

# The Lonely Goddess: The Lack of Personal Female Relationships in the Shi'ite Religious Tradition

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## Abstract

French psychoanalyst, Luce Irigaray, postulated that for patriarchal religious systems to exist, the feminine aspect must be subjected and contradicted. Utilising Irigaray's notion of the absent mother-daughter relationship in the Christian tradition, I have attempted to develop her analysis and meaning in terms of Shi'ite Islam, through Fatima, A'isha and Zeinab. What follows is not an exhaustive investigation into Shi'ite literature but my own interpretation of the Shi'ite feminine role. Within Shi'ite tradition a dichotomy exists between prominent female characters isolating and typifying the *Athena*, Fatima, within the divine. I do not suggest that female characters are victims or fatalistic in their socio-political environment; rather that regardless of mental perseverance and steadfastness, female characters remain isolated from intimate interaction with other females that allows for self-determination.

## Introduction

Shi'ite religious tradition relays the social relationships that developed with the prophet Mohammed and his descendants, encompassing a myriad of emotions, symbols and language that enrich and enthuse the believer and observer alike. However as with the dichotomy of symbols within religious development, the masculine is bestowed with divinity, pride and bravery, whereas the feminine, because of the polarity begets mortality, weakness and frailty. Yet, for this tradition to replicate as much of a human existence, elements of the feminine have to be included in the development of said tradition. As such there has to be a single woman upon whom the foundations of the faith are supported. Although

the Shi'ite system is a male dominated and orientated divine realm, for there to be a logical progression there needs to be a feminine character, namely Fatima; but although she is included in the spiritual realm as paramount to the men of *ahlul Bait* who are descended and exist through her.<sup>1</sup> She is not one of the social leaders but instead a supporter, or as Irigaray implies, an *Athena*.<sup>2</sup> Fatima, through self-demonstration, supports a position that females maintain and accept her ordained role, subservient motherhood.

Yet this motherhood does not encompass the emotional relationship but rather the physical act of reproducing; her emotional motherhood is transferred to the male actors, her father, husband and sons. Never is her emotion and support for her (step)mother(s) or her daughters, for the other female characters, she only vigorously instructs submission to male authority and complete servitude to male happiness and authority. Because male children belong to the father and are his pride and lineage; it is the responsibility of the mother to nurse all males, father, sons, brothers and their male identity (Irigaray 1991: 185). Motherhood, in the language of the male-defined environment, is not sexual or emotionally in love. Fatima is the only female mentioned in the construction of the infallibles and is not accorded the merit and social authority of the *Imams*. In the line of ascension she is spiritually and metaphorically at the head and interpreted as the mother of all the *Imams*, including the "mother of her father" (Fadlullah 2000: 16).<sup>3</sup> Although psychologically stronger than her father in defending his message, and esoterically she is the knowledge *hujjat*, in patriarchal terms she is posed as a frail sickly woman who needed to be sustained by her male relatives (Ordoni 1987: 23; Qummi 2001: 34-37; Shariati 1980: 14-18).

### Shi'ite Development of Immortality and Morality Through the Characters of Fatima and A'isha

Fatima and A'isha are important characters in the development of Shi'ite ideology as such the Battle of Camel (Richard 1995: 18-19; Shariati 1980: 5-10) develops the position and the perception of the female in Shi'ite understanding. It is the first battle undertaken by Ali, Fatima's husband and the first Imam, against A'isha, youngest wife of the Prophet, and the only virgin he married (Al Quazwini & Saleh 2001: 127; at-Tabarsi 1986: 166). Shi'ite scholars observe that A'isha displayed a confrontational nature toward Fatima. Several Shi'ite scholars claim that A'isha contributed to Ali's death by a Kharijite,<sup>4</sup> and suitably this event aided in establishing the creation of good and evil within the development of venerated characters and mortal villains in the Shi'ite tradition (Richard 1995: 19-20; Ordoni 1987: 189-190). As Shi'ite tradition is based on the life of the Prophet Mohammed, Ali and Fatima, it is essential to manifest malevolent opposition when creating a religious tradition. As such the characters of A'isha and Abu Bakr are presented as the malevolent opposition to Fatima and

Ali, respectively. However, A'isha and Abu Bakr are important characters within the Shi'ite tradition as the two malevolent and mortal characters in contrast to the portrayal of Ali and Fatima as divine and immortal.

In Shi'ite tradition, A'isha presents the contrast to Fatima. A'isha is not part of the divine legacy as she is the daughter of Abu Bakr, the first caliph, a usurper of religious power. On a socio-political level, her father illegally leads the ummah and here one could argue that Aisha and Abu Bakr are the earthbound and temporary leaders, but it is Fatima and Ali who are the righteous and moral leaders who are permanent and spiritual. Unlike Fatima, A'isha is not of the blood or of the spiritual dimension of Mohammed; she never bore him children, another blight against her worth and divine integrity in religious patriarchal tradition. "Allah has created you with a sterile womb so you do not give birth to any children" (Ordoni 1987: 139-140) serves as the divine prevention of an alternative lineage. Irigaray stated that in areas such as the patriarchal society and religious tradition, there is no place or tolerance for the woman who cannot procreate (Irigaray 1984b: 80). In contrast, Fatima is presented as the daughter of the Prophet and in certain claims she is portrayed as having been a prophet for seventy-five days after Mohammed's death, she was married to the Imam Ali and the mother of the future Imams and thus eliminating Aisha's claim to religious knowledge. (Ordoni 1987: 155-157; Qummi 2001: 10-12).

In accordance with divine lineage, Khadija, Fatima's mother, and Fatima share several personal characteristics that deem them favourable to Shi'ite religious interpretation. Scholarly authors such as Fadlullah, Ordoni, Shariati and at-Tabarsi, refer to Khadijah and Fatima as "mothers" in a greater sense than literally being one. Irigaray would emphasise that it is because women do not possess an active relationship and identity with the celestial divine, that they are described and credited solely as being mothers (Irigaray 1984a: 67). Khadija and particularly Fatima are defined in terms of the only role that characterises and venerates women in the tradition, rather than for their personalities or their strong relation to male symbols of strength and bravery. As such even in earthly finality Fatima is the *Khatun-I Qiyamat* who will help all mankind, once again emphasizing and supporting this constant nurse and mother role of the female.

