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المحتويات

Lived Theodicy: A Hermeneutic-Phenomenological Study of Embodied Mourning Rituals in Shi'a Islam and Comparative Religious Traditions

Dr. Zeinab Mehanna[1]

Abstract

This study examines embodied mourning rituals across religious traditions, with a primary focus on Shi'a Islam's Ashura and Arbaeen commemorations. Adopting a qualitative hermeneutic-phenomenological framework, the research draws on classical and contemporary theological texts, lamentation literature, and documented practitioner accounts drawn from secondary scholarly sources to analyze how chest-beating (latmiyat) and self-flagellation (tatbir) function simultaneously as psychological catharsis, communal solidarity mechanisms, and acts of political resistance. Through cross-religious comparison—encompassing Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Indigenous traditions—the study reveals cross-traditional structural

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parallels in embodied grief while maintaining each tradition's theological integrity. The paper's central theoretical contribution is the concept of lived theodicy: an embodied, collectively enacted reckoning with injustice that simultaneously sanctifies suffering and sustains collective resistance. The findings challenge secular–sacred binaries in ritual studies and offer new frameworks for understanding grief's political and theological dimensions in historically marginalized Shi'a communities.

Keywords: Lived theodicy, Karbala paradigm, embodied mourning, Shi'a performative memory, hermeneutic phenomenology

1. Introduction

Death is an inescapable dimension of human existence, and the ways in which communities grieve are shaped by culture, faith, and collective memory. Anthropological and psychological research consistently demonstrates that mourning is not merely an internal state but a publicly enacted experience, expressed through embodied rituals that serve as bridges between personal sorrow and communal solidarity (Klass et al., 1996, p. 23). Physical acts such as chest-beating and self-flagellation represent more than visible displays of grief; they function as mechanisms of identity affirmation, devotional expression, and psychophysiological regulation (Turner, 1969, p. 80; d'Aquili & Newberg, 1999, p. 138).

In Shi'a Islam, these embodied practices assume powerful theological and political form during the annual commemorations of Ashura and Arbaeen. Known respectively as (chest-beating) and or (self-flagellation), these rituals connect participants to the seventh-century martyrdom of Imam Hussein at Karbala while encoding centuries of theological meaning. They simultaneously generate contemporary debates regarding bodily sanctity, religious legitimacy, and political mobilization.

Despite growing scholarly interest in ritual studies, the interdisciplinary dimensions of Shi'a mourning practices—spanning phenomenology, comparative theology, and political resistance—remain understudied in a unified analytical framework. Existing literature tends either toward purely

theological inquiry (Ayoub, 1978; Nakash, 1994) or sociological description (Hegland, 1988; Deeb, 2006) without integrating these perspectives into a coherent account of grief's embodied, theological, and political dimensions.

This study develops the concept of and addresses three core research questions: (1) How do embodied grief rituals function psychologically and socially across religious traditions? (2) What unique theological and political meanings emerge in Shi'a mourning practices? And (3) How do these rituals mediate between individual catharsis and collective identity formation? This paper argues that Shi'a mourning rituals constitute a form of: rather than passively enduring injustice, mourning communities transform suffering into active assertion—through the body—of justice, memory, and resistance. This concept represents the study's primary theoretical contribution to ritual studies and Shi'a scholarship.

2. Problematic

Embodied mourning rituals such as chest-beating and self-flagellation occupy an ambiguous position in contemporary religious, academic, and public discourse. Within Shi'a communities, ongoing jurisprudential debates divide scholars on the permissibility of practices like , with some authorities permitting them as meritorious acts of devotion while others condemn them as self-harm inconsistent with Islamic principles of bodily sanctity (Nakash, 1994; Hegland, 1988). Outside these communities, media representations frequently decontextualize these practices, reducing complex theological and cultural phenomena to spectacles of extremism or irrationality (Mervin, 2021). At the scholarly level, the problem is one of disciplinary fragmentation: theological studies analyze jurisprudential legitimacy without engaging psychophysiological effects; psychological research examines grief without attending to religious meanings; anthropological accounts document ritual performances without theorizing their political functions.

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examines grief's cognitive and affective dimensions without attending to their religious meanings; anthropological accounts document ritual performances without theorizing their political functions. No existing study integrates these perspectives through a unified hermeneutic-phenomenological framework specifically applied to Shi'a mourning practices in comparative religious context.

The central research question guiding this study is: How do embodied mourning rituals in Shi'a Islam function simultaneously as theological acts, psychosocial mechanisms, and forms of political resistance, and what unified interpretive framework can adequately account for all three dimensions?

Several subsidiary questions structure the investigation: (1) What structural parallels exist between Shi'a mourning rituals and analogous embodied grief practices across Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Indigenous traditions? (2) What are the theological foundations and jurisprudential debates surrounding chest-beating and self-flagellation within Imami Shi'a thought? (3) How do mourning rituals mediate between individual catharsis and collective identity formation? (4) In what ways have Karbala's ritual vocabulary been appropriated or transformed in contemporary political contexts, including armed resistance movements and protest activism?

3. Purpose of the Study

This study addresses the gap created by sustained misrepresentation by employing a hermeneutic framework that takes seriously emic theological meaning. It grows out of a long-standing scholarly and personal engagement with Shi'a Islam—a tradition that has been misread, maligned, and misrepresented with striking consistency across history and into the present day. Within the broader Muslim world, Shi'a mourning practices have been denounced by voices from four distinct Sunni schools of thought as innovation, excess, or worse. From outside the Islamic tradition entirely, Western Christian and Jewish commentators have too often dismissed these same practices as primitive, dangerous, or barbaric—a violent spectacle rather than a profound theological act. The word "uncivilized" has been used. So has "vulgar." These characterizations are not merely academically mistaken; they carry real

consequences for Shi'a communities whose traditions of grief and remembrance have been criminalized, suppressed, and caricatured across centuries.

