

A *TA'ZIYA* FROM TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY
MALAYSIA

FAISAL TEHRANI'S PASSION PLAY *KARBALA*

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The script of the contemporary Malaysian passion play *Karbala* by maverick writer Faisal Tehrani (born on 7 August 1974 in Kuala Lumpur) piqued my interest while in a bookshop in Kuala Lumpur in March 2009.¹ The name of the author combined with the book's loaded title carried the promise of an attractive read. A prolific writer, Faisal Tehrani established a reputation early in his career as a gifted but controversial man of letters. As anonymous Wikipedia pundits rather awkwardly phrase it: 'His kind critics predict this talented writer, is a "Malaysian National Laureate" in the making. Others say his writings are Islamic extremism, anti-West and are ultra-nationalist. He denies all.'² For Western readers who are unfamiliar with Malaysia's literary scene, his 'unkind' critics would seem to be voicing quite disturbing concerns here. However, even if the characterisations of Faisal Tehrani's work were true, then his writing would still not be necessarily problematic from a Malaysian perspective. Contemporary Malaysian literature is generally known to propagate patriotic, ideological and religious ideas, which simply means that the usual run-of-the-mill book will emphasise the superiority of Malay Islamic culture and religion in glaring contradistinction to the 'wicked' Western world.³

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Faisal Tehrani describes himself on his own personal website as a 'conservative pragmatist writer from Malaysia', and takes issue with the label of Islamic extremism that has been attached to him, citing himself from a 2008 interview: 'People who do not read my stuff will jump to that conclusion. Just because I write about Islam, people think I am an extremist. I feel I write more about human rights and oppression than Islam. Human rights is part of religion. (...) Extremism is an act by certain groups. It is not related to Islam at all.'⁴

Faisal Tehrani writes faster than many people read, and I cannot claim to have perused enough of his *oeuvre* to offer a general appraisal, but I was already familiar with his novel *1515*, which won a literary prize in 2002 (*Hadiah Sastra Kumpulan Utusan 2002*, in the category 'young adult literature'), and was impressed by the author's baroque phraseology, which naturally appealed to my professional interest as a philologist.⁵ The narrative of *1515* is partly deliberately worded in 'classical' language with a rather profuse usage of uncommon proverbs, dialect words and archaisms, which the author in most cases helpfully explains in footnotes, obliging the readers in the target group of teenagers.

This historical novel furnishes in my opinion an interesting case of contemporary literary theories in action. It wittily draws on the post-colonial 'empire writes back' theme, and is greatly indebted to *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* (original title: *História do Cerco de Lisboa*, first published in 1989) by the Nobel-laureate Portuguese author José Saramago (1922–2010).⁶ It should come as no surprise that Faisal Tehrani is well-acquainted with literary studies, having earned his PhD degree in Comparative Literature at the National University of Malaysia (UKM) in 2009. The plot of *1515* could be described as a phantasmagorical alternative for 'The History of the Siege of Malacca' which, according to conventional history, fell into the hands of the Portuguese in 1511. However, in *1515* a sixteenth-century heroine called Nyemah Mulya inspires the present-day Malaysian historian Adi Fimiyun to imagine anew this most dramatic period in Malay history, but now with Malays cast in the role of winners, defeating the Portuguese infidel intruders. History is written by the winners, and in the twenty-firstst century, at long last, the empire strikes back, albeit in fiction.

Holding the book *Karbala* in my hands, I did not quite know what to expect. Surely not another rewriting of history, this time by the Shi'is? The subtitle describes it as 'A *ta'ziya* drama'. *Ta'ziya* (also spelled *ta'zieh*, *ta'zie*, *tazieh*, *tazia* and other variants) is a form of religious theatre, usually defined as a passion play, commemorating the murder of Ḥusayn, grandson of the

Prophet Muḥammad and second son of ʿAlī and Fāṭima, who was slain on the plain of Karbalāʾ on the 10th of the Muslim month of Muḥarram in the 61st year of the Muslim calendar (680 CE). The fundamentally opposing perceptions of this tragedy still deeply separate the Sunnī and Shiʿa branches of Islam to this day. As noted by David Cook:⁷

[v]irtually all Muslims felt (and feel) horror at the murder of al-Ḥusayn. However, among Shiʿites, especially the dominant Twelver Shiʿites this horror is transformed into a type of guilt that has lasting ramifications for believers. The blood of al-Ḥusayn is such that the guilt for its shedding cannot be entirely expiated. The 10th of Muḥarram, the anniversary of his martyrdom, is a time of profound mourning and demonstrations of loyalty to al-Ḥusayn and the other Imāms that followed him.

The *taʿziya*, which revolves around the commemoration of the death of Ḥusayn as a sacred redemptive act of martyrdom, is a uniquely Shiʿī phenomenon. In Malaysia, where the vast majority of the Muslims are adherents of Sunnī Islam, the standard monolingual dictionary *Kamus Dewan* includes the word *takziah*, but there are no references to theatre.⁸ We are only informed about its literal meaning, viz. ‘expression of sympathy’, ‘condolence; mourning’; the verbal form *bertakziah* is explained as ‘to grieve with; to pay a condolence call’. Using the *Kamus Dewan* as an aid to interpreting Faisal Tehrani’s subtitle, a possible translation would be ‘A mourning drama’ (German: *Trauerspiel*).

In such a decidedly Sunnī country as Malaysia, the writing of a *taʿziya* play, which is most intimately associated with Shiʿa Islam, can be called striking and daring. The *taʿziya* genre is not only suspect from a religious, but also from a political standpoint. As the American *taʿziya* specialist William O. Beeman dryly notes, even in the Shiʿī world political officials do not like ‘huge gatherings of people mourning injustice.’⁹ The catchy comment used for the book promotion is quite direct, quite in-your-face, too: ‘Karbalāʾ—a history covered up by propaganda of those in power. May it be seen at the side of the leaders of heaven.’¹⁰ This statement has a rather strong Shiʿī resonance: are the Sunnīs not considered in Shiʿa rhetoric as the forces of injustice and illegitimate usurpers of power, whereas the Shiʿīs follow the ‘Immaculate Imāms’, who are hailed as the true holders of spiritual authority and the gatekeepers of heaven? However this may be, the script of the play *Karbala* was first serialised in 2007 in the literary journal *Dewan Sastera*, which is the flagship publication of the government agency Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP, Institute of Language and Literature). It subsequently appeared in book form in 2008, published by Aberdeen Books World in Putrajaya.¹¹ This chapter will be an

attempt to assess this particular *ta'ziya*, which is aimed at a Malaysian Sunni audience, in terms of both drama text and Faisal Tehrani's own comments as included in the 2008 *editio princeps*.

