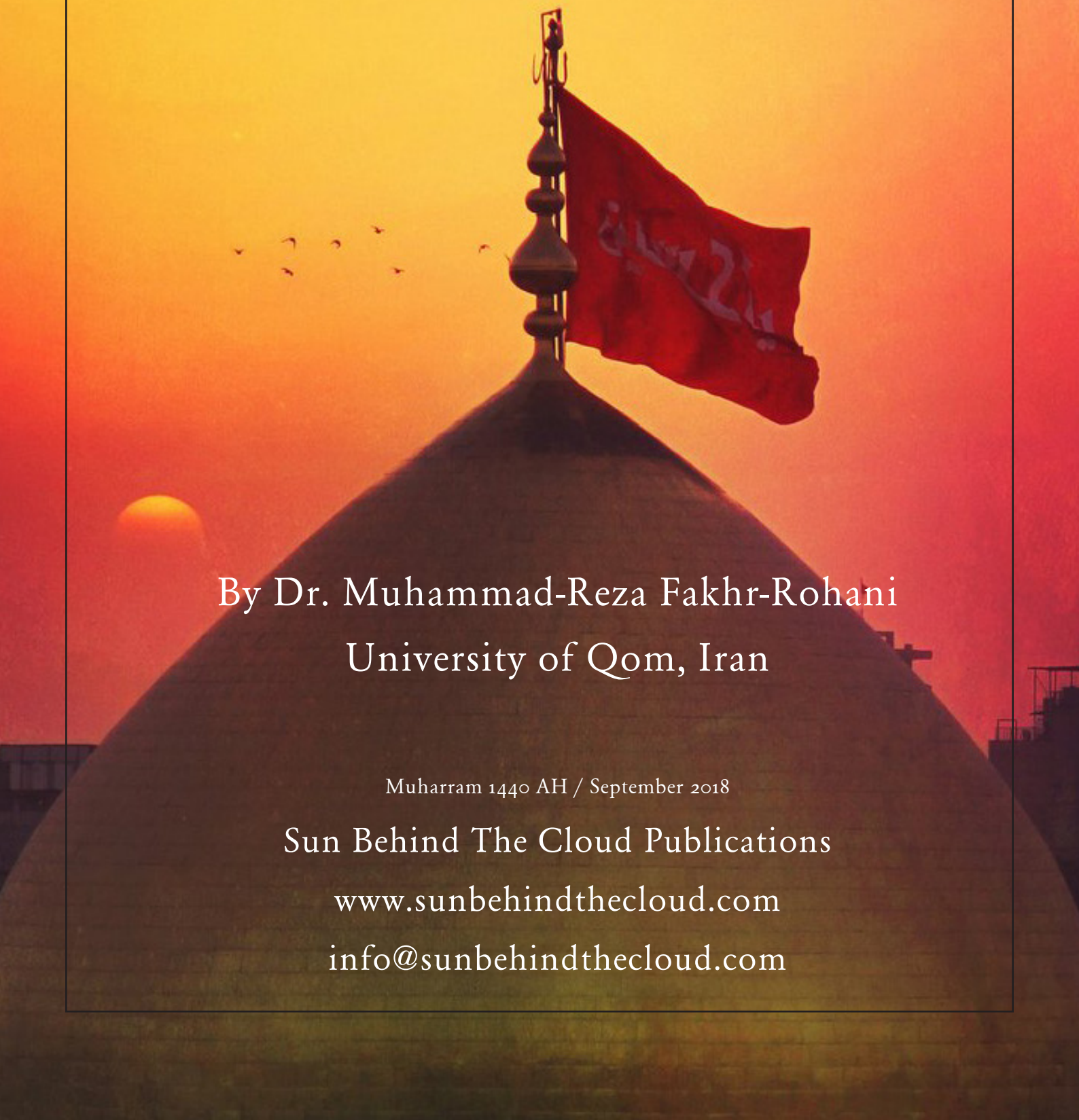
An Introduction to The Islamic Martyrdom Narrative (*Maqtal*)



By Dr. Muhammad-Reza Fakhr-Rohani
University of Qom, Iran

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Sun Behind The Cloud Publications
www.sunbehindthecloud.com
info@sunbehindthecloud.com



In the tradition of mourning the tragedy of Ashura, a martyrdom narrative (*maqtal*) text characterizes a written account or monograph, mainly, but not exclusively, on the martyrdom of Imam al-Ḥusayn and/or his martyred companions. As such, maqtal texts make up a unique genre of literature, though so far largely neglected. They function both as a text to be recounted in the mourning gatherings and as a historiographical account, with varying degrees of authenticity and focus. Although earlier maqtal texts were written in Arabic, they are now available in a variety of languages, for different age groups, and in diverse literary forms. As it seems that there has not been any scheme for classifying the typology of maqtal texts, the present work is an effort to fill in the gap by proposing a preliminary typology of such texts.