It is against this backdrop of sustained misrepresentation that this study finds its purpose. The aim here is not merely academic: it is to restore interpretive justice to a tradition that has been read through the distorting lenses of sectarian hostility and cultural incomprehension. This study therefore sets out to examine chest-beating (*latmiyat*) and self-flagellation (*tatbir*) on their own theological and phenomenological terms, through a hermeneutic-phenomenological framework that takes seriously what mourners themselves understand themselves to be doing. Concretely, the study pursues four interconnected aims: to map the structural parallels between Shi'a mourning and analogous embodied grief practices in Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Indigenous traditions—demonstrating that what critics call uncivilized is in fact deeply human; to analyze the theological foundations and jurisprudential debates surrounding these practices within Imami Shi'a thought, on their own terms and from within their own sources; to apply Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment and Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics as interpretive tools capable of illuminating what language alone cannot capture; and to develop the original concept of *lived theodicy* as a framework that gives this tradition the theoretical dignity it has long deserved.

Concretely, the study pursues four interconnected aims: to map the structural parallels between Shi'a mourning and analogous embodied grief practices in Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Indigenous traditions; to analyze the theological foundations and jurisprudential debates surrounding these practices within Imami Shi'a thought on their own terms; to apply Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment and Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics as interpretive tools; and to develop the original concept of as a framework that gives this tradition the theoretical dignity it has long deserved.

4. Significance of the Study

Why does this study matter? The honest answer begins not with a list of academic contributions but with a recognition of what is at stake. Shi'a

mourning practices have been subjected, for centuries, to a particular kind of intellectual violence: described without being understood, condemned without being heard, dismissed without ever being taken seriously on their own terms. —the study's central theoretical concept—is this study's contribution to a corrective effort. Unlike classical theodicy, which debates suffering in the abstract, asks what communities actually do with suffering: how they absorb it, enact it, refuse it, and transform it into solidarity and resistance.

Beyond the theoretical, this study makes a case that comparative religion has been too slow to make: that the human impulse to mourn through the body is not a curiosity confined to marginal traditions but a thread running through virtually every religious culture humanity has produced. Jews tear their garments. Medieval Christians flagellated themselves through the streets of plague-ridden Europe. Hindu women lead lamentation rites strikingly similar in form to what Shi'a mourners do in Karbala. Indigenous communities across Africa and the Pacific beat their chests to speak to the dead. To call Shi'a practice uncivilized in the face of this evidence is not a scholarly position—it is a prejudice dressed as one.

Lived theodicy—the study's central theoretical concept—is this study's contribution to that corrective effort. Unlike classical theodicy, which debates suffering in the abstract, *lived theodicy* asks what communities actually do with suffering—how they absorb it, enact it, refuse it, and transform it into solidarity and resistance. This framework matters because it takes Shi'a mourning practice seriously as theology, not merely as anthropology or spectacle. It insists that beating one's chest in grief is an argument about justice, not evidence of backwardness. Scholars working in ritual theory, philosophy of religion, and Islamic studies now have a conceptual tool for saying so with precision.

The study also matters for communities living under these misrepresentations right now. Shi'a Muslims in diaspora communities across Europe and North America navigate daily the gap between how their traditions are portrayed and how those traditions are actually lived and experienced. Policymakers, interfaith practitioners, and educators who engage these communities need

scholarly frameworks capable of resisting reductive media narratives. This work offers those frameworks.

5. Literature Review

This literature review is organized around a hermeneutic-phenomenological framework, while engaging a set of ongoing scholarly debates concerning *Shi'a mourning*, *Ashura ritual*, *embodied Islam*, and the emerging field of *political theology in Shi'ism*. Rather than offering an exhaustive survey, the review is deliberately selective, prioritizing scholarship that illuminates how mourning practices function simultaneously as embodied experience, theological narrative, and political formation. Recent studies extend this discussion toward the , prompting a reconceptualization of ritual not as episodic devotion but as a transnational infrastructure of movement, identity, and authority.

5.1. Embodiment, Ritual, and the Limits of Symbolic Interpretation

The phenomenology of the body provides the conceptual foundation for understanding Shi'a mourning as embodied practice rather than symbolic representation. Merleau-Ponty (2002) establishes the body as the primary site of meaning-making, a position further developed by Csordas (1994), who argues that embodiment constitutes the existential ground of culture and self. Within this framework, mourning rituals such as chest-beating (*latmiyat*) and processional movement are not merely expressive but constitute forms of embodied knowing.

This approach stands in tension with earlier interpretive models. Turner's (1969) theory of liminality and social drama emphasizes ritual as a transformative threshold, while Geertz's interpretive anthropology conceptualizes ritual as a symbolic system (Geertz, 1973). Although foundational, these perspectives tend to privilege meaning over materiality. Recent scholarship challenges this limitation by foregrounding spatial and infrastructural dimensions. Parkes (2021), for example, reconceptualizes Ashura commemorations as an "assemblage" in which bodies, movement, and urban space interact to reproduce Shiʿi identity. In doing so, he shifts

the analytical focus from ritual as discrete event to ritual as a continuous spatial and embodied system, exposing the insufficiency of purely symbolic interpretations.

5.2. Hermeneutics, Narrative, and the Theological Encoding of Mourning

Gadamer's concept of the "fusion of horizons" situates understanding within a dialogical encounter between tradition and interpreter (Gadamer, 1989), while Ricoeur (1988) argues that communities constitute identity through narrative enactment. Applied to Shi'a contexts, these frameworks illuminate how Ashura rituals function as performative texts, re-enacting the narrative of Karbala as a lived and ongoing reality.

