(Re-)defining Some Genre-Specific Words: Evidence from some English Texts about Ashura

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Abstract

The Battle of Karbala (Iraq) which took place on Ashura (10 Muharram 61 AH/ 10 October 680 AD) has since exerted some influences on Muslim communities. On such a day, Imam al-Husayn, the 3rd Infallible Imam and the youngest grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, was martyred, together with about 100 of his companions. As the religio-historical significance of the Ashura tragedy of Karbala has made it a symbol of true Islam, it has received the attention and devotion of Muslims, especially, the Shiites. Over time, concepts associated with the Ashura tragedy have become semantically polysemous and religiously (and sometimes regionally) culture-bound, hence somewhat untranslatable from such Islamicate languages as Arabic, Persian, and Urdu into English.

   A glance at some English publications about Islamic history (and early Shiite history in specific) reveals that the Ashura tragedy has had some linguistic influence on the English language. This influence is observable through a range of Ashura-oriented concepts and Oriental loan-words in English, e.g., *Ashura*, *Muharram*, *taziya*, and *azadari* (with the last one chiefly used in Indian English context).

   Certain collegiate English dictionaries seem to be in need of improvement about some Ashura-oriented concepts and senses. For example, words such as "Ashura" and "taziya" have several uses and meanings in Shiite English texts for which the definitions provided in *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (6th ed., 2007) are utterly insufficient. To fill this semantic-cum-lexicographical gap, some solutions can be envisaged, together with some practical ways, to upgrade major English dictionaries regarding typical Ashura discourse in English.

Keywords: Ashura, Karbala, Ashura literature, Ashura-oriented concepts

   The Battle of Ashura took place in the region of Karbala, Iraq on 10 Muharram 61 AH/ 10 October 680 AD. This battle was imposed on the 3rd Infallible Imam al-Husayn, the Prophet Muhammad's youngest grandson, at a place on the river banks of the Euphrates. Albeit quite close to the river Euphrates, the camp of Imam al-Husayn was banned from having access to water for three successive days. The approximately 30,000 soldiers, who made up the horde of the Umayyad ruler Yazid b. Mu`awiyyah, intended to attack Imam al-Husayn's encampment in the late afternoon of 9th Muharram. However, Imam al-Husayn dispatched his step-brother al-`Abbas b. `Ali to take the following night as respite for their last opportunity to perform prayers and offer supplications to God the Almighty. On the ensuing day, the two camps were standing in front of each other, with the male companions of Imam al-Husayn less than 150 in number.

On the ensuing day, viz., Ashura, Imam al-Husayn never let any of his male combatant shoot the first arrow toward the foes, although the latter were resolute to end the battle in the most horrible way. In defense of the true Prophetic Islam, Imam al-Husayn and his men defended themselves; all of them were martyred thirsty. Imam al-Husayn and a number of other martyrs were decapitated, and the beheaded body of Imam al-Husayn was trampled. The river Euphrates never succeeded to quench the thirst of the Ashura martyrs; however, Imam al-Husayn and his men have since watered the tree of Islam by their blood. Ashura symbolizes the perennial opposition of humanity against non-humanity. [1]

The Battle of Ashura has exerted a profound influence on the development of Islam. Shiite Infallible Imams have since regarded it as an act of restoring the true Islam. Hence, Muslims, and particularly Shiites, have been recommended not to forget this unique tragic event. [2] In consequence, Ashura has been commemorated ardently by Shiite Muslims as well as non-Muslims. [3]

Veneration for Imam al-Husayn has made Ashura-oriented concepts and terms exert their influence. This influence has not been limited to major Islamicate languages, e.g., Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. Rather, it is discernible in certain publications of the European explorers who witnessed such observances in Muslim communities as well. [4] The English language is one of those languages that have received the influence of Ashura. Apart from the literary influences of Ashura on the English language, [5] there are some Ashura-oriented terminologies in English texts. Some Ashura-oriented concepts and terms have received various and sometimes inappropriate treatments in prominent English dictionaries. Examples of such terminologies are *Ashura, Muharram, taziya*, and *azadari*, with the last one occurring chiefly in Indian English contexts.