As both women widowed their husbands, the symbolic implication according to Irigaray is that they sacrificed their lives as guardians of the religious tradition (Irigaray 1993: 5). Neither Khadija nor Fatima was subjected to polygamous relationships, although it was a very common social practice. After their deaths, both Mohammed and Ali sought new wives and engaged in polygamy, further demonstrating the purity and virtue of both women. In death, their husbands further elevated their wives by illustrating that a single woman could not replace her, that he needed several to match the character of one woman. Perhaps what can be deduced from this is that the men who establish belief systems and are therefore leaders, have to be portrayed as the ideal pious

men who also embrace the symbols of society. As such, a man of divine origin, disinterested in material assets and financial wealth, would initially seek a wife as spiritual companion rather than fulfill kinship ties that would be of secondary interest (Nafizi 1997: 59-60; Murad 1999: <http://www.iol.ie/>). With Khadija and Fatima elevated to such levels of divine reverence, A'isha's position is further undermined, she is but one of Mohammed's wives, and not the only woman to share his bed. For the Shi'ite interpreters, her image is thus further devalued and degraded in comparison to the veneration shown to Fatima. For A'isha cannot compete with Fatima, or can she compete with the deceased Khadija.

Irigaray contests that belief systems do not elaborate on the mother-daughter relationship (Irigaray 1993: 3), and here similarly, Fatima and Khadija do not establish such emotional interaction, as Khadija dies when Fatima is only eight years old. Khadija is believed to have said, "I am not crying for fear of death ... because every woman needs a friend on her wedding night to tell her secrets and help her ... Fatima is still very young and I fear she will be alone on her wedding night" (Shariati 1980: 131). This demonstrates that she and Fatima never develop the mother-daughter bond that could establish a possible feminine divine legacy. As such, the mother-daughter relationship is not emphasised in Shi'ite Islam and women, as Irigaray would claim, are relegated to that of subservient nurses to men (Irigaray 1991: 120). Further, it can be interpreted that with Khadija's death, she loses her daughter to the Prophet's ideals and message, as Irigaray well illuminates with regard to the original matricide (Irigaray 1980a: 9-10). Not that there was an opportunity to compete, Fatima was born in prostration with her finger raised. Such a physical display defines her as an *Athena*, born with the maturity to recognize the ideals of their fathers'. She is the iniatrix, she can only utilize her power through a male (as the personification of knowledge) she requires a voice and the concept of equality is thus distorted through the patriarchal interpretation, that simply ignores the symbolic (Corbin 1998: 189-190).

With Khadija's death, Mohammed commits to several marriages and a young girl, A'isha, becomes one of Fatima's stepmothers. Although, according to Shi'ite scholars, Mohammed proposed to several women,<sup>5</sup> there is no mention of Fatima's interaction with them; yet, the animosity between her and A'isha is highlighted. Despite their similar ages, no friendship or sisterhood develops between them. In fact, Aisha appears jealous of Fatima and the hostility seems mutual, where Fatima utters to Aisha, "I will not announce the secret of the messenger of the Allah..." further demonstrating that the *Athena* guards her knowledge and her male relationships jealously, denying other women the opportunity to gain knowledge and understanding. Their lack of social engagement demonstrates the divide between good and evil, the divine and mortal. Although it can be interpreted as a possible sisterhood, it is literally a failed mother-daughter relationship, as discussed by Irigaray.

Instead of a benevolent friendship or sisterhood developing between Fatima

and A'isha, there is animosity and rivalry, though Shi'ite scholars, Fadlullah, Ordoni and at-Tabarsi, would imply that the hostility came solely from A'isha, as she envied Fatima and Mohammed's relationship (at-Tabarsi 1986: 174-176). Though he possessed several wives, the Prophet depended solely, emotionally and psychologically, upon his daughter, possibly creating tension within the household between his wives and his daughter. Fatima accompanies Mohammed and removes the garbage from his back (Fadlullah 2000: 10). Fatima does not develop emotional attachment to any of the Prophet's wives, and considering that he proposed to twenty-one women in his life it seems somehow far-fetched that his daughter was unable to relate to a single woman (at-Tabarsi 1986: 175) but as an *Athena* it is part of her misogynist nature that doesn't permit interest in other women. For the interpreter, no female is suitable to be the (step)mother to Fatima, for all women are mortal and ignorant of the true nature of divine orientation. Only Fatima has true awareness, knowledge and access and thus requires no mother-substitute. She is the *Athena* to her father, his spiritual armour, guarding his ideology, whereas his wives serve as the objects of the sympathy that the Prophet possesses for humanity. His wives are human manifestations of his attachment and commitment to socio-political symbols, such that his concern for maintaining family units, kinship, financial wealth and bravery are demonstrated in the women that he selected as wives. Although all wives can serve as mother and nurse, Mohammed transfers this role to his daughter. However, Shi'ite scholars such as at-Tabarsi do not even allow the wives to develop their sexual identity as Fatima claims the identity as the nurse who does not desire, similarly the *Athena* is not interested in things sexual, she loves all in a filial sense.

We were told that our forefathers said that the Messenger of Allah often indulged in kissing the mouth of Fatima the mistress of the women of the world, so that A'isha finally protested ... . He [Mohammed] answered ... "when I yearn for Paradise, I kiss her and place my tongue in her mouth for I find in her the fragrance of Paradise. Fatima is thus a celestial human being" (at-Tabarsi 1986: 177).

In an esoteric sense, Mohammed demonstrates the celestial origin and orientation of Fatima that separates her from other women. As such she denied the wives the ability to satisfy Mohammed and granted him the ability to feel greater emotion than any mundane woman could provide.

