Review


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If Shi'ism as a field of studies is at the fringes of the academic study of Islam, then South Asian Shi'ism is most certainly on the ‘periphery’ of Shi'i studies, which locates Iran and the Arab world as its ‘centre’. Little attention has been given to the area of South Asian Shi'ism, and even less so on South Asian Shi'i religious practices, material culture, and the everyday. Everyday Shi'ism by Karen Ruffle is welcomed as a much-awaited textbook, introducing everyday lived Shi'ism in South Asia and offering fresh new perspectives that shift analytical focus to the periphery. Serving as an introduction to Twelver Shi'ism in South Asia, Everyday Shi'ism concentrates broadly on religious practices, literary aesthetics, and material culture to provide insight into the everyday life and cultural memory of Shi'i people. Drawing from a wide assortment of primary sources, images, and ethnographic data from fieldwork in Pakistan and India but focusing largely on Hyderabad, Everyday Shi'ism contextualizes South Asian Shi'i rituals and practices through case studies that provide broad glimpses of Shi'i life as well as more micro-level investigations of material objects and ritual practices.

The six chapters offer various insightful perspectives to the question posed in the introduction: ‘how have Shia adapted to and been shaped by South Asia?’ (p. 21), through explorations of different aspects such as ‘alam and ta'ziyas, ‘ashurkhana, and nauhah. Ruffle offers theoretical lessons at the end of every chapter, along with references and recommended readings. Chapter 1, ‘South Asian “Lovers” of the Ahl-e Bait: Hindu and Non-Shi'i Muslim Traditions of Devotion’, examines the devotees of Shi'i holy figures, showcasing the inclusivity involved in Shi'i ritual. The second chapter, ‘Come, and Cry, Because ‘Ashura is Today’: Literary Aesthetic’, explores Shi'i literary aesthetic and the reasons how and why the Karbala event (the focal point of Shi'i sacred history) has managed to captivate both Shi'i and non-Shi'i South Asian writers. Chapter 3, ‘In the House of the Tenth: Spaces of Shi'i...
Devotion’, surveys the various different forms of South Asian Shi‘i religious architecture and space, and chapter 4, ‘Metal Hands and Stone Footprints: Shi‘i Material Practice’, explores the objects that constitute Shi‘i material practice. Chapter 5, ‘Every Place is Karbala, Every Day is ‘Ashura: South Asian Muharram Rituals’, features detailed descriptions of rituals and events in Muharram, including the structure and performance of the majlis mourning assembly, and chapter 6, ‘Tasting Sorrow before Joy: Vow-Making and Festival Occasions’, takes a look at intercessory rituals. Included at the end are a glossary and a teaching appendix which contains discussion questions for each chapter, suggestions on which chapters to use for certain courses, and source suggestions including documentary films, image archives, YouTube videos, and museum collections.

Packed densely with information and descriptions, Everyday Shi‘ism makes some important interventions. Expanding on Simon Wolfgang Fuchs’s ideas on centring South Asian Shi‘ism in a field where it is treated as a periphery, Ruffle problematizes the very notion of centre and periphery and shifts the analytic focus to Shi‘ism in the subcontinent, allowing for new lines of thinking to emerge (pp. 13–15). Ruffle also reconceptualizes the relationship between religious normativity and the everyday (pp. 17–20), opening up space for Shi‘ism in current academic debates in the anthropology of Islam. Focusing on everyday lived religion yet remaining cognizant that the everyday is integral to the normative (p. 20), Ruffle pushes back against the binary that conceives ‘a divide between non-elite practice and the “religion of scholars”’ (p. 7). Ruffle also makes a point regarding the inclusion of women, not as an exception but integrating them into the studies through the everyday (p. 7). This also challenges another divide between the idea of ‘popular’ religion being practised by women, and the scholarly/intellectual belonging to men (p. 7). By utilizing the concept of the everyday as a space ‘inhabited by all people’, we are able to see how Shi‘i identities are shaped and formed by many layers. Another strength of the book is the theorization of what Ruffle calls the ‘religious sensorium’ (p. 169). Building on Adam Yuet Chau’s idea of the sensorium as socially productive, Ruffle goes further and conceptualizes the religious sensorium as a ‘symbolically rich religio-social space’ through which ‘Shi‘a engage with material objects, poetry, narrative discourse, and the body to produce sense-experiences’ (pp. 169, 220). These sense-experiences not only recall sacred history but make present Shi‘i holy figures. Theorization of the religious sensorium enables new perspectives on everyday lived religion and material culture.

