

Elegy-Recitation by Shi'ah poets

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Another important arena about which the Shi'ah poets have recited poetry and delivered speeches extensively is the commemoration of the tragedy experienced by the descendants of the Prophet (S) and elegy-recitation for the martyrs among them. This arena came into being after the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn ('a) in 61 AH. In this regard, two parts may be discussed and examined:

a. Elegies for Imam al-Husayn ('a) and the Other Martyrs in Karbala'

From the beginning of Islam, no tragedy more serious and painful than the event of Karbala' has happened in the history of Islam, and after the lapse of one thousand and four hundred years, it still has the greatest impact upon the hearts of the devotees of the Prophet's ('a) descendants. Since then, anyone who has the love of the Prophet's (S) Ahl al-Bayt and talent in composing poetry has recited poetry in this regard.

The pioneering poems pertaining to the event of Karbala' have been recited from the end of the first century AH and the commencement of the Umayyad decline. As Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani says: Many of the latter poets have recited poetry in mourning for Imam al-Husayn ('a) about which we do not tend to complain as we are fond of long speech. Yet, on account of the harshness of the Umayyad's atmosphere of strangulation, the earlier poets during the Umayyad period have recited fewer elegies about the tribulation of Imam al-Husayn ('a).[44][696]

For example, 'Ubayd Allah ibn Hurr was chased by 'Ubayd Allah ibn Ziyad for reciting elegy for Imam al-Husayn ('a) and was forced to flee.[45][697] Of course, many poems have been composed during the first century AH about the tribulation of the Doyen of the Martyrs ('a) though they are lesser in number compared to the quantity of poems that have been recited since the second century AH.

The bereaved women of Banu Hashim were among the pioneering people who have recited elegies in lamentation of their lost loved ones. When the news of the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn ('a) reached Medina, Zaynab bint 'Aqil came out wailing amidst the women of Banu Hashim while reciting the following poem:

ماذا تقولون إذ قال النبي لكم ماذا فعلتم و انتم آخر الامم
بعترتي و باهلي بعد مُفْتَقِدِي نصف اسارى و نصف ضُرَّ جُوا بدم
ما كان هذا جزائي إذ نصحت لكم أن تخلفوني بشرًا في ذوى رَجَمِي

What shall you say in reply to the Prophet when he will ask from you, "O the latter ones of the ummah! What have you done?"

"{What did you do} with my descendants and Household after I passed away? Half of them were taken as captives while the other half was weltered in blood."

"It was not my reward for my admonition to you that you would do the worst treatment to my nearest of kin."[46][698]

Among the most heartrending elegies ever recited for the martyrs of Karbala' are the elegies of Umm al-Banin, the mother of Hadhrat Abu'l-Fadhli. Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani has narrated that Umm al-Banin was holding the hand of 'Ubayd Allah, son of Hadhrat al-'Abbas and going to the Baqi' Cemetery while the people of Medina were gathering around her and weeping because of her elegies. Even an enemy such as Marwan ibn al-Hakam used to weep with of her elegies.[47][699] Umm al-Banin was thus saying:

يا من رأى العباس كر على جماهير النقد
وورانه من أبناء حيدر كل ليث ذي لبد
انبتت أن ابني اصيب براسه مقطوع يد
ويل على شبلي اما ل براسه ضرب العمد
لوكان سيفك في يد يك لمادنا منك احد

I wished I saw (with my own eyes) how 'Abbas was assaulting the groups of vile people!

Behind him were the sons of Haydar (Imam 'Ali ('a)) standing like lions.

I have been informed that his hands have been amputated while his head has received a blow.

Woe to my son whose head has received a strong blow!

If your sword were in your hand, no one could have ever come near you.[48][700]

When the caravan of the captives of Karbala' was heading toward Medina and arrived near the city, Imam Zayn al-'Abidin ('a) dispatched Bashir ibn Jadhlam to Medina ahead of them, and Bashir informed the people of their arrival in the city through this poem:

يا اهل يثرب لامقام لكم بها قتل الحسين فادمعي مدرار
الجسم منه بكربلاء مضرّج و الرأس منه على القنّاة يدار

O people of Yathrib! No more opportunity for you to stay there. Husayn was killed; shed your tears.

