

*Karamah* (‘marvel’): an exploration of the literal and ethnographic meaning of miracles among Shia female artists in Kuwait

Nada Al-Hudaid

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## ***Karamah* ('marvel'): an exploration of the literal and ethnographic meaning of miracles among Shīa female artists in Kuwait**

Q1

Nada Al-Hudaid \*

Q2

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This position paper examines new forms of painted artworks made by pious Shīa female artists in Kuwait, which treat imagery and experience known as *Karamah* (pl. *Karamat*), commonly understood as 'miracle'. I examine current anthropological considerations of 'miracle' and I find that the most suitable translation of the Arabic word *Karamah* may be 'marvel', rather than 'miracle', although how Shīa use and understand 'karamah' may differ regionally. Fieldwork interviews and ethnography reveal that the paintings objectify the relationship between people and the family members of the Prophet Mohammed known as Ahl Al-Bayt. I argue that the new forms and, increasingly, exhibitions comprise important forms of 'service' dedicated to Ahl Al-Bayt.

**Keywords:** miracles; *karamat*; *karamah*; Shi`a art; Kuwait; Ahl Al-Bayt;

Q3 Islamic art; materiality

In 2012 when I was at the art studio, I began my painting by putting on the background colour. I wanted to paint the background with the colours of a sunset. I did it with another woman who was helping me. I was gradually building the colours from black, yellow, orange to red as I prepared it for the idea I wanted to paint. The idea was the Lady Zaynab<sup>1</sup> (peace be on her) on the morning of the 10th of Muharram<sup>2</sup> when she was collecting Imam Hussein's children (peace be on him) to protect them. This was the idea, ok? While I was preparing the background with red in the spot where I wanted to paint Lady Zaynab's face, I gasped hard and felt a deep pain in my heart. I walked back from the painting quickly and said 'oh wow, my heart hurts ... I don't know why ... the red colour is strong'. I felt like ... I don't know ... something like goosebumps. My heart hurt me and I gasped from the colour. I felt the colour was very influential. I then continued to finish making the rest of the colours gradually and then I stopped working on it.

I was working on the painting horizontally. The woman who was helping me took the painting from the stand to store it at the back of the studio so it could dry. She placed it vertically. I left the studio and the next day Umm

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Q4 Mohammed<sup>3</sup> sent me a photo [through the studio's private WhatsApp group and said, 'it is a beautiful painting, see how the man looks very sad'. I was confused as I had not painted anything and my idea was to draw Lady Zaynab anyway, not a man. The other women in the studio told Umm Mohammed [through the WhatsApp group] that it was only a background and that I had not painted anything yet. You remember what I told you about that location on the canvas that I felt pain when I put the red colour on it? In that spot exactly, a face had formed on it.

Some people see the face looking straight at them and some see it is as a profile. It is the face of a man wearing a black turban, his head is facing down, and his hand is on his head. There is a stroke of blood near him. It is the place where I felt pain when I touched it. You can also see that his tears are blood. Others suggested that I try to copy this face onto another canvas. I tried but it was not as beautiful as the original. We put the original in the exhibition the way it was, on a painting stand. People were circling it and moving around it and keep seeing different things, such as small children, graves, Imam Hussein's dome, a lady holding a baby and so on. People were extracting things from this painting, more than I was able to see. The painting can be displayed both horizontally and vertically. There were people who actually did flip the painting in the exhibition and saw more things in it. Thank God, Ahl Al-Bayt<sup>4</sup> glanced at my painting and it got a *karamah*.

This essay introduces the meaning of a 'miraculous' experience known as *Karamah* (sing.) and *Karamat* (pl.) in the context of pious Shia artists in Kuwait. The story quoted above, told to me by Wafa, an artist in her early twenties, concerns a *karamah* experience that is widely talked about and illustrated in [Figure 1](#).

Wafa's story was one of the countless accounts I heard during field-work<sup>5</sup> about the *Karamat* of *Ahl Al-Bayt*.

