

The Martyrdom of Qāsem

بیا ای کفن خلعت شادیم بیا ای کفن رخت دامادیم
 جوانان شما چون عروسی کنید ز ناکامی من بیاد آورید¹

Come O shroud, my robe of joy. Come O shroud, my bridegroom's attire. O youths when you wed, remember me and my disappointment.



Set during the siege at Karbala, *Shahādat-e Ḥazrat-e Qāsem* (The Martyrdom of Qāsem) treats the marriage of the adolescent Qāsem, son of Ḥusain's deceased older brother, the Second Imam of Shi'i Islam, Ḥasan b. 'Alī, to Ḥusain's daughter Fāṭemeh-ye Şughrā. The groom is then martyred before the consummation of the marriage. Whilst not grounded in historical sources, the story of this endogamous battlefield wedding pre-dates the existence of the *ta'ziyeh* tradition. Here I examine how the composers developed it into a drama with various poignant levels, intriguing because, more than any other episode portraying the events prior to Ḥusain's death, it explores the perspective of the women at Karbala.

1 Script Sources, and Tracing the Narrative

My analysis of this episode is based on the ten renditions listed in Table 2. They are mainly from the north of Iran simply because of what is available. Francklin's early spectator account, that recalls this episode being part of the Muḥarram commemorations in Shiraz in 1202/1787, shows that it has also long

1 Couplets sung by Qāsem as he leaves his *hejleh* (nuptial tent) ready for martyrdom, CP: MS 487 (Isfahan, 1350/1931). Quotes in this chapter have largely been drawn from this manuscript due to it being a good example of what came to be the episode's standard form and the way in which its dialogues have been versified.



FIGURE 4 Qāsem Does Battle, painting on tile, anonymous artist, Tekiyeh-ye Mu'aven al-Mulk, Kermanshah

been performed in the south.² However, it appears to have proliferated more in the north, where it has certainly been subject to a larger number of renditions.³

The discussion below will first examine the play's themes. Although it features a wedding, the suffering of the mother of the martyr emerges as the most prominent theme; the dramatists foreground the tragedy of her plight. We will also see how they invoked an existing archetype of beauty and gave the tropes of this description a bitter slant to characterize Qāsem as the idealised *shahīd-e nākām* (virgin martyr). I explore their portrayal of his inner torment and of how a special connection between Qāsem and his older cousin, 'Alī

² Francklin, *Observations*, 100–01.

³ The Cerulli Collection includes three further renditions of the script (MS 594, MS 672 and MS 1026), they are also from the north of Iran and are either similar in date to those used in this study, or later.

TABLE 2 Script sources for *The Martyrdom of Qāsem*

Rendition	Date	Origin	Author or copyist
Chodzko MS (XVIII) ^a	1249/1833	Tehran	“Shūr” ^b
Gobineau ^c	1281–82/ 1865	Unknown	Anon
Pelly Collection ^d	c.1873	Shiraz/ Bushehr	Anon
Şāleḫī Rād Collection ^e	Late 19th cent.	Darbandsar	Anon
Hāshem Fayyāz Collection ^f	Late 19th cent. (copied 1325 SH/ 1946–7)	Kashan/Tehran	Mīr-e ‘Azā-ye Kāshānī/ Mīr-e Mātam
Cerulli Persiani, MS 404	End 19th cent.	Mazandaran	Anon
Cerulli Persiani, MS 27	1369–1371/ 1949–1952	Unknown	Ghulām Ḥusain b. Mullā Sharīf
Cerulli Persiani, MS 476	Beg. 20th cent. & 1332 SH/ 1953	Mazandaran	Anon
Cerulli Persiani, MS 487	1350/ 1931	Isfahan	Anon
Cerulli Persiani (MS 671)	Beg. 20th & 1325 SH/ 1946	Rasht	Anon

a BnF, Supplément Persan 993, 166–177

b This is one of the aforementioned 14 entries in Chodzko’s manuscript to bear a discrete reference to an author or scribe. On the play’s first page is written “*neveshteh-ye Shūr*” (Shūr’s writing). Six of the manuscript’s other plays are also attributed to Shūr.

c French prose translation. Gobineau, *Les religions*, 405–37

d English prose translation. Pelly, *Miracle Play*, 1, 1–17

e Şāleḫī Rād, *Majāles*, 1, 435–49

f Kāzemī, *Mīr-e ‘Azā*, 459–79

Akbar, is created – one young man becoming the reflection of the other. This includes the theme of *nākāmī*, disappointment or lack of fulfilment, which I will show pertains not only to the fact that Qāsem died before the consummation of his marriage, but also to strands of narrative embedded in the wider cycle. Following the exploration of themes, in tracking the play’s historical development I identify a major innovation in content that greatly expanded the focus on the female experience, and that I argue was the result of the dramatists responding to their audience – most of whom were women.

It is useful to begin with consideration of how Qāsem b. Ḥasan has been treated in historical sources and hagiographical literature. Al-Ṭabarī’s *Tārīkh* includes an account from Abū Mekhnaf of Qāsem’s martyrdom. He describes Qāsem as a youth with a shining face who entered the battlefield in Ḥusain’s

defence, recording that the strap of his left sandal was broken and that he was surrounded by the enemy and struck on the head with a sword. As he fell he called for his uncle, who ferociously fought his way to Qāsem's side. It is recounted that, as the dust settled, Ḥusain expressed great sadness at Qāsem's death and was seen taking his body to lie it next to that of his own adolescent son, 'Alī b. Ḥusain.⁴

Bal'amī's Persian version of al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh* elaborates slightly. He describes Qāsem as a ten-year-old boy, and records that when he came out of the camp with a drawn sword Ḥusain said, "Go back, you are a child." The boy answered, "Oh uncle, for the sake of the Prophet, let me be!" and went forward. A horseman attacked him, splitting his head in two with a sword.⁵ Al-Shaikh al-Mufid's *Ketāb al-Ershād* gives an account of Qāsem's martyrdom almost identical to that of Abū Mekhnaf, including the broken sandal and Ḥusain's distress, and adds the detail of the boy's head being split in two.⁶ We will see how details such as Ḥusain's reluctance to see Qāsem fight, the boy's determination and tender beauty, and Ḥusain rushing to his dying nephew's side are expressed and embellished in the work of the *ta'ziyeh* dramatists. However, it is noteworthy that none of these historians mentions Qāsem's wedding.

Qāsem and Fāṭemeh's wedding does not appear in literary sources until the dawn of the Safavid period. In fact, what is likely to be the first literary mention of this marriage is found in Kāshefī's *Rawzat al-shuhadā*.⁷ The *ta'ziyeh* portrayal of the young hero's marriage and martyrdom bears a great resemblance to Kāshefī's rendition of the story but there is also an intriguing narrative discrepancy between them, a point to which we will return.

2 Skeleton of *The Martyrdom of Qāsem* and Function of Its Sections

The *ta'ziyeh* of *The Martyrdom of Qāsem* is a goal-driven narrative and follows an arch plot structure, with two main peaks in action. Set during the siege, it shares with the other central episodes the mounting pressure caused by the merciless encroachment of the enemy and the ticking bomb placed over the

4 Ṭabarī, *History*, XIX, 152–53, 80.

5 Bal'amī, *Tārīkh-nāmeḥ*, 4, 709–10. Bal'amī refers to him as Qāsem b. Muḥammad.

6 Mufid, *Irshād*, 332–33.

7 Kāshefī Sabzevārī, *Rawzat*, 429–39; Karen. G Ruffle, "Karbala in the Indo-Persian Imaginaire: The Indianizing of the Wedding of Qāsim and Fātima Kubrā," in *Muslim Cultures in the Indo-Iranian World During the Early-Modern and Modern Periods*, ed. Denis Hermann and Fabrizio Speziale (Berlin: K. Schwarz; Teheran: Institut Francais de Recherche en Iran, 2010), 183.

lives of the family by the denial of water. However, Qāsem's anguish at the death of his cousin 'Alī Akbar and his desire to prove himself worthy as a warrior, despite his shame at being fatherless, are what drive the action. Ḥusain's initial refusal of permission to fight is overturned by Qāsem's father Ḥasan's last will and testament, which begins a separate branch of action by stipulating not only that Qāsem should be martyred at Karbala, but that he should first wed Ḥusain's daughter Fāṭemeh. The organisation of the wedding constitutes much of the episode's action, with tension created by the juxtaposition of marriage and mourning, represented by the female characters. The distinctly Persian nature of both the nuptial and lamentation rituals reinforces the connection between the Iranian audience and the Arab protagonists.⁸ I now outline the play's skeleton, its essential components, stable over time. It breaks down into six or seven sections (one being an optional *gūsheh*). As with *The Martyrdom of 'Abbās*, despite featuring narrative material specific to Qāsem, it follows the martyrdom composition-scheme (described in chapter 2).