The Arabic word maqtal (plural *maqātil*) means, inter alia, "place of slaughter or execution; place of death, i.e. any part of the body, which, being wounded, causes death" (Steingass 1892/1984, s.v. maqtal). [1] It has another meaning which concerns the annual commemorative sessions (i.e., *majālis*) held to lament the martyrdom of Imam al-Ḥusayn and the heart-rending Ashura tragedy of AH 61/680 CE. The latter use, though not recorded in most Arabic- or Persian-English dictionaries, concerns the "martyrdom narrative" (see Ayoub 1987, p. 153); more specifically, it refers to a written account of the martyrdom of Imam al-Ḥusayn.[2] Typically, a maqtal touches upon the lives of Imam al-Ḥusayn and his loyal companions who sacrificed their lives on the Day of Ashura. [3-4]

Maqtals are important in at least two respects. The first one is a historical factor. It is a written record of the oppressions and atrocity which the Umayyad ruler Yazīd's agents committed at the Battle of Karbala. As a record of the afflictions and hardships of the Imam al-Ḥusayn front, it receives a value-laden religious colouring and, accordingly, comprises part of the Shiite commemorative rituals. Viewed from this perspective, a great number of Muslim scholars, whether Sunnite or Shiite, have authored books on the Karbala tragedy. [5] Although classical or major maqtals have been, and still tend to be, written in Arabic, there have been maqtals in other languages, too. [6-7]

Secondly, sharing a number of features, maqtal books measure up to a specific genre. They focus almost exclusively on the Karbala tragedy in which the pivotal character is Imam al-Ḥusayn. They may mention other events as subsidiary or in support of the main line of the narrative. While biographies start the narrative from the birth of Imam al-Ḥusayn, maqtals have a strong focus on the events taken place on Ashura. Yet, both never lose their focus of the martyrdom of Imam al-Ḥusayn. However, digressions are quite normal as the discourse structure of Persian is totally different from that of English: Arabic and/or Persian discourse structures are not as direct as English is.

Maqtals are written as a devotional record as well as a text to be recited or read out on Muharram mourning days. [8-9] While the practice of Arabic-speaking, chiefly Iraqi, mourners is that a person reads out a maqtal and the mourners listen and weep, such a practice has not been so customary among Iranians. Instead, Iranians prefer *rowzeh khani* (properly *rawḍah khānī*), the apex of which is *muṣībat khānī*. Despite the central role of muṣībat and muṣībat khānī in such devotional and commemorative rituals, some scholars (e.g. Nakash [1993]) seem to bypass them. (Despite his amazing and praiseworthy research and scholarship, Nakash (ibid., p. 163) does not include muṣībat or muṣībat khānī in the "five major rituals [developed] around the Battle of Karbala.")

The maqtal genre can be viewed from a purely linguistic perspective. From the speech-act perspective, it can be regarded as a macro-speech-act text, comprised of multiple micro-speech-acts. Considering its effects of arousing sentiments and sympathetic feelings, it can be regarded as a type of "effective language acts" (Felman 1980/1983, p. 31). Drawing upon the original Austinian notions of 'constative' and 'performative' speech acts (see Austin 1975), one may find out that despite the apparent 'constative' feature of the maqtal books which seemingly 'report' certain past incidents, they are in reality true instances of 'performatives', for recounting them "is part of the doing or accomplishing of an action" (Nagarajan 2006, p. 263), not merely reporting them, devoid of effects. On analogy with the notion that "[a]ll that we designate literature is performative" (Nagarajan, ibid), one can argue that what we designate as maqtal or muṣībat text is virtually 'performative' in character. Hence, it can be argued that such texts constitute what can be safely regarded as 'religious or ritual performatives or speech acts', by means of which both the person who recounts them and those who listen to them jointly perform a religious or ritual speech act. Such acts fit what Austin terms as "behabitives" because they express "attitudes and social behaviour" (Austin 1975, p. 152); in Searle's terminology they are regarded as "expressives", for they "express the psychological state […] about a state of affairs" (Searle 1979, p. 15). Moreover, as "a [language] game is a type of social activity, a form of life" (Souza Filho 1984, p. 2), both mourning/ lamentation and muṣībat khānī represent a specific type of language game, hence a type of social activity as well as a form of life. [10-11]