It is widely understood that miracles play a major role in the everyday spiritual and material life in most world religions. For example, understanding the motivations and experience of mass pilgrimage to shrines of Catholic Saints needs to examine the narratives of miracles as they provide specific sensory engagements and encounters with saints and their miraculous interactions (Bigliardi 2013). Similarly, for much religious experience in Islam, miracles can provide further insight to understand why people do what they do. Despite the commonality of 'miraculous' experience worldwide, there is no universal definition of miracles for philosophers, theologians and social scientists, nor for anthropologists.

The present paper aims to contribute to the study of miracles and contemporary Islamic art in several ways. First, I provide an ethnographic vignette of a Shia female artist with her painting and how she experienced a *karamah*, what is generally understood as 'miracle', but which I will examine as 'marvel'. Most scholarship that studies Islamic art in relation

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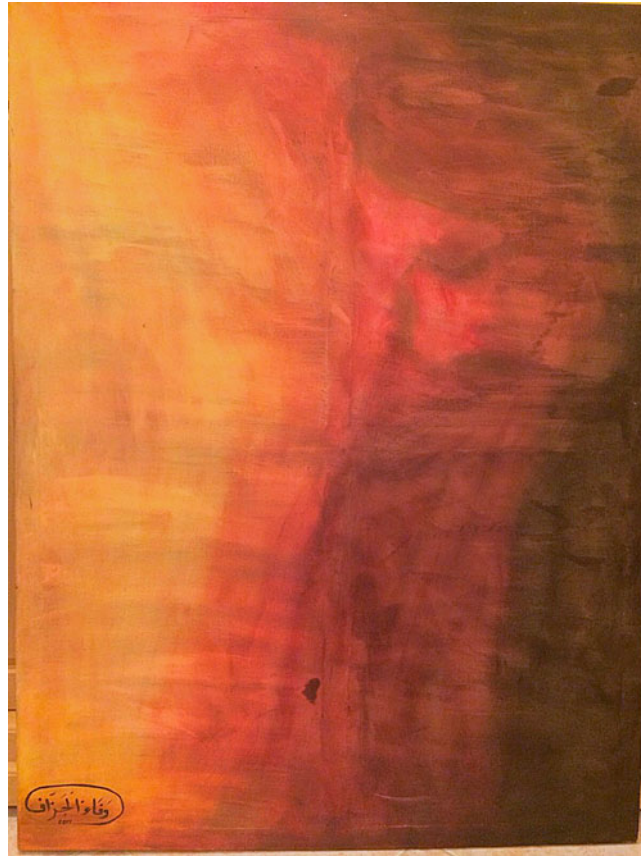


Figure 1. Karamah painting by Wafa, 2015. Oil on canvas, 36 × 48 cm. Photograph by author.

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to miracles focuses on the commemoration of miracles in architecture and shrines (Asher 2015). The focus on pious Muslim artists in the Arab world and Islamic painting is not familiar despite its popularity in several Arab countries, especially among Shia Muslims. Furthermore, narratives of miracles from women's perspective in relation to art have also been understudied (Sirriyeh 2015). *Karamah* painting provides multi-layered insights into how art is used as an expressive tool to reflect deeply held beliefs and values that permeate social life and activities across Shia Muslim society.

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The process of the production of *Karamat* cannot be reduced to the reproduction of a ritual process. It is rather a result of a lifelong commitment of serving *Ahl Al-Bayt* through various paths known as *Khidmah* (sing. 'service') and making art is one of them. *Karamat* occurs regularly during the process of *Khidmah*. The latter is an act of doing something useful under the name of *Ahl Al-Bayt* by Shia to other Shia, for instance cooking and distributing meals during sermons, preaching and completing

other activities that help spread the knowledge and maintain the remembrance of *Ahl Al-Bayt*. The role of art is important in this process as it enables experiences such as miracles to materialise into forms that can be seen and touched.

