GRIEF AND IDENTITY: PERFORMANCE OF SHIA COMMUNITY RELIGIOUS RITUALS IN DISTRICT JHANG (1947–2009)

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ABSTRACT

This study argues that ritual performances among the Shia community of District Jhang, Pakistan, served as powerful mechanisms for negotiating collective grief, asserting religious identity, and sustaining cultural continuity during the volatile period from 1947 to 2009. The temporal scope encompasses the displacement following the Partition of British India, the rise of political Islam under General Zia-ul-Haq, and escalating sectarian violence which defined Jhang as a conflict hotspot. Using ethnographic, archival, and oral history data, the research analyzes Muharram processions, majalis, and azadari as resilient forms of cultural practice. Findings demonstrate that the ritualization of Karbala's historical suffering provides a necessary master narrative for understanding contemporary marginalization, transforming public grief from devotional piety into a deliberate political assertion of identity. This analysis provides a focused, micro-level understanding of how lived religious experience underpins collective resilience in a critical conflict zone.

KEYWORDS: Grief, Identity, Religion, Rituals, District Jhang.

This essay asserts that the Shia ritual practices in District Jhang, Punjab, Pakistan, between 1947 and 2009 transcended mere religious expression, functioning instead as dynamic mechanisms for resisting marginalization, preserving communal identity, and enabling the community to cope with frequent socio-political upheaval (Rieck 2015, 101–145). This study establishes the enduring role of rituals like majalis, processions, and commemorations, showing how they remain deeply linked to history and politics, connections that consistently strengthen community solidarity and collective memory (Jafarian 2008, 215–230). The endurance of these practices provided a necessary anchor in an environment characterized by systemic instability.

Following the partition of British India, District Jhang underwent a dramatic transformation after 1947, moving from a multi-communal society to an increasingly polarized arena (Fuchs 2019, 67–103). The wide-ranging consequences of Partition—including displacement, economic victimization, and the acute need to re-develop a social and spiritual order—imposed immense pressure on the newly settled Shia community (Nasr 1999, 311–323). In this turbulent atmosphere, the communal performance of religious rituals was immediately utilized to preserve identity and respond to shared trauma. Commemorative rites such as majalis and Ashura processions not only respected the martyrdom of Imam Hussain at Karbala but also gave the community a powerful symbolic identity, allowing them to define themselves in relation to loss, injustice, and endurance, a foundational psychological mechanism for coping with profound instability (Teymoori 2018, 25–70).

The period from 1947 to 2009 is crucial for studying this relationship between grief and identity due to significant socio-political transformations in Pakistan. Over the decades, Jhang evolved into a hotspot of sectarian conflict, especially from the 1980s onward with the rise of influential sectarian organizations like Sipah-e-Sahaba ("The Impact of Zia-ul-Haq's Regime" 2021, 84–100). This period captures the transition from communal harmony to increasing polarization and intensified violence, demanding a comprehensive analysis of how Shia mourning rituals became powerful expressions of identity, memory, and resistance. The rituals provide a lens through which the community reframed contemporary persecution through the moral imperative of resistance against tyranny, thus confirming the political and cultural necessity of their continuation (Rieck 2015).

My study is deeply informed by the History of Emotions (HoE) school, which posits that emotions are fundamentally "culturally and historically constructed" rather than mere innate feelings (Stearns 1986, 185–193). This theoretical stream, advanced by scholars like Peter N. Stearns and Barbara H. Rosenwein, emphasizes that the collective management of feeling—or "emotionology"—and the existence of "emotional communities" define how grief is expressed and interpreted within a given society (Rosenwein 2006, 2). This framework moves beyond viewing Shia mourning solely through a theological lens, examining grief as a sophisticated, culturally embedded practice within the specific socio-religious context of District Jhang. The formal structure of Shia ritual ensures that the standardized expression of grief functions as a reliable social and political marker, defining

the allegiance and boundaries of the collective (Dixon 2015).