2.1 Section One – Ḥusain's Protection Diminished, His Final Battle Immanent (*Exposition*)

Within the *ta'ziyeh* chronology of the events at Karbala, Qāsem's martyrdom follows the deaths of both 'Abbās and Ḥusain's son 'Alī Akbar. Thus, at the beginning of this episode, apart from the Imam himself and Zain al-'Ābedīn (who is too ill to fight), the adolescent Qāsem is the oldest male remaining in the besieged camp. This is expounded in the opening section when, making the typical opening prayer, Ḥusain and Zainab lament the deaths of their loved ones. Again, true to the martyrdom composition-scheme, in the opening scene not only are the deaths of the martyrs recounted in chronological order but the fates of those who are still alive are recited, including the fact that Qāsem will be the next martyr and that Zainab and Sakīneh will be taken as prisoners to Shām. The typical enemy challenge, from Shemr or Ebn-e Sa'd, often in combination with Sakīneh complaining of thirst, sees Ḥusain prepare to enter the battlefield.⁹

8 Ṣādeq Humāyūnī, "An Analysis of the Ta'ziyeh of Qasem," in Chelkowski ed. *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama*, 19–20; Rebecca Ansary Pettys, "The Ta'zieh: Ritual of Renewal in Persia," vol. 1 (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1982), 219.

9 The *Mīr-e 'Azā*/ *Mīr-e Mātām* rendition is an exception among my sample in that it features a short wine-drinking scene in the enemy camp as a prologue. In contrast to Ḥusain and his entourage, who are without so much as a drop of water, Ebn-e Sa'd and Shemr repeatedly call upon the *sāqī* (cup-bearer) to pour them wine and the *muṭreb* (musician) to play. See Kāzemī, *Mīr-e 'Azā*, 461–62. Wine-drinking in the *ta'ziyeh* is unambiguously a negative trait and is used to show the antagonists as debauched. CP: MS 404 (Mazandaran, End 19th Cent.) is also exceptional in that the opening section does not feature an enemy challenge.

2.2 Section Two – Qāsem Requests and Is Denied Permission to Fight (Exposition-Rising Action)

Qāsem is introduced through a conversation either with his mother or younger brother ‘Abdullāh, or speaking to himself. He is shown to suffer great anguish at witnessing his uncle unprotected. This is compounded by grief at the recent loss of his cousin and companion Akbar. Full of adolescent zeal he approaches Ḥusain for permission to fight yet, grief-stricken due to Akbar’s recent death, the Imam refuses on account of Qāsem’s youth. Humiliated, Qāsem cries to his mother and she gives him (or he finds inside a talisman attached to his arm) his father’s last will and testament. Ḥasan’s will is the impetus for the beginning of the rising action. Qāsem proudly takes it to Ḥusain who responds that he must respect his brother’s wishes. Ḥusain’s initial rejection of Qāsem’s petition to do battle, the subsequent emotional torment suffered by the willing martyr, and Ḥusain’s decision being overruled by the wishes of a senior relative are true to the martyrdom composition-scheme. But in this case there is the catch that Ḥasan’s will also contains his marriage wish for Qāsem. Although he initially objects to the wedding, his attention being fixed upon martyrdom, hierarchy prevails and Qāsem concedes. A discussion about the nature of the dowry ensues between the bridegroom and father of the bride. In all renditions Qāsem offers the gory goods of his own martyrdom, the verse cleverly combining the imagery of wedding gifts with that of a bloody death. Ḥusain accepts and charges Zainab with gaining the bride’s consent.¹⁰

2.3 Section Three – Nuptial Negotiations (Rising Action)

Female characters and their agreement to the celebration are the focus of this section. Zainab is mourning for her own two sons and distraught at the loss of Akbar. She is bitterly reluctant to celebrate a wedding but ultimately obeys her brother’s command and approaches Fāṭemeh. The young bride also initially objects due to her grief for her brother, Akbar, but Zainab persuades her to obey her father’s will.¹¹

10 The Mir-e ‘Azā/ Mir-e Mātām rendition omits this negotiation but has Ḥusain tell Zainab that if the bride requests a dowry, she should be offered the hands of ‘Abbās and head of Akbar.

11 The Gobineau rendition calls the bride “Zobeydèh”. He believes that “Zobeydèh-Fathemèh” (the bride) is different from Fāṭemeh-ye Şughrā, when in fact she is one and the same. Gobineau, *Les religions*, 423. This confusion is understandable as in *The Martyrdom of Imam Ḥusain* Fāṭemeh-ye Şughrā is shown to have remained in Medina due to illness. This discrepancy is testament to the fact that the *ta’ziyeh*’s Muḥarram cycle is comprised of a patchwork of stories, originating from different sources and not necessarily consistent with each other.

Qāsem's mother requests that, despite the circumstances, the appropriate rituals be followed and her fatherless son not shamed. The couple should be decorated with henna and a *hejleh* (nuptial tent) be mounted. Ḥusain gives her permission to organise a celebration, assuring her that where henna is lacking, there will be blood, a *kafan* (shroud) will be her son's wedding attire and the grave will be his *hejleh*. Qāsem's mother is adamant that Umm Lailā, still grieving over her son Akbar's newly slain body (present on stage), must participate in the wedding celebrations.¹² There is a long dialogue between the two women, a poignant scene contrasting one mother grieving her son's death with another preparing her son's wedding. Umm Lailā is portrayed as inconsolable, beside herself with grief. No one can persuade her to celebrate. Instead, she demands that nuptial rites also be carried out for unmarried Akbar's corpse; Ḥusain agrees to her request and a *hejleh* is also set up for Akbar.¹³

2.4 Section Four – Wedding (Rising Action)

With Fāṭemeh's consent, and a compromise in place with Umm Lailā through the mirroring of ceremonies for Akbar, the wedding can now go ahead. The preparations include Qāsem being dressed and preened by the women. This serves simultaneously as him being prepared for the battlefield,¹⁴ an essential part of the martyrdom composition-scheme, although the final element of that preparation, in which he is dressed in a *kafan*, is reserved for the subsequent section when he bids goodbye to the family.

The celebration of Qāsem and Fāṭemeh's union goes ahead to the backdrop of Umm Lailā's laments. There is an atmosphere of derangement as Lailā begins to speak for Akbar, telling Qāsem that he gives his congratulations. The dramatists show Ḥusain's intense grief by having him drawn into this hysteria, berating Akbar's headless body for not responding to his greeting. Qāsem's mother tries to command an air of celebration regardless. The wedding scene itself has little dialogue, but a procession, the throwing of rice, and the bride and groom entering the *hejleh*. In the Gobineau rendition, stage directions describe Qāsem riding in a cavalcade of caparisoned horses, accompanied by musicians playing flute and tambourine, the women showering him with flowers. Behind him march other musicians, playing funerary music and carrying a bier draped

12 The Chodzko rendition is an exception amongst my sample in that it does not feature Umm Lailā. I analyse the significance of this discrepancy below.

13 In some versions Ḥusain has the women sing a dirge for Akbar at this point, but it is not explicitly stated that a second *hejleh* is mounted. CP: MS 671 (Rasht, Beg. 20th Century & 1325 SH/ 1946); MS 27 (Ghulām Ḥusain b. Mullā Sharīf, 1370/1951); and the Darbandsar rendition.

14 For example, in the Gobineau rendition he is sprinkled with rosewater and adorned with jewellery. A special robe is often mentioned and, in CP: MS 487, a turban.

in black, ready for Akbar's corpse. Whilst the wedding provides the spectacle, the juxtaposition of celebration and mourning provides the dramatic tension. The transition from festivities to farewells is initiated by the arrival of Shemr and Ebn-e Sa'd at the camp. Having heard the sounds of celebration they come on the pretence of offering their congratulations and sweets for the wedding. But instead they issue a battle challenge that sees the interruption of the ritual.

2.5 *Section Five – Saying Goodbye, Qāsem's Resolve Tested (Rising Action)*

Qāsem must leave his bride before the consummation of the marriage; he promises her that the conclusion of their union will be on the day of resurrection. Fāṭemeh passionately begs him not to go. These familial farewells are an essential element of the martyrdom composition-scheme and true to that scheme we see Qāsem impart his *vaṣīyyat*, entrusting his wife and mother to each other and often both of them to Zainab. Also true to the composition-scheme is that Qāsem's resolve is tested as he is torn between his divinely ordained duty – to be martyred for Ḥusain – and his earthly obligation to protect his womenfolk. The dramatists have expressed this in a particularly interesting way in this episode. In a number of renditions they have the *houris* (virgins of paradise) calling Qāsem to them and competing with the attraction of staying with the bride. Qāsem is torn between the *houris'* call of *bīyā* (Come!) contrasted with Fāṭemeh's cries of *marow* (Don't go!).¹⁵ Thus, the heavenly and earthly pulls are represented by potential female companions. Qāsem's mother's pleas are added to Fāṭemeh's, further intensifying the situation.¹⁶ Nonetheless, Qāsem's duty to the divine design wins out. He is dressed in a *kafan*, the final and irreversible stage of martyrdom preparation. His horse and weapons are brought forward and a repeated enemy challenge sees him head into battle.

2.6 *Section Six – First Battle: Qāsem Fights Azraq-e Shāmī and Sons (Rising Action-First Climax)*

Qāsem enters the battlefield and calls for Ebn Sa'd. He either demands water for the family (as dictated by the composition-scheme), or simply berates and challenges his opponent. His request is denied and he draws his sword. Sometimes, it is merely implied that in his first battle Qāsem vanquishes

15 CP: MS 27 and the Darbandsar rendition. In MS 487; MS 671; and MS 476 (Mazandaran, Beg 20th Cent. & 1372/ 1953) the calls of the *houris* are mentioned but they have no lines. In MS 404 when Qāsem is lying wounded on the battlefield the *houris* call him to paradise, mirrored by Fāṭemeh calling him to return to camp.