125 Second, I briefly discuss how the current study of miracles in anthropology continues to have deficiencies. I examine different meanings given to the Arabic word '*Karamah*' and argue that it is best translated as 'marvel' not 'miracle' in English when concerning the context of Shìà artists in Kuwait. Definitions of what miracles actually are understood to mean are still overlooked as anthropologists tend to rely on early works that blurred the line between magic and miracles (Shanafelt 2004). Similarly, in Arabic studies on Shìà doctrines, the interpretation of the term *Mu'jizat* (miracles) is not only different but become a differentiating factor between which religious scholars are more convincing to mainstream society (Bigliardi 2013). Although dreams and miracles are central to everyday life in the Middle East, there are few dedicated studies (Mittermaier 2015) and debates concerning the degrees of validity among philosophers and theologians (Bigliardi 2013).<sup>6</sup>

140 The question that this essay poses and attempts to answer is 'what role do *Karamat* play in Shìà art?'. To help address this, I want to first provide the necessary background information on Shìà in Kuwait and their art activities. Then, I discuss the definitions and translations of the term 'miracle' in Arabic and English, then turn to examine the social and literal meanings of the term '*Karamah*'. In the conclusion, I examine the role and understandings of *karamah* specifically among Shìà artists in Kuwait.

### 150 Shìà art and *Khidmah* service in Kuwait

155 According to the official government website, Kuwait is a country of 17,820 km<sup>2</sup> in the north-east corner of the Arabian Peninsula, bordering Iraq and Saudi Arabia.<sup>7</sup> Although oil is its only source of income, Kuwait is the fifth richest country in the world. In addition, the Kuwaiti government is a constitutional monarchy that follows the Sunna branch of Islam. Considered by many to be the first liberal country on the Arabian Peninsula, Kuwait is an important hub for artists from around the Arab world. Indeed, many famous Arab Gulf actors and singers attribute their success to the training and experience they received in Kuwait. Kuwait has approximately 4.7 million people (ca. 1.4 m citizens and 3.3 non-citizens), of which 30% are Shìà, including Ahmadi and Ismaili sects considered by the government as Shìà as well. In comparison to most other Arab countries, Kuwait is one of the few countries that give rights to Kuwaiti Shìà and treat them equally to their Sunni counterparts (Alhabib 2010).

165 The integration of Kuwaiti Shìà has its origins in the 1930s, when the  
Kuwaiti Amir asked Shìà residents to ally with him in opposition to  
groups who were against the ruling family. Many Shìà, including notable  
merchant families, stood with the Amir. As a consequence of these ties,  
the situation of Shìà in Kuwait became more stable. Many Shìà have  
since been able to hold important positions in various economic and gov-  
ernment posts, unlike many Arab countries in which they are considered  
second-class citizens (Jamal 2005; Louër 2008).

170 Throughout history, Shìà faced oppression in various forms due to their  
ideological and political positions. The largest sects within Islam are Sunna  
and Shìà. Sunna Muslims believe that the Muslim *umma* (nation) should  
be ruled through the election of a leader, while Shìà believe that the  
Prophet Mohammed appointed his cousin as his successor and that leader-  
ship is hereditary in Ali's bloodline through the children that he had with  
175 Fatima, the Prophet's daughter. The strong emergence of Shìà traditions  
began after the slaughter of Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet of  
Islam, along with 72 of his friends and family by Yazid, the ruler at that  
time (Ali 2006; Campbell 2010). This event occurred on 10 October,  
A.D. 680 (*Muharram* 352 A.H.<sup>8</sup>) in Karbala, a city in Iraq. The day  
180 Hussein was killed is called *Ashura*, which means 'the tenth', denoting  
the tenth day of the Arabic month of *Muharram* in which imam Hussein  
and his friends were slaughtered.