Stylistically, muṣībat khānī can be regarded as reading out part of a maqtal. Whereas a maqtal is expected to be a book- or monograph-length account, muṣībat is normally a short, oral text, usually focusing on one or two episodes or scenes aimed at evoking the audience's intense tearful and emotional responses. However, both belong to the same genre, as they have the same "thematic content" and "expressive capacity" (Frow 2006, pp. 64, 72) and meet certain "sets of conventions and expectations" (Culler 1997, p. 72), hence "appropriate to a type of situation" (Frow 1980, p. 78). Granted that "every work is its own genre, is sui generic" (Schlegel [1957, p. 116]; qtd. in Frow [2006, p. 26]), "genre is defined 'by the way it expresses human experience (subject matter) through an identifiable form (formal character) that clarifies or discovers the values in or attitude toward that experience (generic attitude)'."(Imbrie [1986, p. 60]; qtd. in Frow [2006, p. 73]). It follows that every maqtal (or muṣībat) text proves to be a genre which encodes parts of Shiite religio-historical, hence collectively, cultural experience and, accordingly, manifests "a framework for processing information" (Frow 2006, p. 80). Unfortunately, maqtal (or muṣībat), as a distinct genre, has not received the due attention. The present study aims to fill such a serious gap.

Maqtals focus and concern praiseworthy and positive figures. While a maqtal, as a genre in itself, might be expected to be an account of the way someone was killed, it is almost never used for depicting the way a notorious figure, such as an enemy soldier or commander, was killed. Where such a depiction is made, it rarely arises tearful reactions of the audience. This is most probably because a profligate or a ruthless person seldom deserves an account, hence no maqtal has been written in respect of the fate of the pro-Umayyad enemy forces who committed the massacre in the Ashura episode in Karbala in 61 AH/ 680 CE.

Developing an Ashura-oriented maqtal is generally regarded as a praiseworthy act of Islamic scholarly piety and is regarded as the author's religiosity, particularly from a Shiite perspective. It follows that there can hardly be an Ashura-oriented maqtal developed by anybody who does not believe in, or show respect for, the truthfulness and rightfulness of the Ashura episode. From this perspective, even those non-Muslims who develop a maqtal must have perceived some praiseworthy scenes or indications in the Ashura episode. Such religio-scholarly urges prove admirable motivations for their works.

The muṣībats focus on the afflictions imposed on a range of positive and praiseworthy personalities. This range is virtually divided into the infallible and non-infallible ones. The only infallible personality is Imam al-Ḥusayn, widely referred to as 'Sayyid al-Shuhadā'' (The Prince of Martyrs). The other personalities, all non-infallible, who are lamented, can be further divided into those who were martyred on Ashura and who passed away later on, mainly female persona. The former category includes Imam al-Ḥusayn's younger step-brother al-'Abbās, the water-carrier and standard-bearer of Imam al-Ḥusayn's camp, 'Alī al-Akbar, and 'Alī al-Aṣghar. In the latter category are Zaynab and Imam al-Ḥusayn's (three- or four-year old) daughter who passed away in Damascus and was buried there. In addition to the above, Imam al-Ḥusayn's cousin and envoy Muslim b. 'Aqīl and his two young children whom were beheaded thirsty beside a trajectory of the river Euphrates are also lamented, were all non-infallible. Yet in another classification the Imam's companions can be divided into Hāshimid and non-Hāshimid companions, each further subdivided by gender. 'Alī al-Akbar is exemplary of being a Hāshimid martyr and al-Ḥurr (who symbolizes last-minute penitence and attaining salvation) is a non-Hashimid martyr. Notice must be made that there were reportedly a few Christian martyrs, too, such as, Wahab and his mother. Although all the Ashura martyrs are respected, the Hāshimid are most venerated and are in the focus of muṣībat khānī and maqtal-author's concentration.