16 In the Mir-e 'Azā/ Mir-e Mātām rendition the bride does not have any lines at all; Qāsem being torn in this section is expressed entirely through a dialogue between the hero and his mother.

multiple adversaries. However, a more elaborate battle scene, in which he fights and kills the Damascene commander Azraq and his four sons, often features here.¹⁷ In this scene, Ebn-e Sa'd orders Azraq to slay Qāsem. Azraq is reluctant on account of the hero's youth so sends one of his four sons (who he boasts are like Rustam-e Zāl).¹⁸ Qāsem kills the first son with ease. Azraq sends his second son, and so on until all four sons have been killed. Then Azraq faces Qāsem. This marks a first climax as Ḥusain himself is afraid for Qāsem, and the family pray for him. Nevertheless, Qāsem triumphs. It is often suggested that he cuts Azraq in half. This story features in Kāshefī's *Rawżat*, so was not an innovation of the dramatists. Rather, it is a *gūsheh* affirming Qāsem's battle prowess, the insertion of which is optional.¹⁹ Apart from providing a first peak in the drama, it does not alter the plot.

2.7 Section Seven – Qāsem's Final Battle and Return to Camp (Second Climax-Denouement)

Qāsem returns to camp in what marks a brief lull in the forward momentum of the plot (and is also a feature of the martyrdom composition-scheme). He is desperately thirsty and begs Ḥusain for water as a prize for his triumph. Whilst always responding that he has no water, Ḥusain offers an alternative. He either: seeks to quench Qāsem's thirst by putting the Prophet Muḥammad's signet ring into his mouth;²⁰ attempts to give Qāsem water from his own mouth;²¹ or tells Qāsem that his thirst will be quenched by Sāqī Kowsar (a sobriquet of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭāleb), which implies after death.²² A further variation is that, citing his desperation, Qāsem asks for permission to wet his lips with his own blood.²³ Ḥusain replies that this is forbidden and offers one of the aforementioned alternatives.

17 CP: MS 476; MS 671; MS 27; and the Mīr-e 'Azā/ Mīr-e Mātām and Darbandsar renditions.

18 CP: MS 27; and the Mīr-e 'Azā/ Mīr-e Mātām and Darbandsar renditions.

19 CP: MS 487, is a good example of the optional nature of this scene. It is in *tak-nuskheh* form; the *fehrest* does not include Qāsem fighting Azraq and sons. However, the set includes two scripts for Qāsem: one with his lines for the whole play and corresponding to the *fehrest*, and another that includes only his lines for the encounter with Azraq and sons (should the scene be played). A script for Azraq and an additional script for Ebn-e Sa'd are also included.

20 CP: MS 476; and the Chodzko and Pelly renditions.

21 CP: MS 27; MS 671; and the Gobineau and Darbandsar renditions. This detail is, again, reminiscent of Bal'amī's account of Ḥusain relieving Akbar's thirst at Karbala with his own tongue. Bal'amī, *Tārīkh-nāmeḥ*, 4, 709.

22 CP: MS 404; MS 487; and the Chodzko rendition. Sāqī Kowsar means "cup-bearer of the Kowsar" (a river of heaven).

23 CP: MS 487 and the Gobineau rendition.

Bidding a final farewell, Qāsem returns to the battlefield and is subject to a massive collective attack. It is implied that he is overcome only because drastically outnumbered. The play reaches its climax as Qāsem falls from his horse mortally wounded (either by Shemr or an anonymous enemy group). True to the martyrdom composition-scheme, and indeed the historian's accounts, Ḥusain rushes onto the battlefield. He finds Qāsem's trampled body. In some renditions Qāsem, like 'Abbās, asks not to be taken back to the camp before death, in this case because he is ashamed to be seen by his wife and mother.²⁴ As he passes away in his uncle's arms, Qāsem's inner struggle is resolved as his goal of martyrdom is reached. A new status quo is established as the bride becomes a widow, her golden wedding veil exchanged for black robes of mourning. The *hejleh* is also draped in black. The tension between the situation of the two mothers is also resolved as Qāsem's mother joins Umm Lailā in bereavement.²⁵

3 "After You I Sit amongst the Ashes" Foregrounding the Bereaved Mother

The hero of this episode is the virgin martyr, an idealised youth cut off in his prime. Although it narrates the preparations for a wedding, in the *ta'ziyeh* rendition of this story the central dramatic theme is the loss of an adolescent son. The nuptial rites create a spectacle and allow the composers to play with the replacement of the symbolism of marriage with that of a gory death. However, in the arc of the plot the wedding is merely an obstacle between Qāsem and his goal of martyrdom.²⁶ Ḥusain's distress over the death of his son 'Alī Akbar is treated, but the dramatists have foregrounded the suffering of the bereaved mother.

Although Qāsem's mother initially supports her son's petition for permission to do battle, the bereaved mother is already present in the figure of Umm

24 CP: MS 27 and MS 404.

25 A note regarding the Mīr-e 'Azā/ Mīr-e Mātam rendition: The plot corresponds to the majority of my sample, yet the edition features some erroneous labelling of the mature female characters. The interjections by Qāsem's mother are sometimes labelled as belonging to his "aunt". Meanwhile, Umm Lailā is mentioned by name and addressed as *mādar-e Akbar* (Akbar's mother), but the lines that she usually speaks are attributed to Zainab. Given that the lines are so similar to the usual format but belong to the wrong characters, and that this issue is present in a number of places, it is unlikely that the episode was ever performed like this. Rather, it is the result of confusion in the copying or editing process.

26 Ansary Pettys, "The Ta'zieh," 226–227.

Lailā. Gobineau's spectator account from the 1860s shows that even at that stage, grief at 'Alī Akbar's death was a central element of this episode: throughout the performance the audience were reminded of it by the presence of the beheaded body and mourning mother on one side of the stage.²⁷ Even as the audience witness Qāsem's mother making the wedding preparations, the distraught Umm Lailā is a constant reminder of what awaits her sister-in-law. The fragility of the position of a woman who loses her son is underscored. The audience know that Qāsem is his mother's oldest son. The fact that she is a widow is constantly reiterated by Qāsem bemoaning the loss of his father. She tells him that she had been relying on him to be her "cane in old age."²⁸ Likewise, speaking to her son's corpse, Umm Lailā asks Akbar if he has forgotten his promise; she cared for him as an infant so he should have looked after her when elderly. She expresses her own desperate grief and says that she will become destitute.

امّ لیلّا:
 به بندم چشم خود دنیا نبینم ز بعدت روی خاکستر نشینم
 عصا گیرم بکف در بینوائی روم در کوچها بهر گدائی²⁹

Umm Lailā: *I'll close my eyes not to see the world. After you I will sit amongst the ashes. In my destitution I'll go, stick in hand, begging in the alleys.*

The suffering of other characters pales in comparison: Ḥusain's lamentations at the bitterness of his fate are not dissimilar to his expressions of suffering in other episodes; the pain of the widow-bride at being separated from her groom is too hastily constructed to be truly moving; the mother's loss of a son is the main theme through which this episode provokes lament. It has been said that women in the *ta'ziyeh* and similar literature have an essential role as the educators of the next generation of martyrs,³⁰ we do not see this here. Instead we see the torment experienced by the mother of the martyr.

In exploring this, the juxtaposition of the situations of the two mothers has great dramatic potential and it is all about contrast; the very woman destined to move from celebration to mourning requests of her contemporary that she make the opposite transition. After the negotiation of the dowry, the scene in which Qāsem's mother begs Umm Lailā to participate in the celebrations

27 Gobineau, *Les religions*, 402.

28 Gobineau, *Les religions*, 433. Translation from French.

29 CP: MS 671.

30 Aghaie, "Gender Dynamics," 54.

allows the dramatists to include further verse contrasting the motifs of marriage and death. A golden headscarf proffered by Qāsem's mother, which she asks Umm Lailā to don in place of her black robes of mourning, is a visual symbol of the attempted imposition of happiness.