The story of the Shi'a begins at Ghadir Khumm

Although my contribution will deal specifically with *Karbala*, it should be known that Faisal Tehrani has meanwhile produced more work expressing 'Alid piety, viz. another play, entitled *Kopitiam Ghadir* (Coffee Shop Ghadir), which was performed on 13–16 August 2009 in Wisma ITNM (Institut Terjemahan Negara Malaysia, the Malaysian National Institute of Translation) in Wangsa Maju, and the short story *Tunggu ana di Karbala* (Wait for Me in Karbalā'), which appeared in the journal *Mingguan Malaysia* on 3 January 2010. There was some controversy over the play *Kopitiam Ghadir*: originally, it should have been performed in August 2009 at the Stor Teater (Theatre at the Store) in the compound of the DBP in Kuala Lumpur.¹² The police had already issued a permit for its production, but at the end of July DBP suddenly wished to have official approval concerning the religious contents of the play. In the fallout to the incident, *Kopitiam Ghadir* was finally performed in Wisma ITNM, which in fact does not have proper theatre facilities.¹³

According to Faisal Tehrani, the central theme of *Kopitiam Ghadir* is the so-called Farewell Pilgrimage, i.e. the pilgrimage which the Prophet Muḥammad performed a few weeks before his death. In a newspaper interview Faisal Tehrani expressed his astonishment and anger that the religiosity of his play, dealing with formative Islamic history based upon *hadiths*, was called into question, whereas at the same time DBP had no problems whatsoever with the performance of an 'immoral' play featuring illegitimate pregnancy and homosexuality.¹⁴ He rhetorically asked why DBP had not consulted the Department of Islamic Development in Malaysia (*Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* or JAKIM)—the government-run religious watchdog—for its opinion about this manifestly non-Islamic play.

The drama *Kopitiam Ghadir* is relatively short (20 pages in print), taking up one and a quarter hours in performance, and tells about a man called Ustaz Tok Malaya who is lost in a mysterious small-town place and is forced to go to a café (*kopitiam*) in order to ask for directions.¹⁵ There he meets three men, Bakar, Umaq and Seman, who are members of a boy-band singing Islamic pop music (*nasyid*) in praise of the Prophet and his family. He informs them that people call him Ustaz Tok Guru Malaya or Ustaz Tok Malaya (both meaning



Fig. 13.1: In *Kopitiam Ghadir* ('Coffee shop Ghadir'), the 'Honourable Religious Teacher of the Malays' (standing) enters into a doctrinal discussion with a pious pop trio. Clad in *djellaba* and wearing a white skull cap, the strict theologian stands out as *haji*, while the weighty tomes under his arm mark him as a pillar of scripturalist Islam (from the private collection of Faisal Tehrani/Dr Haji Mohd Faizal Musa)

something like 'Honourable Religious Teacher of the Malays'), but that his name is Dr Maulana, having a PhD in *ḥadīth* criticism. He treats the three young men in the café rather arrogantly, but they are very courteous and explain to him that the area (*kampung*) is called 'Housing Estate of the Victorious *Ahl al-Bayt*' (*Taman Perumahan Ahlul Bait Jaya*). The theologian objects that this name is inappropriate as one should not 'idolise' the People of the House (*mendewa-dewakan ahlul bait*). Animated discussion ensues on the People of the House in *ḥadīth* lore (citing chapter and verse from published works), and finally the religious teacher asks himself why he is stranded in a coffee shop called Ghadir. The young men explain to him that the Prophet appointed his successor in Ghadir Khumm, and thereupon they perform the song *Saidina Ali* (Our Lord 'Alī), praising the latter's wisdom (including the line *Oh Ali engkaulah gerbang kota ilmu*, 'O 'Alī, you are the door to the city of knowledge', which is a well-known *ḥadīth*).¹⁶ The cleric protests that he has written a PhD thesis to prove that the *ḥadīth* concerning Ghadir Khumm is

'weak' (*dha'if*, from Arabic *da'if*), but to his great astonishment the pious pop trio show him, with the help of the scholar's own authoritative reference books and again citing page and *ḥadīth* number, that it is also classified as 'sound' (*sabih*, from Arabic *ṣaḥīḥ*). Finally, the 'Honourable Religious Teacher of the Malays' is shown how to get out of this little place, but the play ends with his decision to remain in the *kampung* 'Victorious People of the House'.

Faisal Tehrani relates how he found inspiration for his theatre piece while performing the pilgrimage in 2008: 'When I was in Medina, I felt that many in our population are still looking for clues and orientation. The incident of a Zionist attack on Gaza made me delve more deeply into the question of who our real leader is, namely the Messenger of God (PBUH).¹⁷ The play focuses upon *ḥadīths* concerning Ghadīr Khumm ('Pond of Khumm').¹⁸ To many Muslims, the name Ghadir of the café in the play *Kopitiam Ghadir*, which alludes to Ghadīr Khumm, will have no significance. However, as reported in *ḥadīths*, Ghadīr Khumm was the place where the Prophet and his followers rested during the return journey to Medina, in the year 10/632, and where Muḥammad took 'Alī by the hand, raised it before the assembly and proclaimed: 'Everyone whose patron I am, also has 'Alī as a patron. O Allah, befriend every friend of 'Alī and be the enemy of all his enemies; help those that aid him and abandon all who desert him.'¹⁹ The affair of Ghadīr Khumm provides material for intense debate in the field of Sunnī–Shi'ī polemics, and hence the play *Kopitiam Ghadir* is potentially caught up in a game of political and religious brinkmanship.

Sunnī authorities commonly do not question the historicity of the event in Ghadīr Khumm, but do certainly refute the interpretation that the Prophet had intended 'Alī to become his immediate successor.²⁰ 'Alī's partisans, however, have viewed Ghadīr Khumm in a radical manner, claiming that 'Alī should be regarded as the only legitimate and 'rightly guided' Imām. Adding considerable weight to their exegesis were the circumstances of Muḥammad delivering God's final revelation (Q 5:3) on the same day in his Farewell Sermon: 'Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed My blessing upon you, and I have approved Islam for your religion.'²¹ As one Islamicist once aptly put it, 'the story of the Shi'ah begins at Ghadīr Khumm.'²²

Passionately arguing the case for the religiosity of his play, Faisal Tehrani points out in an interview that as a Muslim, an Islamic proselytiser (*seorang dha'ei*) and winner of the 2006 National Arts Award (*Anugerah Seni Negara*), he felt very badly treated by DBP. He explains that he is situating *Kopitiam Ghadir* intellectually within the discourse of canonical literature, particularly

authoritative *ḥadīth* lore.²³ He seems to be suggesting that one should let historical facts speak for themselves. However, he is evading the difficulties involved in the interpretation of the episode in Ghadīr Khumm. Yet the crux of the matter lies exactly in its interpretation, as the relative degree of importance attached to the subject indicates whether a believer sides with the Sunnī and their caliphs or with the Shi'a and their Imāms. Here what has primacy is the contextual meaning of a text of the past: what did the Prophet imply by saying what he reportedly said in Ghadīr Khumm? Throughout the ages, up to the present day, the issue of the Prophet's intentions lying behind his statements and actions is treated scrupulously and imaginatively in Islamic scholarship.²⁴ However, in twenty-first-century Malaysia the official, government-sanctioned discourse on Islam is exclusivist Sunnī, which means that only the Sunnī way of seeing things is allowed.

The author and his intention

Mutatis mutandis, the same could be said of the drama at Karbalā' in 61/680, which functions as the 'founding myth' of Shi'a Islam: its historicity is not a bone of contention among Sunnī and Shi'i Muslims, but rather the fundamental question is whether there is a deeper significance beyond the event itself.²⁵ For the Shi'is, as Vernon James Schubert observes, these events 'are not simply historical but metahistorical. They are archetypal and in some sense stand outside of real time and are parallel to it.'²⁶ Hence a passion play bewailing the tribulations of 'Alī's second son Ḥusayn and his martyred followers, written in a country poised against the Shi'a, invites several questions. To begin with, who is this author whose name already sounds so Iranian? Literally, his name identifies him as Faisal of Tehran, but this is a *nom de plume* of a Malaysian author whose given name is Mohd Faizal Musa. He insists that the choice of his pen name does not reflect any Shi'i leanings on his part but was merely chosen for commercial reasons: at the start of his writing career, when he still had difficulty attracting attention from publishers, a foreign-sounding name assured that editors would take notice.²⁷ By now, he is so successful that his pseudonym has become a trademark or a brand name.