A critical mass of scholarship, including the work of Vali Nasr and Mariam Abou Zahab, underscores how historical factors—specifically British colonial policies and the institutionalization of religious politics following the Partition of 1947—created a socio-political environment leading to the marginalization of Shia Muslims (Nasr 2006; Abou Zahab and Roy 2004). This marginalization was dramatically heightened following the rise of political Islam under General Zia-ul-Haq and the subsequent ascent of sectarian-jihadi organizations in areas like Jhang (Ali 2017). Scholars focusing on ritual and memory, such as Veena Das and Michael Fisher, confirm that in response to such systemic threats, rituals transition into essential mechanisms for preserving collective memory and embodying resistance values (Das 1995; Fisher 1980). This body of literature provides the crucial context, allowing this study to analyze the sustained persecution documented by scholars like Muhammad Yasir Ali, and how it transformed acts of commemoration into explicit acts of communal defiance and survival (Bakhsh, Khan, and Haider 2020, 51–57).

The theoretical core of this study utilizes William M. Reddy's concept of "emotives," defining emotional expressions not as passive indicators of an inner state but as active, performative acts designed to shape internal states and carry political weight within society's "emotional regimes" (Reddy 2001). This framework is vital for understanding how public displays of sorrow, such as ritual weeping and rhythmic chest beating (matam), operate as sophisticated political statements in a hostile environment

(Schubel 1998, 33–46). Furthermore, the aesthetic elements of rituals, analyzed by scholars like Syed Akbar Hyder, confirm the central role of marsiyas (elegiac poetry) and nauhas (lamentation songs) in regulating and scripting the communal affective experience, ensuring the consistent ideological transmission of the Karbala narrative (Hyder 2006). Additionally, perspectives from anthropologists like Talal Asad and sociologists like Saskia Sassen emphasize the spatial politics of rituals, noting how the changing urban landscape of Jhang impacted the visibility, accessibility, and political expression of Shia communal grief, confirming that the negotiation of public space is inherently political (Asad 1993, 123–125; Sassen 1991).

This research utilizes a qualitative ethnographic design, chosen for its ability to capture the deeply personal and communal "lived experiences" of the Shia community in District Jhang (Yin 2018). The core theoretical lens employs William M. Reddy's concept of "emotives," which frames Shia rituals (such as majalis and Muharram processions) as emotionally performative acts that actively shape and regulate collective grief (Reddy 2001). Within the specific sectarian context of Jhang, this framing allows the rituals to be analyzed not merely as expressions of sorrow but as tools for emotional navigation, enabling the Shia community to assert resilience, preserve cultural continuity, and resist dominant narratives through embodied emotional expression. This is further supported by the work of Thomas Dixon, who investigated the role of public weeping as an emotional and cultural expression pivotal in identity formation, which is applied here to understand the function of grief in

constructing and preserving Shia identity in Jhang (Dixon 2015).

The methodology relies on the triangulation of three distinct data streams. Firstly, Ethnography involved extensive participant observation conducted during key religious events, particularly Muharram processions and majalis, in various community-dense locations across Jhang (Haider 2023, Fieldnotes). Observations focused on the performance dynamics, gender participation, and the spatial arrangement of these events. Secondly, Oral History was collected via semi-structured interviews with diverse participants, including religious scholars, community leaders, procession organizers, and lay members from Shia-dense areas such as Siwa Sadaat, Majhi Sultan, and Shah Jeona (Haider 2023, Interviews). These interviews captured personal and collective narratives, specifically addressing how ritual practices had shifted in response to historic occurrences like Partition (1947) and the emergence of sectarianism in Pakistan. Finally, Archival Data was employed through longitudinal analysis of historical documents, local annals, and records of religious assemblies, essential for contextualizing the rituals across the 1947–2009 period, including government reports concerning Muharram and sectarian tensions (Punjab Archives Lahore 1947–1955).

Post–Partition Trauma and the Ritual Master Narrative (1947–1977)

The immediate aftermath of the Partition of British India in 1947 saw the Shia community in District Jhang grappling with profound trauma stemming from displacement, socio-economic instability, and the urgent need to establish cultural continuity within the newly formed state (Fuchs 2019, 67–103). The communal performance of Muharram rituals, even in the early post-Partition decades, immediately assumed a functional role beyond mere piety, becoming essential tools for communal healing and the preservation of cultural identity amidst systemic instability (Jafarian 2008, 215–230). The rituals provided a consistent, annual cycle of meaning-making which grounded the dispersed community, offering an essential spiritual and social structure when other civil and administrative institutions were fragile.

