

***The Language of Tears: My Journey into the World of Shi'i Muslim Women.* By Bridget Blomfield. White Cloud Press, 2015. 160 pages. ISBN: 978-1935952428.**

Reviewed by Fatima Chakroun
Wilfrid Laurier University

Bridget Blomfield's *The Language of Tears: My Journey into the World of Shi'i Muslim Women* offers an intimate ethnographic account of Shī'ī Muslim women living in the United States. Through personal anecdotes and community observations, gained through immersion in Shī'ī communities, she explores how ritual, identity, and faith intersect in the lives of these women. Centring two Islamic female figures—Prophet Muḥammad's daughter, Fatima, and granddaughter, Zaynab—Blomfield examines how historical legacies of resilience and piety are lived and reinterpreted across generations. This study brings visibility to a marginalised and often mischaracterised group, highlighting the complexity, agency, and spiritual depth of Shī'ī women's lives in a Western context.

Blomfield begins the first chapter by providing her own story of attending Arabic classes alongside young children. In this process she provides informative descriptions regarding general Shī'ī belief and practices, such as fasting and charity. Blomfield's anecdotes also include reflections on her own navigation as self-described outsider, which either granted her special privileges or, although less often, excluded her entirely. Blomfield discusses her experiences through formal structures, such as the school institution, but also informal relationships she built with her participants while doing the research. One of the interesting facets that Blomfield picks up on is the enthusiasm of the women regarding her interest in learning Arabic and in Shī'ism.

She speaks to their underlying desire for her to convert which, with more exposure to Shī'ī belief, they see as inevitable.

In Chapter 2, Blomfield then moves on to provide an analysis of the importance of two female Islamic figures, Fatima and Zaynab. She describes the way the women in her study utilise both women as a source of strength, resilience, and piety. An important finding of Blomfield's research is the way in which the figures of both Fatima and Zaynab are invoked varyingly by women of different ages. Fatima, labelled "the lady of heaven," is described as love, wisdom, and as a symbol of hope for humankind (23). The women invoke her qualities in their times of need and weep with her in times of sadness. Blomfield notes a particular appeal of Zaynab amongst college-aged Shī'ī women (19). This discussion is particularly interesting because it illustrates the negotiations of identity and religion for American Shī'ī girls and women. They negotiate religious rulings, coming to conclusions based on their own experiences and negotiate hybrid identities of being Muslim and American, as well as from their respective ethnic backgrounds. Due to characterising Zaynab as a powerful, out-spoken leader, they feel granted the permission to be the same. Blomfield speaks of a more "fluid" identity for the younger women who identify with both the Islamic and cultural values of their mothers, while rejecting the elements of that identity that do not line up with their understandings of equality (47). In this section, the young girls also discuss their opinions on a number of controversial issues within the Muslim community, such as arranged marriages and polygamy. The use of Zaynab as a female archetype guides their contributions to community discourses on these issues.

The discussion of Zaynab provides a transition to a discussion in Chapter 4 regarding Muharram ritual practices, as she is considered the original mourner in the story of Ashura. This chapter thoroughly explains the significance of Muharram to Shī'ī Muslims and specifically how its significance is translated into lived experiences. Blomfield describes her own engagement with Muharram practices, such as

listening to lamentations and acts of mourning, such as weeping and the beating of the chest. Although these traits vary from culture to culture, Blomfield visits a mosque that caters to three different languages and ethnicities and so she is able to capture a general idea of practices without being caught up in cultural specifics. although she does provide details on cultural diversity in the following chapters. She illustrates the way Shī'ī women and men lament over the events of Karbala, and she provides her own reactions to the story, as well as the mourning and the practices she witnesses. An essential point is the demonstration of how the community connects the events of Karbala to contemporary struggles of injustice, using generational mourning in conjunction with current grief-invoking events.

In the remaining three chapters, Blomfield provides culturally specific anecdotes featuring the Iranian, Iraqi and Pakistani Shī'ī women she encounters. While the three groups have many practices in common, Blomfield draws attention to the diversity among them. Due to the fact that Blomfield was visiting many of these women in their homes to attend Muharram rituals, she was also able to analyse home dynamics and infer class differentiations.

Blomfield concludes her book with an epilogue about her trip to Iran. She details the interactions she has with locals as an American woman and her experience visiting holy sites. Each city she visits offers her different experiences; Qom offers her a scholarly city, Mashhad a place where she visits shrines, and Tehran the capital. As she does in the earlier parts of the book, she makes notes of all the occurrences that surprise her. The honesty of these statements are pleasant additions to the book that showcase an authentic interaction when experiencing different cultures.