The Shi'ite scholars do not mention rivalry within the Prophet's household, but the patriarchal obsession with youthful female sexuality should be noted. A'isha is young and sexual, but not in the same manner as Fatima, but whereas Fatima appears not to be interested in such matters, the implication is that A'isha

was aware of her virginity, youth and resulting sexual appeal. Instead Fatima's youth is juxtaposed as a daughter's deep adoration for her father against her maturity as a mother in defending and protecting him. Similarly as the *Athena* who shows little interest in marriage regardless of the suitors, so Fatima rejects all prominent suitors (Umar and Abu Bakr) other than Ali, who shares a celestial orientation with her, in order to continue nursing her father. Her relationship with Ali should be viewed in the greater sense than being merely his wife, she is possessor of knowledge and the protector of the tradition's heroes.

### Development of the Single Perfect Woman

Her father's death brought immense pain and inner turmoil to her, such that the pressure on her heart caused her eyes to bleed (Shariati 1980: 194), her purpose for living had ceased, she was no longer an *Athena*, dispossessed of the right to defend her father's ideals and message. Umar had reduced the *Athena* to a mortal subservient woman. No one could thus suffer the way she had, her elevated position had been sacrificed by usurpers; for the Shi'ite interpreter, her loss is amplified in that there is no allusion that Mohammed's widows mourned his loss. After his death their identities disintegrate with the physical body of the Prophet; their emotional suffering and financial destitution ignored. Within a patriarchal social environment familial males mourn the death of another male but familial females are not entitled to display their grief nor is it acknowledged (Korte 1994: 75-78; Minces 1982: 35-39; Nafizi 1997: 65-69; Helminski 2003: 13). In moments of sorrow, surely women seek emotional comfort from other women? Certainly a sisterhood is created in which women bond and share, becoming a closed social unit where males cannot venture and intrude. So how can this simply be disregarded in the development of social relations?

Fatima grieves alone; other than A'isha, there are no women of similar age, yet hostility and tension increases between them and is greatest after Mohammed's death. In a moment of sorrow, when sympathy and empathy ought to be greatest between them, A'isha and Fatima remain poles apart. Fatima cannot even grieve with her daughters, Zeinab and Umm Kulthuum, as they are too young. The female burdens herself with grief, suppresses it and is eventually consumed by it crying day and night; her pain and her inability to communicate her pain ultimately lead to madness, such that she bleeds from her eyes. Fatima claws at the earth, she cries and laments at her father's grave cursing her loss, the *Athena* that has lost her father-god cannot continue to defend his ideology if he is no longer present. She is after all the most knowledgeable person of the message (Al Quazwini & Saleh 2001: 115; Fadlullah 2000: 46). Her loss is even greater, for she is disappointed that Ali is denied the right to be the caliph through righteous claim, so she cannot continue to be the guardian of the religious tradition. Worse still, her authority isn't acknowledged because the father is absent and his announcement

to Ali, Fatima, Hassan and Husayn, of their infallibility, under his mantle fall silent (Ordoni 1987: 89-93; Rizvi 1985: 16-20). As if invisible, she does not speak of her position as the Prophet's daughter, of her disappointment about not being able to continue as the *Athena* of Mohammed, or of her neglect by the society that has embraced the ideology of the Prophet (Shariati 1980: 187-190; Fadlullah 2000: 154; Mutahhari 2001: 65-67).

Behaving as if she no longer has a purpose, Fatima mourns her father, becoming depressed and withdrawn. Rather than permit Fatima to die in frailty and depression, Shi'ite scholars defend Fatima's celestial origin, hence her ability to determine her hour of death and prepare for it. According to Ordoni, Ali complies with Fatima's request for a secret burial (Shariati 1980: 195). Having lost the *Athena* position, she is reduced to the subservient and silent role that she demanded of women. She asks to be buried with no grave marker, demonstrating that she has joined her father, to continue serving him as a *houri* (heavenly virgin) (Ordoni 1987: 228). As a *houri* she would lovingly serve her father-god as a servant and nurse, reviving her position of daughter and mother. Ali, Imam and righteous caliphate, cleanses and ritually purifies the bodies of the mother and father of Shi'ite Islam, Fatima and Mohammed, relinquishing them both to be united celestially, ninety-five days apart (at-Tabarsi 1986: 178).

Fatima is the perfect woman, emphasised by her poverty, frugality, social marginalisation<sup>6</sup> and alienation from other females. She is presented as the speaker for all women and her reality depicts a woman who accommodated her poverty. Although she certainly did not enjoy being poor, she worked hard possessed little but was told to endure, as Shariati points out:

One day like any other day, the Prophet enters Fatima's home.  
His eye falls upon a patterned curtain. He frowns, says nothing and leaves. Fatima senses it. She knows what her sin is.  
She also knows what repentance is (Shariati 1980: 141).

Yet her poverty should also be viewed allegorically, Fatima demonstrated to believers that financial security was not a requirement in fulfilling spiritual obligations; rather it was an advantage in that lack of material assets did not obstruct the veneration of the ideals and teachings of Mohammed as Corbin states that the spiritual dimension has been translated into a physical reality (Corbin 1998: 25; Mutahhari 2001: 12-18; Al Quazwini and Saleh 2001: 25-32). Instead, Shi'ite authors support their arguments on Fatima's subservience and acceptance of poverty in not amassing material assets; as such, women must not seek to enrich and empower themselves by using the symbols that define men in terms of power, prestige and status. The Prophet advised her to pray against such inclinations and to seek inner-strength, as daughter and confidante of her father - as the Prophet, wife and mother of the Imam, she was expected to be self-sacrificing in her role.