Some Ashura-oriented words have received additional senses and are used with more than one part of speech. Examples of these words are *tazziya* or *tazia*; *marthiya, marsiya*; and the word *Ashura*. Texts concerned with Muharram and Ashura public observances, with a focus on Indian contexts and produced in Indian English are replete with such words and uses. Although *tazia* is already recorded in *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 6th ed. (2007), its variant forms *ta'zia* [6] and *tazziya* is missing therein. [7] The word *marthiya* or *marsiya* stand for elegy, composed especially for commemoration of Imam al-Husayn or other Ashura martyrs. The word Ashura is sometimes used not as a noun, but as an adjective, as in Ashura martyrs.

There is at least one instance of a place name which has received another sense. Granted that the place name Karbala refers to a famous shrine city in Iraq where Imam al-Husayn's sacred sanctuary is located, the same place name has got another sense. This additional meaning concerns a specific place in some Indian cities whereat the Ashura commemorative processions end.[8] It seems that this use of the name Karbala deserves special attention and recording in major English dictionaries.

There is also an honorific title that is used in Islamic contexts. The originally-Arabic title *hazrat* is a case in point. *Hazrat* appears before personal names of highly-religious and personalities in the Islamic culture, e.g., Hazrat `Ali, Hazrat Fatima   (al-)Zahra. [9] Negative personalities never receive any title. [10]

A glance at some Ashura-oriented English texts reveals that there are many such words, often with new uses, that have not been recorded in *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. [11] A simple solution to fill this research gap seems to be to invite volunteer readers who have interests in Ashura texts. These readers can read their relevant texts and check the above dictionary. This way may prove a solution, affordable and feasible. Such readers can report to the relevant authorities at Oxford dictionaries' editorial board if a definition might be provided or the available entries must be corrected.[12]

Notes:

1. An account of the Battle of Ashura can be found in Jafri, *The Origins and Early Development of Shia Islam* (London: Longman; Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1979; repr. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000), Ch. 7.

2. The Shiite Infallible Imams following Imam al-Husayn never lost any opportunity to remind the Shiites of the significance of the role of Imam al-Husayn. For example, the 6th Infallible Imam Ja`far al-Sadiq instructed one of his disciples to invoke God's blessings for Imam al-Husayn and the Divine curse for those who slew him after each instance of drinking water. For a recent study in this regard, see Fakhr-Rohani, "Devotion and Thirst: The Role of 'Water' in the Permanence of the Battle of Ashura in Muslims' Historical Memory", paper presented, and accepted for electronic publication, at the conference The Challenge of Water in the Province of Qom, held at the University of Qom on 19 Khordad 1389 Sh/ 9 June 2010, to be accessible at www.qomwater.ir.

3. Accounts for commemoration of the Battle of Ashura amongst the Hindus of Andhra Pradesh can be found in Naqvi and Kishan Rao, eds., *The Muharram Ceremonies among the Non-Muslims of Andhra Pradesh* (Hyderabad, A.P.: Bab-ul-Ilm Society, 2004), and Cole, "Popular Shi'ism", (pp. 330-332), in Eaton, ed., *India's Islamic Traditions, 711-1750* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

4. See, for instance, de Tassy's 1831 book, rendered into English by M. Waseem (1995).

5. Fakhr-Rohani (2007) anthologizes a first collection of Ashura poems in English.

6. The spelling *ta'zia* appears in de Tassy, 1995 [1831], pp. 53, 54, and 55.

7. The spelling *tazziya* appears in Fruzzetti, "Muslim Rituals", pp. 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110; and in Saiyid, "Ideal and Reality in the Observance of Moharram", pp. 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 129, 130, 131, 133, 136, 138, and 139.

8. A citation from Fruzzetti, "Muslim Rituals," for this use of *Karbala* is as follows: "The Muslims then proceed to 'Karbala' to bury the flowers which were used to decorate the *tazziyas*, the *tazziyas* themselves being kept for the next year's celebration." (pp. 108-109).

9. Although Hazrat, as a title, is missing from *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 6th ed., it is used in at least two Oxford books: Lewis (1991, s.v., Shia[h], sheeah), and Ahmed (2004, p. 155).

10. For basic insights on some pragmatic-cum-religious aspects of the uses of certain religious honorific terms, see Fakhr-Rohani (2005, 2007).

11. Several other Ashura-oriented words and concepts are missing from *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, ed. Esposito (2003).

12. This is what I contributed on the meanings of "Ashura" to the forthcoming *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed.

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