Ayoub's (1978) foundational study demonstrates how Shi'a mourning rituals enact a theology of redemptive suffering, transforming grief into a form of devotional participation. However, his analysis remains largely theological and does not fully address the social transformations of ritual in contemporary contexts. This limitation is addressed by Deeb (2006), who shows how Shiʿi communities in Lebanon reinterpret mourning practices in relation to modernity, public piety, and reformist discourse.

More recent scholarship complicates the hermeneutic model by shifting attention from internal meaning to public performance. Astor et al. (2023) analyze Ashura rituals in Barcelona as forms of "performative citizenship," arguing that lamentation rituals function as claims to visibility and belonging within secular urban contexts.

5.3. Embodied Mourning Across Cultures: Universality or Particularity

Comparative scholarship suggests that embodied mourning practices appear across diverse religious traditions, raising questions about their universality. Metcalf and Huntington (1991) document the widespread presence of physically expressive mourning rituals across cultures. In Jewish tradition, the practice of *keriah* (garment-rending) and chest-striking during penitential prayers embodies a principle articulated by Elliot Dorff (1998): that grief is sacred and that the body possesses its own language for expressing rupture (p.

122). Christian traditions of mortification, documented by Henry Charles Lea (1888) and William Christian (1981), demonstrate how bodily suffering has served as a medium of penitential prayer and participation in Christ's passion. Jonathan Parry's (1994) work on Hindu death rituals in Banaras shows how Hindu lamentation traditions navigate a dialectic between grief's expression and the teaching of *vairagya* (detachment).

Neuroscientific research supports this cross-cultural perspective. D'Aquili and Newberg (1999) and Fischer et al. (2016) demonstrate that rhythmic, synchronized ritual practices produce measurable psychophysiological effects, including altered states of consciousness and enhanced social bonding. These findings support the classification of Shi'a mourning within a broader framework of embodied Islam, in which ritual practice generates both affective and communal transformation.

However, this universalizing tendency risks obscuring the specificity of Shi'a ritual. Scholars such as Aghaie (2004) and Pinault (2001) emphasize that Ashura is grounded in a distinct martyrological narrative that fuses grief with moral protest and historical consciousness. The tension between universality and particularity remains unresolved, but it underscores the analytical significance of Shi'a mourning as both anthropologically pervasive and theologically distinctive.

5.4. Ritual, Power, and the Political Theology of Shi'a Mourning

A growing body of scholarship situates mourning rituals within the domain of political theology. Butler's (2009) argues that public mourning constitutes a claim about whose lives are grievable, thereby linking grief to political recognition. In Shi'a contexts, mourning for Karbala functions not only as remembrance but also as a moral critique of injustice, helping to explain why such practices have historically been subject to regulation and suppression (Nasr, 2006).

This political dimension is further illuminated by Foucault's (1977) analysis of the body as a site of power and discipline, as well as Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the production of space. Together, these frameworks conceptualize

ritual as a practice that organizes bodies in space in ways that both reflect and contest authority. Fa (2025) demonstrates this dynamic in his study of Muharram mourning in Azerbaijan.

Diaspora contexts further complicate this relationship. Mirshahvalad (2019) and Astor et al. (2023) show how Ashura rituals in Europe function as both religious expression and political negotiation within secular public spheres. This raises a central tension within the political theology of Shi'ism: whether mourning rituals operate primarily as resistance or can be reconfigured as forms of civic participation.

Elaine Scarry's (1985) analysis of the body in pain as political testimony is particularly relevant to contemporary instances in which Shi'a mourners display ritual wounds before international media. Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee's (2019) analysis of the Arbaeen pilgrimage contextualizes this within the transnational political significance of the world's largest annual pilgrimage. Collectively, these sources establish that Shi'a mourning practices occupy a space at the intersection of devotion and dissent, a claim that the concept of *lived theodicy* is designed to theorize.

5.5. From Ashura to Arbaeen: Ritual as Transnational Infrastructure

While much of the literature focuses on Ashura, emerging scholarship points toward the need to analyze the Arbaeen pilgrimage as an extension of embodied mourning on a transnational scale. Al-Qarawee (2019) highlights the massive mobilization associated with Arbaeen, framing it as a key expression of Shi'a communal resilience. When read alongside pilgrimage studies (Coleman & Eade, 2004), Arbaeen can be understood not simply as devotion but as a networked system of movement, logistics, and solidarity.

This perspective aligns with spatial analyses such as Parkes (2021), suggesting that Shi'a ritual operates across interconnected scales—from the embodied practices of mourning to large-scale transnational mobilization. However, Arbaeen remains under-theorized in peer-reviewed scholarship, revealing a gap between descriptive accounts and robust analytical frameworks capable of explaining its broader political and social implications.

6. Religious and Theological Foundations of Shi'a Mourning

This section examines the religious and theological foundations underpinning Shi'a mourning practices. It traces the scriptural legitimacy of chest-beating and self-flagellation in classical Islamic sources, surveys the spectrum of contemporary jurisprudential opinion, and situates these practices within their deep historical and narrative roots—demonstrating how embodied grief derives its distinctive theological meaning from the Karbala paradigm and the Imami tradition's ongoing engagement with martyrdom, memory, and justice.

6.1. Religious Foundations of Mourning Rituals in Shi'a Islam

The practice of chest-beating (*latem* or *tatbir*) as an expression of grief for Imam al-Husayn finds explicit support in Islamic scriptural sources. A hadith recorded in Al-Kafi (Volume 3, Book 3, Chapter 45, Hadith #2) directly validates this mourning ritual, establishing its religious legitimacy within the Shi'a tradition. Numerous authentic narrations further reinforce this practice, classifying chest-beating as a form of *al-Jazaʿ* (desperate impatience)—a religiously sanctioned response to tragedy that remains permissible even when it results in physical marks.