His corpse has been weltering in blood in Karbala' and his head is placed on top of spear. [49][701]

Khalid ibn Ma'dan, 'Uqbah ibn 'Amru, Abu'r-Ramih al-Khaza'i, Sulayman ibn Quttah al-'Adawi, 'Awf ibn 'Abd Allah Ahmar al-Azdi, and 'Ubayd Allah ibn Hurr were among the elegists of the first century AH who have recited poetry about the tribulation of Imam al-Husayn ('a). It has been narrated that when Khalid ibn Ma'dan saw in Sham the Imam's head on top of the spear, he recited this poem:

جاؤا برأسك يا ابن بنت محمد مترملاً بدمائه ترميلاً
و كاتماً بك يا ابن بنت محمد قتلوا جهاراً عامدين رسولاً
قتلوك عطشاً و لم يترقبوا في قتلك التنزيل و التأويل
و يكبرون بان قتلتي و أنما قتلوا بك التكبير و التهليل

O son of the daughter of Muhammad! They have made your head weltering in blood.

O son of the daughter of Muhammad! By overtly killing you, as if they wanted to take revenge from the Prophet!

They have killed you while thirsty and they have not observed the interpretation and injunction of the Qur'an about killing.

And that they have killed you, they are uttering "Allahu akbar" {Allah is the greatest} while uttering "Allahu akbar," they have also killed your companions! [50][702]

Among the first poets to have recited poetry in lamentation for Imam al-Husayn ('a) is 'Ubayd Allah in Hurr whose ode starts with the following couplet:

يقول امر غادر اي غادر ألاكنت قاتلت الشهيد بن فاطمه

The treacherous chief, son of a traitor asks {me}: "Did you not fight against the martyr, the son of Fatimah?"

When Ibn Ziyad heard this poem, he chased 'Ubayd Allah who immediately rode on a horse and escaped, thus saving his life. [51][703]

Sulayman ibn Quttah al-'Adawi has been one of the most prominent elegists for the tribulation of Imam al-Husayn ('a). The following poem is attributed to him:

مررت على أبيات آل محمد فلم أرها كعهدها يوم خلّت
و كانوا رجاء ثم صاروا رزيةً و قد عظمت تلك الرزايا و جلّت
ألم تر أن الشمس اضحت مريضةً لفقد حسين و البلاد اقشعرت
و قد اعولت تبكي السماء لفقدة و انجمها ناحت عليه و صلت

I roamed around the house of Muhammad's progeny and I saw them not fully occupied as before.

They were the House of hope and later became the House of tribulation—grave and serious tribulations.

Can you not see that due to the loss of Husayn the sun turned lackluster and the cities melancholic?!

Can you not see that owing to the loss of Husayn the sky has wept and wailed and its stars lamented and invoked salutations? [52][704]

But after the end of the first century AH when the repression of the Umayyad rulers diminished because of their confrontation with the 'Abbasid movement and other revolts and were finally defeated by the 'Abbasids, the pure Imams ('a) revived the recitation of elegies for Imam al-Husayn ('a) and great poets such as Kumayt al-Asadi, Sayyid Humayri, Sufyan ibn Mus'ab 'Abdi, Mansur Namri, and Da'bal al-Khaza'i used to recite poetry in their presence for the tribulation of Imam al-Husayn ('a). As Sufyan ibn Mus'ab 'Abdi narrates: I visited Imam as-Sadiq ('a) and the Imam said to his attendant, "Tell Umm Farwah to come and listen to what happened to his (great) grandfather." Umm Farwah came and sat behind a curtain. Then, Imam as-Sadiq ('a) said to me: "You recite." I started reciting an elegy which commences with this couplet:

فرو جودي بدمعك المسكوب

O Umm Farwah! Render tears to your eyes.

At this point, Umm Farwah and other ladies burst into tears. [53][705]

Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani also narrates from Isma'il at-Tamimi, thus: I was with Imam as-Sadiq ('a) when Sayyid Hamayri asked for permission and entered. The Imam asked the members of his household to sit behind a curtain. He then asked Sayyid Humayri to recite poetry in lamentation for Imam al-Husayn ('a). Sayyid recited this poem:

امرر على جدث الحسين فقل لاعظمة الزكية
يا اعظماً لازلت من وظفا و ساكية روية
فاذا مررت بقبره فاطل به وقف المطية
و ابك المطهر للمطهر و المطهرة النقية
كبكاء معوله انت يوماً لواحداه المنية

You pass by the grave of Husayn and tell to his pure bones: "O bones! Be always sound and gluttoned."

As you pass by his grave, make a long stopover as the camels do.

Let the pure {mutahhar} Imam weep for the pure Husayn.

Your cry must be like the cry and lamentation of the mother of a dead son.