185 According to the common narrative repeated by Shìà, during the rule of  
Yazid, people in Iraq had asked for Hussein to move to Karbala and act as  
their leader. Hussein, however, was not happy in Mecca because he did not  
conform to the Sunna regime, which suppressed him and his followers. He,  
*therefore*, considered this an opportune time to leave the political chaos in  
Mecca and find peace in Iraq. Hussein departed with his entire family and  
many of his devoted followers. On reaching the city of Karbala, he discov-  
190 ered that he had been deceived. By order of Yazid, he was followed to Iraq  
to be assassinated in order to eliminate the issue of leadership between  
Sunna and Shìà. The Battle of Karbala then took place and he was killed.  
The heads of those slain, along with whoever was left alive including chil-  
dren and women as hostages, were taken to Yazid. Today, Karbala houses  
195 the shrine of Hussein and the graves of many of those who were killed with  
him. It subsequently became a Mecca for Shìà, and millions visit the city  
annually. Ever since the incident of Karbala, Shi`a perform annual  
rituals and rites to keep the memory of *Ahl Al-Bayt* alive. This resulted  
in the creation of many ceremonies and modern adaptations for remem-  
bering Hussein, including the production of art.  
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The art practice that I focus on in this paper is painting. Shìà art in  
Kuwait is diverse from performative (theatre and singing) to visual (paint-  
ings, photographs and films). The employment of painting as part of reli-  
gious practice started in the seventies. In the early 1970s, Dr Abdel

Mehsin Al-Sayigh graduated with a PhD in Fine Art from the United States. When he returned to Kuwait, he worked as a full-time professor at the University of Kuwait. Along with a few other Shìa artists, Al-Sayigh started painting pieces that incorporated stories of *Ahl Al-Bayt* and gave them as gifts to different *Husseinyyat* (rooms or buildings dedicated for events related to *Ahl Al-Bayt*). He said that they started making paintings and sending them to exhibitions abroad, which encouraged them to host important Shìa artists in Kuwait.

Until 2011, Shìa artists for the most part created works as solo artists, mainly on non-religious art. A young man approached Dr Al-Sayigh and asked him to start an organisation that could bring all artists together under one name. This resulted in *Mihrab Al-Finoon*, the first Shìa artists' organisation in Kuwait. Since then, the idea of having yearly exhibitions in the name of Hussein was adopted, and the idea of 'serving' through art became more and more common among non-artists. New kinds of religious art exist and are now exhibited in Kuwait.

Figures 2 and 3 show part of the annual exhibition during Muharram to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. All types of paintings are accepted regardless of their quality and size because the main objective is to contribute with anything that will help share a side of the story of Hussein. Artists of all ages strive to contribute, as this is understood as service '*Khidmah*'.



Colour online, B/W in print

Figure 2. Annual exhibition on Imam Hussein, with mix of oil and acrylic paintings. Ebra and Abra – Imam Hussein Exhibition, 2015. Photograph by author.

Colour online, B/W in print



Figure 3. Annual exhibition on Imam Hussein, with mix of oil and acrylic paintings. Such exhibitions are becoming regular events. Ebra and Abra – Imam Hussein Exhibition, 2015. Photograph by author.

Figure 4 is a painting by a young woman in her late teens showing the hand of Hussein's brother, Abbas, in the moment it was cut while he was carrying water to the thirsty children of Hussein in the desert of Karbala.

Figure 5 is by Balqees Albd Al-Razaq, an artist well-known among many Shīa Kuwaitis. Similar to Figure 4, it shows the moment Hussein fell from his horse and the enemies approaching him for capture and torture. Many of the stories that artists paint come from the sermons they hear on a regular basis. The examples shown in this essay draw from stories that are well-known among most Shīa. The captions on these paintings do not need to explain much apart from the title because visitors, mostly Shīa, understand the context immediately.

### Definitions and translations: 'A miracle is a type of marvel'

The term 'miracle' does not fully define the meaning of *Karamah*. When I first began research, I used the word miracle to translate the Arabic word *karamah*. But I was not satisfied that it was the correct term, as there is another Arabic word for miracle, *mu'jizah*, which was almost never used in my fieldwork. This difference in meaning in Arabic made me explore English publications on the meaning of miracle.