Aside from her poverty, authors are quick to point out her frailty and poor health. Although of dubious health, Fatima was determined to maintain a hold on the *Fadak*, an inheritance granted by Gabriel, displaying strength in promoting her self-interest, although it can be argued that she sought it to provide for her two male children, Hassan and Hoseyn, rather than for herself (at-Tabarsi 1986: 119). Such sacrifices remain somewhat problematic for the contemporary woman who struggles to assert herself in terms of identity and economic independence, rather than simply benefiting the men in her family. In relating the life of Fatima, it appears that she sacrifices her all, offering her wellbeing and acting in a supportive capacity for her men, Mohammed and Ali. This well reflects Irigaray and Murad's claims that regardless of the mental strength of the woman, she cannot occupy centre stage in constructing a religious tradition, simply because she does not have a female god with which to identify (Irigaray 1984a: 63; Murad 1999: <http://www.ie>). In the spiritual context one could state that the message or spirit of the creative feminine can only be passed to men who then appear to possess it, in terms of the patriarchal interpretation, the feminine though central within the tradition is but a silent life force (Corbin 1998: 45-56). She has no symbols to which she can relate and therefore cannot seek recognition on the same level as the male who already exerts control over the language and symbolic construction of the socio-political reality. The existing symbols allocated to females, those of subservience, compassion and self-sacrifice appear to be accommodated by a divine female, such as Fatima, and interpreted as creating a subordinate model for believing Shi'ite women to imitate in defining themselves. Such limitation and restriction in developing self-identity is problematic in that women are denied self-expression and true identity; instead, they are being compartmentalised according to patriarchal, androcentric language and symbols that women cannot understand (Allen 1998: 180-181; Eliade 1991: 82-84; Foucault 2000: 139-145; Keddie 2000: 409-412).

Fatima represents the strength and possesses the knowledge that the male characters could never engender, yet she is portrayed as the self-sacrificing character, even though she is the guardian of the Shi'ite tradition directing the witnesses to the right path of the Imams, she never benefits; she only suffers silently (Ordoni 1987: 328). Without her self-sacrifice and determination, ideology could not survive; where the male fails to be the heroic warrior, it is the female who must muster the psychological strength to pursue her own identity for the benefit of her men. Although Ordoni, Fadlullah, at-Tabarsi and Shariati, elaborate the battles undertaken by Mohammed and Ali, enacting the male symbols of power and bravery, they do not possess the psychological strength and eloquent oration that Fatima possesses. As the protector of the tradition's heroes, Fatima uses her ability to strengthen their positions by promoting their ideology and masculinity rather than creating a position that promotes her own gender. Instead, she foregoes her opportunity and allows the men to benefit from her actions and to



receive the credit, receding to the background as a supporter of their actions and allowing them to bask in the glory.

Although scholars maintain that Fatima espouses the notions that all Shi'ite women should embrace; based upon two reasons, I believe that Fatima should not be considered the sole icon for women's interests: firstly in terms of the popular religious tradition, she defends the position dictated by the patriarchal social reality and secondly, she defines the female as purely a mother-type to her father, husband and sons, relinquishing personal power and happiness, an environment that is anti-pleasure, anti-sexual and anti-feminine.

Venerated as the "All-Pure", loyal, obedient wife and devoted mother who silently sacrifices her being for the benefit of men and their ideology it is imperative that literature undermines the position of competing female characters. A'isha certainly never suffered in silence, regularly challenging Mohammed, particularly with regard to his practice of polygamy. "It seems to me that your Lord makes haste to satisfy your desires" (cited in Brooks 1995: 83). However, the challenges with which she confronted the Prophet were matched by Ali and Fatima's enmity toward A'isha, who wished for Mohammed to divorce her, aiming to sever the kinship tie with her father, Abu Bakr, the eventual successor. At-Tabarsi claims that Aisha wanted her father to lead the prayers while Mohammed was ill although still alive; as such her behaviour suggests of events to arise – the intention and the eventual claim to the position but not to the message, this could only belong to Fatima and Ali (at-Tabarsi 1986: 156-157).

As Imam, Ali's position promotes the development of Fatima's chastity and purity, yet the immorality and dishonesty of A'isha, in a context of male-constructed reality. A'isha's independent nature is not admired by the Shi'ite scholar as her character is viewed as chaotic and threatening to the patriarchal social order and normative submission of women. So although possessing strong character, Fatima used it to benefit her male relatives and the male-defined environment, and is rewarded with veneration as a nurse, mother and self-sacrificing woman.

## Guardian of the Flesh

Demonstrating Irigaray's claim that the female continually gives birth (1980a: 15), Fatima bore four children and is fatally injured resulting in the stillbirth of her fifth child, a son, at twenty years of age but as guardian of the flesh (Irigaray 1980a: 19; Fadlullah 2000: 18), she assured the male lineage of Imams.<sup>7</sup> Yet it is important to note that Fatima's death occurs when her house is under siege yet she does not die immediately in terms of the patriarchal interpretation of the concept of martyrdom.<sup>8</sup> For the male defined reality, men succumb immediately in a scene of passion and blood whereas women are sacrificed, lingering and suffering. This devalues the essence of the woman, why is she not attacked and blood drawn; why does her life essence not flow from her body? Fatima could

not create the symbolic discourse of the Shi'ite tradition nor could she be credited with the dissemination of the messages and teachings, she could only relate them but she was permitted to be the symbolic sacrificial object for the sake of growth and defender of Shi'ite society (Irigaray 1984b: 78-79). Certainly it can be argued that the essence of knowledge comes directly from Fatima, but popular tradition doesn't grant the female the opportunity to be this symbol of knowledge and commitment to God.

