

Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism by Karen G. Ruffle, 2011. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, xiii + 222 pp., ill., \$65.00. ISBN: 978-0-80783-475-6.

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This monograph takes us into the heart and soul, beliefs, and practices of Shi'ism in Hyderabad, India. A combination of literary and field work research examines how texts impact daily life, affirm identities, and nourish spiritual and moral growth. The field work element was funded by a University of North Carolina Doctoral Research Grant through its Center for Global Initiatives. The author carried out field work in Iran and India but the book is derived from the India segment. It has five chapters, a glossary, and a number of images and tables. Each chapter begins with an 'experience' from the author's fieldwork. The thesis is that remembering and emulating the heroes of Karbala translates into everyday life as socio-ethical ideals, thus connecting individuals and their community with their religion's most iconic figures. The Introduction has an interesting description of the author's identity as an 'outsider' and 'female' which, she says, placed her on the 'hermeneutical and confessional margins'. A few men were reluctant to speak with her. However, she was also seen as possessing a certain 'scholarly authority' (16) that perhaps at times gave her a 'degree of legitimacy.' What she does not describe in any detail is her actual fieldwork methodology; thus we cannot deduce whether she conducted her interviews via a translator, or speaks Urdu. Use of the word ethnography to describe any type of fieldwork is increasingly common but a little misleading. On the other hand, this reviewer has also carried out field work in Hyderabad through the same institution that facilitated her work, and can vouch for the authentic tenor and hue of her descriptions of encounter, which very convincingly, indeed nostalgically, transported him back to once familiar surroundings.

Chapter 1 begins with an analysis of sainthood in Shi'ism and how, through 'devotional literature and performance of the *majlis*', saints become role models (20). Her main argument is that these heroes are

real people, whose virtues can be imitated. Members of 'Husain's family are recognized as the ultimate exemplars of submission to God's will' (50). She distinguishes between transcendent and imitable sainthood. The former 'cannot be imitated' (18); the second represents an attainable ideal. This reviewer is left a little vague about the relationship between their inimitable and imitable sainthoods, though. Chapter 2 develops the theme, touched on earlier, of female sainthood, which offers role models for men as well as women. What is significant here is that, while imitating female members of the Prophet's house as model mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives is vital, so is following their example of engaging in community service. This takes them out of the domestic sphere into the public arena, as actors and leaders. Thus, there is a 'deep tradition of women whose public lives ... are committed to the doctrine of justice ... and social service' (63) in Shi'ism. This tradition challenges the stereotype of Iranian women in the media, which presents them as docile and oppressed.

Chapter 3 continues the book's focus on women through analysis of how the Karbala narrative has been re-told in the Indic setting. This chapter is especially interesting because it engages with how Hindu ideals and role models have coloured how the Karbala story has been told. This is an example of Islam adapting to a specific cultural context. In this instance, the process resulted in Karbala's story being narrated through feminine idiom and female-centred emotions (99). As the author points out, it was mainly women who lived to tell the tale of Karbala (21). The next chapter presents a great deal of information on marriage, marriage rituals, and the ideals involved. Again, Indic aspects are seen in the pre-wedding *mehndi* ceremony, in which the bride and groom are decorated with henna, and which some people condemn as un-Islamic. The final chapter is also concerned with the issue of acculturation, discussing opposing forces. One puts Iran and Iranian practice at the centre as the model for all Shi'a; the other resists 'abandoning local ritual traditions' (21). Discussion focuses on the *Rawdat al-Shuhada'* (a sixteenth century hagiography), its status as an authentic Karbala narrative, and its popular Indian translations. Hyderabadis have resisted 'the devernacularizing pressure from Iran' (163). This pressure for minority Shi'a communities to conform to a supposed purer expression of the tradition, one controlled by Iran, has received little scholarly attention compared with Islamist efforts toward Sunni conformity. The author argues that Islam should

not be reduced to Arab Islam (though with respect to Shi'ism, Iran might be more relevant) but takes root in many different cultural contexts, which are equally legitimate when identity is directed toward 'a universal submission to Allah' (13). One of the main strengths of this book is that rituals, including those that commemorate Karbala as 'the saddest story ever told', are described in detail. So also are the ethical ideals that shape the lives of those who practice these. The main weaknesses are lack of a concluding chapter that summarizes findings, highlighting the most significant and how the content is organized. A separate chapter reviewing and introducing the various hagiographies and Karbala accounts would make it easier to relate these to the ceremonies and contexts described in subsequent chapters. However, this book is a readable, informative, and erudite addition to scholarship on South Asian Shi'ism, especially on understanding the feminine in Shi'a sainthood. The author is to be congratulated for producing this valuable study.

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