Maqtal texts may be classified in a number of ways. Guenther's (1994) paper provides an earlier survey of certain maqtal literature in Arabic, with a thematic array from the pre-Islamic times up to the Karbala tragedy. However, it does not offer a classification or typology of the maqtal texts dealing exclusively with Karbala. As there are various kinds of maqtal books, it is time for devising a typology or a classificatory scheme of them.

While classical or original maqtal books have appeared in Arabic, there have been a large number of maqtal books in other languages, whether merely translations from Arabic or original publications (drawing upon Arabic sources). Amongst maqtal books in other languages, one can mention Persian translations of *al-Luhūf* (or *al-Malhūf*) of Sayyid 'Alī b. Mūsā b. Ja'far (better known as both Sayyid b. Ṭāwūs and Ibn Ṭāwūs (or its English translation by Athar Husain Rizvi [2007]), *Nafas al-mahmūm* of Sheikh 'Abbās al-Qummī, the English translation of *Abu Mikhnaf's Kitāb Maqtal al-Ḥusayn*, by H. Mavani, or a German study of its sources, contents, and ways of transmission by U. Sezgin (1971).

While maqtal books are traditionally expected to have a heavy focus on the tragic scenes of the afflictions imposed on Imam al-Ḥusayn's front, there are some accounts which have appeared in recent years and are devoted to analytical treatment of the whole event, adopting a socio-psychological or political approach, e.g. Āyatī's seminal volume *Barrasī-yi tārīkh-i 'Āshūrā* (also available in English translation).

Another classification concerns the narrator. Whereas almost all Persian maqtals rely on Arabic sources, a great majority of classical Arabic maqtal texts are incidents recorded by either eye-witnesses or those who relied on the eye-witnesses' accounts, hence in some respects at variance with one another. There is at least one maqtal which is superior by far to all the other ones; that is the maqtal compiled originally by Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn b. Mūsā b. Bābwayh al-Qummī, commonly known as Sheikh al-Ṣadūq (d. A. H. 381/991 CE). Although the original maqtal edited by Sheikh al-Ṣadūq is believed to have been extinct, hence no longer directly available, [12] it has been reconstructed from the sources which quoted its fragments. The unique feature of this maqtal which makes it stand as the crown of all other ones is its quotations from the Infallible Imams as well as other reliable authorities on the Ashura tragedy. Certainly none of the other maqtals can match it. [13] There is also a famous prayer text widely known as "*Zīyārat al-Nāḥīyah al-Muqaddasah*," originally ascribed to, hence composed by, the eleventh Infallible Imam al-Ḥasan al-'Askarī, or the still-alive twelfth Infallible Imam al-Mahdī, in which a clear and moving picture of the whole tragedy is portrayed. [14] Next to these

infallible-portrayed maqtals, one can mention the other ones, provisionally divided into those ascribed to Shiite versus Sunnite sources, reporters, or authorities.

Maqtal texts can also be divided according to their audience. While non-simplified maqtal texts seem suitable for scholars who prefer to approach the episode in its original form, [15] there are simplified versions designed for non-experts, further divided into those for adults versus the versions suitable for young boys and girls. [16]

Maqtal texts vary with regard to their focal events. While the main focus and the most tragic event is undoubtedly the martyrdom of Imam al-Ḥusayn, the events can concern those which took place on Ashura versus those which took place either before or after the Imam's heart-rending martyrdom. The events which took place on Ashura include the martyrdom of Imam al-Ḥusayn and most of his matchless companions, e.g. al-'Abbās, 'Alī al-Akbar, 'Alī al-Aṣghar, and so on. Pre-Ashura tragic events concern such incidents as the arrest and martyrdom of Muslim b. 'Aqīl and his two sons and the enemy's ban of water. The events which took place after the Imam's martyrdom include the enemies' attacking the tents and looting and burning them, captivating the surviving women, children, and the fourth Infallible Imam 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn. These scenes stretch to Yazīd's happy ceremonies and bringing the triumphant captives into his palace in Damascus. Perhaps the most tragic and impressing scene of the Damascus phase is the story of the demise of Imam al-Ḥusayn's daughter at the sight of Imam al-Ḥusayn's severed head laid before her.