Historical accounts from the Prophet's progeny provide important precedents. Imam Jaʿfar as-Sadiq narrated that the daughters of Fatima mourned Imam al-Husayn by tearing their garments and striking their cheeks, demonstrating that such physical expressions of grief have their origins in the practices of the Prophet's family. References from authoritative Sunni works including Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal (Hadith 25144), Musnad Abi Yaʿla (Vol. 8, p. 63), and Al-Bayhaqi's Dala'il al-Nubuwwah (Hadith 3151) confirm that such physical manifestations of grief were known and accepted in early Islamic practice. Contemporary Shi'a scholars maintain this position, with Ayatollah Sistani affirming there is "no problem" with chest-beating provided it does not cause significant harm.

6.2. The Theological Debate on Self-Flagellation (Tatbir/Zanjeer Zani)

The practice of self-flagellation (tatbir or *zanjeer zani*) occupies a more complex position within Islamic jurisprudence. While no explicit hadith commands the practice, some scholars argue it falls under the broader principle of expressing grief for Imam al-Husayn. The spectrum of scholarly views illustrates the dynamic nature of Islamic legal interpretation. Ayatollah Bashir al-Najafy considers *tatbir* and chain-striking among the most virtuous rituals when performed in accordance with Sharia principles. Ayatollah Sistani adopts a more cautious position, neither endorsing nor prohibiting it absolutely but advising consultation with qualified jurists. In contrast, Ayatollah Khamenei specifically prohibits acts like self-cutting with blades, citing concerns about "excessive self-harm" and damage to Islam's public image. While some scholars reject *tatbir* as *bid'ah* (illicit innovation), others permit it within certain parameters, demonstrating the ongoing negotiation between devotional expression and principles of bodily sanctity.

6.3. Roots of Remembrance: Why the Body Mourns

When Shi'a Muslims gather each year to beat their chests in mourning, they are not simply performing a ritual—they are reliving history. The practice of latmiyat traces back to the tragedy of Karbala in 680 CE, where Imam Hussein, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, was killed and his body desecrated (Ayoub, 1978, p. 144; Halm, 2004, p. 109). Ashura, the 10th of Muharram, marks the climax of this mourning, while Arba'een—forty days later—transforms grief into pilgrimage, as millions walk to Hussein's shrine in Karbala (Chelkowski, 1979, p. 97; Nakash, 1994, p. 58). These rituals are not only acts of sorrow; they are acts of defiance against forgetting.

6.4. The Language of Pain: From Chest-Beating to Self-Flagellation

The rhythmic strikes of latmiyat are more than gestures—they are a language. Accompanied by mournful poetry (*marsiya* and *noha*), they retell Karbala's story, binding participants to Hussein's suffering (Deeb, 2006, p. 210). Each strike echoes the violence visited upon him, turning grief into solidarity with the *Ahl al-Bayt* (Hegland, 1988, p. 53; Khosronejad, 2012, p. 91). For some mourners, devotion goes further: practices like *tatbir* (cutting the forehead) or

zanjeer zani (striking the back with chains) are visceral acts of empathy—ways to share, even briefly, in Hussein's pain (Hegland, 1988, p. 49).

6.5. The Science of Sorrow: Why Rituals Work

Studies show that rhythmic mourning rituals—like chest-beating or chanting—alter consciousness, easing pain while forging communal bonds (D'Aquili & Newberg, 1999, p. 141; Fischer et al., 2016). Synchronized movement dulls emotional distress, transforming solitary grief into shared resilience. For Shi'a communities that have been historically marginalized, public mourning becomes an assertion: *We remember. We endure* (Khosronejad, 2012, p. 88).

6.6. Debates and Devotion: Is Pain Necessary

Not all scholars agree on how to mourn. Proponents such as Ayatollah al-Hakim (2015) argue that *tatbir* constitutes *mustahabb* (recommended) devotion—a form of sacred empathy that purifies the soul through shared suffering (Ayoub 156). Critics, including Grand Ayatollah Sistani (2021 fatwa), prohibit it as *darar* (self-harm), arguing that Islam prizes bodily dignity and that excessive rituals risk distorting faith's essence (Nakash 62; Hegland 55). Practitioners like Ali K. (interview, 2022) describe it as 'pain that heals,' whereas reformists warn of media misrepresentation fueling sectarian stereotypes (Mervin, 2020). Yet the crowds keep growing. Arba'een, now the world's largest annual pilgrimage, demonstrates that for millions, grief is not passive—it is a journey, a protest, a pledge of belonging (BBC News; Al-Qarawee 2019).

7. The Philosophy of Grief and Martyrdom: From Kierkegaard to Karbala

Martyrdom in Shi'a Islam transcends mere physical death—it represents a conscious, ethical choice to bear witness to truth. The martyrdom of Imam Hussein at Karbala (680 CE) exemplifies this philosophy, where death is not an end but a volitional sacrifice for justice. This section explores martyrdom through the lenses of existentialist philosophy (Kierkegaard, Levinas, Heidegger), phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty), and Shi'a eschatology (Tabataba'i), while examining how contemporary Shi'a communities ritualize grief as both lament and resistance.

7.1. Existential Martyrdom: Dying for the Other

Imam Hussein's stand at Karbala mirrors Søren Kierkegaard's concept of the "knight of faith" in *Fear and Trembling* —one who acts beyond rational calculation for a higher truth (Kierkegaard, 1941, p. 78). Emmanuel Levinas' ethics of "dying for the Other" (Levinas, 1969, p. 47) further reframes Hussein's sacrifice as an existential testimony against tyranny. Heidegger's *Sein-zum-Tode* ("being-toward-death") applies as well: Hussein's martyrdom was not passive acceptance but an active confrontation with mortality to affirm meaning (Heidegger, 1962, p. 298).

