

# Shi'a Women's Rituals in Northwest Pakistan: The Shortcomings and Significance of Resistance

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*Contained by strong bonds with family, religious community, and Shi'a spirituality, Shi'a Muslim women in Peshawar, Pakistan did not overtly protest strict gender rules. Rather, they resisted the phallogentric messages in ritual symbolism and sermons through ritual performance. They redefined ritual meanings by applying them to their own purposes. Their recitation, chanting, preaching, self-flagellation, repertoire of chants, administration, and outreach activities in Shi'a ritual demonstrated their abilities and competence in dealing with the public, thereby non-verbally contesting belittling gender characterizations. While noting the short-comings of their accommodating resistance through ritual practice and the uncertainty of its results, this article, based on fieldwork conducted in the early 1990s, argues that even such subtle gender resistance sustains women's resilience. It provides opportunities for building confidence and for practicing resistance which may later be wielded with significant outcomes, should developing conditions allow. gender, resistance, Pakistan, Shi'a Muslims, ritual, practice*

Through their performances of mourning rites, Shi'a *Mohajerin* (emigrants from India) Muslim women in Peshawar, Pakistan practiced an oblique, undeclared contestation against their subordinate position in a harshly patriarchal society. During my fieldwork in 1991, these women nurtured resilience in the face of repeated reminders of their religious dependency and lack of agency. They appropriated rituals for their own spiritual, religious, and social meanings. Their energizing ritual performances allowed them to build up, within a protected framework, characteristics and abilities which they may later, depending on surrounding conditions, be able to apply more overtly for influence, self-advancement, and loosening strict gender controls. In this article, I look at pre-movement and pre-articulated gender questioning. What are the preparatory activities that, if conditions change and if alternative perspectives become available, enable women to openly protest and change gender restrictions?

Drawing on Clifford Geertz's classic article, "Religion as a Cultural System" (1973), and works by Brenneis (1987), Mankekar (1993), Peteet (1994), and Schieffelin (1985), I argue that audiences of ritual or media are not passive recipients but participants in constructions of meaning. Based on participant observation at women's *majales* (sing. *majles*—communal mourning rituals) in Peshawar, I extend this argument to performers as well as audience. As both actors and audience, some Peshawar Shi'a women managed to deflect messages inherent in the mourning rituals about the inferiority, dependency, and disruptive nature of females by devising keener communications from their own validating ritual experiences. They subverted Shi'a rituals of martyrdom, recitations, mourning chants, self-flagellation, and male primacy to build up their own skills, self-esteem, and self-confidence. These valuable abilities and characteristics—created through their ritual practices and fueled by growing literacy, opportunities through education, and evolving social and economic conditions—then formed a realm of contention and negotiation over gender power, control, and change with implications potentially extending beyond the *majles*.

This situation bears much in common with one discussed by Michael de Certeau: "Thus the spectacular victory of Spanish colonization over the indigenous Indian cultures was diverted from its intended aims by the use made of it: even when they were subjected, indeed even when they accepted their subjection, the Indians often used the laws, practices, and representations that were imposed on them by force or by fascination to ends other than

those of their conquerors; they made something else out of them; they subverted them from within...(1988:31,32)<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, while acting out their profound attachment to Imam Husein, martyred in 680 A.D., and their acceptance of Shi'a gender advisories through the Moharram mourning rituals, some Peshawar Shi'a women simultaneously "made something else out of them; they subverted them from within." The women were in accord with the intended spiritual and religio/political uses of the Husein representations, but practiced implicit resistance to some of the rituals' phallogocentric gender lessons (Hegland 1998b).

Peshawar Shi'a women's religiosity and spirituality is of course complex. They have multifaceted motivations for ritual participation. In other articles I deal with a variety of aspects of their mourning ritual participation. For example, Peshawar Shi'a women's crucial and unique ritual roles advance Shi'a identity and unity as well as women's competence and confidence (1997). Women's ritual performances and community constitute a mixed blessing—bringing them both valued religious and spiritual roles and an empowering personal growth workshop but also limiting teachings about femininity and a strict, constricting social control unit.

Women also helped create a new multi-ethnic Shi'a identity and community from the formerly separate Shi'a ethnic communities, under the umbrella of the dominant *Mohajerin* (emigrants from India) Shi'a figures, ritual practices, theology, and language. Mohajerin women reached out to Shi'a women in other ethnic groups—Kizilbash and Pukhtun—and helped meld Shi'a into a more dedicated, vociferous, and cohesive interest group (Hegland 1998a).

In "Flagellation and Fundamentalism: (Trans)forming Meaning, Identity, and Gender" (1998b), I describe how Peshawar Shi'a women's ritual participation was expanding during the late 1980s and early 1990s as a result of the growth of religious transnationalism, sectarian violence in Pakistan, and so-called religious fundamentalism among Pakistani Shi'a and Sunni. In mourning rituals, women were therefore increasingly presented with limiting ritual constructions of femininity and so-called fundamentalist ideology. These were added on to ritual symbolic complexes which reinforced men as repositories of holy power and succor and reminded women of their own unworthiness to shed blood on behalf of Imam Husein and Shi'a Islam, as did men. In spite of these teachings, through their ritual practice women proclaimed their passionate devotion to Imam Husein and thereby their religious, spiritual, and social worthiness, subtly resisting negative gender definitions. We must look not only at teachings and

preachings but at what individuals make of religion and rituals in practice. Even self-flagellation and so-called religious fundamentalism may present potential for agency, individual creativity, and gender resistance, blended in with renewal of cultural and power structures.

In this article, my aim is the narrow one of investigating the shortcomings of women's subtle gender resistance through ritual participation, as well as discussing its potential for bringing about gender change—a loosening of gender control—should surrounding conditions permit. In previous work I analyze women's cooperation with men in serving the interests of their beleaguered Shi'a community, and women's deep devotion to their community, their mourning rituals, the martyrs of Karbala, and Shi'a spirituality. I refer briefly to those aspects in this article as well. My goal in this article, however, is to single out those ritual aspects of women's subtle resistance to the patriarchal demands and gender definitions promoted by male Shi'a clerics and leaders, and to evaluate them in terms of their potential to bring about positive gender modification. In this article, I take a liberal/progressive feminist approach, critically oriented, in that I evaluate as negative aspects of social institutions—whether political, religious, economic, or cultural—which constrain women's opportunities, mobility, definition, and ability to make their own decisions about their lives. I take a positive stance towards change which allows women more opportunity, equality, recognition of their social and religious worth, and ability to control their own lives. I take the stance that Islam, as practiced among Shi'a Muslims in Peshawar, and by Pakistani Muslims in general—like Islam, Christianity and Judaism elsewhere—can be characterized as patriarchal. Religious practices in Peshawar are largely under the control of men. Men hold positions of authority and make decisions about what is religiously appropriate and what is not. Religious symbols and paradigms tend to be male-oriented, and religious and spiritual leaders male (Hegland 1997; 1998a; 1998b; 1999). For Pakistani Muslims, in general, many publications support these assertions (for example, Khawar and Shaheed 1987; Shaheed, et al 1998; and studies by the Women & Law Programme, Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre, and Pakistani lawyers and social scientists). Finally, I assume that Peshawar Shi'a women, as women elsewhere, resent patriarchal demands and that they would like to make their own choices. At times, women may profit from patriarchal policies and even, therefore, become agents of patriarchal control themselves. Otherwise, to the extent that they have avoided internalization, women try to resist patriarchal demands when and if they feel the costs will not be too high.

## Shi'a Mourning Rituals and Women of Northwest Pakistan

During *majles* rites, Shi'a Muslims lament the suffering and death of Imam Husein—grandson of the Prophet Mohammad and third Shi'a *Imam* or leader. This event, source of the major Shi'a symbolic complex and paradigm, arose out of the split between the two main groups in Islam, Sunni and Shi'a, who differed in their approaches to leadership succession after Prophet Mohammad's death in 632 A.D. Sunnis wanted elections, but the Shi'a believed the successor to Mohammad should be of the Prophet's family. They looked to Ali, his son-in-law and cousin. Thus a rift developed between the Sunni with their Caliphs and the Shi'a with their Imams—all the Prophet's descendants through his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali. (Mohammad had no surviving sons.)