Most literature on the anthropology of miracles assume the meaning of miracles to be experiences that occur and do not have scientific



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Figure 4. *The Hand of Abbas*, no artist attribution. Oil on canvas, 36 × 48 cm. Ebra and Abra – Imam Hussein Exhibition after Muharram, 2015. Photograph by Author.

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Figure 5. Balqees Albd Al-Razaq, *The Fall of Imam Hussein*, oil on canvas, 180 × 120 cm, 2015. Photograph by author.

325 explanations (Ashe 1978; Gable 2002; Lambek 1993; Tambiah 2017; Waida 1986). Shanafelt's (2004) article, 'Magic, Miracle, and Marvels in Anthropology', discusses the limitations we have in the definitions and terminology for miracles, and emphasises that there are no clear-cut distinctions in what is a miracle and what is magic. Shanafelt (2004) analyses the different theoretical work that discussed these terms and showed how after the creation of monotheist religions, the term magic was somehow replaced by miracle, suggesting a specific hierarchical ordering and understanding of miracles as having more positive outcomes and associations. Magic came to be understood as an act of unmediated connection with the objects of desire whereas miracle occurs by God through intermediaries such as saints, angels or sacred relics. For Shanafelt (2004), anthropology did not pay much attention to this difference. Much of what is understood as witchcraft is applied to miracles, resulting in generalisation or imposing definitions of what a miracle or magic is. He found that 'miracle' is generally used as the interference of God in the human world through divine agents in order to produce supernatural occurrences. Some authors do not reference God when defining miracles and instead they state paranormal phenomena.

340 According to Shanafelt (2004), 'marvel' may be a better general term than 'miracle'. He notes that 'miracle' derives from the Latin word, *miraculum*, which means 'an object of wonder', but today has lost the particular meanings centred on 'divine interventions, supernatural wonders, and other paranormal phenomena without the implied hierarchy of monotheism or traditional anthropology'; rather, today, miracle can merely describe unusual (secular) happenstances (Shanafelt 2004, 321–322). In lieu, he advocates that 'marvel' better encapsulates the extraordinary wonder that has physical consequences as a result of ultra-natural forces. Shanafelt (2004, 322) thus sees 'miracle' to be 'a special type of marvel that yields positive results, traditionally ascribed to the power of the divine'. Miracles are directly associated with monotheistic religions whereas marvel opens up the consideration of other forces as a source of supernatural power.

355 The significance of these definitions is important because the term *Karamah* is used to describe Shīa miracles in a distinctive way that not many Sunna people in Kuwait otherwise use. It becomes an useful analytical tool for understanding how Shīa *Karamat* are context-specific and may not be applicable to other Islamic sects. I would like to note that 'marvel' does not translate as *karamah* specifically. 'Marvel' translates as *o'jubah* ('wonder') which is a type of miracle depending on the context. The actual meaning of *karamah* will be explored in more detail in the next section. I found 'marvel' to be a better alternative to 'miracle' due to its versatility, as Shanafelt advocates. In short, we can still consider *karamah* as a type of marvel, but I contend that it is not a miracle in the customary sense.

### Q5 *Meaning of Karamah in social contexts and in Islamic literature*

365 <sup>^</sup> *Karamah* is often translated to English by my research participants as 'miracles', for lack of a better word. When I ask what is a *karamah*, they say, 'it is like a miracle'. But if it is not really a miracle, then what is it? I asked many people and they found it difficult to define. Some said *karamah* is an explanation for things that happen but have no scientific explanation for. Others said it is a gift in the form of divine manifestation. One thing that they all agreed on is that the source of these experiences comes from *Ahl Al-Bayt*. This is where ethnographic work becomes such a valuable tool in unravelling complex and multi-layered meanings. *Karamah* is a phenomenon that many Arabic and Shia scholars agree on and they usually define it as evidence of sincere interactions between pious people and *Ahl Al-Bayt* (Al-Abtahy 2005; Hadraj 2003a, 2003b; Khalaf 2003).