مادر قاسم:
بیا خواهر سیاهت بگیرم از سر

Qāsem's Mother: *Come sister, I will take the black from your head.*

امّ لیلّا:
چه تکلیف است این الله اکبر

Umm Lailā: *For the greatness of God, what kind of command is this?*

مادر قاسم:
بیا بر رخ گلاب افشان نمایم

Qāsem's Mother: *Come, let me sprinkle rosewater on your face.*

امّ لیلّا:
گلابم هست اشک دیده هایم

Umm Lailā: *My own tears are my rosewater.*

مادر قاسم:
بیا بر کف حنا بر بند خواهر

Qāsem's Mother: *Come sister, let's paint your hands with henna.*

امّ لیلّا:
حنا بندان کنم از خون اکبر

Umm Lailā: *I will be painted with the henna of Akbar's blood.*

مادر قاسم:
مکن خواهر دل زارم فسرده

Qāsem's Mother: *Sister, do not dismay my poor heart.*

مَ لیلَا:
نیبئی جوانم تازه مرده

Umm Lailā: *Do you not see my son has just died?*

مادر قاسم:
بعشرت خانه ی من پای بگذار

Qāsem's Mother: *Please come to my place of celebration.*

مَ لیلَا:
برو خواهر تو از من دست بردار³¹

Umm Lailā: *Go sister, leave me in peace.*

Qāsem's mother, however, does not leave Umm Lailā in peace. In a protracted scene she moves from trying to console Umm Lailā in her grief to haranguing her about Qāsem's right to have a proper wedding, with *everyone* in attendance. She appeals on the grounds of him being an orphan, and the discourse between the two women commonly concludes with a variation of the following exchange:

مادر قاسم:
ببین قاسم پدر بر سر ندارد

Qāsem's Mother: *Look! Qāsem has no father.*

مَ لیلَا:
ببین اکبر به پیکر سر ندارد³²

Umm Lailā: [You] *Look! Akbar has no head!*

In a different literary context, one would consider this a form of dramatic irony, as a character (in this case Qāsem's mother) moves unwittingly towards a fate which is nonetheless crystal clear to the audience. The aim is to create in the observers a sense of anxiety, as they wish to warn the character to choose a different path. However, in the *ta'ziyeh* genre everything is known to

31 CP: MS 487.

32 CP: MS 487.

all protagonists, as is frequently demonstrated by the fates of Ḥusain's family members being foretold in detail by the characters themselves. They are acting out a predestined scenario in which each is bound to play her or his part. Even within this episode it is clear that Qāsem's mother knows that her son's wedding will be followed by his martyrdom and her bereavement, yet she dutifully fulfils her role as organiser.

Of course, the *ta'ziyeh* aims to provoke the shedding of tears. It is clear that the scene between the two mothers aims to extend the space for apprehension of Qāsem's martyrdom. Instead of crying for Qāsem's death in retrospect, the audience are made to cry in anticipation of his martyrdom, the grief and destitution of his mother, and in solidarity with poor Umm Lailā. Indeed such scenes, in which a painful moment is drawn out to allow time for the tears of the audience, are common in the central episodes.

3.1 *Oblivious to Hierarchy: Derangement in Grief*

Indicating further that motherly bereavement as personified by Umm Lailā is essential to this episode, she is shown breaking from a fundamental behaviour of all *ta'ziyeh* characters: obedience to hierarchy. As a general feature of the Muḥarram cycle, all characters are shown to submit to the hierarchical order, even obeying commands that are against their most fundamental wishes. There are a series of such examples in the early sections of *The Martyrdom of Qāsem*, demonstrating that everyone is bound by tradition and everyone bows to hierarchy, except Umm Lailā. Qāsem obeys Ḥusain's initial refusal of permission to fight, despite burning frustration. Zainab, although opposed to the idea of a battlefield wedding, surrounded by the dead, ultimately obeys the Imam's command and makes the necessary arrangements. When Ḥusain tells her the plan her answer begins with the traditional expression of obedience, but then she questions his decision.

زینب:

قربان صدات ای برادر	لبیک فدات ای برادر
صد داغ بسینه‌ام نهادی	گفتی که عروسی است و شادی
بر عیش و نشاط چون بکوشیم	ما تعزیه دار نیله پوشیم
بر دست حنا نمی‌گذارد ³³	هر کس که دو طفل مرده دارد

Zainab: I am your sacrifice and here to help O brother! I am a slave to your voice O brother! You spoke of happiness for your wedding O brother and

placed a hundred miseries upon my breast. We wear dark robes in mourning. How can we attempt revelry for a wedding? Anyone who has two dead children, does not paint her hands with henna.

Even Ḥusain himself defers to hierarchy in his response. Sending Zainab to obtain Fāṭemeh's consent he states that he is bound to obey his older brother's will, implying that carrying out that duty is painful for him.

امام حسین:
 برو تو اذن طلب کن ز دختر زارم کن این مقدمه از هر دو دیده خون بارم³⁴

Imam Ḥusain: *Go and request the consent of my grief-stricken daughter. Tell her first that my two eyes are full of tears.*

Zainab goes to Fāṭemeh, obeying Ḥusain's order but acting against her own wishes, as is clear from the conversation that follows featuring the refrain *sharmandeh-ām* (I am ashamed).³⁵ She is ashamed to ask Fāṭemeh to marry at this time and Fāṭemeh is ashamed to accept:

زینب:
 خواهد ببندد این زمان عقد تو ای آرام جان به قاسم شیرین زبان ای عمه جان شرمندهام

Zainab: *O calm of my soul, he wishes at this time to have you married to sweet-voiced Qāsem. O niece, I am ashamed.*³⁶

فاطمه:
 بنگر به نعش اکبر افتاده است اندر رزم خاک دو عالم بر سرم ای عمه جان شرمندهام³⁷

Fāṭemeh: [But] *look at Akbar's body, fallen in battle. May the dirt of both worlds be on my head. O dear aunt, I am ashamed.*³⁸

34 CP: MS 487. In the manuscript the letter و is omitted from the word خون.

35 The conversation between Zainab and Fāṭemeh features this refrain in all renditions of the play among my sample.

36 Zainab technically refers to Fāṭemeh as 'ameh (aunt), such inversions of title are common in affectionate addresses in colloquial Persian.

37 CP: MS 487.

38 Throwing earth onto the head is an old Persian mourning custom.



FIGURE 5 Performers playing 'Ali Akbar and Umm Laila, Tekiyeh-ye Husaini-ye 'Azam, Armaghankhaneh, Zanjan Province, 8th Muharram 1439/2017

The conversation is lengthy, Zainab cajoling and Fāṭemeh resisting. She eventually consents but rather than expressing will for the marriage to take place, she states obedience to her father's order:

فاطمه:
 خجالت‌م مده ای عمه جان برای خدا برو بگو به حسین ناز پرور ز مرا
 که حجت احد و وصی کردگار توئی به آتش ار تو بری صاحب‌اختیار توئی³⁹

Fāṭemeh: *Dear aunt for the sake of God do not embarrass me further. Go and say from me to Husain, who cherishes tenderly, "You are the proof, the emissary of God. Even if you take [me] into the fire, you are the authority."*⁴⁰

So, four key family members in turn have bowed to tradition and the hierarchical, patriarchal order. However, following Fāṭemeh's consent, despite Qāsem's

39 CP: MS 487.

40 A drastic statement of obedience from Fāṭemeh is always present, she cites willingness to be burned if her father so wishes in CP: MS 27, the Gobineau, Darbandsar and Chodzko renditions.

mother's petitions and Zainab often bringing the order to celebrate directly from Ḥusain, Umm Lailā refuses to leave her lament and her dead son's side.⁴¹ She breaks the mold of obedience and submission to hierarchy and is thus depicted as genuinely deranged; the suffering of the martyr's mother is sufficiently intense to cause a complete loss of reason.

Umm Lailā's delusional state having been established, she haunts the stage as the embodiment of grief. The power of this grief trumps even hierarchy itself: nobody can draw the grieving mother out of her delusional behaviour, and Ḥusain is drawn into it. For example, he berates Akbar's corpse for not replying to his greeting,⁴² and indulges Umm Lailā's request that parallel wedding rites be carried out for it.

4 A Full Moon over the Battlefield: Physical Characterisation of Qāsem

The tragedy of Qāsem's death is compounded by the emphasis placed on his innocent beauty and adulthood lost. We know that 'Alī Akbar is dead by the opening of *The Martyrdom of Qāsem* but within the earlier plays of the cycle a strong connection is suggested between Qāsem and Akbar (who is around four years his senior). The cousins are depicted as a duo. There are many examples of Qāsem following Akbar, repeating his deeds as if he were Akbar's shadow. This is significant and will be discussed further below. When we examine Qāsem's physical attributes and the literary devices employed to achieve this depiction, a further connection between the two emerges. Thus, analysis of Qāsem's physical characterisation will benefit from simultaneous consideration of that of Akbar.

The *ta'ziyeh* dramatists use the metaphors for human beauty standard in classical Persian poetry, and descriptions of young heroes of epic, to describe the two adolescent combatants. They have moon-like faces, are spruce or cypress-like in stature – a host of further botanical metaphors are employed. However, such metaphors are also used to describe other members of the family. In fact, it is in the application of a further metaphor system, the sensory imagery prevalent in *ghazal* love poetry, that Qāsem and Akbar receive a

41 Ansary Pettys remarks briefly upon the fact that everyone is opposed to the marriage but is persuaded to go along with it, except Umm Lailā. Ansary Pettys, "The Ta'zieh," 214.

42 CP: MS 671; MS 27; and the Darbandsar and Mir-e 'Azā/ Mir-e Mātām renditions.

special treatment that underscores their youthful beauty and the tragedy of their loss.

The adolescent boy is considered the epitome of earthly beauty in the Persian *ghazals* and is often the *ma'shūq* (beloved), the figure praised by the lover poet.⁴³ The figure of the beloved is not only endowed with a moon-like face and spruce or cypress-like stature but has other distinct physical attributes such as dark, musk-scented curly hair with a *kākul* (forelock), a ruby-like mouth topped with a *khāl* (mole or beauty spot) and a *nowkhaṭṭ* or *khāṭṭ*, the faint line of a budding moustache.⁴⁴ This figure of the beloved is not only an archetype of human beauty, but in the more mystical *ghazals*, typified by their ambiguity, is also a figure of transcendental beauty through whom the Divine can be contemplated.⁴⁵ In the *ta'ziyeh* we find the topos of the beloved invoked in descriptions of both Qāsem and 'Alī Akbar.