In 680 A.D., Imam Husein and some seventy male followers battled against the reigning Caliph's much larger forces and were killed on the Karbala plains, south of present-day Baghdad. Women were taken as captives to Damascus, the Caliph's seat of power. According to Shi'a tradition, the courageous lamentations and recounting of the tragic Karbala stories by Zaynab, Imam Husein's sister, initiated the mourning observances of weeping, chanting, self-flagellation, recitation of martyrdom stories, and passion plays.

As David Kertzer (1988) argues, ritual holds potential for sustaining both continuity and change. The rituals surrounding Imam Husein's martyrdom epitomize this complex possibility. Gustav Thaiss's fine 1960s study based in the Tehran bazar documents the malleability of the Husein symbolic complex: "(T)he multivocality of the symbol of Husayn represents the world-view of the Shi'ah and at the same time the factional stance of particular status groups throughout the Shi'i world... (T)he same symbol—loaded with emotional, social, economic or political significata—provides an idiom for the communication of conflicting claims over resources and power particularly under conditions of social change." (Thaiss 1972:119)

Several scholars have explored how rituals commemorating the passion of Imam Husein have become arenas for contestation over political power among Shi'a or between Shi'a and non-Shi'a, but the potential of these rituals for gender politics had not been investigated previous to my research among Peshawar Shi'a women. My 1991 Peshawar case study shows how women's *majales* can form a realm of contestation over power and change in the area of gender as well as in other intersecting spheres.

When I conducted research in Peshawar, Shi'a Muslims were uniting as an interest group to press for better treatment from the Sunni government and in op-

position to radical Sunni groups which denounced and killed Shi'a. In conjunction with the escalating politicization of Pakistani Shi'a, mourning rites were flourishing. From September 1990 through mid-January 1991, I taught at the University of Peshawar and conducted Fulbright-funded research about women in education and politics. Evacuated during the Gulf War, I was allowed to return to Peshawar that summer, arriving the day before the 9th of the month of Moharram (July 21) in 1991—remembered as the eve of Imam Husein's martyrdom. Immediately, I called "Shahida," one of my University of Peshawar Shi'a students, to ask if I might attend rituals with her the next day. Shahida and I went to the Huseiniyyah Hall where I was introduced to Peshawar women's sermons, chanting, self-flagellation, and grief-stricken responses to the entrance of the horse representing Imam Husein's charger, Zuljinnah.

Fortuitously, it turned out that Shahida's aunt was the most well-known female preacher in the city, her father and uncle were high up in the male Shi'a organizations, and other family members were also prominent among the Shi'a emigrants from India. Shahida herself proudly enjoyed fame as the best female performer of mourning chants in all of Peshawar! My few months as her professor had gained for me the best possible guide into the closed community of Peshawar Shi'a women. Their dramatic and forceful mourning that first day—contrasting sharply with what I had seen of Shi'a women's practices in village Iran—intrigued me, and my uncertainty and fear about the possible reactions to my presence challenged me. At the same time, I experienced a sense of being in a familiar setting—among Shi'a mourning for Husein—and felt a particular connection with the Persian-speaking Qizilbash Shi'a. Like Shi'a women, I became subject to warm invitations and gentle social pressure. Welcomed, tantalized, and mesmerized, I spent the next two months at Shi'a women's mourning gatherings.

### **A Peshawar Shi'a Women's Majles**

As an example of Peshawar Shi'a women's rituals, I will describe the *majles* or mourning ceremony which I attended on August 20, 1991. Shi'a of different ethnic groups had quite different traditions of chants, *majles* behavior, and self-flagellation. Each ritual was also unique, in terms of intensity, length, specific chants and elegies presented, food served, level of competition or conflict, and so on. The Urdu language, women preachers, and mourning style of the Indian emigrants, the Mohajerin, were gaining predominance among Shi'a of other ethnic groups (Hegland 1998a).

All Peshawar Shi'a women's *majales* followed the same basic steps. To inform people about a *majles*, women spread the word informally through their networks, by phone or when running into other women. They might announce the upcoming *majles* at earlier gatherings in homes or Huseiniyyahs (buildings dedicated to mourning ceremonies for Imam Husein and the other Shi'a martyrs). Sometimes women distributed leaflets with the information about a *majles* they were hosting.

In the case of this *majles*, held in a Pushtun or Pukhtun<sup>2</sup> home, two buses brought Mohajerin (Indian emigrant) women from the Imam Barrah or shrine in the Sadar Bazar Indian emigrant area to the host's home in a newly built section of the city. A car came to bring the most eminent Mohajerin female preacher, Shahida's aunt, for the sermon. One of the women of the family had invited me earlier, at another ceremony. She came with a couple of family men to pick me up about 11:00 AM. When we arrived, some women were cutting up vegetables to cook. As usual during women's *majales*, men made themselves scarce. In another room, women took different chapters of the Qor'an to read to themselves, bringing additional spiritual power to the proceedings. When the women had completed reading the Qor'an chapters, the rest of us entered the room. A young woman read the beginning prayers and devotions from a book placed on a black pillow in front of her. Other women sat on the floor in a circle around her. The women intoned some lyrical elegies. The sermon followed. The Mohajerin preacher sat on a chair draped in white and vigorously exhorted women to uphold Islam. Her own voice rising and cracking in grief, she then talked about the saints' deaths while women wept. When the sermon ended, the women stood up and some started calling out, "Husein, Husein, Husein." Until this point, the women had conducted the service in Urdu, except for the Qor'an reading which of course was in Arabic. Now a group of girls in a corner started a mourning chant in Pushtu. Most women beat themselves on the chest with one hand in rhythm with the chanting. As the pace and intensity picked up, some women started raising both arms high to slap simultaneously down on their chests. Others stretched up and then pulled their fists down to thump on their skulls. One woman started moving her body from side to side in time to the chant. She closed her eyes, and her *dupata* or scarf<sup>3</sup> dropped from her shoulders to the floor. Another woman followed her example. Both of them swung from side to side, bending their legs down toward a squatting position at each end of the swing. The two faced each other and moved together almost as if they were doing a dance. The younger of the two started hitting her forehead instead of her chest. She did this for a while, and then people tried

to get her to stop hitting her forehead with both hands at the same time. She seemed to be in a trance like state. Others attempted to physically restrain her, but she tried to avoid them and continued.<sup>4</sup> Finally, she was down on the floor, and the people in front of her blocked the view. Three or four women in the center of the circle performed more vigorous self-flagellation, flinging their arms out further. One woman who played in a Pushtu TV drama was particularly energetic in her self-flagellation. During the faster choruses of chants, she hit herself on the forehead instead of on the chest, although the women on both sides tried to prevent her from doing this.

When the first group of girls finished their long chant, two other groups of girls from the Sadar Bazar Mohajerin area, notebooks held up to read in front of them, started different Urdu chants simultaneously. One group prevailed and continued with their performance. After the second chant, more senior women talked with each other about who should get the next opportunity to perform. A group of professional singing girls, who had been keeping to themselves, commanded the next performance slot, chanting in their Hindko language. When they concluded, more senior women consulted with each other to decide on the next group to perform a chant.