The narrator says, "I saw the tears of the Imam fall on his cheek and weeping reigned in the house." [54][706]

Sometimes also others such as Fadhil Rasan and Abu Harun Makfuf would recite the poems of Sayyid Humayri in lamentation for Imam al-Husayn ('a) near Imam as-Sadiq ('a) and make the Imam cry. As reported by Ibn Qawlawiyyah, Imam as-Sadiq ('a) asked one of his companions named Abu 'Ammar to recite for him the poems of 'Abdi in lamentation for Imam al-Husayn ('a). [55][707]

Poet such as Da'bal al-Khaza'i who recited many poems in lamentation for Imam al-Husayn ('a) also engaged in reciting elegies near Imam ar-Ridha ('a) for his great grandfather. [56][708]

b. Elegies for the Other Martyrs among the Descendants of the Prophet (S)

--As a deeply touched Shi'ah poet is witnessing the scene of martyrdom of Muslim ibn 'Aqil and Hani ibn 'Urwah, he recites this poem and this poem is thereafter recited by many:

إذا كنت لا تدرين ما الموت فانظري إلى هاتي في السوق و ابن عقيل
إلى بطل قد هشم السيف وجهه و آخر يهوي في طمار قنيل
اصابهما أمر الأمير فأصبحا أحاديث من يسعى بكل سبيل
ابتكر أسماء المهايج آمناً و قد طلبته مذبح بذحول

If you do not know what is meant by death, look at Ibn 'Aqil and Hani at the market.

His (Ibn 'Aqil's) face was heroically cut into pieces by swords while the other one (Hani) was thrown from the top (of palace) and was killed.

By the order of the emir, this happened to them on this day and the news about them was relayed by the travelers.

You can see a corpse whose color has been changed by death and every part of which has been weltering in blood.

Will the names of Mahayij be in safety? This is while the tribe of Madhhaj is about to be punished. [57][709]

While reciting a long elegy in lamentation for the martyrs of the Tawabun {the Penitents}, a certain poet named A'sha Hamdan thus says:

توجه من دون ثنية سائراً إلى ابن زياد في الجموع الكتاب
فياخير جيش للعراق و اهله سقيتم روايا كل اسحم ساكب

From that direction, soldiers rushed toward Ibn Ziyad.

O the best of Iraqi army! You filled every gutter for rainwater. [58][710]

The Shi'ah poets also used to recite poetry in mourning for Zayd ibn 'Ali, his son Yahya, and the descendants of Imam al-Hasan ('a) who staged uprisings during the 'Abbasid period and attained martyrdom.

The poets such 'Ali ibn 'Abd Allah al-Khawafi, Mashi' Madani, Ashja' ibn 'Amru Salmi, and Abu Talib al-Qummi have also recited poetry in mourning for Imam ar-Ridha ('a). [59][711]

But after Imam al-Husayn ('a), among the murdered descendants of Abu Talib, the greatest number of elegies has been recited in mourning for Yahya ibn 'Umar at-Talibi. He staged an uprising in 248 AH and was killed by Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah ibn Tahir. [60][712] Mas'udi says, "People from near and far recited elegies for him while young and old wept for him." [61][713]

Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani says, "Of all the descendants of Abu Talib killed during the 'Abbasid period, I do not find anyone about whom poems and elegies have been recited as much as what has been done to Yahya ibn 'Umar at-Talibi." [62][714]

4. The Virtues and Merits of the Descendants of the Prophet (S)

Since the second century AH, the Shi'ah poets used to recite poetry more about the virtues and merits of the Commander of the Faithful ('a), and in this manner, engaging in the information drive and spread of the school of Shi'ism whose basic foundation is the succession and Imamate of 'Ali ('a). The great poets such as Kumayt al-Asadi, Humayri, Sufyan ibn Mus'ab 'Abdi, and Da'bal al-Khaza'i were forerunners in this affair.

Sayyid Humayri spent his time expressing the merits of the Commander of the Faithful, and he was one of the prominent preachers of the school of Ahl al-Bayt ('a) during his time. As narrated by Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani, he recited two thousand three hundred odes in praise of Banu Hashim, while none of his poems has been devoid of praise for Banu Hashim and reproach for their enemies.

Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani has also said that in Kufah, Sayyid Humayri used to go to the house of Sulayman ibn Mihran known as A'mash from whom he would learn about and write the virtues of the Commander of the Faithful 'Ali ('a), and thereafter, he would express them in poetry.