Central to this initial phase (1947–1960s) was the adoption of the Karbala incident as a psychological master narrative (Teymoori 2018, 25–70). The commemoration of Imam Hussain's martyrdom provided a powerful framework through which the community could interpret its own contemporary suffering—displacement, economic loss, and increasing political marginalization—not as random tragedy but as a continuation of a noble, historical sacrifice (Ayoub 1978). This symbolic linkage was crucial: it allowed the community to define itself as inheritors of a sacred tradition of resistance against injustice (zulm), transforming raw trauma into an ideological source of endurance and self-definition within the new nation-state (Hyder 2006).

This identity was materially expressed through specific ritual semiotics (Cohen 2013, 3–19). The obligatory donning of black attire, the public procession of symbolic artifacts like the Alam (banners), and the meticulous observance of ritual prohibitions (azadari) were not just acts of personal devotion; they were visible, communal assertions of presence (Lightstone et al. 2006). In the fluid political environment of

early Pakistan, these symbolic actions established a discernible Shia public space and identity marker, reinforcing internal solidarity and projecting a distinct communal presence against the backdrop of an evolving and increasingly Sunni-majority national identity (Rieck 2015, 101–145).

The continuity was managed primarily through ritual assemblies (majalis), which served as crucial sites for the unmediated transmission of emotional scripts and cultural knowledge (Schubel 1991, 118–131). The predictable structure of the majlis, which included orations, poetry recitation, and collective mourning, institutionalized the community's emotional response, ensuring that grief was standardized and consistently linked to the theological and historical narrative of resistance (Schubel 1998, 33–46). This ritualization of sorrow was foundational, establishing the affective base that would later be politicized under conditions of extreme sectarian pressure.

THE RISE OF SECTARIANISM AND THE EMOTIVE OF RESISTANCE (1977–1990S)

The political landscape in Pakistan shifted dramatically during the Zia-ul-Haq era (1977–1988), marked by the rise of political Islam, which institutionalized sectarian identities and heightened tensions nationwide, particularly in volatile regions like Jhang (Nasr 2006). The global reverberations of the 1979 Iranian Revolution further inspired renewed Shia consciousness and political engagement, which simultaneously contributed to soaring sectarian conflict, exacerbated by the ascent of influential anti-Shia organizations ("The Impact of Zia-ul-Haq's Regime" 2021, 84–100). This environment fundamentally altered the function of public ritual,

transforming it from commemoration into a high-stakes, political emotive (Reddy 2001).

As persecution intensified, characterized by communal violence and systemic marginalization, the performance of azadari became a deliberate act of political defiance and communal resistance (Ali 2017). Scholars confirm that the sustained targeting of Shia populations in Jhang redefined religious ritual as an act of survival and identity construction (Abou Zahab 2020, 67–78). The explicit and highly visible public display of sorrow, especially during Muharram processions, ceased to be merely devotional and became a strategic performance designed to challenge and navigate the dominant "emotional regime" imposed by a hostile external environment (Khan, Chaudhry, and Badshah 2014, 123–138).

The physical practice of matam (rhythmic chest beating) in the face of escalating threats was a powerful demonstration of emotional mobilization (Dixon 2015). Far from indicating theological penitence or personal weakness, this collective, intentional pain asserted the community's moral superiority and its defiant commitment to the path of Imam Hussain—a commitment that prioritized truth and justice over security or submission (Hegland 1998, 240–266). The sheer intensity and visibility of matam during processions maximized political visibility, leveraging shared pain to strengthen internal loyalty and project an external moral position of resilience against sectarian tyranny (Bakhsh, Khan, and Haider 2020, 51–57).

The capacity of rituals to continuously narrate contemporary struggles using the historical symbology of Karbala underscores their inherent plasticity (Das 1995; Fisher

1980). By linking current systemic suffering to the timeless struggle against the tyrannical Yazid, the community provided a moral lens that offered psychological distance and effective coping mechanisms against profound marginalization and pervasive violence (Mahmood 2005). Thus, the endurance of public rituals, even when facing severe threats and violence, became a performance of political non-submission, solidifying the fusion of collective grief with group identity that characterized the conflict-ridden decades of the 1980s and 1990s.