Finally, the “Husein, Husein, Husein” calls came, signaling the end of the *majles*. The women turned toward Mecca and called out greetings and prayers to the Prophet Mohammad and the saints. Arranged in rows along long tablecloths spread on the floor, we ate lunch, helping ourselves from bowls of meat in sauce, rice with raisins and bits of meat, yogurt mixed with chopped onions and tomatoes, and bread. Finally, we were served sweet yellow rice with some nuts in it. Enjoying the socializing, women relaxed and chatted until the buses came to take the Mohajerin women back to the Sadar Bazar area.<sup>5</sup>

### **Agency and the Limiting Loyalties of Gender**

Only a small number of Pakistani women are active with feminist concerns.<sup>6</sup> The great majority remain tethered to men, dependent on them for economic support, social propriety, and even physical protection. Thus, they do not feel able to openly question dominant gender constructions. Political contests can include kidnapping or rape of opponents' womenfolk. Any woman charging a man with rape must produce eye witnesses to testify that the sexual encounter was indeed rape and not consensual, or she herself will be punished for making the charge (Shaheed et al 1998). Accustomed to Iranian women's critical, cynical remarks about Shi'a clerics, religious rituals, and even gender rules



from my visits to Iran beginning in 1966, field research in rural Iran during 1978-79, and fieldwork among Iranians living in the U.S., I found Pakistani women to be remarkably uncritical toward such laws and religious figures and traditions, in spite of more severe restrictions on their mobility and activities.

If anything, Peshawar women's lives were more restricted than those of Pakistani women elsewhere. They were living in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), homeland of the Pukhtun ethnic group whose stark views of women's place are distilled in their ominous saying: "Women—either the house or the grave."<sup>7</sup> Women must be in seclusion. Men have separate buildings or set-apart rooms for entertaining other males so that their females are never exposed to outsiders. In the NWFP, only some 3% of women are literate. Peshawar women must have very good reason to be allowed out of the home, and if they do leave they must be fully covered with a body veil and—for most—a face shield, and escorted by a male relative. Real dangers, threats to physical safety and reputation, combine with social, psychological, and economic dependence on the family to force Peshawar women into compliance with confining social, cultural, and religious structures.

In addition, Shi'a women were by no means alienated from their religion and its male hierarchy. They anguished over the besieged Shi'a in Iraq after the Gulf War and empathized with the predicament of Shi'a in other countries as well as in Pakistan. Peshawar Shi'a women shared with other Shi'a a passionate devotion to the Family of the Prophet and the Karbala story—the heart of Shi'a spiritual life. Shi'a women ardently sustained the Shi'a minority community and defended Shi'a interpretation of history against Sunni majority views. Their agency constrained by their reluctance to jeopardize bonds with family, religion, and all they held sacred, Shi'a women did not directly contradict or deny patriarchal cultural and religious teachings and the associated male hierarchies. They even found it difficult to resist social pressure to participate in *majales*. Several M.S. level students commented to me how difficult it was to contend with the constant pressure to attend. Sometimes they could use the excuse of exams, but on the most significant days, even this was not an adequate reason to be absent. Once, while waiting in a home to go to an all night ritual, I noted that one woman seemed unwell and clearly did not want to go. Her seniors reprimanded her and told her to get on her feet. Although she did not say anything, her expression showed her reluctance. She slowly lifted herself up.

Family-enmeshed Pakistani women find it difficult to openly resist gender systems, for such steps would threaten their family's standing and might well result in violence to themselves.<sup>8</sup> Shi'a women especially, members of an en-

trenched religious minority, generally avoided forms of gender resistance, which would disrupt Shi'a identity markers and unifying ideology. Resistance through ritual performance, proclaiming women's competence through practice rather than verbally, did not threaten Shi'a interests. Rather, women's outstanding ritual performances, outreach activities, and strengthening of ties served Shi'a interests and therefore pleased male leaders, while simultaneously subtly contesting gender characterizations.

### **Agency through Ritual Practice**

At the end of the 1980's, Peshawar Shi'a women were active in pulling Shi'a from a variety of ethnic backgrounds—Pukhtuns, Qizilbash,<sup>9</sup> and Mohajerin or migrants from India—into a more unified and dedicated interest group (Hegland 1998a). They carried out this heavy responsibility mainly through the *majles*. In conjunction, women's participation in mourning was rising. Some years earlier, for example, unmarried girls might attend a *majles* three times during Safar and Moharram, the Shi'a months of mourning, informants told me. By 1991, though, they attended four or five a day for the entire two and a half months of mourning.

Women's work of community formation through heightened participation in mourning held contradictory implications for their autonomy and development. The Iranian Islamic Republic influenced Pakistani Shi'a clerics into preaching more confining definitions of women's place. In the context of Sunni aggression and the increasing influence of fundamentalist interpretations of Islam in general, male Shi'a leaders turned to more fundamentalist interpretations of Shi'a Islam, including restrictions on women. The more fundamentalist and emotionally distraught sermons and flagellation practices of the Shi'a emigrants from India gained ground over the lyrical, gentle Moharram recitations of the Qizilbash ethnic group (Hegland 1998a). Thus, while Peshawar Shi'a women were able to leave their homes for hours day after day to attend rituals, they were more exposed to messages of male supremacy and increasingly fundamentalist sermons admonishing female seclusion, modesty, and obedience.

### ***Ritual Privileging of Masculinity***

Women increased their self-exposure to an Islamic ideology calling for stricter *pardah* and submissiveness through their accelerating ritual activity and attendance at sermons. Although women conducted their own rituals, men stim-

ulated and channeled their performances. In rituals, women turned to male-oriented symbolic complexes for spiritual blessing and hope for solving life's problems—horses representing Imam Husein's devoted mount Zuljinnah and standards representing the flag held by Hazrat-e Abbas (half-brother of Imam Husein) at the Karbala stand. Symbolism surrounding Zuljinnah reminded women that their menstrual blood was polluting rather than purifying, in contrast to men's heroic bloodshed from flagellating themselves with knifed chains. Disqualified by their sex from flailing their bare backs, women bore no embodied label—no martyr's wounds of flowing blood and scars, the coat of arms chiseled on human flesh that represented men's entitlement and desire to offer the supreme sacrifice, suffering for their faith like Imam Husein. Symbols of male dominance were everywhere—in sermon messages, social interaction, ritual paraphernalia, and embodied crests—proclaiming women's inferiority and lack of autonomy (Hegland 1998b).

### **Ritual Practice: Reforming and Transforming Personal and Cultural Patterns**

Paradoxically, instead of embracing the instructions of these ubiquitous phallocentric symbols and becoming more subdued and submissive, women used the *majles* for performance, socializing, and even competition. Shi'a women carried out the expected and approved ritual routines, but added to them their own emphases and meanings, thus redefining both their sense of self and their understandings of the Karbala paradigm.<sup>10</sup> They saw *majales* as chances to get away from home, housework, and male authority and to develop social networks, abilities, and reputations. They used their sacred performances to evade husbands' demands and to roam the city, attending rituals in a number of different homes daily, traveling to other towns or even to home communities in India for mourning rituals. Failing to heed female preachers' and male clerics' admonishments, in 1991 they did not intensify their modesty through augmenting coverage or further improving sex segregation. At a joint male-female Mohajerin *majles* one evening, women quietly giggled behind their concealing curtains when the visiting cleric scolded them for failures in wifely obedience.

The Persian-speaking Qizilbash women were especially lax in "proper" Moharram appearance—dressing in black and abstaining from use of make-up, jewelry, and decoration—and deportment—solemnity and reserve—as defined by fundamentalist Shi'a movement leaders. They appeared not to notice repeated exhortations from *majles* speakers (Hegland 1998a).

Through the Moharram mourning rituals, some women cultivated unique talents and gained fame as performers. My University of Peshawar student, Shahida, aggressively competed for performance slots, leading her own small ensemble and attaining a city-wide reputation as the best Mohajerin ritual chanter (Hegland 1998b). With her mother and sisters, a teacher at the University of Peshawar College of Home Economics sang at Qizilbash ritual gatherings, and was respected for delivery effectiveness and a large repertoire. Her younger sister, whose voice was particularly lovely, frequently sang solos. Another Qizilbash friend led her daughters and nieces in a singing group and recently had begun giving Moharram story recitations, earning the respect even of her older sisters-in-law. One childless woman was in great demand among *majales* hostesses; her singing voice was so beautiful and emotionally evocative, it brought tears even to my eyes. Several single or widowed Mohajerin women preached at rituals, their voices rising throughout sermons teaching women their religious duties and forcefully pointing out the consequences of disobedience. Then going on to recite a martyrdom story, they became increasingly overwrought with sorrow, and finally wailed the tragic conclusion while their audience sobbed and struck their chests (Hegland 1997).

