



The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi'i Islam

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Commemorating the Battle of Karbala, in which the Prophet Mohammad's grandson Hosayn and seventy-two of his family members and supporters were martyred in 680 CE, is the central religious observance of Shi'i Islam. Though much has been written about the rituals that reenact and venerate Karbala, until now no one has studied women's participation in these observances. This collection of original essays by a multidisciplinary team of scholars analyzes the diverse roles that women have played in the Karbala rituals, as well as the varied ways in which gender-coded symbols have been used within religious and political discourses.

The contributors to this volume consider women as participants in and observers of the Karbala rituals in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, India, Pakistan, and the United States. They find that women's experiences in the Shi'i rituals vary considerably from one community to another, based on regional customs, personal preferences, religious interpretations, popular culture, and socioeconomic background. The authors also examine the gender symbolism within the rituals, showing how it reinforces distinctions between the genders while it also highlights the centrality of women to the symbolic repertory of Shi'ism. Overall, the authors conclude that while Shi'i rituals and symbols have in some ways been used to restrict women's social roles, in other ways they have served to provide women with a sense of independence and empowerment.

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