The book *Karbala* features two interviews with Faisal Tehrani, both conducted with him in 2007 (slightly edited for this publication), and it is noteworthy that he is most evasive on questions pertaining to any personal involvement with the Shi'a. In his opinion, Sunnī Muslims should not divide the world into Islam and non-Islam but into 'oppressed' and 'oppressors'.²⁸

Calling himself a human rights activist, he positions himself on the side of the oppressed.²⁹ As I see it, Faisal Tehrani is a master of the double entendre, by which his phrases can be understood in both a Sunnī and Shi'ī way. If we take the example about his objection to the labels Sunnī and Shi'a, we encounter a variant of the 'God is one, Islam is one' refrain, mostly to the effect that there are only Muslims and infidels (*kuffār*).³⁰ This familiar argument is not specifically Sunnī or Shi'ī, but Faisal Tehrani adds a political and social justice dimension to it which makes it sound rather Shi'ī in tone. The dichotomised worldview of oppressors and oppressed is curiously reminiscent of late-twentieth-century Iranian Shi'ī rhetoric, in which humanity is bipolarly divided into the 'members of the tribe of God' and the 'tribe of *tāghūt*'.³¹ The meaning of the latter term differs from the Qur'anic meaning of 'idol', i.e. something worshipped other than God, and must be understood as denoting oppressive governments and their infidel allies.³² The 'tribe of *tāghūt*' is presented as the evil force which imposes oppression.³³

The Iranian-American scholar Hamid Dabashi has called Shi'a 'a religion of protest', with a 'theology of discontent' or an 'Islamic liberation theology'.³⁴ Discussing *ta'ziya* as theatre of protest, Dabashi points to the notion of *maḍlūmiyyat* as its central thematic which, in his opinion, is the defining aspect of Shi'a itself. *Maḍlūmiyyat* 'constitutes the moral/political community in terms of justice and its aberration. *Maḍlūmiyyat* is the absence of justice that signals the necessity of its presence.'³⁵ The base word *maḍlūm* literally means 'someone who has been wronged, someone who has been subjected to a grave injustice'.³⁶ The archetypal model of a *maḍlūm* is, of course, Ḥusayn, who for the Shi'ī epitomises the ultimate moral exemplar, safeguarding true Islam and fighting against oppression and tyranny. Shi'īs regard his martyrdom at Karbalā' as the greatest victory of good over evil, right over wrong and truth over falsehood.³⁷ As the famous slogan goes: 'Every day is 'Āshūrā, every land is Karbalā'.'

So on the one hand, Faisal Tehrani's remarks would seem to adhere to the Karbalā' paradigm; but on the other hand, such an interpretation is in the eye of the beholder. To describe oneself, as Faisal Tehrani does, as a human rights activist who is on the side of the oppressed cannot give offence to anyone and does not lead to problems with the authorities. The interviewers do not press the issue, but nevertheless their questions are straightforward enough. For example, the editor of *Dewan Sastera*, Rozninah Abdul Azib, confronts him with the view of many readers of his work, who feel that it is suffused with a Shi'a spirit, and she asks: 'Is this accusation correct?'³⁸ This is a simple yes or no question, but again Faisal Tehrani avoids giving a direct answer.

His act of rhetorical bravado employs several debating tricks that shift the focus from the original question about writing Shi'ī propaganda to the bigger question of respectability, both for the author and Shi'a. Against those who dare criticise him, Faisal Tehrani retorts that people tend to judge easily, but in fact don't read and don't know: the allegations hurled at him are being skewed by prejudice and ignorance.³⁹ Another line of counter-attack is his response that ideas need to be freely discussed and not forbidden. Here Faisal Tehrani utilises the Nazi trump card or the *Reductio ad Hitlerum*: 'Historically, the Nazis and Hitler tried to forbid ideas, and they failed.'⁴⁰ What is wrong with Shi'ism anyway? Employing an *argumentum ad numerum* approach, Faisal Tehrani asks how Shi'ism can be accused of deviating from the 'norm' when it is, in fact, the most successful doctrine in the Islamic world, having hundred of thousands of mosques, thousands of theologians, hundred of thousands of theological books and hundreds of millions of followers. How can you consider hundreds of millions of Shi'is as infidels? Shi'ism, as he concludes, is part of the Islamic community (*umat Islam*).⁴¹

In the other interview, which first appeared in the magazine *Millinia Muslim*, when the journalist Maizura Mohd Ederis asked Faisal Tehrani to comment on why he was seen as such a staunch defender of Shi'ism, he once more denied this allegation. In his opinion lay people are unable to discuss whether the Shi'a or Sunnī side is right: 'The one, who is right is the *Rasul Allah* (PBUH), he is the Messenger of God. When someone is obedient to our Prophet, this person will find the truth.'⁴² The interviewer just left it at that, but again one may notice that Faisal Tehrani's rebuttal is not only indirect and abstract but also rather puzzling for raising the subject of obedience to the Prophet. This statement is ambiguous and open to opposing interpretations: on the one hand, it could be interpreted as pro-Sunnī, because Sunnī Muslims like to define themselves as those who adhere to the *sunna* ('trodden path') of the Prophet Muḥammad himself; on the other hand, the idea of unquestioning obedience and devotion to Muḥammad also happens to be a key doctrine in Shi'ī Islam, but with the corollary claim that this principle extends to the Imāms, as they carry on the sacred Prophetic bloodline. Faisal Tehrani reserves for himself the right to address religious issues on the grounds of his academic theological education.⁴³ He presents himself as a theologian who wants to propagate the faith by his pen.⁴⁴

Rozninah Abdul Azib directly asks Faisal Tehrani about the authorial intention: 'What are you in fact trying to convey in this drama?'⁴⁵ Of course, in this particular case, using the word 'proselytising' is somewhat taboo

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because attempting to persuade Sunnīs to convert to Shi'ism is strictly forbidden in Malaysia, and Faisal Tehrani makes use of a well-known *topos*, so familiar in academia, that a topic has been neglected. He argues that hitherto, Malaysian scholars in the field of theatre studies have studied all kinds of theatre from all over the world, never minding their non- or even anti-Islamic character, and he rhetorically asks: 'If our Muslim scholars can accept all these kinds of drama, which deny God, which have Buddhist elements, which have Hindu features, which have Christian flavours, well then, please show me now what is wrong with *ta'ziya* drama?'⁴⁶ His play provides material for Malaysian theatregoers and students and he remarks: 'I think it would only be right to receive thanks and not scolding.'⁴⁷ This argument in defence of *Karbala* would seem to stress the cultural rather than the religio-political aspects of the play, thereby strategically situating this theatre piece under the rubric of 'culture' as opposed to 'religion'. Acts and utterances, which are placed in the general realm of 'culture', 'art' or 'custom', and thus outside the sensitive framework of 'religion', will find a more receptive public mindset.⁴⁸

Perhaps in an effort to downplay the Shi'a character of the *ta'ziya* drama further, Faisal Tehrani emphasises that love for the family of the Prophet is at the very heart of it.⁴⁹

The *ta'ziya* drama tells about the murder of the Prophet's grandson in Karbala at Ashura day. The noble grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) belongs to us all, regardless whether Sunni or Shi'a, and no community can accept this atrocity and this war crime, the slaughtering of the Prophet's grandson is something which is unimaginable. This tragedy is the basis of the *ta'ziya* drama.