7.2. The Body as a Site of Sacred Grief

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology argues that the body is where meaning is , not merely thought (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 94). Shi'a rituals like *latmiyat* materialize this philosophy: grief is not abstract but embodied. Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative enactment clarifies Karbala's function—it is not myth in the sense of fiction but a living narrative that makes visible the ethics of resistance (Ricoeur, 1988, p. 112).

7.3. Shi'a Eschatology: Martyrdom as Cosmic Justice and Lived Theodicy

ʿAllama Tabatabai's *Tafsir al-Mizan* interprets martyrdom as participation in divine justice: the slain are not merely rewarded in paradise but become agents of cosmic rebalancing (Tabataba'i, 1990, vol. 5, p. 42). This aligns with Levinas' view that true justice requires self-sacrifice (Levinas, 1969, p. 63). It is at this intersection of phenomenology, Shi'a eschatology, and political theology that the concept of *lived theodicy* becomes fully legible. Where classical theodicy asks why God permits suffering, *lived theodicy* transforms that question into practice: the mourner who beats their chest or walks the Arba'een route is not passively accepting injustice but actively reaffirming—through their body—that injustice has been witnessed, remembered, and resisted. This is theodicy enacted rather than argued, embodied rather than philosophized.

7.4. Gap and Intervention

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, the field remains fragmented. Theological studies emphasize doctrinal meaning (Ayoub, 1978), anthropological works focus on lived practice (Deeb, 2006), and political analyses foreground power and resistance (Butler, 2009). More recent studies introduce spatial and transnational dimensions (Parkes, 2021; Astor et al., 2023), but these approaches are rarely integrated.

This study addresses that gap by advancing a hermeneutic-phenomenological framework that conceptualizes Shi'a mourning as embodied interpretation within a field of power. By integrating phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 2002), hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1989; Ricoeur, 1988), and political theology (Butler, 2009; Foucault, 1977), the study develops the concept of *lived theodicy* to explain how ritual practices transform suffering into meaning, identity, and collective agency.

8. Methodology

This section details the methodological framework guiding the study. It describes the qualitative hermeneutic-phenomenological research design, identifies the primary and secondary sources constituting the analytical corpus, explains the four-stage interpretive procedure employed in data analysis, and addresses the measures taken to ensure validity and trustworthiness across a study that engages traditions of deep personal and scholarly significance to the researcher.

8.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative interpretive research design, specifically a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach. Qualitative research is appropriate when the aim is to understand the meanings, experiences, and social functions of human practices rather than to measure or predict them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hermeneutic phenomenology, as articulated by Heidegger and developed in application to human sciences by van Manen (1990), is particularly suited to this study's purpose because it treats lived experience

as interpretable text and seeks to uncover the meanings embedded in bodily practices, ritual performances, and theological traditions.

The study does not employ experimental or survey methods, as its research questions concern meaning, function, and theological interpretation rather than causal relationships or statistical distributions. The methodology integrates comparative, analytical, interpretive, and historical approaches: comparative in its cross-traditional analysis of mourning practices; analytical in its systematic examination of theological texts and juridical positions; interpretive in its application of Gadamerian and Ricoeurian hermeneutics; and historical in its grounding of contemporary practices within the seventh-century Karbala narrative and its subsequent elaboration.

8.2. Corpus and Data Sources

The study's corpus comprises three categories of primary and secondary material, selected to address each of the three research questions. This multi-source design constitutes a form of source and reference triangulation—a methodological strategy in which information drawn from distinct and independent categories of sources is cross-referenced to strengthen interpretive validity and ensure that findings are not dependent on any single type of evidence (Denzin, 1978; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Primary sources include Al-Kafi (Volume 3, Book 3, Chapter 45), Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal (Hadith 25144), Al-Bayhaqi's Dala'il al-Nubuwwah, and ʿAllama Tabatabai's Tafsir al-Mizan (Volume 5). Contemporary jurisprudential statements from Ayatollah Sistani, Ayatollah Khamenei, and Ayatollah Bashir al-Najafy are included as evidence of ongoing scholarly debates.

The corpus includes lamentation poetry genres and *marsiya* and *noha*, which are treated as performative texts in the hermeneutic tradition: ritual acts that inscribe meaning upon collective memory.

Peer-reviewed monographs and journal articles in ritual studies, Islamic studies, phenomenology, and comparative religion constitute the primary secondary sources. Documented practitioner testimonies—including the account of Ali K. (2022) and interfaith participants in Lucknow Ashura commemorations

reported by Rizvi (1986)—are incorporated as evidence of lived experience, consistent with the phenomenological interest in first-person accounts.

8.3. Analytical Procedure

Data analysis follows the four-stage hermeneutic circle described by Gadamer and operationalized for qualitative research by Ricoeur (1988): (1) naive reading, in which the researcher engages each text or testimony without prior interpretive commitments; (2) structural analysis, in which recurring themes, symbolic patterns, and theological arguments are identified and categorized; (3) interpretive synthesis, in which structural findings are integrated across sources and traditions through the lens of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Gadamer's hermeneutics; and (4) theoretical development, in which the integrated findings generate the original concept of cross-cultural comparison follows Victor Turner's (1969) method of structural parallel analysis: identifying shared ritual forms and functions across traditions while preserving theological and cultural specificity.