GENDER DYNAMICS AND THE PRESERVATION OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Within the rigorous structure of Shia ritual practice in District Jhang, gender dynamics, while often segregated, played an indispensable role in maintaining the affective core and ensuring the intergenerational transmission of identity (Hegland 1998, 391–428). Traditionally, men occupied the visible public sphere, leading processions and performing the high-visibility matam, thereby enacting the community's public political emotive (Ali 2011). However, the resilience of the community was equally, and perhaps foundationally, sustained by the distinct spheres of women's participation, which concentrated on the organized and consistent transmission of emotional scripts within segregated, often domestic, spaces (Ruffle 2009, 167–176).

Women's majalis served as critical, often unobserved, infrastructure for cultural continuity, transforming personal homes and private assembly halls into vital reservoirs of collective memory (Wohlrab-Sahr 2005, 602–617). These gatherings focused on

detailed narrative engagement with the Karbala tragedy, using religious poetry and carefully scripted lamentations to ensure the emotional and ideological lessons were passed consistently across generations (Hasnain, Khan, and Hassan 2022, 243–262). This "private" performance of grief was politically foundational: it secured the emotional and historical narrative that ultimately fueled the highly visible, public acts of resistance performed by the men.

The shift towards urbanization and political volatility brought internal challenges, yet gendered ritual spaces provided necessary emotional stability. In times of extreme sectarian violence, when public processions were deemed too dangerous or were banned outright, women's domestic gatherings ensured that the performance of grief—and thus the assertion of Shia identity—did not cease (Hegland 2003, 411–442). These female-led rituals sustained the affective engine of the community, preserving the collective trauma and transforming it into a spiritual basis for endurance, even when public male-led resistance was temporarily curtailed by external threat.

Moreover, the performance of weeping, deeply rooted in the Shia tradition and often associated with the women of Imam Hussain's family, serves a unique cultural function that transcends simple sorrow (Dixon 2015). This stylized expression of tears in both public and private spaces acts as a powerful moral currency, symbolically affirming the righteousness of the persecuted community (Aghaie 2004). By embodying and preserving this ritualized, gendered sorrow, Shia women ensured that the community's commitment to the enduring moral framework of Karbala

remained potent, securing cultural and spiritual survival across the tumultuous six decades examined in this study.

THE AESTHETICS OF GRIEF: POETRY, PERFORMANCE, AND AFFECTIVE MOBILIZATION

The mobilization of collective grief in District Jhang depended fundamentally on the highly refined aesthetic and performative elements embedded within Shia rituals, particularly the symbiotic relationship between recitation, music, and dramatic action (Hyder 2001, 151–168). These aesthetic mediums—primarily the use of marsiyas (elegiac poetry) and nauhas (lamentation songs)—functioned as essential emotional scripts, meticulously regulating the communal affective experience and ensuring that historical trauma was internalized in a consistent, ideologically potent manner (Schubel 1991, 118–131).

The rhythmic and mournful recitation of nauhas during majalis and processions generated an intensely charged emotional atmosphere, enabling participants to empathetically and physically "relive" the Karbala tragedy (Schubel 1998, 33–46). By scripting sorrow—detailing specific moments of sacrifice, loss, and bravery—these narratives ensured that the collective emotional state served the intended ideological function: reinforcing the values of sacrifice and resistance rather than fragmenting into unmanageable personal despair (Ayoub 1978). This emotional regulation was critical for maintaining the unity and focus of the political emotive during the periods of escalating sectarian conflict in the 1980s and 1990s (Reddy 2001).

Beyond auditory elements, the performance relies heavily on visual and kinetic expressions. The collective performance of matam is a powerful, unifying, kinetic event, where shared, rhythmic physical pain fosters deep spiritual solidarity among participants (Stewart 1996, 78–93). By physically linking their bodies to the historical suffering of Imam Hussain, participants symbolically cleanse themselves while simultaneously asserting a defiant, collective identity (Aghaie 2004). This aesthetic-kinetic fusion is essential to the resilience model, transforming abstract religious conviction into a visceral, shared experience that strengthens communal bonds (Chelkowski 2005, 121–132).

Furthermore, the ritual use of sacred artifacts, such as the elaborately decorated taziya (replicas of mausoleums) and the zuljanah (the horse replica), served as visual anchors for the emotional mobilization (Pinault 1992, 135–152). These symbolic representations transformed abstract religious history into concrete, emotionally resonant objects that traveled through the streets of Jhang (Nakash 1998, 189–209). By physically consecrating public space, the processions became a visible, performative mapping of Shia identity onto the hostile urban landscape, using artistic expression and regulated emotional performance as primary tools for cultural and political assertion (Cole 2007).