Even those women at extreme ends of the life cycle could gain praise and status from *majles* contributions. One small girl boomed out a phrase at an afternoon mourning session and was rewarded by pats and smiles from surrounding women. Mothers brought celebratory sweets to distribute in honor of a little daughter's first *majles* solo. Little girls could even become preacher apprentices under one of the female professionals, and give emotional if brief little sermons preceding the professional's lengthier turn in the speaker's chair. In older age, women might read the opening verses, offer the final prayers, or serve as one of the behind-the-scenes *majles* managers. Even women who were no longer very physically mobile could gain eminence through hosting many women's *majales*, perhaps enhanced by particularly generous and delicious food offerings (Hegland 1999).

Shi'a women with personal or family problems, rather than emphasizing international Shi'a identity and demonstrating through self-flagellation their preparedness to fight or undergo privation for their religion and religious community, focused on emotions and personal connections. One woman wept profusely at a female *majles*. She had a serious illness, others told me. She hoped her sorrow for the saints would touch their hearts with pity and influence them to intercede on her behalf. Another woman ran after the horse representing Imam Husein's steed at a courtyard *majles*, hoping for a job for her un-

employed husband. Women connected emotionally with the Karbala martyrs and their bereft female relatives, empathizing and feeling comforted in their own heartaches.<sup>11</sup> The Shi'a women "reemployed" (Coombe 1989:95) *majles* rituals for these very human goals—while engaging in spiritual life through them—thus taking an active part in the construction of their experiences, meanings, spiritual sensibilities, and selves.

"Practice" anthropologists, such as Rosemary Coombe (1989), Reinhold Loeffler (1988), and Sherry Ortner (1990), have developed theoretical frameworks to show how actors influence cultural schema through their agency in putting the schema into practice. Any action contains aspects of agency and resistance as well as control and accommodation,<sup>12</sup> and, even within the confines of ritual, people can find opportunities to be creative. Women's enactments of Karbala religio/cultural representations simultaneously provided the potential for control and maintenance of patriarchal structures on the one hand and individual agency and creativity on the other. Individuals and groups of young women vied with each other to perform mourning chants first and more often as well as striving for prestige by developing the largest and most contemporary repertoire of chants and mourning hymns. Women contended to be the best and most dedicated singers, preachers, Qor'an readers, hostesses, and donors. They wanted to display the largest and most resplendent shrines, shrine rooms, and Hazrat-e Abbas standards, thereby improving their family's social, religious, political, and economic status. Troubled women redirected ritual focus away from national and international sectarian politics and preparedness for martyrdom to personal and family issues. Through such competition, self-expression, and re-application of ritual efficacy, women's *majles* gatherings became sites of contestation over women's power to construct freedom, autonomy, mobility, self, meaning, and experience.

## Resistance

### *Resistance through Alternative Transcripts: Creating Co-existing and Co-mingling Worlds*

The way these women used *majales* falls into the category of "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985), those restrained or wily means of resistance available to the relatively powerless who are unable to overtly confront authority. One such weapon is the "hidden transcript." According to Scott, a hidden transcript characterizes "discourse that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation by

powerholders.” (1990:4) The alternative transcripts drafted for wielding in gender-based altercation take on a somewhat different guise.<sup>13</sup> In appropriating *majales* to address their personal interests and ambitions, Shi'a women did not compose private or hidden transcripts nor were their transcripts “produced for a different audience and under different constraints.” (Scott 1990:5) At times, men were present at women's rituals to distribute food or bring in the horse or battle standard. If men were not present, their female managers were; senior women took their responsibilities of maintaining proper mourning decorum seriously. Female participants' manifested convictions and behavior were hardly different from what they would have been with males present. Further, males were not displeased with these transcripts but lauded them, aware that the women's labor furthered their own aims. In this situation, the delineation between hidden and public transcripts was not so distinct. Rather than dissident transcripts which must be hidden or disguised like those which Scott examined, Shi'a women's alternative transcripts about their competence, religious contributions, and individual worth co-existed and co-mingled with the dominant paradigm, questioning it through bodily demonstration. Rather than messages of women's religious inadequacy, inappropriateness, marginality, and, therefore, dependence on male spiritual and religious donations, some women foregrounded their own sense of self-worth and competence, based on their own outstanding ritual contributions.

These women's deportment was assertive. They expertly administered ritual proceedings. Some of the unmarried university students were particularly open about their pride in abilities and city-wide performance renown. My lively student, Shahida, was the prime example of such self-confident bearing and appreciation for female contributions. She pointed to the crucial role of Imam Husein's sister Zaynab in (Shi'a) Islam. Without Zaynab's courageous mourning and recounting the Karbala story, the memory of this event would have been lost, she said, and, “If there was no Karbala, there is no Islam.” Outside of the ritual environment, as well, Shahida acted straightforward and even relatively bold, in contrast to her shyer, more compliant classmates, who talked to me and other teachers with restraint and down-cast eyes. Shahida was the first to imitate my example of leaving my veiling shawl around my shoulders rather than pulled up over my hair on our women's bus—quite a dramatic gesture in the Peshawar setting.<sup>14</sup>

No one among the Peshawar Shi'a women discussed with me utilizing the *majales* to resist male authority or limiting gender definitions. Instead, they turned to authorized, valorized ritual performances to open larger worlds and

tactfully and wordlessly query belittling assessments of their worth, character, and competence.

During the mourning season in the months of Moharram and Safar, women participated in up to five or even more rituals, lasting much of the day. Their intense dedication to honor and mourn the Shi'a martyrs contradicted male clerics' definition of women as wasting their time in frivolous pursuits. Older women's scheduling and quietly effective administration of rituals questioned women's supposed weak-mindedness and emotional irrationality. The determined competitiveness especially of younger women to perform more often, gather the largest and most up-to-date repertoire, and gain fame did not jive with fundamentalist leaders' characterization of women as emotionally delicate and unfit for the rough and tumble of the public world outside of the home. Athletically swinging their arms up over their heads and then down to thump their chests for many hours a day or even all night, as they stood in a circle chanting elegies, or raising their hands up to fling them down on their cheek bones, women did not seem physically weak, as the clergy maintained. The discipline with which the women maintained their exacting round of rituals, exhausting self-flagellation, and extensive knowledge of chants—all without showing signs of fatigue or pain—seemed at odds with Shi'a clerics' concept of females as lacking in self-control and needing male supervision. The bodily bearing, level gazes, self-assurance, quietly confident directing, assertive snatching of performance opportunities, and intent, self-possessed expressions of successful hostesses, administrators, and performers communicated their sense of competence and self-worth.

Unable to articulate their disagreement with Shi'a clerics pronouncements about gender, because of their loyalty to their threatened religious community for one reason, the Shi'a women created and communicated their alternative views of themselves with their bodies in ritual performance. Rather than verbalizing resistance or even discussing how they gained competence and confidence through ritual participation, women engaged themselves in ritual activity and proclaimed their worth and abilities with their performing bodies.

***Problems of Covert Resistance: Confines of Alternative Structures, Talking Past Each Other, Counter-Appropriation***

The unarticulated and roundabout form of resistance practiced by Peshawar Shi'a women, along with the great advantage of conserving valued connections with family, religion, and spiritual mooring, also had its shortcomings. Deeper commitment to the structure of ritual mourning ushered women into

a larger field of action and opportunity, but this gain came with the stipulation that women must confine themselves to religious, sex-segregated, and patriarchy-approved activity. Their talents and proclivities must be fitted into authorized forms. Their oft-repeated ritual enactments of these forms could not but affect their subjectivities, no matter how much their intellects or fame-achieving selves might argue for another truth. As ritual practice theorist Catherine Bell phrases it, "...one might retain one's limited and negotiated involvement in the activities of ritual, but bowing or singing in unison imperceptibly schools the social body in the pleasures of and schemes for acting in accordance with assumptions that remain far from conscious or articulate" (1992:215). Their wider worlds, achieved through ritual involvement, came with the permission of male authorities and could just as well be restricted again, should those authorities decide on different policies.