The modes of expressing the maqtal contents are now quite varied. Regardless of the language used (e.g. Arabic, Urdu, Turkish) most of them are performed orally and the audience follow up and shed tears in silence. [17] Other modes of expression concern plays, e.g. Sharqawi (2003), poems [18], and prose. [19]

There can be various kinds of maqtals. While a great majority of maqtals are written by Muslims, some of them are works written by non-Muslims, e.g. Christians or Hindus. It is a fact that a considerable number of maqtals are narratives of the Ashura episode, some maqtals are half analytical, half narrative. Whereas some maqtals are graphically detailed, others may be brief reports. More importantly, some maqtals are anticipatory and/or pre-martyrdomwise, e.g. the martyrdom of Imam al-Ḥusayn as anticipated by the Prophet Muḥammad, while others can be regarded as post-martyrdom reports. In contrast to major and usually reference maqtals that are in formal, if not literary, language, other maqtals may be produced in local languages and dialects, and sometimes in a rather folkloric style that resembles everyday street language. In Arab countries where there are usually two distinct varieties of formal language, i.e., Classical Arabic, in contrast to informal language, maqtals can be produced and orally presented in either variety, with the exception of fragments from Qur'ānic or *hadith* passages that are always in the formal high language.

There is yet another classification of maqtal texts that concern their textual authenticity and historical reliability, mainly based on the time they were written. With the exception of reliable and brief reports of the fifth Infallible Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir and the sixth Infallible Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, Arabic maqtals that have been written by Muslims are divided into two broad categories: (1) those that were written from the 2nd/ 8th century to the 8th/ 16th century, and (2) those that were produced from the 8th/16th century up to the 14th/20th century. [20] While maqtals in the former category contain mere reports of the tragic scenes, maqtals of the second category tend to be rather graphic and often pity-arising depictions. Such pity-arising and tearful depictions are recounted by Shiite clerics in their Ashura-oriented addresses.

While in the earlier generations single authors endeavoured to develop maqtals and rarely claimed for their works to be 'comprehensive', some modern and particularly contemporary maqtals are results of groups of scholars and claim to be 'comprehensive', just in contrast to many other shorter maqtals that must be selections, abridgements, or adoptions in which just a limited number of tragic scenes are included

Here only a preliminary sketch of a typology and certain speech-act aspects of maqtals have been rendered. No doubt, each and every of the points elaborated above can be further developed so as to dive deep in the fascinating ocean of the present unexplored religio-cultural atmosphere. May the Almighty grant us His grace to accomplish such a task. Amen!

Notes:

[1] This is a fully revised version of the same paper read at the National Seminar on Tradition of Azadari of Muharram in India, held at Iran Culture House, New Delhi, 18-19 November 2006. Although maqātil is the Arabic plural form, I deliberately use *maqtals*, rather than *maqātil*, simply to conform to the English rule of pluralization.

[2] Linguistically the term maqtal always appears in collocation with the name (and/or appellative designations) of Imam al-Ḥusayn, hence in Arabic *Maqtal al-Ḥusayn* 'the martyrdom account or narrative of Imam al-Ḥusayn', or in Persian *Maqtal-i Imam Ḥusiyn* (with the same meaning as given above).

[3] Although the number of the Karbala martyrs is given as seventy-two, the reality is that some 100 martyrs, whose names inscribed on gold tablets, are buried near the feet of Imam al-Ḥusayn inside his shrine (personal observation).

[4] There is a practice of *maqtal khani* among Arab, particularly Iraqi, peoples; the same practice is referred to *kitab khwani*, that is *ketab khani*, among the Shia of India. (See Howarth, Glossary, s.v. kitab khwani.)

[5] For a (partial and relatively short) list of Arabic maqtals see, for example, al-Ṭabasī (1424AH/2003, pp. 9-20), and al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī (1417AH/1996, passim).

[6] For a bibliography of Persian maqtal books, see Pūr-Amīnī (1382 Sh/2002, Bibliography).

[7] For *rowzeh khani* with a focus on the typical Iranian practice, see G. Thaiss, "Rowzah Khvani", in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. J. L. Esposito (4 vols., New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3: pp. 412-413.

[8] Granted that the Islamic lunar months of Muharram and Safar are characterized by holding mourning sessions, more passionate sessions (i.e. majālis) are held on the seventh to tenth day of Muharram (i.e. Ashura), on the twentieth day of Safar, known as Arbaʿīn (lit. forty, fortieth), and the twenty-eighth of Safar, the anniversary of the demise of the Prophet Muḥammad and the second infallible Imam al-Ḥasan.