As mother and the nurse, she is martyred for the religious tradition, entombed within divine law, disappearing into shadow. Like Irigaray's notion of the mechanically urged woman (1985b: 120), Fatima never expected reciprocity; she assumed it was her duty to be instructed by her husband and father, subservient and self-sacrificing to their ambitions at all times remaining pure and retaining her virginity *al-adhra* despite motherhood (Richard 1995: 24; Qummi 2001: 123-125; Shahrastani 1984: 24-32), thus challenging the position of A'isha, whom Sunni authors claim as being the only virgin that Mohammed married (Al Quazwini & Saleh 2001: 127; Brooks 1995: 68). However, as a mortal, A'isha lost her virginity although she remained childless, whereas Fatima, whom Mohammed referred to as *al-batul* bore divine children and retained her virginity (at-Tabarsi 1986: 175). As Mohammed had no surviving sons, Shi'ite ideology introduced the notion that Mohammed was the father of Hassan and Hoseyn, creating a celestial link directly between Mohammed and the Imams, just as Fatima and Mohammed were. Osameh ibn Zeid asked Mohammed, "What is that which you are holding, Prophet of God?" The Prophet, while his face filled with delight and pleasure, pulled apart his cloak revealing Hasan and Hoseyn, said, 'these are my two sons and the sons of my daughter'" [Fatima] (Shariati 1980: 153).

Fatima served both roles to her father - mother and daughter - but she is also the 'mother' of all the celestially divine Imams who are representations of God, she is the knowledge (Corbin 1998: 165-166). As Irigaray claims, all women are mothers to men and to the social reality (Irigaray 1985b: 121). It was revealed to Fatima that the twelfth Imam would be named Mohammed and so she was named Mother of the Father (*omm abiha*) and the Radiant One (*Zahra*) (Fadlullah 2000: 9; at-Tabarsi 1986: 176) creating a closed cycle with Fatima as paramount and further developing her position as *Athena*. For popular patriarchal tradition that interprets on a level dismissive of the implied feminine, there can be only one mother in the tradition.

## Blood and Menstruation in Patriarchal Interpretation

According to patriarchal tradition, menstruating women are inflected with an evil spirit; though this is not to say that the woman is primarily an evil creature, simply that an essential evil exists that is part of her nature; because of this blood, the person who nears a woman is polluted through that association

(Noddings 1989: 37; Shaaban 1995: 68; Nafizi 1997: 60-63). For the male-dominated society, menstruation is a manifestation of evil in the universe, and therefore enormous power is inherent in the blood. Feminist scholar of religion, Carol Christ, and Irigaray, elaborate that religion centres on the worship of a male God, and due to notions of female pollution, women cannot participate fully in the belief structure and religious practices. Instead, they are dependent on and subservient to androcentric religious interpretation and male authority that legitimises the socio-political authority of fathers, husbands and sons (Christ, cited in Noddings 1989: 65; Irigaray 1984b: 80).

As Fatima did not experience menstruation, she is not restricted from prayer as are other women and is therefore never polluted and exposed to evil (Richard 1995: 25; Qummi 2001: 96-98). However, several hadith illustrate that A'isha menstruated: "the Prophet would lie back in my lap while I was having my period, and then he would recite the *Qur'an*" (*Al-Jami' al-sahih* 1/179 see Awde 2000: 93). A'isha's menstruation aided in establishing her mortality, implying that menstruation is the catalyst to aging and death.

As a human mother, Fatima is the human *houri* who maintains her virginity, does not menstruate, has no afterbirth and remains eternally youthful (Ordoni 1987: 140). Mohammed is believed to have said in the *Musnad* of the eighth Imam that Fatima did not suffer as other women do; she did not menstruate nor did she remain bedridden after childbirth (at-Tabarsi 1986: 174-175; Ordoni 1987: 121-123). Al-Hakim claims that the Prophet said that menstruation is resented if it occurs in the Prophet's daughters (Ordoni 1987: 122). This blood that excludes women from prayer and entry to mosques, particularly those in Mecca, the birthplace of Islam yet Fatima could and did pray continuously, avoiding pollution and remaining eternally pure. As such, God created Fatima to characterise moral excellence along with a high level of divinity placing her in a position paramount to the Imams yet never permitting her to elaborate socio-political ideology (Ordoni 1987: 10; 44).

Yet authors such as Shari'ati insist that Fatima is the model that every woman should emulate, which seems impossible as no woman can retain youth, fertility and not menstruate (Shariati 1980: 26-30; Mutahhari 2001: 10-15; Najmabadi 1998: 63-68). To imitate this archetype lacks practicality in the normative sense, a mother who does not menstruate, retains her virginity and dwells as a spiritual apogee? Silently observing her socio-religious environment, as the woman, Fatima never seeks or desires anything, yet avails herself to all her male relatives (Richard 1995: 25-26; at-Tabarsi 1986: 19-23).

## The Lack of Feminine Social Interaction

According to the Shi'ite tradition, Fatima does not establish relationships with other females; she loses her mother and sisters, and dedicates herself to serving

her father and husband. Drawing on Irigaray's theory about the mother-daughter relationship, it is clear that Fatima, the *Athena*, is denied the opportunity to establish a mother-daughter relationship either with her mother, Khadija, or with her daughters, Umm Kulthuum and Zeinab. Yet a woman must adhere to motherhood as her natural role, producing sons to lead the community, whereas mothers and their daughters must submit to male issues, concerns and symbols (Birge 1999: 49-52). The implication is that men struggle to embrace their symbols and defend their social reality that women form a part of. As such when Fatima dies because of injuries sustained, her third son, possibly a divine Imam, perishes too but she has left a legacy of divinity that posits women to contribute to their communities through children, especially sons. As Irigaray implies, the woman sacrifices herself in completing her duty of motherhood (1985b: 120); Fatima reproduces the progeny that allows for the continuance of the divine descendants and raises the leaders of the "Community".

Although, amongst Shi'ite scholars, Mohammed is promoted as an ordinary man relaying a divine message, yet his daughter possesses the qualities of a celestial being and as a virgin goddess. The patriarchal environment will not tolerate an ideology that places an ordinary woman as the "mother" - creatrix of the religious tradition, as she has reproduced the men who will construct the symbolic reality and relay the message. Imams, men that possess a celestial link, cannot be born from the dark womb of a mortal, ordinary woman, and hence the mother must be re-created as part of the divine and different from the mortal female.