Faisal Tehrani also mentions that in preparing his *ta'ziya* drama, he has done much research, and has studied many works on the drama of Karbalā'. 'And among the many books there were two reference works, which have been published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka itself': *Peristiwa di Padang Karbala* (The Incident at the Plain of Karbalā') by Wan Yusof Hassan; and a Malay translation of the Arabic work *al-Fitna al-kubrā* (The Great Discord) by the famed Egyptian historian and literary writer Taha Husayn (d.1973).⁵⁰ This makes it seem as if the publication of his own *ta'ziya* drama in the literary journal *Dewan Sastera* by DBP is nothing out of the ordinary.

The plight of Shi'ī Muslims in Malaysia

Faisal Tehrani's heedful answers to inquiries about his personal involvement with Shi'a Islam become readily understandable when one considers his coun-

try's official government policy toward Islamic matters. As anyone following the news coverage on Malaysia may know, the Malaysian government sees it as its task to defend Sunnī orthodoxy. Recently, 'Allah-gate' hit the headlines. On 31 December 2009, a high court ruling overturned a government order that banned non-Muslims from using the word 'Allah'. Nevertheless, in January 2010, the government continued to restrict the usage of the word 'Allah' exclusively for Muslims on the grounds of national security, and to avoid misunderstanding and confusion among Muslims.

The government-run Department of Islamic Development in Malaysia (JAKIM) is responsible for enforcing Islamic law on the Muslim population. JAKIM also carries out rulings issued by the National Fatwa Council. As the journalist Niluksi Koswanage reports:⁵¹

In recent months the council has asked Muslims to stay away from yoga because of its Hindu origins, and forbidden women from wearing trousers. Although edicts are not legally binding, they are very influential in Malaysia. Working as a moral police, JAKIM officers patrol parks looking for unwed couples holding hands, raid nightclubs to catch Muslims drinking alcohol, stake out betting shops and fine Muslims who eat in public during the fasting month of Ramadan. In 2006, Islamic officials mistakenly raided the apartment of a married American couple, both Christians, on suspicion of *khalwat*, or the Islamic crime of close proximity between unmarried couples. The government later apologised.

JAKIM enforces faith (*akidah*) conceptualised along the lines of 'the People of the Custom and Community'.⁵² The latter expression is the conventional title by which Sunnī Muslims like to identify themselves, and is particularly directed against the Shi'īs, who are accused of deviating from 'orthodox' doctrine and practice. Shi'a Islam is forbidden in Malaysia, and its followers have been detained under the so-called Internal Security Act (ISA) in the past.⁵³ ISA, which was originally introduced in 1960 to fight an anti-colonial communist-led insurgency, permits indefinite detention without trial and is a most effective law to 'silence those considered "deviant" or "subversive" by the government'.⁵⁴ JAKIM has published an informative booklet on Shi'ism (2001), which is also available online at the official government website.⁵⁵ It contains a strong government warning against Shi'ism:⁵⁶

The goal of this book is to provide information and explanation to the general public on Shi'a views, so that Muslims and society stay away from these teachings and are not influenced by them, and to convince those who are involved that the guidelines of their views are in conflict with genuine Islamic teachings.

In this publication the number of Shi'īs in Malaysia is estimated between 300 and 500 people, but Shi'ism is deemed to be a 'dangerous sect'. Appar-

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ently, the Malaysian government is not only concerned for the spiritual welfare of its Muslim citizens but is also worried about possible Shi'ī threats to national security. The conclusion is well worth quoting in full:⁵⁷

The Southeast Asian area, especially Malaysia, is a quiet area following the guidelines of the People of the Custom and Community. Any attempt to introduce a non-Sunni view, especially Shi'a views, to the people of this area will certainly upset societal harmony. Countries, which have Shi'a adherents, have experienced public and governmental instability.⁵⁸ Shi'is will always try to increase their hold on Sunnis, and influence them. They do not want to surrender to a Sunni government and administration. The National Fatwa Council, in its session of 3 May 1996, has taken the following decision: 'It is decreed that the Muslim community in Malaysia should only follow Islamic teachings, as concerns doctrine, law, and ethics, which are based upon the guidelines of the People of the Custom and Community. It is certified that Islamic teachings, which are different from those of the People of the Custom and Community, are in conflict with Islamic Canon Law and Islamic Regulations; therefore the propagation of any non-Sunni teachings is forbidden.

Against this backdrop, showing a Shi'a affiliation is not without risks in Malaysia. On account of his literary work, and also because of his comments on topical issues posted on his blogs (tehranifaisal.blogspot.com and pedulipalestina.blogspot.com), Faisal Tehrani is regularly accused by other Malaysian bloggers of being a closet Shi'a.⁵⁹ Some bloggers call for his detention under the ISA, and one ill-wisher commented: 'Please remember that in the case of an apostate, we should first put him in quarantine (ISA) before sentencing him to death. Someone like Faisal Tehrani should surely be detained under ISA.'⁶⁰ In 2008, the *mufti* of Perlis, Dr Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, wrote a letter to the editor of the newspaper *Metro*, in which he accused Faisal Tehrani of being someone of Shi'a persuasion who used his creative work in order to disseminate Shi'a thoughts.⁶¹ Duplicates were sent to the director general of JAKIM and the director general of the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Horizons of expectation

Karbala is a three-act play, and each act presents different episodes from the Karbalā' story which can be played separately.⁶² For example, Act One (pp. 3–29) ends with the dramatic death scene of Ḥusayn, but in Act Two (pp. 31–80) we are back again in Ḥusayn's lifetime, as this part starts with a conversation between Ḥusayn and general Hurr bin Yazid (al-Ḥurr b. Yazid), who in this episode is still on the enemy side. Act Two also ends with the murder of Ḥusayn, but this time highlighting the despicable role of Syimir bin

Dzil Jausyan (Shamir b. Dhi 'l-Jawshan). Finally, Act Three (pp. 81–109) begins with a favourite topic in Shi'ī narratives of Karbalā': the arrival of Hurr bin Yazid in Ḥusayn's camp, having decided to attain martyrdom on Ḥusayn's side. The well-known pun on Hurr's name, meaning 'freeborn', is not missing here.⁶³ As Ḥusayn points out: 'Congratulations, Hurr. Now you are "hur" or free, in accordance with the name which your mother gave you. You are "hur" in this world and in the next.'⁶⁴ This last Act ends with a furious speech by Zaynab al-Kubra (Ḥusayn's sister) given after the slaughter when the remaining followers of Ḥusayn have been brought as captives to Kūfa.