URBANIZATION, DIGITAL ADAPTATION, AND CONTINUITY (1990S–2009)

The period spanning the late 1990s through 2009 saw the Shia community in District Jhang navigate the intersecting pressures of rapid urbanization, heightened security concerns, and the advent of digital

technologies (Litvak 1999, 204–219). The transformation of Jhang from a largely rural settlement into an urbanized center significantly affected the spatial dynamics and political expression of Shia rituals (Sassen 1991; Certeau 1984). The accessibility and security of permanent religious structures (Imambargahs) and temporary procession routes became critical points of negotiation, often requiring community mobilization to defend the right to public religious expression in densely populated, volatile urban areas (Rieck 2015).

Urban processions, while maximizing political visibility—a critical need for asserting identity in a hostile environment—simultaneously increased the community's security risks (Ali 2017). The necessity of meticulous planning of routes and the strategic use of security measures demonstrate the complex trade-off faced by the community between the political imperative of identity assertion and the fundamental survival imperative (Rizvi 2013, 321–339). The public performance of the emotive in these confined and dangerous urban spaces transformed every Muharram procession into a deliberate, highly courageous act of non-submission to sectarian pressure (Rizvi 2016, 352–367).

A defining adaptation in this final period was the strategic adoption of digital technology and social media platforms (Haider 2021). The advent of the internet and later, platforms like YouTube and Facebook, fundamentally altered how rituals were performed and experienced, effectively expanding ritual access beyond physical and geographical barriers (Hasnain, Khan, and Baba 2021, 147–158). Live streaming of majalis and processions allowed individuals who were geographically distant

or internally restricted due to security risks to participate actively, thereby fostering a sense of virtual, deterritorialized unity (Elias 2007, 387–408).

The digital turn served multiple, critical functions for cultural continuity. Firstly, these platforms became a "digital library" for the transmission of cultural knowledge, preserving lectures, poetry (marsiyas), and ritual performances online for younger generations (Haider 2021). Secondly, and most significantly, the strategic use of deterritorialized digital spaces represented a high-level adaptation to extreme pressure: when physical rituals became too dangerous or subject to strict state control, the community ensured the continuity of its narrative and the performance of its emotives in the virtual realm (Hasnain 2015). This technological resilience secured the cultural survival of the Shia identity, regardless of the restrictions placed upon the use of physical public space in Jhang (Robinson 2010, 219–236).

Conclusion

The longitudinal analysis of Shia ritual performances in District Jhang between 1947 and 2009 affirms the profound historical plasticity and resilience of these practices, confirming that they operated as indispensable tools for cultural preservation and identity assertion amidst pervasive socio-political challenge. The function of these rituals consistently evolved, shifting from crucial mechanisms of communal healing immediately post-Partition to highly articulate and resilient acts of identity assertion and political defiance against escalating sectarian hostility (Rieck 2015). The enduring core of Shia identity is maintained through its capacity to

continually transform historical suffering into contemporary political and moral strength (Ayoub 2003).

The theoretical lens of emotives proves invaluable, confirming that the public performance of grief, particularly matam and standardized lamentation, was a cohesive, politically articulated strategy for cultural survival (Reddy 2001). This stylized sorrow operated as an active counter-narrative, challenging the pervasive hostile "emotional regime" imposed by external socio-political forces. The capacity of the Jhang Shia community to integrate complex variables— historical trauma, evolving gender roles, intense external violence, and modern technology—into the very structure of the ritual is the definitive marker of their collective resilience across six decades of profound transformation.

The transition from localized, physically embodied grief to deterritorialized, virtual expressions demonstrates the enduring necessity of the ritual cycle as an engine of identity transmission (Haider 2021). This research underscores the necessity of micro-level, ethnographic studies to fully understand how localized religious practice sustains cultural and psychological life in the face of systemic challenge, thereby contributing a focused analysis to the broader scholarship on sectarian conflict and ritual resilience in Pakistan (Ali 2017). Ultimately, the performance of grief remains the most potent expression of belonging and political defiance for the Shia community in District Jhang.

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