By elevating Fatima to a celestial level, no woman can truly imitate her and therefore excluded from participating, contributing and interacting with the religious tradition remaining a silent spectator, silence through mere adherence and no interpretation. Instead, ordinary women are threatened with the perfect *imago* of Fatima and manipulated into reenacting her lifestyle, yet concurrently are reminded that they can never replicate her image. God prepared Fatima for her hardship and oppression such that she was prepared to exist under these circumstances. Consequently, mortal women must accommodate their social predicaments and envision Fatima's position, accepted as God's determination (Ordoni 1987: 108; Mutahhari 2001: 98-102; Iwai 1985: 54-56; Shariati 1980: 120). Touted as the perfect *imago* of wife, mother and daughter, all relationship constructions mimic Fatima in relation to her male relatives, never to her female relatives. Regardless of these virtuous attributes bestowed upon the divine feminine Fatima, no women, including Fatima herself, are entitled to be messengers (Prophets) or direct representation of God (Imams), only enactors of the message.

As Irigaray would argue, women do not possess a God and are thus forced to comply with male perceptions of an ideal type that must meet male needs and ambitions but offer the woman little satisfaction (Irigaray 1984a: 64). Fatima demonstrates to women that there is no divinity for women, no sisterhood of

communication and no matrilineal lineage to create a mirror for women. Instead, Shi'ite women are presented with an image that, as Irigaray stated, reduces Fatima to an exterior symbol, devoid of female interaction and signifying an inability to define herself without the need to attach her existence to a male relative. Prevented from determining her own social environment she concedes in accepting and accommodating her relegation to an object status.

## Zeinab

Ali is said to have asked Fatima, "Who is the best amongst women?" to which she replied that "...those that do not see men nor are men seen by them" (cited in Bilgrami 1986: 5). This claim has been used to support and validate the isolation and submission expected of Shi'ite women, as well as when speaking and writing of Fatima's daughter, Zeinab. Like the relationship between Fatima and Khadija, Zeinab too, loses her mother, Fatima, at a young age but she is expected to support her brother, Hoseyn, as her mother supported her father, Mohammed. The mother-daughter relationship is never developed, apart from in relation to Fatima's death; Zeinab is not part of the celestial family in which her mother is touted as the *imago*. Instead, she and her sister, Umm Kulthuum, are the only persons in her family, of Ali and Fatima, not to be considered a representative of God. A void exists between mother and daughter in that their celestial orientations differ, and hence their sense of emotional attachment and familiarity cannot develop. Zeinab may possess knowledge (*Aqilat Bani Hashim*) but her mortal position prevents her from linking to her mother in order to forge a female lineage.

Zeinab possesses only one sister yet their relationship is never highlighted or developed in Shi'ite literature. As a child Zeinab is constantly reminded by both parents, of her responsibility to her brother, Hoseyn, that she is the guardian of his person and ideology. Like her mother who supported her father, Mohammed, in times of his humiliation and weakness, so Zeinab supported Hoseyn in his attempt to demonstrate his religious ideology, subjecting herself to humiliation.

As a pious woman, Zeinab is silent in her existence as wife and mother, but vocal as the sister of Hoseyn, the third Imam. Her identity is that of a guardian, her life dedicated to the Prophet's family more so after her brother, Hoseyn, is murdered and his surviving heir is the sickly Imam Sajjad. This well illustrates Irigaray's claim that it is the responsibility of the female in patriarchy, to ensure that the male's goals are realised, and that she should sacrifice herself in order that his ambitions be realised (Irigaray 1984b: 78). Zeinab asks:

If I leave him [Hoseyn] now, how shall I be able to face my mother, who at the time of her death had willed, "Zeinab, after me you are both mother and sister for Husayn [a.s.]"? It

is obligatory for me to stay with you [Abdullah - husband], but if I do not go with him at this time, I shall not be able to bear the separation (cited in Bilgrami 1986: 15).

Here it is apparent that women cannot be martyred in the manner as men – men die for the message and the ideals, whereas women are sacrificed throughout their lives in defending the message as well as the messenger. Although her mother, Fatima, suffers as the guardian of her grandfather's, Mohammed's, ambitions, Fatima, as an *Athena*, instructs Zeinab to realise her responsibilities as dedication to the service of the Imams. However, Zeinab cannot be an *Athena*; she is not part of the divine legacy in orientation as her mother, but merely a mortal woman related through blood. Her brother, Hoseyn, hinders an emotional bond from developing between mother and daughter preventing Zeinab from becoming a guardian of her mother's latent ideals and personal aspirations. As such Zeinab becomes the extension of Fatima's self-sacrificing nature and Irigaray states that it is impossible for a woman, say Zeinab, to love anyone other than the male interest she is expected to protect and serve (Whitford 1991: 79-81). Unable to approach her mother for love, adoration and an identity, as her mother is an ally of patriarchy, Zeinab too defends and venerates the male-constructed symbols be defended and venerated. Perhaps her self-flagellation after Karbala can be interpreted as the manner in which she demonstrates her relation to Hoseyn. Unlike Ali, Fatima, Hassan and Hoseyn, Zeinab is not linked in a similar anthropo-cosmic sense but merely in terms of mortal relations of blood.

Zeinab's position in her divine family is diametrically revealed in the event at Karbala, Iraq, where Hoseyn is invited to Baghdad, is ambushed by Yazid and murdered.<sup>9</sup> Zeinab is presented as the middle-aged, married mother, a position that commands respect and a degree of autonomy and independence in Islamic society (Bilgrami 1986: 38). It is considered that when a woman is past her youth, has fulfilled her role as a mother, then she is entitled to pursue interests outside the family. Yet the relationship between Zeinab and Hoseyn highlights the issue that the female must always be subservient to the ideologies and ambitions of men, regardless of the fact that she is of the age where she possesses autonomy and independence. As such, older Shi'ite women should concern themselves with aiding their brothers' families rather than seek to establish female benevolent relationships or economic independence. Her age also places her opposite her mother, Fatima, in terms of divinity, female youth and her position as a human *hourî*. Zeinab's mortality, apart from her family's divine position, signifies that in a patriarchal society, a girl possesses temporary status in her father's home and when she marries she becomes the responsibility of her husband's home. As such there is no need for her to possess an anthropo-cosmic connection but of vital importance is that she now represent an autochthonic position in demonstrating the female self-sacrifice to defend male ideals and

symbols (Goodwin 1994: 44). Mohammed instructed Ali that Zeinab would in adulthood protect Hoseyn from his enemies, and for that reason she maintained a deep emotional attachment to him and his ideology, becoming the guardian to his ideals.