370 According to the online Arabic dictionary, *AL-Ma'any*, the term *karamah* (sing.) [pl. *karamat*] derives from the Arabic noun *karam* which means 'generosity'. It can be transformed into a verb and be ascribed a range of meanings such as 'hospitable', 'kindness', and 'respectable'. The word *karamah* has a range of meanings as well, depending on how it is used in a sentence. For instance, if it is used with the article 'the' (*al-karamah*) it can mean either a jar cover or a supernatural ability that comes from God or his guardians. In the Arabic dictionary, the word *karamah* alone does not have a meaning, as it needs to be attached to another word to generate sense, like '*karamat Ensan*' which means human dignity. The addition of the letter 't' at the end of *Karamah* serves as a pronoun to indicate that it is the dignity of a human. Another example of how this word is used is when saying '*huban wa karamah*' meaning 'most surely' – it translates literally as 'with love and dignity/generosity'. This is expressed when you want to reassure someone that you are doing something for their sake.

380 However, *karamah* has several additional meanings among people beyond the dictionary definitions. The social contexts of words are important in order to understand the norms and habits of how they are used. For example, I grew up in Yemen knowing this word as *dignity*, and we use it as a noun on its own, for instance saying '*mafee karamah*' meaning without dignity. When I moved to Kuwait in 2004 and started to attend Shia events and meet people there, I learnt that the meaning of *karamah* in the Shia context is very different. This term became part of my focus in fieldwork after I noticed its constant use in varying situations. For example, people who attend sermons regularly and cry for Hussein say they have seen many *Karamat* happen to them and their family as a result, such as having pressing problems solved or serious diseases cured. In other

words, they used the term differently from how I knew it. In the beginning, I thought it meant the generosity of Ahl Al-Bayt, but this is only one way that it may be utilised by Shìà. Before examining how *karamah* is used in my research context, I would like to give a brief overview of how other scholars describe it.

Islamic literature uses the term ‘miracles’ in English and *muʿjizat* in Arabic (Bigliardi 2013). One of the few texts that treats *karamah* is Mittermaier’s (2015) chapter on ‘Dreams and the Miraculous’, which discusses the difference between the Arabic terms *karamat* and *muʿjizat*. She states that the latter is used among Christians and the former among Muslims in Egypt. She discusses how Muslims use *karamat* in reference to the miraculous deeds of saints which are different from those of the prophets. In the case of Muslims, according to Mittermaier, miracles (*muʿjizat*) are a speciality of prophets. In the sections below, I will show that these usages do not match Shìà understandings or usages of the term *karamat*.

### ***Karamah* meanings for Shìà artists in Kuwait**

Aside from Arabic Shìà books that are specifically written on *Karamat* (Al-Abtahy 2005; Hadraj 2003a, 2003b; Khalaf 2003), the term *karamat* is not common in scholarly work. I found that the way *karamat* and miracles are understood in Egypt differs from my experience with Shìà in Kuwait. For example, Mittermaier’s account (2015) finds that *karamat* is used to refer to saints’ deeds, such as being healed after visiting a saint’s shrine, whereas *muʿjizat* is used in the same context but for Christian Egyptians. Also, for Muslim Egyptians, she states that *Karamat* is a quality attributed to saints, whereas *muʿjizat* is the same but for Prophets.

For Shìà in general, they may use *Karamat* and *muʿjizat* interchangeably when referring to saints’ deeds; for the Prophet they refer to his deeds as *muʿjizat*. I found that Shìà in Kuwait never used *muʿjizat* to refer to marvel experiences involving *Ahl Al-Bayt*. The only time they mentioned it was if I brought it up; finding it hard to distinguish, they ended up conceding that both words mean the same. But observation says otherwise. *Karamat* is a particular experience that is only used in relation to *Ahl Al-Bayt*’s communication with their followers.