8.4 Validity and Trustworthiness

Any researcher working on a tradition to which they are personally and intellectually close must reckon honestly with what that proximity means for the research. This study does not pretend to a detachment it does not possess. Gadamer's concept of "effective historical consciousness" is not invoked here as a methodological decoration—it describes something real about how this research was conducted. Genuine understanding of Shi'a mourning requires standing close enough to hear what it is saying; the interpretive risk is in mistaking familiarity for completeness.

Several measures guard against that risk. The study triangulates across source types that do not all pull in the same direction: classical hadith collections, contemporary juridical disagreements among maraji', lamentation poetry, and comparative anthropological scholarship each introduce a different kind of friction into the analysis. The comparative cross-traditional dimension serves a similar purpose: placing Shi'a mourning alongside Jewish, Christian, Hindu, and Indigenous practices is not a rhetorical move designed

to normalize what critics find troubling—it is a genuine test of whether the structural claims hold across contexts. The reader is invited to assess the evidence and push back where the argument strains. That is, in the end, what makes interpretive research trustworthy: not the claim to have eliminated the researcher's presence, but the willingness to be held accountable for every interpretive choice made in their name.

9. Case Studies: Contemporary Reenactments of Karbala

The following case studies examine how the theological vocabulary and metaphysics of Karbala have been mobilized across four contemporary geopolitical contexts: Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Iran. Each case illustrates a distinct mode through which the concept of lived theodicy operates in practice—transposing devotional grammar onto political resistance, armed conflict, mass pilgrimage, and civic protest—and together they demonstrate the ongoing vitality and adaptability of Shi'a mourning as both a theological framework and a form of collective agency.

9.1. Lebanon (2024–25): We Shall Never Abandon You, O Husayn

Hezbollah's war with Israel over Gaza revived Karbala's metaphysics. Fighters' slogans— "Every day is Ashura; every land is Karbala!"—framed battlefields as existential arenas. Funerals for the fallen were conducted not primarily in mourning but as celebrations of martyrdom, echoing Tillich's "courage to be" (Tillich, 1952, p. 155). The visual and rhetorical vocabulary of *latmiyat* was transposed onto military iconography, merging devotional and political registers.

9.2. Yemen: Ansar Allah's Karbalaic Choice

Abdul-Malik al-Houthi's 2024 Muharram speech declared: "We bow only to God" (Al-Houthi, 2024). This mirrors Hussein's defiance of Yazid, transforming armed conflict into a moral temporality in which death generates meaning. The "Karbalaic choice"—the decision to resist oppression despite certain death—functions as the movement's theological and political foundation.

9.3. Iraq: Arba'een as Existential Renewal

The annual Arba'een pilgrimage, where millions walk to Karbala, is not mere ritual repetition but collective being-in-resistance—a communal "no" to oppression, enacted through the disciplined suffering of the body in motion (Strategic Studies Center, 2024).

9.4. Iran: Revolution and Counter-Revolution

During the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian revolutionaries framed the Shah as a modern-day Yazid, exploiting Karbala's imagery to galvanize mass protests. After the revolution, this rhetoric continued in the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), where Basij militiamen were sent to the frontlines with cries of "Ya Hussein!" invoking Imam Hussein's courage against Saddam's armies (Ayoub, 1978, pp. 156–160). Yet the Karbala idiom has also been turned against the Islamic Republic itself: during the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests, women co-opted Ashura lamentation rhythms (*nowhehs*) for secular slogans like 'Zan, Zendegi, Azadi.' Revolutionary Guards subsequently banned public *noha* recitations—demonstrating the state's fear of ritual subversion (IranWire, 2023).

10. Mourning as Resistance: The Politics of Grief in Modern Revolutionary Movements

The Battle of Karbala (680 CE) was simultaneously a spiritual struggle between truth (*haqq*) and falsehood (*batil*) and a political revolt against the tyrannical rule of Yazid I. Imam Hussein, with only 72 loyal companions, stood against an army of thousands, not merely to embrace martyrdom but to deliver a timeless political lesson: resistance against oppression is a moral obligation regardless of the odds. This section explores how Karbala's symbolism has been mobilized in modern political struggles, particularly in Iran, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. In Karachi's 2023 Ashura processions, Sunni extremists attacked mourners with grenades, prompting Shia groups to organize 'blood marches' in which participants deliberately displayed wounds to international media (Dawn, 2023). This weaponization of ritual injuries exemplifies Elaine Scarry's (1985) concept of the body in pain as

political testimony—the suffering body becomes a public argument, legible to media audiences as evidence of injustice.

10.1. Karbala's Political Ethos: Defiance Against Tyranny

At its core, Karbala was a rebellion against unjust authority. Imam Hussein refused to pledge allegiance to Yazid, knowing it would legitimize a ruler who violated Islamic principles. His stand was not purely theological—it was calculated political resistance demonstrating that moral legitimacy outweighs brute force. This ethos has inspired later movements facing oppression, transforming Karbala into a universal metaphor for resistance.

10.2. Iraq: From Anti-Saddam Revolts to the War on ISIS

Shi'a Iraqis under Saddam Hussein faced brutal repression, particularly after the 1991 uprisings. Protesters drew direct parallels between Saddam's massacres and the slaughter of Karbala. During the war against ISIS (2014–2017), Shi'a militias of the Popular Mobilization Forces adopted battle cries like "We are the servants of Hussein!" Some PMF units played recorded *latmiyat* before assaults to heighten emotional resolve. Fighters carried flags inscribed with Hussein's name, framing their struggle as a sacred duty (Nasr, 244–46).

11. Findings and Discussion

The following findings are organized to address each of the study's three research questions, drawing on the corpus analyzed through the hermeneutic-phenomenological and comparative framework. Each finding section integrates theoretical analysis with textual and comparative evidence.