There are, however, some weaknesses throughout the book, some easily rectifiable in the next edition, and some that should be substantially reconsidered. One such problem reflects the precarious nature of writing a book that totalizes an entire region; the issue is not so much trying to write about a region, rather it is that the book generalizes South Asia while relying heavily on the context in Hyderabad, India. Although early in the book, Ruffle does
provide a disclaimer that she is not trying to ‘speak’ for all of South Asia (pp. 6, 31), she ends up focusing on one context and holding it as common or standard practice. For example, Ruffle claims definitively that the das-tarkhwan (or dastarkhwan-e nazri) is a female-only votive meal (pp. 273, 320). This seems to be specific to some women and dastarkhwan events known as Bibi ka dastarkhwan or another as Bibi ki sehnak. It largely depends on the individual holding the dastarkhwan whether their dastarkhwan event has a gender preference or not—but is by no means common practice. In another example, Ruffle describes the importance of the ritual ‘cooling’ (thanda karna) of the ta’ziyas (replica shrine-tombs) as ‘burial cools the ta’ziya by releasing built-up spiritual power that has accumulated during the previous ten days; more importantly, it releases Imam Husain from his shrine-tomb replica to which he will return the next Muharram’ (p. 160). Generally, Shi’as do not believe that Imam Husain is present in the replica shrine-tomb and ‘leaves’ so that he can ‘return the next Muharram’. It might help to mention alongside these rituals where the author got her information from, and if it applies to a small sub-section of Shi’as, as it appears to in this case. Some confusion might also come from her own interpretation of the ‘cooling’ of the ‘alam or ta’ziya. ‘Cooling’ of the ta’ziya or ‘alam means to bury in the ground (or immerse in water), alluding to how the body turns cold once dead. Even if she were to be describing this as a representation of Husain’s departure, there is neither a reference or source to her analysis or interpretation of the ‘release’ and ‘return’ of Imam Husain to the ta’ziya, nor to her conception of the ritual cooling.

A more significant problem with the book is that it deliberately ignores two major issues that have ‘received disproportionate attention from scholars’ (p. 29), but are still integral to Shi’i everyday religious life. Ruffle excludes the topics of religious authority (the marja’iyyah and the howzah) and sectarian politics, thereby limitedly engaging with a lived reality for many South Asian Shi’a. While she situates them as overdone in scholarship, they remain nonetheless important to cover in a textbook. Ruffle concedes that every Shi’a follows a marja’ (p. 30), but still insists on excluding any mention of religious institutional authority which does have a bearing on everyday lived Shi’i religious life. Ruffle also ignores sectarianism despite mentioning the debates of devotional representations of the Imams and their intersection with sectarian politics (p. 208) and acknowledging that Shi’i Muharram rituals make the Shi’a hyper-visual to the public (p. 213). Pakistani Shi’a in particular navigate minority politics precariously and face discriminatory violence on a daily basis; to remain silent on sectarianism misses a crucial facet of both their identity and religion. The lives of South Asian Shi’a are shaped and directly impacted by sectarianism, and this lack of address is a significant concern—especially for what is intended to be an introductory text.

The book also contains several factual errors that could have easily been checked. Ruffle cites the small gift received by women who perform ‘amal as
‘hidayat’ (p. 288). The small gift in question is actually ‘hadiya’, (or ‘hadiyat’, plural), as opposed to ‘hidayat’ which means guidance. Even as a typographical error, this imparts a completely different meaning. Similarly, the transliteration of nazr is used by Ruffle to denote two things, but nazr as ‘reciprocal gazing’ (pp. 203, 213) should be nazar, while nazr signifying a vow-offering (pp. 62, 281) is synonymous to niyaz. Ruffle also makes a point to note that ‘Abu Fazl means the “father of” a son named Fazl. The popularity of this name for ‘Abbas reflects his status as a father and a “family man,” connected to this world by his wife and children’ (p. 219). This reads as over-interpretation, as even Imam Husain is popularly referred to as ‘Aba ‘Abdullah’, or father of ‘Abdullah. This was a common Arab way of addressing a person, by their kunya (which she herself states) and it is in no way specific to only ‘Abbas; it is exaggerative to say that its popularity reflects his status as a family man. In South Asia, the title ‘Abu Fazl’ is also considered to mean ‘one who is generous’ or ‘the father of generosity’. This directly links to his other nickname, ‘Babul Hawa’ij’, or ‘the door to fulfilling [people’s] requests’, a title which he shares with the seventh Shi’i Imam, Musa b. Ja’far. It would make more sense to draw conclusions around his persona regarding the meaning of these two titles. These seemingly minor errors can have a significant impact on clarity and understanding.