In choosing an alternative understanding of their ritual participation—their own competence and worth—and communicating this through enacted demonstration rather than open, verbal contradiction, the Shi'a women avoided endangering confrontation. However, patriarchal authorities could play the same game. Male political and family leaders could likewise choose *their* own understandings of women's ritual performances. Indeed, they saw women's expert ritual performances and social networking for Shi'a unification as denoting proper fulfillment of their female roles—not as indicating equal competence and worth. When I asked him who contributed more to Imam Husein, men or women, the president of Peshawar's main Shi'a organization replied that women do. Women were most active in rituals, he said; they attend *majales* all day long. Men go only in the evening when they are free from work and schooling. He went on to explain women's more intense and distraught mourning with the observations that, "Women are more emotional," and, "They have nothing else to do" (!)<sup>15</sup> Women's emotional character makes them fit for home and serving men and children and unfit for the outer world, leaving them with "nothing else to do." Their greater contributions to Imam Husein were not due to spirituality, competence, or religious worth then, but only to the God-given, innate differences between male and female—and thus were really no credit to them! The women's acted-out but verbally unstated communications about their attainments and worth, subtly refuting diminishing verbal and symbolic ritual messages through ritual practice excellence, could very easily be ignored by the men.

Failing to perceive women's fine *majles* work as signifying their full social, political, and religious adulthood, male authorities could comfortably counter-ap-



appropriate women's ritual practice attainments for their own political aims, rather than allowing women to independently develop their own applications for their ritual gatherings and performances.<sup>16</sup> Women's accomplished ritual work became a valuable, contested resource, but because of their gendered situation in conservative Peshawar women were limited to roles of agreeable, watchful, cautiously calculating contestants. Their unspoken resistance was confining and compromising.

The dedicated participation and outstanding singing and chanting performances of Shi'a University of Peshawar undergraduate and graduate female students certainly helped develop—and also reflected—their assertiveness, competitiveness, and self-assurance. However, they made their decisions to pursue performance fame and a competitively large and up-to-date repertoire of ritual songs and chants in the context of male family members' encouragement, women's social pressure, and the positive reinforcement of praise and approval. Shi'a rituals and community approval for their ritual activities contained their practiced assertiveness. The young women were not thinking of applying their enhanced confidence and self-esteem to overtly struggle against patriarchy. The lack of other approved activities and excuses to get outside of the home also channeled the young women's energy and time within *majles* activity. Further, the young women's agency, competence, and sense of personal identity in choosing to develop performance competence and reputation contributes to the expansion of the Shi'a fundamentalist movement and to the male power and authority heading it.

This paradox is similar to that described by Suzanne Brenner (1996) about young, educated, middle-class Javanese Muslim women deciding to put on the veil and the associated devout lifestyle. According to Brenner's analysis, these women demonstrate self-mastery, individual decision-making, and a sense of personal identity through choosing to veil and thereby turning away from Javanese traditions and often the wishes of parents, husbands, or teachers. At the same time, such personal "choices" often resulted from anxiety, constraints, and urging from siblings or friends, which "raises questions about the limits of personal agency in the exercising of 'choice.'" (684) Wearing the veil then subjects women to increased scrutiny and social pressure. Further, in aggregate, these young women's decisions to veil strengthens the Islamic movement, Brenner points out, with effects which they may not have intended or foreseen.

Given the problems of covert resistance, the difficulty and potential dangers of cautious, calculating resistance, and the small chance of its resulting in significant change, why do people bother with it? Why should *we* bother?

## Resilience

### *Resistance and Resilience*

As Lila Abu-Lughod points out (1990), resistance is significant in understanding power. Attending to the forms of resistance utilized by women facilitates our understanding of the degrees to which various women feel they can exert agency in constructing their lives and when they must accommodate to the authorities and social system. Often those resisting are in intimate, long-term contact with power sources and have spent their lives observing, analyzing, and testing that power. These on-the-spot women and their forms of resistance can tell us much about the power of people and forces exerting influence over them—the main tools, current strategies, worn or weaker points, manipulable contradictions, loopholes, swells and ebbs, and transmutations. Cautions from careful thinkers, such as Abu-Lughod's against "romanticizing resistance" (1990) and Okely's (1991) against seeing resistance as proof of a lack of female subordination (instead of subservience), must be applied to research about gender politics. We should not, however, become disheartened about studying resistance as an end in itself, I believe. "Weapons of the weak" and the everyday resisters wielding them can sometimes be credited for bringing change. My view of Shi'a women's resistance through ritual practice is in accord with Reed-Danahay's perception of "everyday resistance" and such ways of artfully wielding cultural forms and meanings as including fluidity, providing power for the "weak," and serving not only "as reactions to (or resistance to) dominance, but as modes for the creation of new cultural meanings" (1993:223). Nimble individuals use their ingenuity and knowledge about the powers-that-be, gained through close observation and long experience, to bring into play forms of resistance from the existing repertoire and to conceive new forms to address evolving circumstances. With these self-made, often curious and innovative instruments, activists can sometimes discover and work away at the cracks, pushing forward—if only a few inches—the less entrenched sections of the power barriers, potentially leading to alterations in power configurations.

Even when it is not possible to immediately apply resistance-honed skills and subjectivities to producing new realities, resistance is still significant. In resisting, people sustain their spirits, agency, self-confidence, and self-esteem. The practice of resistance, however low-key or subtle, preserves the potential for change, although the degree to which this potential will eventually be realized can be known only in retrospect. Resistance is not only a means to the end of understanding power. Resistance is power; it is the power in the hands of the less powerful.

### *Building Power through Accommodating Practice*

Several social scientists (Comaroff 1985, de Certeau 1988, Scott 1990, Tiano 1994) have pointed out that if we overlook subtle, covert, undeclared, or even unknowing forms of resistance, we are leaving out a vast area of political activity. Specifically, in the realm of gender politics, with women tied in so many ways to the mutually reinforcing networks of forces oppressing them and thus often able to engage only in circumspect resistance, we must attend to these obscure and ambiguous forms of struggle. A main reason for so many questions yet to answer in the politics of gender (Vincent 1990:429,30) is the lack of proper focus, methodology, and theoretical frameworks for investigating the nebulous but immense region of political life between submission and revolt—which encompasses most female resistance. It is during this in-between stage that subordinates build up the power necessary before overt confrontation is possible. They transform self-concepts, imaginations, and world views within a protective framework before risking direct challenge to power structures.<sup>17</sup> Through subtle subversive actions, alternative transcripts, and created worlds of personal meaning and attainment—even within the walls of patriarchal structures—women maintain resilience and may even build their strength, confidence, abilities, and subjectivities which can later, if and when circumstances change, be applied in other arenas as well to more specifically serve their own interests.

Most often, throughout history, women could take such resilience and self-created worlds no further than their own thinking, combined and alternating with dominant gender discourses, or at most share them with other trusted women in underground critiques or personal story-telling. Iranian women typically shared personal stories about their own lives or those of others with intimates, forming an underground knowledge reservoir about mistreatment of women not disclosed to males (Hegland 1992). These narratives could bring comfort, catharsis, and community. However, such knowledge could not be used to bring about significant transformation in gender-based subordination without a change in other aspects of society.