In addition, Shìà believe that saints also perform miracles, and the term *karamat* only indicates the generosity of the saints towards their followers. Such a slight difference in the term is not an issue, but can overshadow an important understanding of how Shìà perceive the saints in relation to the Prophet. In this case, saints are as important as the Prophet for Shìà and they are capable of performing miraculous acts, such as walking over water, reviving the dead and speaking to animals.

How Mittermaier explained them is not necessarily wrong as the terminology can be region- and context-specific. But I would argue that there may be a greater cross-cultural essence in the term *Karamat*, but it is less explored term than ‘miracles’ in the Muslim world; this also helps to explain the lack of scholarly focus on concepts of presence and objectification in Islam. *Karamat* requires a dedicated and sharper focus on how people use and understand it. If my fieldwork had not focused on *Karamat*, I would have arrived at conclusions similar to Mittermaier (that it is a term used to describe deeds of saints and in reference to being healed after attending religious sermons, for instance).

I asked Umm Khalid<sup>9</sup> to tell me what *karamat* meant because she is well known to experience them regularly, and she explained:

To be honest, I can't lie to you and tell you I know the exact meaning of what *karamah* means, but to us it is the occurring of miracles [*ma'ajiz*] to people. I mean ... what is *karamah*? *Karamah* is when someone is sick and goes to visit the Imam and asks him to heal and it happens, this is a *karamah* from the Imam. I think *karamah* is the things that happen for ordinary people from the Imam. Do you understand me? For instance, we made something and if I want to see if it is accepted [by *Ahl Al-Bayt*] then I dream, or I paint something and it becomes a different painting and things like this are *karamah*. I think it is a *karamah* from the Imam (peace be upon him) to ordinary people like us. This is considered a *karamah* from them to us. From their generosity to us. They bless us with their generosity by answering our prayers, healing us, allowing us to see things. All these are *karamat*. For example, some people see Lady Zahra [Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet] in a religious sermon, like a lady who attended one of the sermons I hosted in my house many years ago at an event to recognise the death of Lady Zahra. One of the attendees was a woman who had been trying to get pregnant for more than ten years. The tradition is to cover our faces with a transparent black cloth when crying in sermons. This woman cried a lot during the event and asked Lady Zahra for help, and she saw a woman dressed in black and fully covered, including her face, approach her, bend towards her and put a baby on her lap. After the surprise, the woman removed her transparent cloth to see what had just happened and when she did, there was no baby and no woman bending towards her. Nine months later, she gave birth to a girl and named her Fatima. This is a *karamah* from Fatima Al-Zahra.

From this description, it becomes clear that *karamah* is seen as a blessing or gift. Also, it is notable that Umm Khalid used *mu'jizat* synonymously, to signal a term that she knows I understand. She mentioned it only once then went back to give examples of how *karamah* can be many things. In other contexts, like Wafa (the artist in the introductory vignette presented earlier), *karamah* was more like a surprise for something that previously was uncertain. In another example of a woman who was not able to give birth, she made a pact with Imam Hussein that she would go to the

Fatimi studio<sup>10</sup> to paint and if he answered her prayer, she would dress the whole studio with black for Muharram (this is a traditional practice of pious Shia). The following year, Umm Mohammed (the owner of the studio) was surprised to see the studio already decorated in black as she was planning to do it the next day. The woman had fallen pregnant and therefore she fulfilled her promise. In this case, *karamah* was more like an exchange than a gift.

When I asked Umm Mohammed about Wafa's painting and the *karamah* she received, she told me that *Ahl Al-Bayt* have special ways to communicate with people. And although Wafa was not a regular in her studio, she had a pure heart and they rewarded her in this way in order for her to strengthen her faith and stay attached. I learned not to ask many questions in such cases; otherwise, I risked not being told the details as many Shia artists fear being judged as superficial. So I waited for other *karamat* to happen and then asked another set of questions. Through ongoing observation and noting how they use this term, it turned out to be a very versatile concept, encompassing meanings of a miracle, marvel, wonder, gift, blessing, reward, generosity, divine mediation, and connections with the world of *Ahl Al-Bayt*.

