloved. I thank the Anonymous reviewer of this paper for making this point.

to misrepresent the reality by stressing uniquely the “defiant” segment’s life in the capital, whose actors most despise religious rituals -either because they consider them to be folkloristic and archaic, or because of their manipulation by a political power they strongly reject. In this way, researchers disregard the fact that Iran is characterized by a great cultural diversity and that men and women living far from the posh north Tehran area adopt many other and multiple strategies to affirm their agency.²⁹ I argue that women in Bushehr have proved they can autonomously develop different experiences of self-realization, following their own way of emancipation, which is certainly modern because it is not a continuation of a canon but rather establishes a new subjectivity. Not only have they found the way to make their voices heard, they have also established a category of professionals of the voice, thus amplifying every woman’s voice. Though they perpetuate gender-coded symbols (patience, sacrifice, enduring suffering)

along the path of tradition, their agency is political, because they act in the *polis* and authoritatively affirm their presence in the public sphere. By acting in the communal space in which everybody wants to take part women become political subjects (Rollero 2006). In other words, they enact that “art of presence” (Bayat 2004) that, by challenging gender hierarchy, enforce their collective action on the state and on the patriarchy.

Bushehri women’ ideas and actions show that active citizenry can be exerted in multiple ways; their strong presence in the most important local rituals constitutes another tile in the complex picture representing Iranian contemporary society and life in which women always play crucial roles.

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²⁹ On the limits of recent ethnographic studies on Iran see Olszewska 2013.

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