

Of *ziyarat*, nationalist and religious identities: Gendered perspectives on Shia pilgrimage in Iraq

Almost 1400 years later, the tragic death of Imam Hussain and his male relatives on 10th Muharram in Karbala in 680 AD continues to be an important religious, political and social symbol of justice and resilience. Every year, as 10th Muharram approaches, millions of Shia Muslims around the world frequent shrine cities of Najaf, Karbala, Kazmain, Samarra and Balad in Iraq to pay their respects to Shia Imams and to commemorate the tragedy of Karbala by participating in numerous mourning rituals.

This paper focuses on the ways in which *ziyarat* (visitation) to shrines in Iraq entangles the relationship between gender, religion, nationalism and internationalism. How does *ziyarat* challenge our very understanding of nationalism and internationalism? How is the story of Karbala as an emblem of justice manifested in rituals conducted in shrines of Shia Imams? In what ways do these rituals complicate hegemony and in turn, how does this convolute our understanding of nationalism and internationalism? How does the presence of women in shrines complicate the relationship between gender, nationalism, internationalism and practiced religion?

These questions will be addressed through ethnographic study of a group of Pakistani Shia women who will embark on *ziyarat* to Iraq during July 2024. I'll be travelling with these women from Karachi and will be staying with them in Iraq during their pilgrimage. Through this rich ethnographic experience, I hope to observe how women claim sacred spaces, how they behave in shrines, how they communicate with each other and the rituals they perform. What does this tell us about the ways in which women navigate their nationalist identity as Pakistani women and transcendental identity as Shia women? By employing an ethnographic methodology, this paper challenges our existing assumptions about the religious, social and political aspects of shrines and shows how the three are not as distinct as they are often considered. In turn, this provides an interesting angle to understand the ways in which personal and public experiences of piety are an integral part of the discourse of religion, nationalism and internationalism.