Ibn Mu'taz says: Sayyid Humayri has transformed into poetry all the virtues of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib ('a) and he would easily become tired sitting at any assembly where the progeny of Muhammad was not pleasantly mentioned. For example, someone has thus narrated: "We were sitting beside 'Amru ibn 'Ala' when Sayyid Humayri came. And we were then busy talking about common affairs such as farming and date palms. Sayyid stood up as he wanted to go. When we asked for the reason why he wanted to leave, he gave this reply to us:

إني لاكره أن اطيل بمجلس لا ذكر فيه لفضل آل محمّد
لا ذكر فيه لاحمد و وصيه و بنيه ذلك مجلس نطف ردى
ان الذي ينساهم في مجلس حتى يفارقه لغير مسدد

I abhor sitting at an assembly in which none of the virtues of the progeny of Muhammad is ever mentioned.

Any assembly in which there is no mention of Ahmad, his successor and his offspring is a worthless assembly.

Anyone who shall not mention them in the assembly shall leave that assembly without gaining any benefit.[63][715]

Similarly, one day, one of the chiefs of Kufah gave a horse and a gift to Sayyid Humayri. He mounted the horse and took the gift, and went to the working place of Kufah. He then addressed the Shi'ah, saying: "O Kufans! If anyone could mention any of the virtues of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib about which I have not expressed in poetry yet, I shall give this horse and gift to him."

People from every direction would mention each of the superiorities of the Commander of the Faithful ('a) and in return he would recite the poem he composed about it. Finally, someone said: One day, 'Ali ('a) wanted to wear his shoes and go out. He had already worn one pair of his shoes when an eagle came, picked up the other pair of shoes and brought it up. But it suddenly abandoned as a black snake went out of the shoe and entered into a ground hole. 'Ali ('a) then wore the other pair of his shoes.

At this point, Sayyid Humayri thought for sometime and then said, "I have not composed a poem about it so far." As such, he gave the horse and the gift to the man, and recited the following poem:

الا يا قوم للعجب العجب لخفّ ابى الحسن و للحباب
عدوّ من عداة الجن و غدّ بعيد في المراد من صواب
اتي خفاً له انساب فيه لينهش رجله منه بناب
لينهش خير من ركب المطايا امير المؤمنين اباتراب
فخرّ من السّما له عقاب من العقبان او شبه العقاب
و دوفع عن ابى حسن علي نقيع سماه بعد انسياب

Be aware O people that there is a miracle in the shoe of Abu'l-Hasan.

One of the hostile jinns among the imprudent and strayed from the path Hid in the shoe of 'Ali himself so as to bite him with its fangs— So as to bite the one who rides on four-footed animals—the Commander of the Faithful, Abu Turab.

At that moment, one of the eagles of the sky or a bird that looks like an eagle descended upon his head.

In this manner, its (the hostile jinn's) venom and wickedness were warded off.[64][716]

Sufyan ibn Mus'ab 'Abdi is among the poets who have spent their time in mentioning the merits of the Commander of the Faithful ('a). 'Allamah Amini says, thus: "I never found any poem of his that was in praise of other than the progeny of Muhammad (S)."

He used to learn the hadiths about the merits and virtues of the progeny of the Prophet (S) from Imam as-Sadiq ('a) and immediately composed pertinent poems.[65][717] For this reason, Ibn Shahr Ashub narrates that Imam as-Sadiq ('a) says, "O assembly of the Shi'ah! Teach the poetry of 'Abdi to your children as he is with the religion of God."

5. The Demerits of the Enemies of the Prophet's (S) Descendants

One of the ways of fighting the enemies is propaganda war, which is tremendously rampant today through the mass media. In the past, the demerits of the enemies in the context of poetry also had a very significant propaganda impact.

In defending the school of Shi'ism, the Shi'ah poets used to also deal with the demerits of the enemies of Ahl al-Bayt ('a). At any opportune time, they could destroy an enemy and break his back through some couplets. Persons such as Mu'awiyah, Walid ibn 'Uqbah and 'Amr ibn al-'As who were enemies of God and the Messenger (S) have been dispraised many

times by the poets of Banu Hashim, and the supporters and poets of the Commander of the Faithful ('a).

Without revealing his name and thus be pursued by the Umayyads, a certain poet has soothed the hearts of the Shi'ah by dispraising Yazid after his death by saying, thus:

يا أيها القبر بحوارينا ضمنت شرَّ الناس أجمعينا

O grave which is in "hawarin"! The worst of all people is in your bosom.[66][718]

One of the best satires about the Umayyads is a poem which has been recited by Kumayt ibn Zayd al-Asadi concerning them:

فقل لبني أمية حيث حلُّوا و إن خفت المهند و القطيعا

اجاع الله من اشبعتموه و اشبع من بجوركم اجيعا

بمرضئ السياسة هاشمي يكون حياً لامته ربيعاً

Tell the Umayyads wherever they are, if you are afraid of sword and scourge.