With regards to hair, in both the Darbandsar and Gobineau renditions of *The Martyrdom of Qāsem* as the young hero approaches his uncle to ask permission to fight, Ḥusain speaks of the *ṣabā* bringing the scent of musk from Qāsem's curls and calls upon the breeze to carry the perfume as an offering to Ḥasan's grave.⁴⁶ In the Darbandsar rendition of *The Martyrdom of 'Alī Akbar* Ḥusain also comments on the musky scent of his son Akbar's curls as he draws near.⁴⁷ There are frequent allusions throughout the *ta'ziyeh* repertoire to Qāsem and Akbar's dark curls and in particular, the stunning blackness of Akbar's tresses. In the *ghazals*, the curls of the beloved are treacherous, acting as a lasso with which to ensnare the lover poet.⁴⁸ In the Darbandsar version of Akbar's martyrdom, in justifying to Umm Lailā his need to enter the battlefield to defend his father, we see Akbar apply this metaphor reflexively.

43 For the beloved in Persian poetry see: Ehsan Yarshater, "The Theme of Wine-Drinking and the Concept of the Beloved in Early Persian Poetry," *Studia Islamica*, no. 13 (1960): 48–52; J.T.P. De Bruijn, "Beloved," *Encyclopædia Iranica* IV/2 (1989). Available online at <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/beloved> (accessed June 18th, 2024).

44 Annemarie Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, [1992] 2004), 232–33.

45 For elaboration of this concept see: Leonard Lewisohn, "Prolegomenon to the Study of Hafiz," in *Hafiz and the Religion of Love in Classical Persian Poetry*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 43–49.

46 Gobineau, *Les religions*, 407; Şāleḥī Rād, *Majāles*, 1, 439.

47 *Majāles*, 1, 423.

48 De Bruijn, "Beloved". It merits comment that Kāshefī has Shemr describe Qāsem in the terms of the beloved when warning his fellow soldiers how dangerous the boy is, and advising against single combat. *Rawzat*, 433.

علی اکبر:

مادر نگر به کرب و بلا شور و محشرست عالم به پیچ و تاب چو زلفین اکبرست⁴⁹

‘Alī Akbar: *Mother, look at this anguish and affliction (Karbala). It is the turmoil of the resurrection. The world is twisting and curling like this Akbar’s locks.*⁵⁰

Describing the world as contorting like curls conjures a visual image of the chaos of the battlefield, thronging with enemy troops. Through the association of the curve of the beloved’s curl with danger, the peril of the situation is also implied.⁵¹ Furthermore, Akbar is described as having a forelock. In Cerulli MS 476 (*The Martyrdom of Qāsem*), in a macabre fashion, Umm Lailā offers her dead son’s forelock to Qāsem as a wedding gift instead of flowers. As for the *khāl* (mole), Qāsem having a facial mole is also mentioned in number of plays of the wider cycle.⁵² The *khatt* of both young men also receives frequent mention and appears to have found a specific significance in its *ta’ziyeh* context.

4.1 *The Nowkhatt: Symbol of an Adulthood Lost*

Both Qāsem and Akbar are undergoing a transition into adulthood, an adulthood that they will not experience. In the Persian *ghazals*, whilst the *khatt* (emergent moustache) is considered a sign of beauty, its appearance provokes in the lover poet a sense of foreboding. It is a symbol of impending loss, signalling that his smooth-cheeked beloved will soon become a bearded man and thus his perfect beauty will be lost.⁵³ Meanwhile, in the *ta’ziyeh* the presence of the *khatt* signifies that the youths are old enough to fight and can be seen as a symbol of the adulthood that they will forfeit.

Protagonists and antagonists alike use the *topos* of the beloved to describe Qāsem and Akbar. However, interestingly, in the scripts studied here, the vast

49 Şāleḥī Rād, *Majāles*, 1, 423.

50 The words *karb* and *balā*, meaning “anguish and affliction”, are used to denote Karbala.

51 As further similar examples, in the Mīr-e ‘Azā/ Mīr-e Mātam rendition of *The Martyrdom of Qāsem*, Qāsem twice uses the beloved’s black curls as a metaphor for darkness, once when discussing the downward turn in his fortunes and again when asking for dark tulips to be brought to his grave. Kāzemī, *Mīr-e ‘Azā*, 463–64.

52 For an example see “The Lamentations of Ḥusain and His Family for the Loss of the Martyrs in Karbala,” Pelly, *Miracle Play*, 2, 75.

53 Julie Scott Meisami, “The Body as Garden: Nature and Sexuality in Persian Poetry,” *Edebiyât*, no. 6.2 (1995): 271; Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley, California; London: University of California Press, 2005), 15.

majority of the references to Qāsem or Akbar's *khatt* are made by either the characters' mothers or the young men themselves. For example, amongst the Cerulli Collection renditions of *The Martyrdom of Qāsem* Akbar's mother refers to her son's *nowkhatt* when mourning his loss, as does Qāsem's mother when begging her son not to go onto the battlefield.⁵⁴ In addition to this, in the opening scene of Pelly's rendition when Ḥusain predicts that Qāsem will be the next martyr, Zainab decries the fact that she should suffer more loss after the martyrdoms of her own two sons whom she describes as "new-moustached youths".⁵⁵ Before going into battle, Umm Laila insists that Qāsem bid farewell to Akbar's corpse: as he does so he himself mentions Akbar's *nowkhatt*:

قاسم:
 پسر عموی دل افگار من خدا حافظ جوان نوخط ناشاد من خدا حافظ
 یک آرزو بدلم ماند تا صف محشر به حجله رفتن دامادیت علی اکبر⁵⁶

Qāsem: Farewell my cousin of the wounded heart. Farewell my newly-moustached unhappy youth. One wish remains in my heart until the resurrection, for you, 'Alī Akbar, to go to the nuptial tent and be wed.

It is indeed fitting that Qāsem mentions Akbar's *nowkhatt* in connection with the longing to see his wedding, an earthly rite pertaining to adulthood that his cousin has forfeited. The impending loss signified by the *khatt* in classical Persian poetry finds a new level of meaning in the *ta'ziyeh*. As a line between childhood and maturity, the appearance of the *khatt* signifies the wearer's candidacy for martyrdom and that he will pass, not into adulthood, but onto the battlefield – a loss felt most acutely by his mother.

A clever allusion to the *khatt* as proof of readiness for battle features in the Mīr-e 'Azā/ Mīr-e Mātam rendition of Qāsem's martyrdom. When he presents Ḥusain with Ḥasan's will, deeply moved by his older brother's handwriting, Ḥusain exclaims, "O let me be a sacrifice for your dear *khatt* my noble brother."⁵⁷ *Khatt* literally means "line" (hence its reference to the moustache), but it also means "script" and in this case should be read as the latter (Ḥasan being a senior figure whose protection Ḥusain misses and not one with a nascent moustache). Then, following a trend in the *ghazals* of having this word

54 CP: MS 404 and MS 671 respectively.

55 Pelly, *Miracle Play*, 2, 2.

56 CP: MS 487. The *ezāfeh* after the words افگار and ناشاد is written with the letter ه in the manuscript and آرزو is spelled آرضو.

57 This also features in CP: MS 487; MS 671 and the Chodzko, Darbandsar renditions.

simultaneously describe calligraphy and allude to the beloved,⁵⁸ Qāsem uses it ambiguously:

قاسم:
عمو بنگر به خط مهربانم بده رخصت به میدان دل کبابم⁵⁹

This can be read as either:

Qāsem: *Look at my merciful script uncle. Give me permission to go onto the battlefield, I am broken-hearted.*

Or:

Qāsem: *Look at my tender moustache uncle. Give me permission to go onto the battlefield, I am broken-hearted.*

By allowing for the second reading, the poet has in fact provided for a third level of meaning. Not only can it be read as Qāsem appealing to his uncle's affection for his youthful beauty but the *khatt* as a marker of the approach of adulthood is crucial here. Qāsem's initial request for permission to fight has been refused on account of his young age. Now, as he hands Ḥusain the will, by drawing attention to his emerging moustache he is saying, "Look uncle, I am old enough." Indeed, whilst the general application of the depiction of the beloved of the Persian *ghazals* to both Qāsem and Akbar in the *ta'ziyeh* emphasizes their youthful beauty, compounding the tragedy of their loss, the *khatt* becomes the symbol of an adulthood that will be sacrificed.

5 Qāsem's Inner World and the Theme of *Nākāmī*

Closely connected with the idea of an adulthood sacrificed is the theme of *nākāmī*, meaning disappointment or lack of fulfilment. It is more complex than first meets the eye. To appreciate that complexity, we must first understand how Qāsem's inner world has been constructed. Like Akbar and 'Abbās, he is shown to feel great camaraderie with his male companions and to be devoted to Ḥusain. Whilst this is relatively predictable, the dramatists have successfully endowed Qāsem with adolescent characteristics, showing him as

⁵⁸ Schimmel, *Two-Colored Brocade*, 232–33.