Iranian women might complain, make bitter comments, or indicate cynicism concerning religious gender teachings privately to trusted females. During Erika Friedl's research among Shi'a Muslim women in an Iranian village, an illiterate, poor woman confided to Friedl her strong suspicion "that religion, as preached and practiced, was not made by God but by men in order to suppress women!" (Friedl 1989,133) All other village women with whom she spoke, Friedl reported, found it troubling to deal with the contradictions about women in their religion. At the time, though, such village women were not able to openly express

their reservations about phallogentric, male-dominated religious discourses and rulings, and develop and put into practice more feminist interpretations.

Women might use their knowledge to privately manipulate or pressure, bringing some advantage to themselves but not questioning the system. A few women might break out of confining expectations—and suffer the consequences, serving as warning to other women. In her rural Iranian Shi'a setting, Erika Friedl, examining the results of cases of women's resistance over several decades, found the consequences of open resistance on the part of women to be less than inviting. Because they resist, "women are said to be by nature obstinate, shameful, foolish, sinful, or childish...As such, it is argued, they must be carefully watched and treated with commensurate firmness...Resistance therefore can, and often does, lead to more suppression: to punishment, discreditation, loss of honor, and confinement rather than freedom, choice, or autonomy." (Friedl 1994:152)<sup>18</sup>

In recent years, a number of educated Muslim women who enjoy more resources have critiqued male traditions and exegesis of the Qor'an and other Islamic texts. They are themselves conducting research and developing interpretations. They are publishing about conditions for and treatment of women living in Islamic societies. Many Iranian women living outside of the Islamic Republic of Iran are outspoken feminists who argue that the Iranian Islamic Republic administration's gender constructions are actually not in accord with Islam. Concluding that Islam and women's rights are inherently incompatible, other expatriate Iranian women even view the eradication of Islam as the necessary first step in struggling for women's rights. However, women living in more confining circumstances would be too concerned about ramifications for their social, material, and spiritual lives to attempt such battles.

Many studies of Muslim women document why they felt unable to openly rebel against gender restrictions. For example, Nancy Tapper's (Lindisfarne) publications on Syrian elites (1988/89) and an Afghan Durrani Pushtun tribal group (1991), and Patricia Jeffery's (1989) on Muslim shrine managers in India feature women who could not afford to leave the relative security of family ties and patriarchal protection and so felt forced to comply with patriarchal authority.<sup>19</sup> Pakistani women, too, most often feel it best to keep the "patriarchal bargain" (Kandiyoti 1988) of accepting compliance and dependency in exchange for protection, social legitimacy, and economic and social support.

Even when research discerns women's gender resistance, it is often temporary, subtle, limited, partial, compartmentalized, or calculatingly cautious. Resisting veiling requirements, my student Shahida allowed her *chadur*, a large

rectangular piece of cloth, to slip from her head down to her shoulders, allowing her hair to show while in our bus on the way to Peshawar University's segregated School of Home Economics. She followed my example of wearing her *chadur* around her shoulders only for a couple of days. Under the conditions of the up-coming Gulf War, with the attack of the U.S. against Iraq clearly in the offing, Muslim identity and women's role in personifying Muslim identity came further to the fore. I myself was worried about attitudes towards Americans at this point and, rather frightened, wanted to do all I could to assure any Muslim males of my compliance with Islamic female modesty rules. Shahida and I both put our *chadurs* back up on our heads.

Very often women feel they must use caution in finding ways to express dissatisfaction and alternative viewpoints. It is practically impossible to find any example of women's protest against gender dynamics without some level of accommodation present as well. In settings characterized by relatively rigid gender boundaries, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, some other Islamic societies, or fundamentalist religious groups, women generally practice a form of "accommodating protest" (MacLeod 1992b:553,554) when attempting to contest dominant gender constructions. Lower middle class working women in Cairo, Arlene MacLeod (1992a, 1992b) found, did not overtly resist gender constructions. They could not afford to alienate husbands, families, and neighbors. Their low salaries would not allow self-sufficiency, and they could not face loss of social ties and status. Instead of resisting their situation openly, therefore, they put on the veil in accommodating resistance when going out to work. Their framed their paid work as supporting the family, defined as women's appropriate concern.<sup>20</sup>

It is not only Middle Eastern women who hesitate to sever connections tainted by gender-based subordination. In her research among Chicana fruit canning workers in the Santa Clara Valley, Patricia Zavella (1987) saw them staying with problematic husbands for similar reasons. Some of Arlie Hochschild's "feminist" U.S. *Second Shift* informants likewise found ways of framing and accepting gender-based housework inequities (1989).<sup>21</sup>

There are examples, though, in the Middle East and elsewhere, of people applying subversion-honed resistance towards transforming their own situations and even their social environments. My own research in 1978/1979 (Hegland 1983a, 1983b, 1986) documents the dramatic case of Shi'a Iranians covertly developing politically dissenting subjectivities through Moharram ritual participation. Finally, during December 1978, men and women alike poured out into streets all over the country for the anti-Shah Moharram processions, their chants laced

with the political demand, "Down with the Shah!" These millions of marchers, defying government ban, turned the political tide toward the revolutionary movement. The Pahlavi regime fell shortly afterwards, on February 11, 1979.

During the two decades since then, women often protested the strict Islamic Republic of Iran official veiling policy by letting a strand of hair slip out from under their scarves, for example, or by creating fashion from forms of covering. Such small rebellions as a touch of lipstick or a hint of skin tone visible through not quite dark enough stockings below a body veil or long Islamic duster told of Iranian women's carefully calculating insubordination. They exchanged bitter comments and critiques with trusted associates. Even such minute acts of defiance can help to maintain an internal and communicated subjectivity of resistance.

Shahin Gerami found indications of a critical gender subjectivity among Iranian women, in spite of the deluge of messages from official sources about femininity, backed by harsh repressive measures. The middle class Iranian women who answered her survey had also found some means of resisting; they did not accept all of the teachings of Islamic Republic officials about females and their place. The women rejected sexual spatial segregation, they reported, and, with it, the belief that women should not work as they did not belong in public space. From her study Gerami concluded: "Women have clearly declared that their place is where they choose it to be—not where it is decreed to be." (Gerami 1994:346)

Many Iranian women were able to put their resistance to the conservative clerical government—sustained by small insubordinate acts—to use in the 1997 Iranian presidential election. In spite of the ruling clerics confidently advancing their own conservative candidate, women voted for the more moderate cleric, Seyyid Mohammad Khatami. Dissatisfied with the cleric-created restrictive environment, women and youth brought about the surprise victory of President Khatami, to the great chagrin of the more hard-line clergy.

Iranian women's subtle resistance of letting a strand of hair show under their head coverings has brought about change. Iranian women used appearance resistance to bring about softening dress codes. By 2002, Iranian women were able to wear only a skimpy scarf allowing masses of hair to show, without punishment. Now females freely wear make-up out of the house. Rather than floor-length enveloping *chadors* (a large, half-circle of cloth wound around the body) or the loose, long rain-coat like *manto*, some females put on mere tokens of modesty: short, form-fitting tunics which button down barely to the waist, falling open below to reveal tight jeans or pants. Now many women in Iran are actively involved in a variety of activities to improve their situations and influ-

ence. Even village females are actually using the word freedom (*azadi*) to talk about their wishes and efforts for freedom from patriarchal control (personal communications, Erika Friedl, Nina Cithocki, Sara Ludder, Ashraf Zahedi, and others). In this case, women's small and subtle acts of resistance to Shi'a clerics' pronouncements helped to bring about significant change.

## Conclusion

By endowing commemorations of Imam Husein's martyrdom with meaning derived from their own ritual experiences, some Shi'a women in Peshawar, Pakistan were able to evade, to an extent, ritual teachings about women's inadequacy, subservience, and inappropriateness. These women pursued their own aims in ritual engagement by molding traditional mourning rituals into festivals of performance excellence and women's community. They subverted the rituals by applying them to their own meanings and personal concerns. They resisted patriarchal proclamations through constructing alternative transcripts and gender definitions from affirming ritual performances.