[9] The Persian word *mosibat* (from Arabic *muṣībah*) means 'A misfortune, disaster, calamity, evil, misery, ill, trouble, adversity, agony' (Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary*). However, in the tradition of mourning, muṣībat signifies 'a sorrowful account or narrative of the afflictions imposed on Imam al-Ḥusayn's front'.

[10] Although the Persian word *azadari* means 'lamentation, mourning', I deliberately prefer to use the former rather than the latter, for azadari (properly, '*azādārī*) is particularly associated with commemorative sessions held in memory of Imam al-Ḥusayn and the Karbala tragedy. Granted that it has not been recorded in major English dictionaries (e.g. *The Oxford Dictionary of Foreign Words and Phrases* [1997], *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* [5th ed., 2 vols., 2002], *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* [11th ed. rev., 2006], *Oxford Dictionary of English* [2nd ed., 2003], *The New Oxford American Dictionary,* 2nd ed., 2005], and *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* [11th ed. 2003]), it has been in use in other publications (e.g. Baumgardner, Kennedy, and Shamim [1993, p. 189], Schubel [1993, p. 13], Ahmed [2004, p. 162], Hyder [2006, p. 9], and Aghaie [2004, p. 72], to name just a few.)

[11] For an earlier study of the speech-act aspects of the use of honorifics for the infallibles and highly-venerated religious dignitaries as well as sacred objects and texts, see Fakhr-Rohani (2005).

[12] Sheikh al-Ṣadūq was a prolific author. Despite his over 250 books and monographs, only fourteen of them have survived. There is a Persian translation of this book: *Maqtal al-Ḥusayn bi riwāyat-i Sheikh-i Ṣadūq: Imam Ḥusayn wa 'Āshūrā az zabān-i ma'ṣūmān*, ed. and trans. Muḥammad Ṣiḥḥatī-Sardrūdī (2nd ed., Tehran: Hastinama, 1384 Sh/2006).

[13] This is because Sheikh al-Ṣadūq was cautious to quote only the statements made by the Infallible Imams; in consequence, his works are regarded in high esteem.

[14] There is an English translation of this maqtal-like ziarat text, see Majd (2004).

[15] Such maqtal texts, if accessible, are available in either in Arabic or in translation. H. Mavani (2002) produced an English translation of *Abu Mikhnaf's maqtal*; Athar Husayn Rizvi produced an English version of Ibn Ṭāwūs's *al-Luhuf*; Sezgin (1971) developed a German study of it; and a great number of Iranian translators worked out a great number of Persian versions of Ibn Ṭāwūs's *al-Malhūf* (commonly known as *al-Luhūf*) by Mirza Riḍā Qulī Khan Shaqaqi (d. 1283 AH/1266 CE) and *Abū Mikhnaf's maqtal*, see Yūsufī-Gharawī (1383 Sh/ 2004), to mention just a few.

[16] The booklets developed by Mahdi Wahīdī-Ṣadr (1385 Sh/2006) in Persian are representative in this regard.

[17] This type of azadari-specific silence is very interesting from a purely pragmatic view, most of whose features yet uncovered in such works on silence as, for example, in Agyekum (2002). Hyder (2006) touches on certain implications of this type of azadari-specific silence but not from a linguistic pragmatic perspective.

[18] Generally known as *marthiya* (var. *marsiya*), poems concerning the Ashura episode are very legion, and it seems to be almost an infeasible task to be able to collect all the poems so far composed, for there is virtually no end to such a literary heritage and trend, particularly with regard to such languages as Arabic (see, e.g. Shubbar [1409 AH/1988]), Persian (see, e.g. Mujāhadī [1379 Sh/1999], and Urdu (see, e.g. the marsiya of Mir Babar Ali Anis [1801-1874] and that of Mirza Salamat Ali Dabir [1803-1875]). Recently, there has been an effort to collect the English poems composed on the Ashura tragedy,

see Fakhr-Rohani (2007).

[19] Apart from such texts as those specifically concerned with recounting of the Karbala tragic events, books on the virtues of paying ziarat and remembering Imam al-Ḥusayn prove moving and heart-rending.

[20] This broad classification is based on M. Pīshwayī, 1: p. 44.

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