After Hoseyn is martyred, Zeinab is captured and humiliated, but is not killed as a female can never achieve martyrdom similarly to men. Men are martyred through blood, the epitome of life, but not women; women instead must sacrifice of themselves. Not possessing divinity, these surviving women could not experience their own subjectivity and so could not embrace the symbols of martyrdom and death. Instead, Zeinab, and the other surviving women and children, were spared in order to guard the religious tradition and to ensure its survival and to vocalise the injustice. So although Zeinab could not embrace the symbols and the language of martyrdom, she could physically and publicly suffer the humiliation – self-sacrifice – sparing her brother such a fate. Utilising Irigaray's claims of the guardian feminine (Irigaray 1984b: 78), the Shi'ite religious tradition dictates that Zeinab must survive as a guardian of Hoseyn's goals. Although captured along with other women, there is no construction of a benevolent sisterhood, or a communication of empathy and mutual suffering. Instead, Zeinab is steadfast in mourning the loss of her brother, wanting to sacrifice herself and her children for his ideals.

Zeinab brought to him [Hoseyn] her two sons and said to him, "O my brother, if women were permitted to fight I would have courted death to save you. But it is not allowed. Accept therefore the sacrifice of my two sons" (Bilgrami 1986: 18).

It is interesting to note that she would sacrifice her sons, and yet one does not hear of the daughters being sacrificed – why can such a position not be postulated to the Imam? Another interesting point is that women are not permitted to enter battle, therefore implying, as suggested by Irigaray, that women are not permitted to embrace the symbols or use the language of the religious tradition (Irigaray 1984a: 64). Attacking and slandering Zeinab was an attack on the very institution of Shi'ite tradition that she represented; because she is relegated the bottom of the socio-political environment, it is she who suffers the degradation and humiliation while the male, who occupies the heavenly position, remains superior and ambitious (Irigaray 1985b: 108). In her suffering and humiliation she remained undefended as a fifty-year old woman (Bilgrami 1986: 20-24; Ayati 2001: 8-12).<sup>10</sup>

Fatima's statement, that a good woman does not see men, is problematic as she accompanied her father, and challenged Mohammed's followers when she wanted to claim the *Fadak*. As an *Athena*, according to Irigaray, she enforced the

will of her father-god while controlling the movements of women, isolating and restricting them to the submissive positions within their homes (Irigaray 1980a: 12-13). As a woman who personified psychological strength and divine origin, according to the Shi'ite scholars, Shariati, Fadlullah, Ordoni and Bilgrami, she reduces women to objects, removing them from the public sphere and silencing them in darkness and isolation. The divine, perfect "mother" female is prescribing a muted role for women, asking them to be the guardians of the male-dominated environment. In other words, Fatima wishes women to demonstrate their strength of character in order to defend the ideals and ambitions of their men, rather than for their personal benefit. If necessary, the woman is entitled to sacrifice her life, as Fatima and Khadija had, while supporting their husbands' goals, most particularly when his social reality is threatened. It seems that Zeinab espouses this position prescribed by the male audience, which is uncomfortable with any form of female freedom, regardless of age; but that this same female strength can be channeled to defend male symbols. Patriarchal society desires a domestic female that is mute and submissive, but when the male is unable to defend his symbols and language, then she must defend what is perceived threatening to the righteous in the male-ordered reality. Under exceptional circumstances, however, women are entitled to fight against chaos and the threat to patriarchal order.

Consider that the only redeeming quality that Zeinab's husband, Abdullah, could render of Zeinab was that she was "a good housewife" (Bilgrami 1986: 8-10; Ayati 2001: 23-30; Fadlullah 2000: 124-125), places women firmly in the domestic domain under the supervision of the male, silent and alienated from the socio-political domain regardless that Zeinab had special knowledge, *Aqilat Bani Hashim*. Cloistered in a house she never developed benevolent female relationships nor communication with other women particularly her sister, Umm Kulthuum, but is reminded of her duty to her brother, Hoseyn, rather than realising her own identity and happiness (Bilgrami 1986: 15). Is the implication that women are only happy when they are serving male ideals? Fatima favours her son, Hoseyn, over her daughter, Zeinab, who is younger than he, regarding the nurturing and nursing as Zeinab's responsibility to her brother, for he has ideals and ambitions and it is vital that she be a willing participant in sacrificing her life and happiness for his aspirations. Yet, he, Hoseyn, is not asked by their mother to care for Zeinab's welfare. The Imams are the masters of the Shi'ite social environment, and as Zeinab can only be defined in terms of her brothers, it is therefore necessary that she defend the patriarchal religious tradition (Bilgrami 1986: 11).

Asking Zeinab to sacrifice her youth and life to the servitude and emotional comfort of Hoseyn is the role yet rather ambiguous position of the *Athena* (Bilgrami 1986: 15; Ayati 2001: 15-18; Keddie 2000: 407-409); although she has greater freedom of movement than the rest of the female populace, she aims to subordinate women to male authority. Instead, Zeinab, according to Ayati,



educated Shi'ite women in the religious tradition, an occupation that paralleled her mother's role in educating and informing people of the Prophet's message (Ayati 2001: 26; Al-Quazwini and Saleh 2001: 32-33). She volunteers herself for men's ambitions in the male-constructed environment, in the form of Hoseyn, and when he refused, offers her sons instead, and herself:

When Ibn Ziyad ordered that Husayn should be killed, Lady Zeinab said: "O son of Ziyad! If you want to kill him kill me along with him". The Imam, however, said: "O son of Ziyad! Don't you know that being killed is our legacy and martyrdom is an honor for us (Ayati 2001: 146).