Another issue is her comparison between ziyarah (‘visitation’; in South Asia, ziyarat, ‘visitation’ and ‘gazing’) and darśan (‘reciprocal gazing’). While Ruffle critiques the idea of everyday Shi’ism being classified as ‘syncretic’ (p. 41), she repeatedly draws parallels between the Hindu darśanic gaze and the South Asian Shi’i concept of ‘nazr’, or ‘didar’ (pp. 203, 213), as she terms it, which is widely referred to as ziyarat or ziyarat karna. Though she states that ‘there is no comparable ritual for the enlivening of an ‘alam’ (p. 178), elsewhere she calls the act of nazr or didar ‘the darśanic gaze’ (pp. 203, 213). Both are materially different concepts yet Ruffle repeatedly equates the two (p. 203), as well as defining nazr as ‘the act of reciprocal gazing’ in the glossary. Ruffle goes on to state that ‘the darśanic gaze—the act of nazr or didar for Shi’a—makes Imam Husain and other members of the Ahl-e Bait present and physically immediate’ (p. 203). Nazr or didar, as Ruffle incorrectly calls it, cannot be considered ‘reciprocal’ gazing (darśan), since Shi’i holy figures are not considered to be made present through the objects nor are they understood as ‘gazing back’—they are omnipresent, and the objects provide a direction for the devotion (which she actually states on page 178: ‘while they have important representative functions and intercessory powers, these are objects to which devotees direct their love, respect, and veneration’). This is a crucial distinction that would in fact bolster her argument against labelling South Asian Shi’i Muharram rituals as syncretic.

A more serious concern of the book deals with the positionality of the author and is a vital example of the fraught relationship between the scholar and practitioner in the study of religion. On page 128, Ruffle writes in passing
that ‘Mirza Asadullah Baig’s face, with its sharp features, reflects his mixed heritage’, which, taken at face value, is at best problematic. However, this line is definitely coded, even if done so by the author subconsciously. Calling out the features of a person of colour is not only unnecessary but could be seen as an attempt to make the ‘savage’ (Indian) more ‘civil’ (Iranian) through a proximity to whiteness. It is interesting that the author feels the need to even bring up his features in that way—what does it even mean to have sharp features and what is it meant to imply? Plenty of ‘full Indian’ people can be said to have sharp features. Similarly, Ruffle recounts conversations with zakirahs and zakirs (orators) where she ‘excitedly anticipated our entering into deep, literary and theological discussions about Rowzat-e shohada, but the orators typically responded by giving me a blank look’ (p. 245). While Ruffle goes on to explain textual knowledge and literacy in the textual tradition about Karbala, the issue is how this conversation is framed. The author’s positioning implies that her interlocutors are not aware of the meanings behind their rituals, why they believe in what they do, or even that they are incapable of having ‘deep, literary and theological discussions’ about the text referred to. These examples are deeply uncomfortable because of the implications they hold: a clear divide between the scholar and the practitioner.

Finally, the following anecdote invokes broader questions about the politics of social location as it relates to knowledge production:

Although I am not Shi’a, the Ahl-e Bait have made themselves present in my life, and they feel like close, protective companions watching over me … One night, a woman with a bright shining face, wearing a green cloak appeared to me in my dream. Even in my sleep I was extremely overwhelmed because I did not know who this woman was, however I knew she was beyond this realm. I realized it was Fatimah, and began to cry out in my sleep. Hearing my cries, my husband woke me and I told him that Fatimah had come to me … As I was writing this book, Fatimah returned to me again in a dream during the summer of 2019. This time, I did not feel fear, rather a sense of peace and even protection.

(p. 303)

What purpose does recounting this experience serve? How might this sound coming from a scholar from the community? How would this scholar be received and what does this say about the field of religious studies? This points to the issues with the way Ruffle presents herself as a scholar and authority and is reflective of a larger problem: the scholar/practitioner divide and the relations of power between scholars in the Global North and their objects of study in the Global South. Aisha Beliso De-Jesús writes about ‘the ways in which institutional conversations around identity choices differentiate academic research into either personal quests, marks of belonging, or anecdotes of inclusion’ (De-Jesús 2018: 328). The ‘scholar-practitioner’ dichotomy reinforces a White Christian (and here, elite and Western) secularism, naturalizing it as the default. The issue here is that no matter her
intentions or her own self-positioning along the insider-outsider divide, disclosing this dream inevitably instrumentalizes the dream of the revered religious figures supporting her scholarly work. Disclosure of dreams is itself not a common practice among practitioners, for many reasons, one of which is itself the possibility of worldly instrumentalization. Moreover, disclosure of religious experiences or affiliations is not available to those scholars who are already read—and overdetermined—as community members. Despite these varied issues, this book is nonetheless an informative, accessible, and very readable ethnographic introduction to everyday Shi’ism.

REFERENCE