Hitherto, only small fragments from *Karbala* have been played for select audiences, and it has never been performed in its entirety on stage. However, if it were to be staged, what could a spectator expect? In Iranian theatre, the performance of *tā'ziya* can be astoundingly realistic with actors moving about on horses or even camels. Conversely, Faisal Tehrani's play has little action on offer, consisting of rather long sermonising monologues. A relatively large role is given to two commentators, 'Narrator 1' (*tukang cerita 1*) and 'Narrator 2' (*tukang cerita 2*) who relate what is happening, thus elucidating the events to the spectators. Faisal Tehrani has stipulated that there should be at least thirty actors: ten will belong to the 'group of the devout' (*kelompok orang saleh*) and twenty to the antagonistic 'group of the godless' (*kelompok orang fasik*). The devout wear white and green clothes and yellow shoes, whereas the godless characters are completely dressed in red or brown.⁶⁵ The author does not explain this direction, but *tā'ziya* aficionados may know that the colours have symbolic meaning in accordance with genre conventions: green is the colour of Islam and paradise, and white is the colour of innocence and the funeral shroud, while yellow stands for death.⁶⁶ The Umayyad side conventionally wears red clothes, the colour of blood shed by assassins. Hurr bin Yazid is the only person who shifts allegiance, and this is symbolically marked in one episode by a change of clothes when he dons white and green clothing.⁶⁷ In order to lend a bit of *couleur locale* to his play, Faisal Tehrani suggests using Malay-style dress (*baju Melayu*).⁶⁸ As in Iranian *tā'ziya* theatre, male actors play all the parts. In contrast to Iranian productions, however, Faisal Tehrani's adaptation does not involve such animals as horses, camels and sheep, but in accordance with Iranian conventions the action is accompanied by a traditional musical ensemble consisting of trumpets and drums.⁶⁹

Of course, every spectator will come to the theatre with certain preconceptions, which the German literary theorist Hans Robert Jauss called the 'horizon of expectations' (*Erwartungshorizont*). As Robert Leach explains in his introduction to theatre studies:⁷⁰

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There are, however, two kinds of horizons of expectation for the theatregoer. Plays are evaluated against productions of other plays, and perhaps against other productions of the same play; they are also evaluated against the spectator's own personal and social experience. If either of these horizons is exceeded, the spectator is delighted—so long as it is not exceeded by too much, at which point the play begins to become obscure, even indecipherable.

However, in the case of *Karbala*, the Malay audience is confronted by a play operating within unfamiliar Iranian codes which are not instantly understood, and will certainly be met with bafflement. Secondly, the Shi'ī contents run counter to the audience's Sunnī worldview. *Tā'ziya* is a form of religious ritual theatre, and there will be no applause during or after the show. Normally, *tā'ziya* is played before an audience which forms an 'emotional community' (or in Weberian terms, *Gemeinde*).⁷¹ In Iran, the spectators of the tragic scenes would be emotionally affected by the performance and would be participating in the drama through weeping, chanting and breast-beating, becoming 'participant mourners'.⁷² The classic formulation is: 'To weep, or to cause others to weep, or to *pretend* to weep for Imam Hossein, will bring you reward in heaven.'⁷³ In the Malaysian context, however, the interrelationship between spectators and actors will tend to be aloof and detached rather than intimate.

The play's obscurity for Malay spectators is further heightened, I think, because the actors do not have specific roles. As Andrzej Wirth has remarked of this typical *tā'ziya* convention: 'The *Tā'ziyeh* art of acting makes the performer-believer a role carrier *Rollenträger*, not a character.'⁷⁴ This implies in Faisal Tehrani's play that when, for example, the Narrator announces an episode featuring Umar bin Sa'ad ('Umar b. Sa'd) and Imām Ḥusayn, one member of the godless group and one member of the devout group will step forward and play the respective role. Faisal Tehrani writes that he has deliberately opted for this style because it helps to prevent actors being associated with certain roles, whether holy or evil.⁷⁵ This distancing procedure between the actor and the role is a characteristic and oft-commented feature of *tā'ziya* theatre:

Since both the actors and audience are aware of the events of *Karbela*, and are united in their condemnation, there is no illusion, suspense, or dramatic tension. The actors of *Tāziyeh* on both sides, of sacred and evil characters, do not believe that they are playing the role of individuals involved within the tragedy of *Karbela*: rather, they believe they are narrators who make a massive effort towards creating and then transferring the mood and feeling of the actual events of the day of Ashura to their audience.⁷⁶

No Shi'ī actor would dare 'to become one' with Ḥusayn, which would amount to blasphemy, while his revulsion for the monstrous villains also quenches any desire to identify with any of the evil characters.⁷⁷

However, it is doubtful whether all Malay spectators will be able to immediately identify the different roles in a performance on stage. For example, in a dialogue between Ḥusayn and Ummu Kalsum (Umm Kulthūm), it may take some time to realise that the (male) actor playing Ummu Kalsum is Ḥusayn's sister. The stage direction introduces this character as follows: 'A man from the group of the devout moves forward, and although he plays the character of Ummu Kalsum, this actor does not have to act like a woman. It would be better if this character would be played by a child actor.'⁷⁸ Ḥusayn addresses this character as *adikku* (literally 'my younger sibling', a gender-neutral word), but without once mentioning her name, and tells her about a foreboding dream of their father 'Alī. Only when Narrator 1 comments 'That's right, Kalsum, that dream of the Imām 'Alī is terrifying' (*Benar Kalsum, mimpi imam Ali itu mimpi yang menyeramkan*) does the spectator have certainty about the identity of this person.⁷⁹ In another episode, this time about Ḥusayn and Abbas (al-'Abbās), we read the following stage direction: 'The Imām looks at his younger brother, Abbās, and someone from the group of the devout steps forward, "becoming" Abbās.'⁸⁰ However, as there are no clear hints, only *tā'ziya* connoisseurs would be able to identify this actor as Abbās. In the ensuing dialogue between Ḥusayn and Abbās, the latter's name is not once mentioned.

The script often gives information to the reader, which is not available to the audience in the theatre. For example: 'The lights dim, signifying the onset of night, the choir keeps lamenting, the devout group is making a construction with cardboard boxes, which looks like a fortification around them.'⁸¹ The attentive spectator may have remembered that in an earlier episode the same boxes also functioned as a military encampment.⁸² Again, Faisal Tehrani remains close to original *tā'ziya* conventions, as stage décor should be minimal in order to evoke the desolate character of the Karbalā' plain, and the few props are symbolic as well.⁸³ After this stage direction about the cardboard boxes, the reader is introduced to Ali Zaynal Abidin (d.713) ('Alī Zayn al-'Ābidīn, the fourth imām of the Twelver Shi'a): 'he is a son of Imām Husein, the only descendant of God's Messenger who was not killed at Karbala, because he happened to be ill and was saved by his aunt Zainab.'⁸⁴ However, the only clue for the spectator about Ali Zaynal Abidin's identity is in his speech: 'That night I was ill' (*Malam itu aku sedang menderitā sakit*).⁸⁵ *Tā'ziya* enthusiasts will know that the speaker must be 'Alī Zayn al-'Ābidīn, being the only male survivor of Karbalā', as he had been too ill to fight.

Quite a few stage directions are such that I wondered how the director and the actors would manage to achieve the effects that the writer had in mind. Some examples may suffice:

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- The martyrdom of Ibnu Ausajah (aka Muslim bin Ausajah or Muslim b. 'Awsaja). After the dramatic statement, 'I am fully prepared to become a martyr, mother', the stage direction is: 'The young man fights with a soldier from the godless group, he is sacrificed and his head is thrown to his mother' (p. 19).
- About Imām Ḥusayn: 'He realizes that nobody is there, utterly alone he will have to confront the enemy' (p. 25).
- 'The group of the godless throws sticks at Hurr bin Yazid. Hurr falls down, some members of the pious group carry Hurr on the shoulders to Imām Ḥusayn' (p. 89).
- Vocal technique: 'Zaynab speaks so fervently that the hair of anyone who hears her will stand on end' (p. 101).

