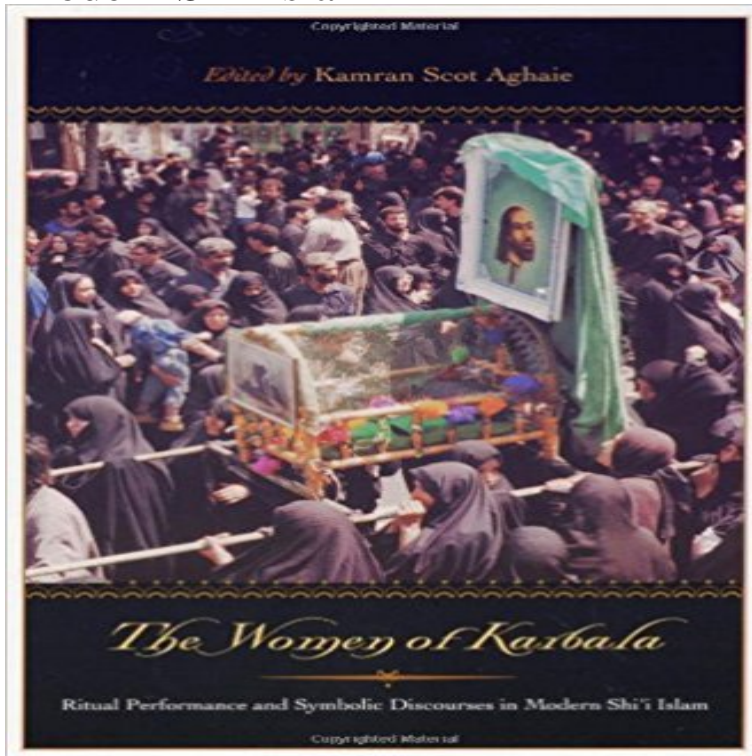


The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shii Islam



Commemorating the Battle of Karbala, in which the Prophet Mohammads grandson Hosayn and seventy-two of his family members and supporters were martyred in 680 CE, is the central religious observance of Shii Islam. Though much has been written about the rituals that reenact and venerate Karbala, until now no one has studied womens participation in these observances. This collection of original essays by a multidisciplinary team of scholars analyzes the diverse roles that women have played in the Karbala rituals, as well as the varied ways in which gender-coded symbols have been used within religious and political discourses. The contributors to this volume consider women as participants in and observers of the Karbala rituals in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, India, Pakistan, and the United States. They find that womens experiences in the Shii rituals vary considerably from one community to another, based on regional customs, personal preferences, religious interpretations, popular culture, and socioeconomic background. The authors also examine the gender symbolism within the rituals, showing how it reinforces distinctions between the genders while it also highlights the centrality of women to the symbolic repertory of Shiism. Overall, the authors conclude that while Shii rituals and symbols have in some ways been used to restrict womens social roles, in other ways they have served to provide women with a sense of independence and empowerment.

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