⁵⁹ Kāzemī, *Mīr-e 'Azā*, 466.

self-conscious, reckless in his desire to prove himself, and fuming with frustration at initially being told that he is too young to fight. His motivations are portrayed quite clearly and simply: he fears being shamed as fatherless; he feels guilt at surviving the deaths of ‘Abbās and particularly Akbar; he desires recognition of his worth, especially from Ḥusain. He sees martyrdom as the obvious solution; it would result in being proved worthy, following in his dear Akbar’s footsteps, and being reunited with his father.

All of this is encapsulated in the scene where he initially requests permission for battle. In this petition he mentions his fatherless state and what has happened to Akbar (and often ‘Abbās). When Ḥusain refuses, ordering him to return to the women and children, Qāsem’s frustration is shown through a conversation with his mother. His response to her asking why he is crying summarises his feelings well:

قاسم:

ایمان مادر غم دل بی شمار است	بیتیمان حرفشان بی اعتبار است
برفتم گردن کج نزد عمو	که گیرم اذن جنگ از حضرت او
بنزد هم سران شرمنده ام کرد	بمیرم من که از درنده ام کرد ⁶⁰

Qāsem: Comfort me mother, the sadness of my heart is boundless. The words of orphans are worthless. I went and bowed down before my uncle to gain permission to fight from his majesty. He shamed me among my companions. I will die, for he treated me as a mere beast.

As we know, his mother will produce his father’s will that remedies the situation but throws the obligation of marriage into the mix.

In contrast to the desire Qāsem shows for martyrdom, he never shows enthusiasm for marriage. He is known as the “*shahīd-e nākām*”. This literally means “the disappointed or unfulfilled martyr”, but there is a further level of connotation. The term “*nākām*” (unfulfilled) seems to refer to Qāsem’s marriage not being consummated before his death. He is the virgin martyr. However, he is also frequently referred to as “*nadīdeh murād*” (one who did not see his wish). Therefore, the idea of Qāsem more generally as someone who did not see his desire fulfilled is certainly present. However, it is somewhat incongruous to describe him in this way when, in fact, we do see the fulfilment of Qāsem’s main and burning desire – martyrdom. The very negotiation of the dowry ensures that the marriage will see the groom’s earthly body torn apart.

60 CP: MS 487. In both cases the *ezāfeh* in the manuscript after the word نزد is written with the letter ه.

What Qāsem offers varies between renditions but always includes the gory goods of his own death. It is common for him to begin by offering four jewels, *jawhar-e jān* (the jewel of his soul or life), *jawhar-e del* (the jewel of his heart), *jawhar-e hūsh u ḥavās* (the jewels of his intelligence and senses). This could, of course, be understood metaphorically but the bloody nature of his offer is made more explicit:

قاسم:
بهر پا انداز پای اشرف از نطع بدن پاره پاره لاله گون خارا مشجر می دهم
بهر گردن بندش از خون گلوی نازنین شده از یاقوت و از مرجان احمر می دهم⁶¹

Qāsem: I will give the skin of my body, torn to pieces and tulip-red, as a brocaded woven silk rug for [her] most noble feet. I will give her a necklace of rubies and red coral from the blood of my sweet throat.

Thus, in agreeing to observe the nuptial formalities he guarantees that the marriage will involve his martyrdom and therefore that it will not reach earthly consummation. There could be no other outcome. Indeed, it is only when we take into account Qāsem's connection with Akbar that the idea of his, or rather their, *nākāmī* fully makes sense.

To the uninitiated, the tragedy that compounds Qāsem's untimely death may appear to be his wedding not reaching its conclusion. However, well acquainted with the wider *ta'ziyeh* repertoire, the audience know that the real tragedy is that Qāsem experiences the wedding planned for 'Alī Akbar. In *The Martyrdom of Qāsem*, there are a number of references to the fact that Akbar was to be married; Umm Lailā details the preparations she has made or would have made for him in Medina, including stitching his wedding garments. This idea has also been set up in earlier plays of the cycle. In Akbar's martyrdom episode, Ḥusain, Umm Lailā and Zainab all protest his intention to sacrifice his life on the basis that wedding plans are in place for him.⁶² When (after lengthy remonstrations) he finally wins Ḥusain's permission to fight, as he is dressed in a *kafan*, he admits that he looked forward to his wedding.⁶³ Furthermore, other episodes mention that Akbar is promised in marriage: for example, in a rendition of *Haftād-u-du tan* in the Cerulli Collection, as 'Abbās makes his last

61 CP: MS 671. Variations of the same lines feature in MS 487; MS 27 and the Darbandsar rendition.

62 For example, see the Darbandsar rendition of *The Martyrdom of 'Alī Akbar*, Šāleḥī Rād, *Majāles*, 1, 419–33.

63 *Ibid.*, 428.

wishes he speaks to Zainab of his daughter in Medina who was destined to be Akbar's bride.⁶⁴ The idea that Akbar was to be betrothed to 'Abbās' daughter is also mentioned in a number of renditions of *The Martyrdom of 'Abbās*,⁶⁵ one of which even features a conversation in which Qāsem tells Akbar that he himself should be martyred first, since Akbar has a named bride.⁶⁶

Indeed, the theme of Qāsem following in Akbar's footsteps runs through the cycle. We have already seen examples of this in *The Martyrdom of 'Abbās*, for example when Qāsem follows Akbar in digging the defensive trench, and arrives to help 'Abbās during the escalation of his night-time encounter with Shemr. As Qāsem follows Akbar in martyrdom, but not before participating in the marriage rites anticipated for his cousin, we see the culmination of this theme: Qāsem's *nākāmī* is Akbar's *nākāmī*.

This makes the situation of Umm Lailā all the more bitter: she watches young Qāsem seated in the *hejleh* that should have been Akbar's, which adds a layer of woe and is likely to have been highly effective in eliciting lamentation. It testifies to the very nature of these plays as episodes inextricably linked to the wider cycle. It also suggests that, while the stories treated may have originated from different sources, once dramatized they developed within the context of the Muḥarram cycle, and the dramatists were able to rely on their faithful audience's familiarity with the other episodes.

6 Historical Development

Fluctuations in the content of this episode are few when compared to *The Martyrdom of 'Abbās*, perhaps because historical sources engage less with Qāsem on account of his youth. There is, however, one striking innovation that is likely to have taken place between the early 1840s and the 1860s. For all the importance of the juxtaposition of Akbar's funerary rites with Qāsem's wedding, Akbar's corpse and the grieving Umm Laila do not appear to have been on stage during this episode before the 1840s. Consequently, the highly evocative scene contrasting the situation of the two mothers did not feature before that point.

In our earliest example of the play, the Chodzko manuscript from 1249/1833 (Tehran), while Fāṭemeh, Zainab and others initially object to the wedding because of Akbar's recent death, his body does not appear to have been on

64 CP: MS 699.

65 CP: MS 51; MS 622; MS 513; and the Darbandsar rendition.

66 CP: MS 51.

stage, and Umm Laila does not feature. The first rendition of the script to include both Laila grieving over Akbar's body and the scene between the two mothers is Gobineau's 1865 translation: the eight later renditions of the play amongst my sample unanimously feature those details. Of course, it is possible that the Chodzko script was exceptional for its time in omitting this content, but this seems unlikely since these eye-catching details are absent from spectator accounts prior to the 1840s. Furthermore, when we trace spectator accounts mentioning Qāsem we find that by the early 1840s there existed a proto-version of his episode, juxtaposing his and Akbar's wedding and funerary rites, and featuring Umm Lailā.

Niebuhr records that Qāsem's martyrdom featured in the rendition of *Haftād-u-du tan* on Kharg Island in 1179/1765, but makes no mention of a wedding;⁶⁷ however, Qāsem's wedding did feature in the martyrdom episode witnessed by Francklin in Shiraz in 1202/1787. Francklin tells of the bride attended by the womenfolk, and the consummation thwarted by the groom's martyrdom, yet does not recall the bodies of any other martyrs featuring in the performance. He remarks that one scene had a particularly strong effect on the audience – it was not the anguish of the martyr's mother but the farewell between the martyr and his bride as she dressed him in a "burial vest" (the familiar *kafan*).⁶⁸ William Ouseley, who saw a performance of *The Martyrdom of Qāsem* in Tehran in 1227/1812 (including the wedding), again mentions the bridal couple's farewell as a prominent feature. He also tells of the women lamenting over the hero's "mangled corpse" when it was returned from the battlefield but says nothing of any other bodies being on stage, or of a particular focus on the mother of the martyr.⁶⁹ Berezin records in detail *The Martyrdom of Qāsem* as performed in Tehran in Muḥarram of 1259/1843, at Ḥājjī Mirzā Āqāsī's *tekiyeh* – a *tekiyeh* that he describes as at the forefront of Tehran's vibrant *ta'ziyeh* circuit.⁷⁰ Crucially, Berezin gives the earliest account of 'Alī Akbar's body being present on stage during this episode. However, in this performance Akbar was not the only body; rather, it was one of four bodies brought onto the stage!