Much depends on acting skills. For example, at the end of Act One there is a great death scene, which could easily have an inadvertently comical effect—that is to say, for a non-Shi'ī public, of course. Imām Ḥusayn is smearing blood on his face and body and says: 'Like this I will meet my grandfather Muhammad (may God's peace and blessings be upon him). I will tell him that those who killed me were these misters so-and-so, the sons of misters so-and-so.'⁸⁶ Immediately after these words Ḥusayn drops dead, and the choir 'sweetly weeps', accompanied by sorrowful music. Undoubtedly the scene is meant to be highly dramatic, but a bad actor may cause the audience to think of a crying little boy who, facing the archetypal schoolyard bullies, cannot come up with a more serious threat than 'I'll tell Daddy on you.'

Looking at the broader issue of intercultural performance, presenting a play originating from another cultural background is always fraught with problems. When the Royal Shakespeare Company director Peter Brook adapted the great ancient Indian epic *Mahabharata* for stage, some critics hailed him as the 'creator of the twentieth-century theatre's most spectacular achievement.'⁸⁷ Others, however, held him guilty of cultural imperialism, 'stealing the cultural "property" of the developing world for his own (Western) ends, ripping the epic from its context, and losing the underpinning Hindu social understanding and cosmology.'⁸⁸ Commenting upon an Indian Shi'ī performance in Chicago, the American Islamicist David Pinault criticises that it failed as 'an educational attempt, as a bridge-building experiment in communication.'⁸⁹ American non-Shi'ī spectators simply failed to grasp its sense, and the performance was merely 'an instance of communal self-assertion.'⁹⁰ Pinault's rather harsh verdict is that it was an example of an 'infelicitous perfor-

mance', being experienced by the audience as meaningless because its acts were unrecognisable or uninterpretable.⁹¹

Critics of Brook's production are unhappy with the act of adapting, complaining that by putting the *Mahabharata* in another context, he had changed its meaning. Conversely, Pinault laments that the Indian 'Ashūrā' performance in Chicago had the 'familiar trappings' he knew from South Asia, but in the USA it was literally 'out of place', and the uninformed onlookers had no idea what was going on.

Meanwhile, *ta'ziya* has been quite successful in the West: France was the first non-Shi'ī country in which *ta'ziya* was performed, at the 1991 Festival of Arts in Avignon, but it has now also been performed at art festivals in Paris, Parma, Rome and New York. However, it should be noted that a wealth of public education surrounded these productions in order to provide the audience members with background information.⁹²

Keeping close to the original template of Iranian *ta'ziya* theatre, Faisal Tehrani's adaptation makes no concessions to a non-Shi'ī audience. Doubtless a non-Shi'ī theatregoer will experience *Karbala* as unusual and at times even obscure to the point of incomprehensibility, but a sanitised version would have robbed the passion play of its meaning: *ta'ziya*, as reenactment of the martyrdom of Ḥusayn at Karbalā', is one of the most striking signifiers of Shi'ī Islam. The Karbalā' story is at the heart of Shi'a spiritual life. As Gustav Thaiss observes, here we touch upon the topic of 'ownership' of intellectual property: to whom does the Karbalā' story 'belong'?⁹³ Does it belong to the Shi'a only? Carnavalesque adaptations of the Muḥarram celebrations in such non-Shi'ī places as Malaysia, Indonesia and Trinidad show that the Karbalā' story has found appeal beyond Shi'ism, but also prove that entertainment value and religious beliefs do not mix easily.⁹⁴

A Shi'a drama

However, the play *Karbala* is not just for Ḥusayn devotees, it also displays a deep devotion for the Prophet Muḥammad and his family, 'the People of the House' (*ahl al-bayt*). The love for the Prophet and his family, which is common among Shi'īs and Sunnīs alike, is so great in Islam that it has baffled many non-believers. It should be emphasised that the exalted status of the Prophet and the *ahl al-bayt* in Islamic piety is not the exclusive reserve of Shi'a Islam. For example, in the songs used in religious schools of the traditionalist Sunnī organisation Nahdhatul Ulama in Indonesia, the *ahl al-bayt* feature no less as

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exemplary role models. Though scholars like to point to the importance of Fāṭima as a symbol of the Holy Family in Shi'a Islam,⁹⁵ religious teachers of Nahdhatul Ulama likewise offer the idealised pious maternal figure of Fāṭima as guide for girls and women to imitate.⁹⁶

In principle, a shared commitment or common ground could facilitate interfaith dialogue. However, in Faisal Tehrani's play the tone is distinctly Shi'i, and there are no conciliatory gestures towards the intended Sunnī public. As Vernon James Schubel astutely remarks, love and devotion for the Prophet and the *ahl al-bayt* is both 'a wall and a bridge' between Shi'is and Sunnīs.⁹⁷ This becomes immediately clear right from the beginning of Act One, in the relatively long introduction (pp. 3–7) by Narrator 1. After a recitation of blessings by the choir, Narrator 1 begins with the *basmala*, continuing with a recitation of blessings over the Prophet, followed by blessings invoked upon Ḥusayn, praising his august role for humankind:⁹⁸

Peace upon you, o Aba [*sic*] 'Abdillah.⁹⁹

Peace upon you, o Lord of Martyrs.

Peace upon you, o Ḥusayn, son of 'Ali, and God's mercy and blessings.

Peace upon you, o Great Fighter of *Karbalā'*.

Peace upon you, o Glorious Islamic Hero.

Peace upon you, o Torch upon Mankind's Path.

May God turn us into people who may follow in your footsteps. And who may receive your future intercession (*syafaat*) thanks to your guardianship (*wilayah*).

The latter sentence contains two key terms, which both betoken deep doctrinal differences between the Shi'a and Sunnī forms of Islam. The word *wilāya* ('guardianship', 'authority', 'lordship') is used here in its Shi'i meaning denoting the leadership of the (twelve infallible) imāms.¹⁰⁰ However, the common Malay usage of the word *wilayah* is 'area, domain, territory, province, sphere', and I am not sure whether all theatregoers may understand this theological expression.¹⁰¹ Of course, the word *shafā'a* ('intercession') is familiar enough to a Malaysian audience, but Sunnī Muslims believe that intercession for sinners on the Day of Judgement is the unique prerogative of the Prophet Muḥammad and not of any other members of his household.¹⁰² The question of intercession and the controversies surrounding this doctrine is a staple in Sunnī–Shi'a polemics, and the inclusion of both 'guardianship' and 'intercession', both of which are hotly debated contentious terms, makes it clear that the play is not exactly ecumenical, attempting to create a rapprochement with Sunnīs.

After this rather formal opening, Narrator 1 directly addresses his public by making an appeal to the emotions. The spectators should imagine being in

Medina, in the humble house of the Prophet Muḥammad: 'Let us imagine being in one room together with the Prophet, whom we all love so much, in a small room.'¹⁰³ Evoking the great love of the Prophet for his two grandsons, Narrator 1 poses some uncomfortable questions: 'Sirs (in a sadder voice), how can we let the Prophet cry, Sirs? What kind of community are we part of that we let the Prophet cry and sob? Does nobody feel affected?'¹⁰⁴ This leitmotif, which is reiterated continuously, is: 'What kind of community are we?' (*umat macam apakah kita ini?*) This refrain also functions as the last sentence of the play, as the closing line of the speech by Zainab al-Kubra to the treacherous people of Kūfa: 'Hey, what kind of community are you?!'¹⁰⁵ This accusatory question is directed at non-Shi'a Muslims, who on the one hand profess a deep love for the Prophet Muḥammad, but on the other hand show themselves indifferent, if not hostile, toward the Prophet's family.