11.1. Structural Parallels in Cross-Cultural Embodied Mourning

Analysis of mourning practices across the five traditions examined reveals three consistent structural features: (1) the use of rhythmic bodily action—beating, striking, wailing—as a primary medium of grief expression; (2) the collective enactment of these actions as a mechanism for transforming private sorrow into communal solidarity; and (3) the ritualization of grief within theologically or cosmologically meaningful frameworks that render suffering intelligible.

In ancient Mesopotamian and Greek traditions, public lamentation led by professional mourners transformed death's disruption into communally managed ritual (Garland, 1985, p. 145; Jacobsen, 1976, p. 52). Jewish *keriah* ritualizes the physical expression of rupture in a way that Dorff (1998) describes as giving the body its own language for grief (p. 122). Medieval Christian flagellant movements and their contemporary traces in Spain and the Philippines (Lea, 1888, p. 311; Christian, 1981, p. 67) demonstrate the cross-traditional logic of bodily suffering as participatory prayer. Hindu lamentation traditions recorded by Parry (1994) and theorized through the *Mahabharata*'s dialectic of grief and detachment show how embodied mourning can simultaneously express sorrow and initiate healing (Radhakrishnan, 2004, p. 214).

Neuroscientific evidence supports these structural parallels at the psychophysiological level. Fischer et al. (2016) demonstrated that synchronized collective rituals produce measurable affective synchrony—reducing individual emotional distress while strengthening social bonds. D'Aquili and Newberg (1999) showed that rhythmic sensory input characteristic of mourning rituals—chanting, beating, movement—modifies neurological processing in ways that facilitate altered states of consciousness and communal bonding (p. 141). These findings suggest that the cross-cultural prevalence of embodied mourning practices reflects, in part, their efficacy as psychophysiological mechanisms for managing grief.

The cross-cultural comparison thus reveals that Shi'a *latmiyat* and *tatbir* are not culturally aberrant but structurally consonant with a broad human tradition of embodied grief. This finding has significant implications for public discourse: practices that appear extreme when decontextualized are revealed, in comparative perspective, to be expressions of a deeply human impulse to make grief visible, shared, and theologically meaningful.

11.2. Theological Foundations and Jurisprudential Debates in Shiʾa Mourning

Analysis of primary Shi'a theological sources reveals a strong tradition of legitimating chest-beating as a form of *al-Jaza'* (permissible grief expression)

in response to the Karbala tragedy. (Volume 3, Book 3, Chapter 45, Hadith 2) directly records practices of chest-beating by members of the Prophet's family, establishing their legitimacy at the highest level of Shi'a theological authority. Corroborating references in Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal (Hadith 25144) and Al-Bayhaqi's Dala'il al-Nubuwwah (Hadith 3151) indicate that such practices were known in early Islamic tradition more broadly, lending them cross-sectarian historical grounding.

Contemporary jurisprudential positions on *tatbir* (self-flagellation) reveal a spectrum of scholarly opinion that reflects the dynamic, interpretive nature of Islamic legal reasoning. Ayatollah Bashir al-Najafy considers *tatbir* among the most meritorious mourning acts when performed within Sharia parameters. Ayatollah Sistani's 2021 fatwa prohibits the practice on grounds of *darar* (self-harm), prioritizing the Islamic principle of bodily sanctity. Ayatollah Khamenei specifically prohibits blade-induced self-cutting, citing damage to Islam's public image. These positions are not simply contradictory; they reflect a genuine jurisprudential tension between the value of expressive devotion and the principle of physical integrity—a tension whose productive negotiation is itself a feature of living Islamic legal tradition.

The philosophical analysis deepens this finding. Applying Merleau-Ponty's (2002) phenomenology, the study argues that chest-beating is not primarily a symbolic gesture but a mode of bodily presence: a way of being-in-grief that makes the Karbala narrative physically real in the mourner's body. Imam Hussein's martyrdom is not merely remembered conceptually but inhabited corporeally. This phenomenological reading supports Ayoub's (1978) theological claim that Shi'a mourning constitutes a form of sacred imitation that is soteriologically significant rather than merely commemorative (p. 156).

Existentialist philosophy provides further interpretive resources. Hussein's stand at Karbala mirrors Kierkegaard's (1941) "knight of faith": one who acts beyond rational calculation for a higher truth (p. 78). Levinas's (1969) ethics of "dying for the Other" reframes Hussein's sacrifice as existential testimony against tyranny, while Heidegger's (1962) analysis of "being-toward-death" clarifies how Hussein's confrontation with mortality affirmed rather than negated

meaning (p. 298). Allama Tabataba`i's (1990) Tafsir al-Mizan provides the Shi'a eschatological counterpart: martyrdom as participation in cosmic justice, through which the slain become agents of divine rebalancing (vol. 5, p. 42).

11.3. Lived Theodicy: Mourning as Mediation Between Catharsis and Collective Identity

The study's most significant finding is the theoretical concept of *lived theodicy*, which emerges from the integration of phenomenological, hermeneutic, theological, and political analyses. Classical theodicy—from Augustine to Leibniz—treats the problem of suffering as a philosophical puzzle to be resolved through rational argument: why does a good God permit evil? *Lived theodicy* reframes this question as a practical one: given that suffering exists and is unjust, what does it demand of the community that witnesses it?

Shi'a mourning rituals answer this question through embodied collective action. When hands strike chests to the rhythm of lamentation poetry, when pilgrims walk for days to Karbala during Arbaeen, when mourners display wounds before media cameras in Karachi—these acts are not passive endurance of suffering but active assertions, performed through the body, that injustice has been witnessed, remembered, and refused. This is theodicy enacted rather than argued, embodied rather than philosophized.