Berezin recalls a wedding procession complete with musicians and sweets in which the bride was followed by a funerary cortege. First came Akbar's

67 Niebuhr, *Reisebeschreibung*, 2, 199–200. However, *Haftād-u-du tan* would come to feature Qāsem's matrimony, it features in two of the three Cerulli Collection versions of said play: CP: MS 699 and MS 915.

68 Francklin, *Observations*, 100–01.

69 William Ouseley, *Travels in Various Countries of the East: More Particularly Persia*, 3 vols., vol. 3 (London: Rodwell and Martin, 1823), 164–65.

70 Bérézine, *Voyage*, 252–55.

headless corpse, carried under a high canopy with arrows protruding from his chest, his weeping mother walking behind him. This was followed by ‘Abbās’ body, carried beneath a lower canopy and accompanied by a mourning woman whom Berezin describes as his wife but is likely to have been his sister Kulṣūm.⁷¹ Then, under a further canopy, were carried the bodies of Zainab’s two sons, beheaded and with arrows and the blades of broken swords piercing their chests, their mother behind them. When the procession stopped, the mourning women sat down next to their respective corpses; they cried, and Ḥusain cried and ordered that the wedding begin.⁷² This account is fascinating firstly because it is an example of a prominent aspect of Muḥarram pageantry, the carrying of symbolic biers graphically displaying likenesses of the wounded bodies of the martyrs, being incorporated into a static performance for dramatic effect. Secondly, and more importantly for our purposes, this account shows that by the 1840s the dramatists were experimenting with the juxtaposition of nuptial and funerary rites and had begun to use ‘Alī Akbar’s body as a focus for lamentations. Also interesting is that each bier was accompanied by a female mourner; whilst the other corpses would be written out, Akbar’s would become a permanent feature and the experience of the mother of the martyr would be highlighted in Umm Lailā.

Berezin’s description goes on to feature Qāsem’s mother crying together with Umm Lailā over Akbar’s corpse. When the enemy challenge sees Qāsem head for the battlefield, Umm Lailā reproaches him for not saying goodbye to Akbar, and he tearfully obliges. “Abbās’ wife” follows suit and so does Zainab, with Qāsem bidding farewell to all of the corpses. Qāsem’s farewell to Akbar, and Umm Lailā insisting that her dead son be treated as the living, would become part of the episode’s standard form.

All things considered, this appears to be an account of the play at a moment when the dramatists had begun to experiment with creating a tragic counterpoint to Qāsem’s wedding, not only by mentioning the other martyrs, but by taking the drastic step of placing their corpses on stage. They had also begun to focus on the loss experienced by the women. Berezin’s account shows that this innovation process had begun by 1259/1843; by the time of Gobineau’s 1281–82/1865 translation, it had been honed. While some elements had been

71 As discussed in chapter 3, in *The Martyrdom of ‘Abbās* the hero asks his sisters and niece to mourn over his body as he has no wife or mother at Karbala. Mistakes regarding the identities of female characters are common in the accounts of foreign spectators.

72 Bérézine, *Voyage*, 253; Jean Calmard and Jacqueline Calmard, “Muharram Ceremonies Observed in Tehran by Ilya Nikolaevich Berezin (1843),” in *Eternal Performance: Ta’ziyeh and other Shi’ite Rituals*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2010), 62.

dropped, the simultaneous nuptial and funerary rites had become a stable feature. Umm Laila embodied the pain of the martyr's mother, and the contrast between her and Qāsem's mother had been exploited for its full dramatic potential. I will now show that when we consider the sources used by *ta'ziyeh* dramatists we find further evidence that making Akbar and Lailā a point of focus in Qāsem's martyrdom narrative was their own innovation, and that this took place in the time period that I have specified.

6.1 *Qāsem's Martyrdom in Rawzat al-shuhadā': a Major Narrative Discrepancy*

The *ta'ziyeh* of *The Martyrdom of Qāsem* and Kāshefī's account of Qāsem's marriage and martyrdom in *Rawzat al-shuhadā'* are very similar: the shared details indicate that the *ta'ziyeh* dramatists were heavily influenced by Kāshefī's version of Qāsem's story. Kāshefī's rendition has the same structure and almost all of the same elements as the earliest extant *ta'ziyeh* script of this episode, although he wrote more than 300 years earlier.⁷³ He begins with Qāsem's request for permission to do battle denied; Ḥasan's will trumps Ḥusain's refusal and contains the wedding wish; exchanges between the hero, his mother, and his bride are like those of the *ta'ziyeh*; an enemy challenge sees the groom leave before consummating the marriage, and his resolve is tested by his wife's pleas for him to remain. Qāsem's initial triumph over Azraq and his sons is also present, as is his return to the camp asking for water. The denouement is again similar; Ḥusain goes to the wounded Qāsem on the battlefield and he dies in his uncle's arms. But one crucial element of the *ta'ziyeh* plot is missing – Akbar's death, mourned by Umm Lailā, is not mentioned at all in Kāshefī's version of Qāsem's story.

In fact, the chronology of the martyrdoms at Karbala differs in Kāshefī's *Rawzat* and in the *ta'ziyeh*. Crucially, in Kāshefī's rendition of events, Qāsem is martyred before 'Alī Akbar, which is particularly curious given the importance of Akbar's recent death in the *ta'ziyeh's Martyrdom of Qāsem*. Kāshefī's story unambiguously presents Akbar as alive when Qāsem is martyred: chapter nine of *Rawzat* is a long chronological account of the martyrdoms of different members of Ḥusain's party; each martyr reacts to the fate of his predecessor, and there are seven martyrs between the story of Qāsem's marriage and martyrdom and the demise of 'Alī Akbar. The order in which Kāshefī recounts these deaths is not random, as Akbar has a role in the martyrdom story immediately prior to Qāsem's.

73 Kāshefī Sabzevārī, *Rawzat*, 429–39.

In *Rawzat*, the martyr preceding Qāsem is his younger brother ‘Abdullāh, whose death spurs Qāsem’s petition for permission to fight. Shortly before the beginning of Qāsem’s story Akbar is alive and well as ‘Abbās passes him the flag in order to go to the aid of the wounded ‘Abdullāh.⁷⁴ Thus, despite clearly having made use of the plot of Qāsem’s story from *Rawzat*, including the wedding, the *ta’ziyeh* dramatists opted for a different ordering of the martyrdoms and in so doing made Akbar’s recent death a central element of their episode about Qāsem – an intriguing decision indeed.

It must first be considered that the alternative order of the martyrdoms may not have originated with the *ta’ziyeh* dramatists but rather in sources other than *Rawzat*. In fact, al-Ṭabarī does cite ‘Alī b. Ḥusain (‘Alī Akbar) as the first martyr of the Banū Abī Ṭaleb at Karbala,⁷⁵ clearly placing Akbar’s martyrdom before Qāsem’s. Bal’ami’s version of al-Ṭabarī’s *Tārīkh* conserves this order and al-Shaikh al-Mufid’s account also has ‘Alī Akbar die before Qāsem. However, as has been discussed, none of these sources include Qāsem’s wedding. Furthermore, Safavid historians Mīrkhānd and Khāndamīr, whose works are much closer in date and origin to the *ta’ziyeh*, agree with Kāshefī in placing the deaths of both ‘Abbās and ‘Alī Akbar firmly after Qāsem’s in the Karbala chronology.⁷⁶

Of course, it is also possible that the change in the order of the martyrdoms was an innovation that had taken place in the way that the stories were told at a popular level during the three centuries between Kāshefī writing *Rawzat* and our earliest *ta’ziyeh* script of the play. We know that during this period the stories circulated orally, told by the *rawzeh-khānān* and the *pardeh-dārān*. As they embellished their accounts, they may indeed have compromised on formal detail (such as the order of martyrdoms) in favour of adding emotive layers to the plot.⁷⁷ However, Jawharī’s *Ṭūfān al-Bukā’*, completed in 1250/1834 and thus coinciding in date with the Chodzko manuscript, presents the Karbala martyrdoms in the same order as Kāshefī’s *Rawzat*.⁷⁸ In chapter 3 we saw evidence that the *ta’ziyeh* dramatists drew directly from *Ṭūfān*. Thus, even if Akbar’s death coming before Qāsem’s had become the popular way of telling the story

74 Ibid., 428.

75 Ṭabarī, *History*, XIX, 150.

76 Mīrkhānd, *Rawzat al-ṣafā*, 3, 2251–53; Khāndamīr, *Ḥabīb al-siyār*, 2, 52–54.

77 A *pardeh* (story-teller’s canvas) featuring a variety of prominent scenes from Karbala, and likely to date to the Zand period, depicts Qāsem in battle lifting Azraq’s oldest son by the hair. For the full canvas and expansion of the Qāsem detail see Figures 13 and 14 in Marzolph, “Visual Culture,” 147–149.

78 For the martyrdom narratives of the figures in question beginning with ‘Abdullāh and ending with Akbar see Jawharī, *Ṭūfān*, 193–218.

by the 1830s, it was not the only version of events in circulation and the *ta'ziyeh* composers were aware of the alternative chronology. What's more, they had used it themselves.