The suggestion is even made that by killing members of the *ahl al-bayt*, (Sunnī) Muslims have killed Muḥammad, their own Prophet. A few examples may suffice. Narrator 1 comments the tragic events surrounding the killing of Ḥusayn's son Ali Akbar ('Alī al-Akbar) with a wailing voice, rebuking his co-religionists:¹⁰⁶

Oh, what kind of community are we? Why do we let it happen that the great-grandchild of the Prophet enters the battlefield? Don't you know that this smart youngster is Husayn's son? Oh, how can we be willing and determined to let this boy put his life at stake? Doesn't this young boy's face look similar to that of his great-grandparent? If someone longs to see the face of the Messenger of God, he should look at the face of Ali Akbar. How can a person be capable of slashing Ali Akbar, and not feeling fear? Aren't they afraid of God's punishment? What kind of community would be able to kill the great-grandchild of the Prophet? What kind of community are you all to let his stomach be poured out, crushed by God's enemies?

Narrator 1 describes the event as an attempted assassination of the Prophet Muḥammad: 'Sharp swords cut Ali Akbar's face into pieces, which radiates the light of Muhammad (PBUH).'¹⁰⁷ In his dying moments 'Abbas bin 'Alī, Ḥusayn's half-brother, asks God for forgiveness as he has not been able to fetch water for Fāṭima's daughters. Thereupon the choir sings: 'What kind of community are you all? Aren't you ashamed to come in throngs to the grave of the Messenger of God in the Prophet's Mosque, whereas you turn away from his grandchild, who is slaughtered like this?'¹⁰⁸ The asides to the public have an accusatory tone, too. In Act Three the choir sings:¹⁰⁹

Oh, how sad is the family of the Prophet, how lonely is the lament of Fatima's son, utterly isolated is the son of the Luminous, [but] on this day when the Prophet's

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descendant is suffering from thirst and is crying loudly, you don't care. You say, what's the use of resuscitating an old story. Oh, how rude. This old story is a story about the sacrifice of the Prophet's family, why do you not want to know about it?

The author is aware that his public has little knowledge of the tragedy. In the words of Narrator 2 in Act Three: 'The tragedy in Karbala is indeed rather unknown in our circles. (...) Sirs, Karbala is a history, which has been lost in our area.'¹¹⁰

The twentieth century has seen the most large-scale atrocities in the history of mankind, claiming millions of innocent victims; hence the pronouncement of Narrator 2 may sound preposterous to a non-Shi'a spectator: 'Oh Karbala, you will witness the most tragic bloodshed in the whole of human history.'¹¹¹ However, the belief that Ḥusayn's sacrifice of himself will bring eternal salvation to the rest of the community belongs to the Shi'a creed, and so his martyrdom is seen as a cosmic event. Narrator 2 explains that Ḥusayn's fight was not motivated by personal interests, but was a fight for 'truth' (*kebenaran*).¹¹² It is therefore tempting to read the play's dedication, 'For those who search the truth' (*Kepada mereka yang mencari kebenaran*) against the background of Ḥusayn's association with 'truth' which is constantly on his tongue.

Demons and saints

In *ta'ziya* theatre, the battle lines are most clearly drawn between good and evil.¹¹³ As noted by many critics, this black-and-white bipolarity is so radical that even the villains openly admit that they are only motivated by worldly gains, whereas truth and justice are on the side of Ḥusayn.¹¹⁴ Spectators who are not familiar with *ta'ziya* rules and regulations may deplore its lack of realism.¹¹⁵ However, an Iranian audience:

knows the story perfectly, and this situation obviates the need for any exposition of character development in the plays. There is no need for the author of the Ta'ziyeh to supply any significant details about the background of the action, the setting, or the personality of the characters. The evil characters know that they are evil and often say so, while the good characters all know in advance the outcome of their actions, and often refer to this. Thus, in the core plays of the Ta'ziyeh, much time can be spent on such emotional scenes as tearful leave-takings and lamentations.¹¹⁶

Faisal Tehrani adheres closely to Iranian *ta'ziya* conventions, and so we find that when the villain 'Umar b. Sa'ad orders the arrest of Ḥusayn, he is respectfully alluding to the majesty of 'Alī as 'Lion of God': 'Encircle this son of the Arab Lion. This is the son of Ali b. Abi Thalib.'¹¹⁷ 'Umar b. Sa'ad fully knows

that he is evil, and with an 'arrogant voice' (*bersuara angkuh*) he says: 'I am convinced that anyone will go to hell if he fights and kills Ḥusayn and his followers.'¹¹⁸ Although Ḥusayn still tries to convince him that it would be better to choose the Imām's side, because this would bring him closer to God, 'Umar b. Sa'ad finds the governorship of the city of Rayy much more alluring, upon which Ḥusayn curses him: 'God will destroy you in your bed. I hope you will not have the opportunity to eat wheat, not even a little bit.'¹¹⁹ 'Umar b. Sa'ad's reaction is one of complete indifference: '(in a mocking tone) Even if I cannot eat a grain of wheat, the available barley (*barli*) will already be enough for me.'¹²⁰ Even Syimir bin Dzil Jausyan (Shimr b. Dhi'l-Jawshan), who will ultimately kill Ḥusayn, addresses the Imām in most respectful language: 'By God, I will separate your head from your body, even though I know that you are the most excellent man because of your grandfather, your father and your mother.'¹²¹ When Ḥusayn asks him if he knows to whom he is talking, Syimir bin Dzil Jausyan mentions Ḥusayn's family background with all due honorific epithets: 'Of course, I know you. Your father is 'Alī, he with whom God is pleased, your mother is Fāṭima the Luminous, your grandfather Muḥammad the Chosen One, and your grandmother Khadija the Great.'¹²²

The demonisation of Ḥusayn's arch-enemy Yazīd is in accordance with *ta'ziya* conventions, but also with general Islamic and Malay taboos: he is accused of drinking wine and being openly drunk, which categorises him as 'the Other'.¹²³ John Renard, in his pioneering studies on pan-Islamic images of saints and heroes 'from Morocco to Malaysia', searches for common Islamic constants, but I think that in some cases regional cultural differences may be of overriding importance.¹²⁴ The way in which the Prophet's family is portrayed in Faisal Tehrani's *ta'ziya* is rather paradoxical: on the one hand, the *ahl al-bayt* are 'holier than thou', but on the other hand they also appear as 'human, all too human'. Both extreme aspects may be off-putting to a Sunnī Malay audience. Theologically, a Sunnī Malay believer cannot accept the imāmate of the *ahl al-bayt*. Culturally, in their role as ranting and raving persons, the *ahl al-bayt* fit into the negative stereotype of the aggressive Arab who always feels wronged. As observed by Michael Gilsean, 'Arabs' in popular imagery throughout maritime Southeast Asia 'are the channels of Islam, pious, upright, representing learning' and a pure, 'unmixed' religion, but in another field of reference 'Arabs' are 'voracious, lustful, hard, greedy and rough'.¹²⁵

The lofty status of the *ahl al-bayt* is constantly repeated in *Karbala*. For example, Ḥusayn declares that not solely the Prophet Muḥammad received the divine message, but rather the Prophet's family as a whole: 'We are the

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family of the Prophet. It is us, who received the Message. Our house became the common meeting place for angels and the centre of God's mercy. It is because of us that God begins and ends everything.¹²⁶ In another episode (in Act Three) Ḥusayn proclaims:¹²⁷

I am the son of 'Alī, from the tribe of the Hashemites (...). Fāṭima is my mother, and Muḥammad is my grandfather. It is through our intermediary that God demonstrates what is right and what is wrong. We are God's lamps which cast light on the face of this earth.¹²⁸ We are the owners of the pool al-Kawthar,¹²⁹ which will give [water] to drink to our devotees, with cups and vessels of the Messenger. Not a single person can deny our position. Our followers belong to the most excellent community among all creatures, and our enemies are the people who most suffer on the Last Day.