May God make him hungry he who has satiated you and satiate him he who has remained hungry because of your tyranny.

With the pleasant Hashimi policy, there shall be the spring of life for the ummah.[67][719]

Dr. Shawqi Dayf says: "The Shi'ah in Iraq, Khurasan and Hijaz used to transmit to one another the poems of Kumayt. For this reason, the Umayyads and their governor in Iraq, Yusuf ibn 'Umar ath-Thaqafi, felt seriously threatened by Kumayt." [68][720]

Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani has thus said about Kumayt: Kumayt al-Asadi, the great Shi'ah poet during the Umayyad period of repression would not hesitate to reply in whatever form to the poets inimical to 'Ali ('a), affiliated to the Umayyads and were reciting poetry against the descendants of the Prophet (S). For example, a certain poet named Hakim ibn al-'Abbas al-Kalbi who was considered one of the Qahtanis had dispraised 'Ali ('a). Kumayt seriously assaulted him and in his poems he placed Hakim vis-à-vis the notables of Quraysh and 'Adnanis. In this way, Kumayt dispraised and defeated him.[69][721]

Sometimes also, without divulging their names, poets used to reply to the court poets, dispraising and crushing them. For example, Sa'id ibn Hamid who was one of the enemies of the Commander of the Faithful ('a) and the descendants of the Prophet (S) during the rule of Musta'in had been humiliated by the Shi'ah poets on various occasions.

On the same period, a certain poet named 'Ali ibn Jahm who had been one of the Nasibis and enemies of the Commander of the Faithful ('a) has been dispraised by the Shi'ah poet, 'Ali ibn Muhammad ibn Ja'far al-'Alawi. He had rejected the genealogy of 'Ali ibn Jahm, regarding him connected to Samah ibn Lawi.

In dispraising Ibn Ziyad, Abu'l-Aswad Da'uli has said:

أقول و ذاك من جَزَع و وَجِدْ أزال الله ملك بني زياد

و ابعدهم بما غدروا و خانوا كما بَعْدَتْ ثمود و قوم عاد

Out of agony and anguish I am saying that may God destroy the dominion of the offspring of Ziyad!

And cause them to perish for their deceit and treason just as the people of Thamud and Ad have been ruined! [70][722]

Sayyid Humayri has humiliated one of the 'Abbasid judges who had dismissed his testimony on account of his faith in Shi'ism, and he has said:

ابوك ابن سارق عنز النبي و انت ابن بنت أبي جحدر

و نحن على رغمك الرافضون لاهل الضلالة و المنكر

Your father steals the sheep of the Prophet while you are maternal grandchild of Abu Jahdar!

And notwithstanding your whim, we shall abandon the people of misguidance and deviation. [71][723]

Abu Nu'amah Daqiqi al-Kufi, one of the poets during the third century AH, had dispraised the notables of the 'Abbasid rule, attributing to them the commission of abominable acts until such time that he had been killed by one of the 'Abbasid Turkish commanders named Mufallah.[72][724]

Summary

3. One of the most important areas about which the Shi'ah poets have recited poetry was the elegy-recitation for the martyrs of the progeny of the Prophet (S). This area can be divided into two parts:

a. Elegies for Imam al-Husayn

The first persons to have recited poetry in mourning for the martyrs of Karbala' were the bereaved women of the Banu Hashim.

Among them was Lady Umm al-Banin, the mother of Hadhrat Abu'l-Fadhli. He used to recite elegies for her sons at the Baqi' Cemetery while the people of Medina gathered around her

and wept. Due to the Umayyad policy of repression, the elegists of the martyrs of Karbala' were lesser in number during the Umayyad period compared to that of the 'Abbasid period except during the time of Imam as-Sadiq ('a) when the condition was conducive for the Imam to revive the elegy for Imam al-Husayn ('a).

b. Elegies for the martyrs among the descendants of the Prophet (S)

The descendants of the Prophet (S) were oppressed and have always been killed by the tyrants. Poets used to recite poems in lamentation for them. Next to the martyrs of Karbala', among the offspring of Abu Talib, the most number of poems has been recited in mourning for Yahya ibn 'Umar at-Talibi.

4. The merits and virtues of the descendants of the Prophet (S)

The poets such as Farazdaq, Kumayt, Sayyid Humayri, and Da'bal al-Khaza'i used to recite poetry to express the virtues of the descendants of the Prophet (S).

5. Dispraising the enemies of the descendants of the Prophet (S)

Shi'ah poets used to engage in dispraising the enemies of Ahl al-Bayt ('a) in defending the school of Shi'ism.