In 2003, twelve years after the events described here, the Sunni-Shi'a strife in Pakistan continues unabated. Extremist groups on both sides are still using violence in their sectarian conflict. Yet another massacre occurred at a Pakistani Shi'a mosque during the early 1999 Muslim holy month of fasting, Ramadan; gunmen shot 15 Shi'a worshipers dead, just as they were finishing their early morning prayers which mark the beginning of their dawn-to-dusk fast. Frequent killings took place in subsequent years as well.

As I read over my 1991 field notes, I wonder what has happened to Shahida since that summer's Moharram season. I remember Shahida's uncle's comments about how she is now just a student but later will become so much more involved in ritual activity. Certainly, this young Shi'a woman was developing a stronger sense of agency by participating in the centuries-old patriarchal ritual about the martyrdom of Imam Husein. But where has her strong sense of agency and assertiveness taken her since 1991? How has her competence been used? Who is directing it? Has Shahida, who in 1991 was already the preeminent example of an able, dynamic young Shi'a woman out for success and ritual performance fame, indeed taken an even more central role in the Peshawar Shi'a community under her uncle's "guidance"? Is her uncle, president of Peshawar's main Shi'a organization, refusing her suitors to keep her under his own control instead of a husband's and encouraging her into training as a female preacher—as he had done with his preacher sister, who in 1991 was

middle-aged but still single? Or has Shahida, after completing her M.S. in home economics, gone on for additional education (which, according to some, would disqualify one from becoming a female preacher) and become equipped for attainments outside of women's religious rituals? An aunt in Karachi wanted her for a daughter-in-law, Shahida confided to me. Has she married her cousin, moved to Karachi, and become a Shi'a female leader amidst that city's chaotic Sunni-Shi'a violence? Given the escalating sectarian violence (Zaman 1998) during the last decade, Shi'a leaders likely would aim to appropriate all resources possible in their struggle against the radical Sunni groups targeting them, including women's *majles* networks and performances.

To resist the Soviet Union and to contain Shi'a Iran, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. had supported militant Sunni groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Baldauf 2002; Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002). Saudi-funded madrassas or religious schools in Pakistan produced anti-Shi'a sentiments and Taliban recruits. In Afghanistan, the Sunni Taliban massacred Shi'a groups. Pakistani Shi'a suspected the Taliban of engineering mosque massacres in Pakistan during the last few years as well. The Taliban in Afghanistan sheltered radical Sunni Pakistanis suspected of killing Pakistani Shi'a. With the downfall of the Taliban, Shi'a fear that these anti-Shi'a elements will return to Pakistan and perpetrate more violence against the Shi'a.

In the face of hundreds of deaths—assassinations of Shi'a doctors, clerics, and government officials; mosque massacres; grenade attacks even in homes—and attempts by Sunni groups to get the Shi'a defined as infidels during the last few years, Shi'a females continue to identify primarily with their besieged community and apply their administrative, networking, and performance abilities in its service. Under such threatening conditions, Shi'a females are not likely to more openly resist Shi'a gender concepts or to more openly pressure for women's separate benefits.

On April 25, 2002, during a commemoration of Imam Husein's martyrdom reportedly attended by more than 50,000 people, a bomb exploded in the women's area of the Qadeem Imambargar (Place of the Imam) in Bhakkar, Punjab province. All 12 people killed were women or children. The blast injured at least 25 people as well. This attack, the second major mosque violence in a couple of months, came after dozens of assassinations of Shi'a doctors and lawyers in Karachi. According to Rory McCarthy of *The Guardian*, "Many suspect the rise in Sunni-sponsored sectarian attacks is linked to the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Sectarian militants were known to train in the same camps in Afghanistan as other Pakistani and al-Gaida fighters."<sup>22</sup> Most likely, until a way is found to quell the sectarian violence, Pakistani Shi'a women will find



it very difficult to utilize the skills and confidence honed in women's rituals for their own individual benefit or for women's advancement outside of the ritual setting.

One cannot at present know the final results of the Shi'a women's resistance through appropriation and subversion of the *majles* rituals in Peshawar, Pakistan. Only unfolding developments and history will tell. But their practice of subtle, accommodating resistance (MacLeod 1992a, 1992b) through *majles* performances enhances the Shi'a women's agency skills. They exercise faculties for constructing self, experience, and meaning. Through resistance, the women learn to detect and may chip away at gaps in the wall of gender power. Should that wall acquire remodeled contours, the women are prepared to devise ingenious tools with an appropriate blend of agency and accommodation for use under the new conditions.

The process of contesting gender dynamics anywhere is slow, with many ups and downs, and the outcome is uncertain and unstable. Given the surge of so-called religious fundamentalism and sectarian conflict worldwide and, in particular, the bloody strife between extremist Sunni and Shi'a in Pakistan—where hundreds are generally killed yearly—concern over the direction of gender construction for Peshawar Shi'a women is well placed. Male fundamentalist leaders are faced with a paradox: because of sex segregation, outspoken females are needed to propagate fundamentalist beliefs among women. Yet a primary tenet of fundamentalist Islam is generally the God-given difference between male—morally, intellectually, and temperamentally qualified for the public world of economics, politics, and religion—and female, who, lacking such qualifications, must be assigned to male supervision, segregated out of temptation's and harm's way, and best occupied with serving husband, keeping house, and birthing and rearing children. Because of fundamentalisms' androcentrism, declared reliance on holy texts, close-knit groupings, and required belief and behavior conformity, it would seem that women can go only so far in creating autonomous space and extending mobility while operating within a fundamentalist framework.<sup>23</sup>

At some point, depending partly on national and international political trends, Peshawar women pulled out of home and housework to work for Shi'a unification may point out that their vitality, moral abilities, and successes—demonstrated through their ritual contributions—make lies out of the clerical pronouncements on women's character and place. They may protest more openly and vehemently. Containing their developing assertiveness and capabilities within the framework defined by their male supervisors may become

more problematic. Male political leaders among the Peshawar Shi'a who wish to keep women at their own disposal may meet with greater difficulty.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>In similar vein, see Peteet's (1994) dramatic study of how young Palestinian males appropriated beatings by Israelis and the resultant body marks to mean, not humiliation and defeat—as had been intended—but the strength, courage, and wisdom qualifying them for manhood and political leadership.

<sup>2</sup>Although the great majority of Pushtun (also called Pukhtun or Pathan) are Sunni, several Shi'a Pukhtun villages are located not far from Peshawar. The host family came from one of these villages. In addition to chants in Pushtu, Shi'a Pukhtun village ritual gatherings were known for more radical mourning behavior, such as men walking on coals and cheek-piercing. Pukhtun Shi'a women practiced arduous facial self-flagellation, swinging their hands together from above to strike their cheekbones. Other Shi'a reported admiring them for their greater devotion to Imam Husein which such practices were thought to demonstrate.

<sup>3</sup>The *dupata* or large, long rectangular scarf is an integral part of Pakistani women's dress. It can be draped around the shoulders or over the head and completes the *kamis* (long tunic) over *shalwar* (full pants) costume. One almost never sees a woman without her *dupata*, a symbol of protected modesty. Perhaps a *dupata* slipping off the shoulders during swaying in a trance-like state, mourning for Imam Husein, demonstrated a woman's utter devotion and lack of attention to self, to the extent that she even forgot to attend to her own modesty.

<sup>4</sup>People saw different types of flagellation as demonstrating various levels of grief, passion, and attachment to the Karbala saints and thus a closer connection, through them, to God as well. Women shift from beating chests to thumping their skulls during more intense parts of ritual ceremonies, such as upon the entrance of the horse representing Imam Husein's steed. Their more frantic grief at this point recalled the reaction of the womenfolk back at the Karbala camp in 680 A.D. upon the return of Imam Husein's riderless steed from the battlefield.