At the beginning of Act Two, Imām Ḥusayn addresses Hurr bin Yazid, telling the latter that he has arrived by invitation of the Kūfāns. As a member of the Prophet's family, he considers himself as the rightful leader. He threatens to leave if the Kūfāns do not acknowledge his right to rulership. After Ḥusayn's rather long oration (taking up a complete page in the script), the deadpan reaction from al-Ḥurr b. Yazīd may be considered funny by a non-Shi'a public: 'I don't know anything about the letters that you're talking about.'¹³⁰ After having been shown the letters of invitation, al-Ḥurr b. Yazīd declares: 'I don't belong to those who have sent these letters. I've been ordered to track your group, and command you to surrender to 'Ubayd Allāh bin Ziyād, the deputy of Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya.'¹³¹ Ḥusayn's aggressive reaction is not quite what one would expect from a saintly hero: '(in a disappointed and angry tone) "May death strike your mother, O Hurr. What do you want from us?"'¹³² In fact, it is al-Ḥurr who shows more politeness than Ḥusayn: 'If it were not for your mother Fāṭima the Luminous, I would certainly use the same words.'¹³³

Ḥusayn delivers a particularly long and wrathful speech in Act Two (pp. 66–71), and the choir twice implores him to stop. In the first intermezzo they sing: 'It is enough Ḥusayn, grandson of the Messenger of God, we are trembling very much as we listen to your curses, O grandson of the beloved of God',¹³⁴ but Ḥusayn still goes on, telling that 'every day is 'Āshūrā', every place is Karbala, and every person is Ḥusayn'.¹³⁵ He is not exactly soft-spoken, and uses threatening and abusive language (e.g. calling 'Ubayd Allāh bin Ziyād a 'bastard's son of a bastard', *anak zina putera si anak zina*).¹³⁶ For a second time the choir tries to intervene: 'Stop it please, O Ḥusayn, we repent, o Husayn, we join forces with your descendants, O Ḥusayn',¹³⁷ but the tirade continues

for another full page of the script. When he is finally finished, the 'godless group' merely reacts with 'Attack and kill Ḥusayn!' ¹³⁸ Again, this very brief, laconic reply of the villains stands in stark contrast to Ḥusayn's long-winded diatribe, which may have an unintended humorous effect upon non-Shi'is.

The humane philosophy of 'Love thy enemies' is not something to which the *abl al-bayt* subscribe. Instead, they view 'religion as blood and punishment'. ¹³⁹ For example, Ḥusayn in his 'farewell address' exclaims: 'O God. You witness Yourself what godless (*derhaka*) things are done to me by your servants. O God, destroy them. Annihilate them. Don't let a single one remain on the face of this earth. Don't have mercy on them.' ¹⁴⁰ In the last Act, towards the end of the play, Fatima binti Husayn (Fāṭima bint al-Ḥusayn), who has been taken captive after the massacre, delivers a rancorous speech in which she lashes out at the treacherous Kūfans: ¹⁴¹

Hey Kūfans! Hey you schemers and cheaters! We are truly the family of the Prophet, tested by God with your unreliable attitude and complete insincerity. You all have brought catastrophe upon us. Contrary to all expectations, however, this will bring fortune upon us, and God has blessed us with His knowledge, and we are the treasury of knowledge and wisdom, and we are the proofs and signs of God's greatness above His servants.

God has glorified us with the glory of my grandfather [*datukku, sic*] the Messenger of God (PBUH), who possesses a glory superior to all creatures. Conversely, you have deceived us and cheated us, and you consider the killing of us as *ḥalāl*, and you have looted our possessions.

The 'human' aspect of her words comes to the fore in the cursing of the enemies, promising eternal revenge: ¹⁴²

Perhaps you look at us now with happy eyes, and your hearts are perhaps filled with joy? God will contrive an appropriate vengeance on you. God possesses tricks superior to your gimmicks. [...] To hell with you all, and just wait for the curses and torments, which God will bring upon you.

There are several more instances in the play in which members of the Holy Family fly into a rage and this may lend them a human face, but does not necessarily make them sympathetic to a non-Shi'a Malay public. The play ends with Zaynab's relatively long oratory which, according to historians of religion, appears to have established 'the practice of praising Ḥusayn and vilifying his killer'. ¹⁴³ Zaynab is known in Shi'i hagiography as such an empowering figure that one scholar has dubbed her the 'co-hero of Karbalā', along with her brother, the 'martyred Imām Ḥusayn'. ¹⁴⁴ Shi'i sources report that 'she recited such a moving oration that she brought even the Umayyad troops guarding

the prisoners to tears'.¹⁴⁵ However, in Faisal Tehrani's rendition the audience may only hear an outraged woman, who curses the Kūfans, and is talking most angrily. The stage direction indicates that her voice should be a mixture of sadness, anger, zest and charm.¹⁴⁶ Vocal virtuosity is thus called for, but her hell-and-brimstone message is anything but charming. She tells the Kūfans, who are symbolical representatives of the Sunnīs, that they will eternally dwell in hell, and her final words are: 'Hey, what kind of community are you?!'¹⁴⁷ The latter outcry is a fine example of *Publikumsbeschimpfung* or 'Offending the Audience' if ever there was one.

Writing for change

During an interview in 2008, Faisal Tehrani gave a broad overview of his literary career, which had begun when he was sixteen following a creative writing course at the DBP. He admits that, at first, writing was 'more of an ego thing, a glamour thing, a money thing', and that he even produced some erotic literature in his youthful years, but on turning twenty-two he changed: 'I wanted to become a responsible writer. I wanted my writing to change society for the better.'¹⁴⁸ Going through his already impressive *oeuvre*, we notice that in his role as historical fiction author, he displays a certain fondness for epic struggles of cosmic dimensions between the forces of good and evil and a penchant for vendetta, set against the background of unjust suffering. In *1515* the protagonist is a Malay historian who rewrites the unfair colonial history that had put an end to the Golden Age of the Malays, and it is his pen which definitively makes Muslim Malays defeat the infidels from Portugal. In another prize-winning novel, *1511H [Kombat]* (1511 Hijri [Combat]), which takes place in the future, the year 1511/2087, a high-tech war takes place between 'Islam' and 'the *kafirs*' (i.e. America and its ally Israel in their stock roles), in which the fantasy of many of Faisal Tehrani's young readers comes true when Muslim soldiers take over the White House.¹⁴⁹ For Malaysian readers the play *Karbala* may perhaps seem to explore an unfamiliar and even controversial terrain, but viewed against the background of the earlier novels *1515* and *1511 [Kombat]*, which are highly popular and have won great acclaim, I think that there is some truth in Marcel Proust's saying that great authors are basically always writing the same book.