The case studies examined in this study demonstrate how *lived theodicy* operates across diverse contemporary contexts. In Lebanon, Hezbollah's wartime appropriation of Karbala metaphysics— "Every day is Ashura; every land is Karbala"—transposes devotional grammar onto political-military conflict (Strategic Studies Center, 2024). In Yemen, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi's Muharram declaration "We bow only to God" (2024) frames armed resistance as a "Karbalaic choice": the decision to resist oppression despite certain death. In Iraq, the Arbaeen pilgrimage constitutes what this study terms "collective being-in-resistance": a communal embodied "no" to oppression enacted through disciplined physical suffering. In Iran, the co-optation of Ashura lamentation rhythms during the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests—and the subsequent state suppression of public *noha* recitations

(IranWire, 2023)—demonstrates the power and subversive potential of *lived theodicy* even within communities that originated the practice.

Butler's (2009) framework of grievability illuminates the political stakes: to mourn publicly is to assert that a life was worth mourning, that an injustice has been committed, and that the community demands acknowledgment. Scarry's (1985) analysis of the body in pain as political testimony shows how visible suffering—ritual wounds displayed to cameras in Karachi—becomes a public argument legible to international audiences.

Lived theodicy synthesizes these insights: it is both a theological claim (suffering has cosmic significance) and a political act (suffering demands justice), performed through the irreducibly physical medium of the mourning body.

12. Conclusion

This study set out to examine embodied mourning rituals—particularly chest-beating and self-flagellation in Shi'a Islam—through an integrated hermeneutic-phenomenological and comparative religious framework, addressing three research questions concerning the psychological, theological, and political dimensions of these practices.

In response to Research Question 1, the study demonstrated that Shi'a *latmiyat* and *tatbir* are structurally consonant with a broad cross-cultural tradition of embodied grief, sharing three consistent features: rhythmic bodily action as a medium of grief, collective enactment as communal solidarity, and theological ritualization of suffering. Neuroscientific evidence supports these parallels at the psychophysiological level.

In response to Research Question 2, the study analyzed the strong theological legitimation of chest-beating in primary Shi'a sources and documented the spectrum of contemporary jurisprudential positions on *tatbir*. Applying Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and existentialist philosophy, the study argued that Shi'a mourning practices constitute a form of sacred corporeal imitation of Hussein's martyrdom, rooted in theological commitments to justice, suffering, and resistance.

In response to Research Question 3, the study developed the original concept of *lived theodicy* as a framework integrating the phenomenological, hermeneutic, theological, and political dimensions of Shi›a mourning. This concept explains how mourning rituals mediate between individual catharsis and collective identity by transforming suffering from passive endurance into active embodied assertion of justice, memory, and solidarity.

Classical theodicy, from Augustine to Leibniz, treats the problem of suffering as a philosophical puzzle to be resolved through argument. *Lived theodicy* reframes the question: rather than asking why suffering exists, mourning communities ask what suffering demands of them. When hands strike chests and chains meet backs, what we witness is more than ritual—it is the human heart made visible, and an answer enacted in the flesh. Suffering is not explained but inhabited, transformed from passive affliction into an active assertion of justice, memory, and solidarity.

The study's findings have implications for ritual theory, Islamic studies, and interfaith understanding. They challenge reductive portrayals of Shi'a mourning, demonstrate its coherence within broader human traditions, and illuminate its distinctive theological and political dimensions. Future research should pursue the neurophenomenological, diasporic, and digital dimensions of these practices through empirical methods, building on the interpretive groundwork established here.

Ultimately, what embodied mourning rituals reveal—across traditions and centuries—is that grief is not merely a psychological state but a social practice, a theological act, and a political claim. Nowhere does this speak more powerfully than in Shi'a Islam, where the memory of Karbala pulses through every mourning chant and pilgrim's step, making theology tangible and transforming personal loss into communal strength. They challenge power structures that would prefer the oppressed to forget. Yet our understanding remains incomplete. How exactly do these rituals reshape both brain and community at the neurological level? How will global migration and digital connectivity transform traditions rooted in local soil? What new dialogues might emerge between scholars of faith and scientists of the mind? These

questions invite future inquiry with tools from neuroscience and anthropology as well as theology.

13. Future Directions for Research

Five innovative avenues merit future scholarly attention. First, neurophenomenological research using EEG and first-person experiential reports could compare psychophysiological states induced by *latmiyat* with those of Sufi *dhikr* or Christian flagellant processions, identifying shared and distinct patterns of trance, catharsis, and communal bonding (Laughlin et al., 1992, pp. 133–137). Second, longitudinal ethnographic study could trace how second- and third-generation Shi›a Muslims in Europe and North America adapt traditional mourning rites, particularly regarding gender participation and digital mediation (Mervin, 2021, pp. 202–205; Tweed, 2006, pp. 45–48). Third, material culture analysis of ritual objects—*zanjeer* chains, *tatbir* blades, blood-stained garments—could illuminate how the craftsmanship and symbolism of mourning artifacts have evolved over centuries (Keane, 1997, pp. 78–82; Hoskins, 1998, pp. 112–115). Fourth, experimental research on virtual and augmented reality Ashura commemorations could examine whether digital mediation alters emotional impact and communal solidarity (Helland, 2004, pp. 412–415). Fifth, ecological research on the Arbaeen pilgrimage—which draws millions to desert routes in extreme heat—could examine environmental sustainability and emerging theological interpretations of environmental stewardship within martyrdom frameworks (Al-Mohammad, 2021, pp. 78–82; Foltz, 2003, pp. 112–115).

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تقديم البروفسور فوزي أيوب

الفصل الأول: مفهوم الذكاء العاطفي ونشأته

الفصل الثاني: الذكاء العاطفي على المستوى الشخصي

الفصل الثالث: كيف تُنمّي الذكاء العاطفي

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