The Zand collection unfortunately does not include a rendition of *The Martyrdom of Qāsem* but it does include a version of *The Martyrdom of 'Alī Akbar* dating to 1206/1792 in which, surprisingly, Qāsem is already dead. Akbar and Ḥusain express grief at his loss.⁷⁹ Of course, there may have existed regional variations in the way that the events at Karbala were understood.⁸⁰ Due to the varying accounts in different sources, there may have even been some flexibility in the martyrdom chronology. Perhaps the order of the martyrdoms was not always considered important, but the *ta'ziyeh* dramatists certainly made it important as they developed the plot of *The Martyrdom of Qāsem*. As the scripts among my sample have shown, by the 1860s the plot had reached a standard form that foregrounded Akbar's recent death and the suffering of Umm Lailā.

Why was Akbar dying before Qāsem their preferred version of events? Why not adhere to Kāshefi's chronology that they otherwise followed closely and that was repeated in *Tūfān*? Why settle on an alternative order? The decision may initially have been arbitrary. In the Chodzko rendition, whilst Akbar's recent death provides a tragic background to Qāsem's wedding, we have seen that neither his corpse nor his grieving mother are on stage, and no attention is given to the idea that he was to be married. However, I venture that, as the episode's characters and the themes developed, the irony of Qāsem marrying when such an experience should have been Akbar's, the connection between Akbar and Qāsem and their *nākāmī*, and the contrasting situation of their two mothers, proved ripe dramatic material. None of this would have been possible with 'Abdullāh as the character whose martyrdom preceded Qāsem's; he was too young to marry and had the same mother as Qāsem. Therefore, the order of the martyrdoms was settled.

6.2 *Expansion of Focus on Women: a Response to the Female Audience*

We have seen that contrasting the situation of the two mothers in this episode was important to the *ta'ziyeh* dramatists. They treated the perspective of the mother of the martyr intensively through long sections of inter-female dialogue. What's more, they settled on portraying the martyrdoms in a particular order, differing to that found in their major sources, at least in part to allow

79 Fath-'Alī Baigī and Daryāi, *Daftar* 12, 9–54.

80 The editors of the aforementioned script identify the presence of words in the dialect of the Arak area in Markazi province, indicating its origin. *Ibid.*, 11.

the development of this scene. This is rendered more intriguing by the fact that these dialogues are examples of cross-gendered verse that, with the exception of women-only private gatherings, were performed by men. What was the motivation for foregrounding these senior female characters?

I argue that the aim was to increase the emotional participation of the female audience members, whose tears and affective responses were (and still are) important to the *ta'ziyeh* ritual as a whole.⁸¹ As the scene between the two mothers was extraneous to formal accounts of the events at Karbala, if it was important to the *ta'ziyeh* dramatists, it must have been important to their audience. We cannot analyse these plays as we would an authored piece of theatre; it is always difficult to be certain of authorial contexts and intentions, but it is especially difficult in the case of (multiple) anonymous composers. However we can use accounts of *ta'ziyeh* such as those of Gobineau, a regular spectator in the early 1860s, as evidence of the important effect that the audience had on the evolution of the plays. He observes the fluctuating content of the plays: he describes plays treating a particular Karbala scene as changing from year to year, and theorises that the sections that had the most influence on the audience were kept, whilst others were dropped. Gobineau argues that each play, "... far from being the work of a single author, is the result of a considerable number of modifications, arriving at a sort of perfection based on public approval."⁸² It indeed appears that the development of the Muḥarram cycle has been something of a democratic process, a symbiotic work of actors and audience. This is supported by what is observable when looking at a range of historical scripts of the same episode. We see creative "dead ends", innovations in content that appear in certain renditions but do not gain traction and later disappear: we also see successful innovations integrated into versions from across the country and, within a couple of decades, becoming permanent features. The scene between the two mothers is a strong example of this, and reveals much about the nature of the audience and the contract between its members and the *ta'ziyeh* performers and composers.

In chapter 1 we heard through the accounts of multiple witnesses how women constituted a highly important, if not the most important, contingent of the *ta'ziyeh* audience in the cities of Qajar Iran, outnumbering their male counterparts and participating vocally and enthusiastically. We heard from Mary Sheil, who spectated at *ta'ziyeh* in Tehran in 1266/1849, that "women of

81 During my 1439/2017 participation as a *ta'ziyeh* audience member the senior women were often the first to cry and vocally lament, triggering a similar reaction from the wider audience. See Deacon, "*Ta'ziyeh-khani* in Iranian Communities."

82 Gobineau, *Les religions*, 368. Translated from French.

humble condition” were present “in great numbers.”⁸³ Seated in the centre of the traditional *tekiyeh* around the *sakū*, women were the main direct audience to whom the *ta'ziyeh-khānān* delivered their performances. To be truly moved by the plays, these women needed to see their own experiences, fears and aspirations represented. An episode that featured a marriage, an occasion when senior females traditionally play an important role as organisers, was an ideal opportunity to foreground the experience of the aging mother and ensure the emotional investment of an important sector of the audience. The fact that the dramatists responded to the reaction of these “women of humble condition” (women of higher social class being seated in loggias behind heavy gauze curtains), and sought to secure their participation, speaks of these women’s agency, and the power they exercised within the *tekiyeh*. They were important to the ritual. Their important contribution was recognised, their needs as an audience catered to.

There is an interesting parallel here with the manner in which Qāsem’s marriage and martyrdom is told, and indeed resonates, amongst the Shi’i community of Hyderabad (India), as discussed in the work of Karen Ruffle. The medium is not devotional drama, rather *marsi'yeh* (lament poetry), and the narrations given by orators in mourning assemblies (similar to Iran’s *rawzeh-khānī* sittings).⁸⁴ As with the “Persianization” of the story when told in the Iranian context, the characters and marital customs are made Indian, the bride and groom portrayed as idealised Deccani Muslims.⁸⁵ Importantly, Ruffle argues that due to the Hindu taboo associated with widow remarriage, the tragedy of the death of the bridegroom has resonated particularly strongly with the Hyderabadī Shi’a.⁸⁶ She gives Mīr ‘Alam’s *Dah Majles* (composed in 1196/1781) as an example of a rendition of Kāshefi’s *Rawzat al-shuhadā*, not only translated from Persian into Urdu, but adapted for a local audience. Reminiscent of the *ta'ziyeh* interpretation of Qāsem’s wedding story, Ruffle observes that Mīr ‘Alam narrates the story largely through the voices of the women and, interestingly, that he includes dialogues between the older women that show their perspective. However, in this case, it is not the suffering of the mother of the martyr, but the tragic nature of Fāṭemeh the bride’s impending plight as a widow and social outcast that is brought to the fore. Ruffle concludes that the author sought to encourage the audience to connect with Fāṭemeh on more

83 Sheil, *Glimpses*, 126–27. See chapter 1 “Women as Audients, Patrons, Performers and Copyists.”

84 There is evidence that some *ta'ziyeh-khānī* performances were staged at the court of Āṣaf al-Dawlah in Lucknow in the late 12th/18th century. However, this tradition seems not to have taken root in India. Bulūkbāshī, *Ta'ziyeh*, 28–29.

85 Ruffle, “Indo-Persian Imaginaire,” 189–191.

86 *Ibid.*, 182.

than a religious level, rather as if she were a real local character.⁸⁷ In the context of the Iranian *ta'ziyeh*, the foregrounding of the suffering of the martyr's mother is likely to have the same effect, the plight of Umm Laila and Qāsem's mother resonating strongly not only with women who had lost their own sons but with their communities, and those who feared such a loss.

7 Conclusion

We have seen that the story of Qāsem and Fāṭemeh's wedding, in circulation from as early as the composition of Kāshefi's *Rawzat al-shuhadā'*, was given new poignant levels as a *ta'ziyeh* episode. The archetypal beauty of the beloved of the Persian *ghazals* was invoked by the dramatists describing Qāsem, allowing them to depict his adolescent charm and compounding the tragedy of his loss. The nascent moustache, *nowkhaṭṭ*, a trope of the beloved, took on a new significance in the Karbala context and became the tragic motif of an adulthood sacrificed, unfulfilled. Qāsem's cousin 'Alī Akbar was similarly presented. The dramatists developed a special connection between these two, one becoming the reflection of the other. They not only gave Qāsem's bloody unconsummated marriage a further tragic twist by portraying it as the wedding planned for Akbar, but they placed Akbar's body on stage throughout the proceedings as a constant reminder of the bridegroom's fate, uniting the cousins in their *nākāmī*.

Throughout all of this, they foregrounded the suffering of the young martyr's mother, exploring the tragedy of her situation, the depth of her grief leading to derangement. The intensive engagement with this figure was the result of a major innovation that took place between the 1840s and 1860s – the introduction of Umm Lailā and Akbar's body to the play. This allowed not only the development of the aforementioned connection between Qāsem and Akbar, but also the juxtaposition of the situations of their mothers: one mourning her son's death, the other preparing her son's wedding. Creating this contrast was clearly important because to facilitate it the dramatists settled on an understanding of the order of the Karbala martyrdoms significantly different to that found in some of their major sources. Those composing and performing the play made these changes in response to their audience, the largest contingent of whom were female: the developments are testament to the importance of the women of the *tekiyeh*.

87 Ibid., 192–197. Ruffle recalls the orator to whom she listened in a Hyderabad mourning assembly in 2005 also encouraging this connection.