Serving through art sometimes resulted in having oneiric experiences such as *Karamat*. Such experiences transform people personally and socially and cause the formation of bonds between the artists and *Ahl Al-Bayt*. Wafa was deeply impacted by this painting (Figure 1) and she told me how people's attention to her work made her feel happy because *Ahl Al-Bayt* recognised her efforts to serve them despite her busy schedule. She gradually became more dedicated to *Khidmah* not just through painting but through performing religious songs in women-only religious gatherings, weddings and other similar events. Wafa's painting was only one example out of many I encountered in which the lives of women and men get transformed personally and/or socially due to experiences they had with their act of serving through art. Oneiric experiences while on services are not confined to art scenes only but they actually emerged from the traditional forms of service like cooking, preaching and so on. Many of the people I met had experiences of *Karamat* because of a specific *Khidmah* service they made. In these cases, art reflects and mobilises the core values and beliefs that the individual has of their immediate environment.

In summary, *Karamat* have important, multi-faceted roles in Shia art and society. The occurrence of a *karamah* brings immense spiritual and social value for the subject and strengthens the ties between *Ahl Al-Bayt* and the artist. The art informs about the sociability of pious women and the process of piousness they take. There is a growing culture of pious art and there are developing networks of practitioners among Shia in different countries which also sheds light on the type of relationship they have with the divine and *Ahl Al-Bayt*; in these, *karamah* can act as a

525 blessing and a reward. Framing these artworks under the category of Islamic art will necessarily widen the scope of what is considered 'Islamic art'. The paintings depart from customary emphasis on geometrical/architectural work by featuring depictions of faces and humans. Both are uncommon and points of contestation for Shia groups. More interdisciplinary dialogue regarding contemporary religious art in relation to oneiric experience will further illuminate the meanings and artful manifestation of what a 'miracle', a 'marvel' or a '*karamah*' is.

### 530 Notes

1. Granddaughter of Prophet Mohammed.
2. The day grandson of Prophet Mohammed, Hussein, was slaughtered in Karbala, Iraq.
3. Retired school art teacher and owner of the art studio.
- 535 4. Family member of Prophet Mohammed.
5. The research presented in this essay is based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork on Shia artists in Kuwait in 2015 for my doctoral thesis.
6. See Bigliardi (2013) for more in-depth analysis and overview on the literature about studies of miracles.
- 540 7. URL: [www.e.gov.kw](http://www.e.gov.kw), official Kuwaiti government website, accessed 1 February 2019.
8. 'A.H.' stands for After Hijra (migration) and it denotes the date when the Prophet migrated from Mecca to Madina.
9. Umm Khalid is in her mid-1960s and a retired nurse and public servant. She is one of the most well-known religious statue artists in Kuwait since 2004. Her statues are made from flexible iron wires and cotton rolls. Her statues are incorporated in religious sermons as part of her demonstration of specific incidents that happen to Ahl Al-Bayt. She also makes statue exhibitions of individual members of Ahl Al-Bayt, like Zaynab (The Prophet's granddaughter), which focus on showing the different episodes of their lives (e.g. birth to death).
- 545 10. The Fatimi art studio (meaning the studio of Lady Fatima, daughter of Prophet Mohammed) is a large room (7 × 5 m) located at the third floor of Umm Mohammed's house which exclusively for Shi'a women who want to learn how to paint for *Ahl Al-Bayt*. Umm Mohammed is a mid-forties retired school art teacher who dedicated her time to teaching other Shi'a women how to paint for *Ahl Al-Bayt* free of charge.
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↑ Campbell, H. 2010. *When Religion Meets New Media*. New York: Taylor.

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