Hitting the cheek bones or hitting the forehead is seen as paying less attention to one's own comfort and more to one's passionate devotion to Imam Husein and the saints. This form of self-flagellation is extremely painful: I tried it once only. Men's beating themselves bloody by flailing their backs with chains is seen as even more ardent and devoted. Hitting their foreheads with swords is extreme devotion, to the extent of lack of concern with one's own safety. Other men intervene very soon, forcefully bringing the men, almost in a trance-like state, to stop their blows to the forehead with swords, before they do themselves serious harm. Likewise, women's self-flagellation to the cheeks and forehead rather than to the chest shows greater devotion. Others stop them after a short while, in order to prevent them from hurting themselves too much. Both Pushtun men and women held reputations of practicing the more extreme forms of self-mortification in honor of Imam Husein. Other Shi'a spoke admiringly about the greater devotion to Imam Husein they thereby demonstrated.

<sup>5</sup>For descriptions of other *majles*, see Hegland 1998a and 1998b.

<sup>6</sup>See Haeri 2002 for fascinating life stories of professional Pakistani women who have struggled to choose their own life paths. Their experiences document how great the barriers and high the prices which resisting women suffer. In spite of severe restrictions, these women stand among the relatively few who have been able to overtly work to change Pakistani gender restrictions. See also Shaheed et al 1998.

<sup>7</sup>Because the Pukhtun ethnic group provided the main source of recruitment to the Taliban movement in Afghanistan (Rashid 2001), their stringent gender views—overlaid with rigid gender constructions of fundamentalist Islam—have become general international knowledge. The Pukhtun are the majority ethnic group in Afghanistan and also across the border in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, of which Peshawar is the provincial capitol.

<sup>8</sup>See Haeri 2002 for examples of drastic family reactions to female transgression.

<sup>9</sup>The Persian shahs brought the Qizilbash forebears, originally of Turkish background, from Anatolia to serve in their administration and military. They had become Persianized during their long residence in Persia. Nadir Shah employed Qizilbash for his invasion of India in 1739. Qizilbash had become scattered along the way. A sizable group, still speaking an older version of Persian, lived in Peshawar's Old City.

<sup>10</sup>As Loeffler points out about the religious world view of Iranian peasants, such understandings were formed for each woman through the factors of "the individual's personality," "social and political interests," "socialization and education," "social milieu," "existential situation," "perceived empirical evidence for certain beliefs," and "preexisting world view" all interacting "in a network of permanent dialectical interplay and interdependence," to continually create and recreate world view (Loeffler 1988:250).

<sup>11</sup>I myself experienced such succor. At one *majles*, I had brought family pictures to show the other women, including a photo of my daughter, with whom I was not able to be in contact. At the women's urgings, I requested the Karbala martyrs' assistance. To commemorate the request, I was told to take a silver wire ring from the tray being passed around. My weeping and the other women's encouraging and sympathetic comments comforted me.

<sup>12</sup>See also Abu-Lughod (1986), Guthrie and Castelnuovo (1992), Heath (1994), Holland and Skinner (1995), Moore (1993), and Ong (1990).

<sup>13</sup>Scott also recognizes that the case of persons in a situation of gender-based subordination differs somewhat from others (Scott 1990:22).

<sup>14</sup>In another dramatic example of resistance to veiling, Iranian women dared to show a bit of hair under their veils and turned veiling into fashion to resist the Islamic Republic government's law that women must cover their hair completely. This resistance finally had an effect. By 2002 Iranian women could show plenty of hair around brief head scarves without fear of previously strict punishment.

<sup>15</sup>This statement is true in a way, as Nayereh Tohidi commented upon reading this manuscript. Women are prevented from attainments in the public, male-dominated world of economics and politics and therefore have no other outlet for ambition and achievement than the *majles*. However, in my view, these words are an insult to women's considerable work of child bearing and raising; cooking and house-keeping; serving family males and guests; maintaining social and kin ties; and sustaining culture, tradition, and identity. Further, many outstanding female performers were also students or worked.

<sup>16</sup>Another dramatic case of appropriation and counter-appropriation of Shi'a Moharram rituals can be seen in the Iranian Revolution of 1978-1979. Anti-shah activists, both religious and secular, appropriated and "re-employed" Shi'a Muslim rituals, mythology, figures, organizations, concepts, and terminology for their revolutionary aims (Hegland 1983a, 1983b). After the Revolution, some of the Shi'a clergy, in turn, counter-appropriated their successful revolutionary work, contained in these Shi'a Muslim channels, and applied it for their own purposes.

<sup>17</sup>As Nayereh Tohidi commented upon reading this manuscript—and I concur entirely—such subtle resistance may not necessarily be “an ‘in-between stage’ as it may not be done deliberately or with a conscious plan, and it can go on for generations as a way of life, a system of power dynamics accepted by both sides without ‘transforming’ anything.”

<sup>18</sup>See her *Deh Koh, Lives in an Iranian Village* (1991) for remarkable ethnographic stories on how the women nevertheless found adroit ways to exert agency. Although the meanings of such terms as freedom, autonomy, and agency will of course differ cross-culturally, here Friedl's conclusion can be taken to mean that women's resistance resulted, not in a lessening but in an increase of limitations and constraints on them.

<sup>19</sup>Also see also Al-Khayyat 1990; Altorki 1986; and Rugh 1984.

<sup>20</sup>See also Afkhami 1995; Arebi 1994; Bodman and Tohidi 1998; Brink and Mencher 1997; Friedl 1989, 1994, 1997; Hale 1996; Jalal 1991; Joseph 1993, 1994; MacLeod 1992a; Moghissi 1996; Najmabadi 1991; Paidar 1995; Peteet 1991; Zuhur 1992.

<sup>21</sup>Even when resisting gender rules, women generally try to accommodate as much as possible to existing frameworks and expectations. Often, when women do disobey, or even commit outrageous acts against gender rules, they attempt to frame their behavior in such a way that it appears less controversial. They seek ways of softening or minimizing the results of gender transgression. Some Iranian women in my village research site took the bus into Shiraz with a few female relatives or neighbors to participate in political demonstrations against the Shah. They enjoyed the day off and the dramatic experience of marching on the streets and chanting with thousands of other black-veiled women, in groups alternating with groups of male marchers. Otherwise, these women had never entered into such public activity and political expression and would have considered it inappropriate for women, especially for seyyids, as many were. Encouraged by Shi'a leaders, they defined these trips into Shiraz to demonstrate as religious duty. Imam Khomeini had ordered women to join in the anti-Shah movement, as a religious requirement, they pointed out to themselves, their male relatives, and me.

Veena Das discusses the case of a Hindu upper-caste woman, widowed in 1941 when twenty. Her natal and conjugal families fled from Lahore to India during the Partition. In acute discomfort as a burden on families who had lost everything, Asha actually decided to remarry. However, she developed for herself a framework of her remarriage as a temporary situation which she had been forced into but which did not negate her culturally and spiritually required eternal devotion to her husband. Through long years of effort, she and her former sister-in-law were able to mend the disrupted relationship between Asha and her first husband's family. (See Das 2000. I am indebted to a AQ anonymous reader for alerting me to this article.)

<sup>22</sup>McCarthy, Roy, “Bomb Kills 12 in Pakistan Mosque.” *The Guardian*, Guardian Foreign Pages, p. 12, April 27, 2002. See also Pakistan Paper: “Bomb Kills 12 at Shi'a Mosque.” British Broadcasting Corporation, BBC Monitoring South Asia, The News Web Site, Islamabad, April 26, 2002.

<sup>23</sup>Among the publications analyzing fundamentalisms' dangers for women are Afkhami 1995; Afkhami and Friedl 1994. Baffoun 1994; Bayes and Tohidi 2001; Bodman and Tohidi 1998; Brink and Mencher 1997; Friedl 1989, 1994, 1997; Hale 1994, 1996; Hardacre 1993; Jalal 1991; Joseph 1993, 1994; Lawrence 1994; MacLeod 1992a; Mazumdar 1994; Moghissi 1996, 2000; Najmabadi 1991; Paidar 1995; Papanek 1994; Peteet 1991; Shaheed 1994; Shaheed et al 1998; and Zuhur 1992.

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