Conclusion

Ta’ziya is the most important Shiite religious ritual. It is performed to commemorate Imām Ḥuseyn’s tragic death at Karbalā on the tenth of Muharram in 60/680. Ta’ziya performances preserve the tragedy of Karbalā to the present day, by re-enacting it. These performances show us the core of Shiite religious identity. They picture the afflictions that Imām Ḥuseyn and his family endured at Karbalā, and motivate the audience to mourn and lament for him.

The present study sheds light on several aspects of ta’ziya in Iran. It appears to have some continuity with the pre-Islamic dramatic tragedies of Mitrā (an Iranian god), of Zarir and of Siyāvuš. Where ancient Iranians mourned and lamented for the afflictions that Mitrā had suffered, medieval and modern Iranians mourn and wail for the afflictions that Imām Ḥuseyn endured on the plain of Karbalā. Where once they applauded Zarir, who fought a neighbouring king to defend the religion of Zoroastrianism, now they applaud Imām Ḥuseyn, who dies in the defence of his faith. Siyāvuš was killed innocently, his head cut off, and after his death his wife was captured by Afrāsiyāb, the king of Tūrān. This is similar to the events of Karbalā: after the death of Imām Ḥuseyn his head was cut off and his household was taken captive on the orders of Yazid, the Umayyad caliph. The common features (fighting for religion, innocence, death, captivity, suffering, affliction, and mourning) have prepared the ground for Iranians to commemorate the tragic death of Imām Ḥuseyn in a dramatic tragedy. For Shiites, the tragedy of Karbalā is a religious myth, and Imām Ḥuseyn and Zeynab are the main figures in it.

In ta’ziya the religious beliefs and virtues of Zeynab are highlighted and mingled with Iranian terms and motifs. Although Zeynab is an Arab, she is so close to the spirit and beliefs of Iranian women that they live with her memories and emulate her behaviour. She is the heroine of the battle of Karbalā.
The \( \textit{ta'ziya} \) ritual unites Shiites and reminds them about their common history. The women of Imām Ḥuseyn’s household are role models for Iranian women in various ways. Fāṭima and Imām Ḥuseyn’s daughter Sakina are the archetypes of suffering and endurance. Imām Ḥuseyn’s sister ‘Umme Kulṭūm is a support to his children and a helper for her sister Zeynab. After the battle, Zeynab protests against the Umayyad caliph Yazid (r.60-3/680-3). Her behaviour enabled the tragedy of Karbalā to become a living tradition. Zeynab played a major role both before the battle and after the battle, during the imprisonment period. Zeynab’s character and her exceptional behaviour in standing up to Yazid have connected Shiite history with the events of Karbalā. Her behaviour made her an archetype for Iranian women before the Islamic Revolution, during the Revolution, during the Iran-Iraq war (in the 1980s), and after it.

Imām Ḥuseyn, too, is an archetype for Shiite behaviour. He teaches Shiites not to accept the authority of a ruler who does not obey the religious law. Imām Ḥuseyn is the symbol of submission to God’s will. He sacrifices himself and his family to preserve the faith. This image, repeated in the \( \textit{ta'ziya} \), has motivated Shiites to preserve their religion and show their loyalty to their Imām.

Zeynab is the archetype of protest against the ruling class. She transcends all prohibitions and restrictions to preserve Shiite Islam and the memory of her brother. Her loyalty to her mission makes her speak against Yazid. Zeynab’s story draws attention to the afflictions and hardships that the family of Imām Ḥuseyn suffered during the siege period at Karbalā and in the imprisonment period.

Before the Islamic Revolution, Zeynab was generally presented in Iran as a passive protestor and an afflicted woman who stood up to Yazid. She appeared only in the \( \textit{ta'ziya} \) plays held during the month of Muharram. During the Islamic Revolution (1979), Zeynab played a more prominent role, as the archetype of protest for Iranian women as a whole. They protested against the tyrant Muḥammad Reżā Shah (1925-1979), whose father had forced women to go to public places without a veil or headscarf. The Shah had continued his father’s policies, and was treated as if he was the return of the tyrant Yazid.

In the \( \textit{ta'ziya} \) texts, Zeynab is also the archetype of self-sacrificing behaviour and of support for Imām Ḥuseyn and his lineage. Zeynab is pictured as a mother for the orphans of Imām Ḥuseyn, especially Sakina, her closest companion. During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), Zeynab was ‘present’ in every house: mothers would send their sons and husbands to battle in
her name, to take revenge on the descendants of Yazid for Imâm Ḥuseyn’s blood.

Those who died in the war were likened to the martyrs of the battle of Karbalā, because they died to preserve the religion of God, like Imâm Ḥuseyn. For them, there was no doubt that the dead would live in paradise beside their master, Imâm Ḥuseyn. Women who supported the soldiers from behind the lines were likened to Zeynab.

After the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), Zeynab’s image was adopted by a corps of moral police. Women who have taken on this role call themselves ‘the sisters of Zeynab’ (khāharān-e Zeynab). Thus, Zeynab is still among the Iranians. She has taken on responsibility for directing women to follow the religious law, she ‘commands the good and forbids the evil’ (amr-e be ma’rūf va nahy-e az munkar). She emphasizes wearing the headscarf that Zeynab was deprived of, after the battle of Karbalā, and she restrains women from doing what the religious law (šari’at) has prohibited.

Another important feature of Zeynab is her relationship with the saintly spirits of the Prophet’s family, who assist her. This image is rooted among Shiites. They believe in the presence of the holy spirits in the physical world and their involvement in people’s affairs. In general, all the members of the Prophet’s family (ahl al-bayt) have a significant role among Shiites. They are their religious leaders, their moral teachers and their spiritual guides. They intercede on behalf of the Shiites in the Hereafter. Thus, the Shiites are responsible for preserving their memory.