The structure of Blomfield's book is commendable for effectively presenting the key elements of Muharram ritual and practice, while also offering insight into how these rituals are interpreted and lived by Shī'ī women. Given the wide range of social issues uniquely affecting women, covering each one in full depth within a short book presents

an understandable challenge. However, one area where the book falls short is in the discussion of Zaynab in Chapter 3. In attempting to weave together various issues that impact young Shī'ī women, Blomfield drifts from the central focus on Zaynab. The connection between the chapter's topics and its namesake feels tenuous, relying primarily on the idea that young women view Zaynab as a "feminist" figure, and that the issues discussed are therefore feminist in nature (33). A more compelling approach would have been to explore how young women actively engage with the figure of Zaynab—within and beyond their communities, as a source of empowerment and guidance in achieving their goals. Many of the other topics addressed in the chapter could have naturally aligned under this broader umbrella. In this way, Blomfield missed an opportunity to more deeply embed Zaynab into the narrative and fully explore her contemporary significance.

While it reads that Blomfield is looking to demonstrate that Shī'ī women are similar to the average American woman, in the exotifying of the practice, food and identities, she draws further emphasis on the differences and potentially draws the Shī'ī Muslim women as foreign or odd. There are sections that seem to be exotifying practices and culture, some even as blatant as calling Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran "exotic places," when the reality is they are simply seen as home to Blomfield's research participants (33). She also compares being a refugee from Iraq to her own relocation from California to Nebraska, a misshapen comparison when discussing the struggles of those fleeing war and political turmoil (35).

Additionally, Blomfield makes an unseemly point early on in her book when she relays an anecdote regarding attending a female-only celebration. She states her surprise at the women—who seemingly only dressed in dark colours—wearing clothing she deemed "sexy and beautiful" and as they were wearing "sequined dresses and danced in the living room" (xxiii). While this point is meant to illustrate the necessity in complexifying the identities of Muslim women, beyond ominous veiled figures, Blomfield's emphasis on their engagement with

otherwise stereotypical Western liberal values in this manner, seems distasteful. Indeed, as Blomfield shows, the women she engages with emphasise their piety and modesty, and therefore Blomfield's publicising of such private details does little to add to her findings. Later in the following chapter, Blomfield repeats this finding in a much better contextualised manner through an anecdote of her attendance of a celebration (27).

One of the elements Blomfield does well is capturing the diversity of perspective within a small group. She accounts for differences in language, class, and ethnicity in addition to age. She successfully illustrates the appeal in the different women based on the different experiences of two generations of Shī'ī women. What she does not capture, or at least selectively omits, are more rigid interpretations of Muharram ritual and practice. Like all groups, despite immigrating to the United States, people maintain rigidity in cultural expectations and practice. For example, in regard to labelling Zaynab a "feminist", Blomfield does not capture how even amongst younger generations there can be disapproval for such labelling, although this may be more related to the associations of the term itself. Quietist interpretations of the story of Ashura rejects the active revolutionary interpretations that would read Zaynab in this frame. There are interpretations of the story of Karbala that view its purpose as stagnant. The view here being that Zaynab's situation was dire and out of the ordinary for her typical behaviour. One of the participants Blomfield speaks to states a similar assertion; that Shī'īs are quietest and do not belong in politics (80). This idea is contested within Shī'ī spheres, with more prominence given to the view that Blomfield finds in her young research subjects. This book is a valuable contribution to ethnographic research on Shī'ism in North America, particularly with a gender-specific focus. This is a relatively new area of study, with English-language research only gaining momentum in the 20th century, after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which drew global attention to Shī'ism. Shī'īs are often described as "a minority within a minority," and as such, were rarely

the central focus of academic research, frequently relegated to footnotes in studies on over-generalised Muslim topics. Despite some shortcomings, the book's focused exploration of this minority group is a welcome and necessary scholarly endeavour. It is especially suitable for non-Muslim readers interested in understanding the significance of Muharram rituals within Shī'ī communities. One of the book's key strengths is its portrayal of the diversity within the group under study and the trust that the author appears to establish with the community she studies. Blomfield's humility throughout the research process is evident, and she is openly accepted by the community, even being initiated through ritual practice. This speaks volumes about the depth of the relationships she built and the respect with which she conducted her fieldwork.