Yet why is she so eager to sacrifice that which is essentially hers, and not expect any form of gratification or merit due to her stance? Zeinab is sacrificing herself because she is the guardian of the religious tradition; by wanting to die alongside Hoseyn, she would be sharing his symbols and language. However, he does not seek her bodily sacrifice for she is not part of the male-controlled tradition; instead he states that only the Imams revere the symbols of martyrdom and the language of death. Irigaray states that women are homeless in the symbolic order (Whitford 1991: 69) and a woman who exists outside a form of socio-religious control must be humiliated and degraded, as happens to Zeinab, once Hoseyn is killed. Their capture and the journey between Kufa and Medina demonstrates a period where Zeinab leads the *Ahlul-Bayt* community, who are in this period in an Imam-less, liminal space, but she cannot offer spiritual leadership; although it is her responsibility within this period to observe guardianship of the tradition (Ayati 2001: 112). After Hoseyn's death, according to Shi'ite scholars, Zeinab became *baakiyah* (one who always weeps), for his death means that Zeinab loses familial association in terms of her anthropo-cosmic family. Her depression is brought on by the knowledge that she guards a tradition situated in a leaderless vacuum, and she weeps because the symbols and the language of the Shi'ite community are in danger of being lost.

Zeinab's life is portrayed in relation to that of Hoseyn and Fatima. Because Fatima had instructed Zeinab to be the mother and nurse of Hoseyn, she accompanies him to Karbala, leaving her husband, Abdullah, in order to protect the male tradition, a female position already explained by Irigaray. Fatima dictates the social subservience and self-sacrifice of the mortal Shi'ite woman, Zeinab (Irigaray 1980a: 12-13). Ironically, her self-sacrifice in leaving her husband, and her subservience to her brother's ambitions and ideals, do not accord her a position with her celestial mother, rather she is relegated a mortal position; invisible in determining and directing religious tradition, that is her grandfather, father and brothers, although she forms an intrinsic part in maintaining and sustaining their ideals and ambitions. Fatima's role as an *Athena* allows no interest or time

to establish a sisterhood of communication, because that time should be utilised in defending and supporting the ambitions of the male ordered reality.

## Conclusion

Although Irigaray claimed that there are no mother daughter relationships within religious tradition, it is important to note that the majority of female characters that appear in Shi'ite interpretation are defined in terms of (step)mothers and (step)daughters. For the characters of Fatima, A'isha and Zeinab, it is essential to view that the presence of the female is always to defend the symbols and ideology of the religious tradition and that the relationship of mother daughter is simply a line of communication that allows for the responsibility of female subjection to be continued. Fatima is the central character, and the females that appear in her family help to support and elevate her divine position for she alone embodies perfection, piety and sacrifice. The mother-daughter type relationship exists to the extent that it provides a foundation of support and sacrifice for the male defined tradition but it is the emotional and psychological attachment that is prevented from existing and developing. I have shown that in order to have a divine female within an androcentric tradition, her immortality must hinge on the mortality and immorality of other female characters, in Shi'ite interpretation, it is A'isha. Her childless position is twofold, firstly it prevented a competing lineage from the Prophet and secondly, preventing her from laying the foundation for a matrilineal lineage and a competing divine order. The reproductive capacity of the female is important in that although she is isolated from the social environment in order to fulfill her role of motherhood; she must reproduce sons to assert a continuance in the male lineage. The female is merely the receptacle to provide for future generations, if need be to sacrifice her life in the process, and to defend male-prescribed symbols. As mothers, daughters and sisters, women are instruments and supportive structures to male ideology and ego; it is the role of the mother as an *Athena* to instruct her female offspring to nurse and self-sacrifice. Women are caregivers to male ego and caretakers of male identity and ideology, but the development of the female sense of self and personal female to female emotional attachment is ignored.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> She is regarded as the first spiritual head of the Shi'ite sufi tradition (Corbin 1998: 15).
- <sup>2</sup> Athena, born from the forehead of Zeus, is the defender of his symbols and position. She differs from all other women as she is born from a male – the supreme male. She relegates all women to the position of subservient, silent mothers and nurses while

she alone remains elevated above this secondary passive position and can be construed as misogynist.

- <sup>3</sup> As the divine feminine she possesses infinite knowledge, yet she passes her knowledge to men, and it is men who essentially become the guardian of this knowledge.
- <sup>4</sup> Kharijism is considered the earliest religious sect in Islam, and adherents, Kharijites, consider only Abu Bakr and Umar, the first and second caliphs, to be the only legitimate appointees (<http://www.princeton.edu/kharijis.htm>). The Shi'ites reject Abu Bakr and Umar as legitimate successors to the Prophet, Mohammed.
- <sup>5</sup> Mohammed married twelve women with whom he consecrated the marriages; he also proposed to several other women (at-Tabarsi 1986: 166-168).
- <sup>6</sup> Her mother, Khadija, did not receive handmaidens or assistance from her Quraishan group when she gave birth to Fatima. Instead mythology defends her position and claims that spiritually superior women were instead in attendance, Mariam Bint Imran, Ayisha bint Muzahim, Eve and Kulthum (Ordoni 1987: 53).
- <sup>7</sup> According to authors Ordoni and Fadlullah, Fatima was injured when she she struck by Umar and consequently suffered a broken rib (Ordoni1987: 285; Fadlullah 2000: 254).
- <sup>8</sup> I have interpreted the attack on Fatima's house figuratively, to be an attack on her family name and authority. It was a sign of disrespect to the Prophet's household and particularly to his direct descendant, his daughter, Fatima.
- <sup>9</sup> For a detailed account of the events at Karbala, see Ayati, "A probe into the history of Ashura" (2001).
- <sup>10</sup> After her capture, she was always presented unveiled to the public, making it difficult for her to guard her modesty and hide her beauty (Bilgrami 1986: 2).

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