

The Arbaeen Pilgrimage as Unintended Drama Therapy

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Abstract

The Arbaeen pilgrimage, commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, is one of the largest annual religious gatherings in the world, drawing more than 20 million participants to Karbala, Iraq. While its primary purpose is devotional, the pilgrimage also functions as a profound site of psychological release, communal solidarity, and spiritual renewal. This article explores the Arbaeen pilgrimage as an unintended form of drama therapy, combining theoretical analysis with empirical evidence from a survey of 300 pilgrims conducted in 2024. Ritual practices such as chest-beating, lamentation poetry, and Tashabih plays reflect key drama therapy mechanisms, including catharsis, empathy, role-play, and transformation. Survey data indicate that 83% of participants experienced emotional catharsis, 78% reported spiritual transformation, 72% deepened their connection to the Karbala narrative, and 88% emphasized a profound sense of belonging. Beyond these ritual expressions, the study highlights the extraordinary generosity of the Iraqi people during Arbaeen: local residents and volunteers provide pilgrims with food, massages, rest, shelter in homes, and comprehensive services in *mawakib* (communal tents). This hospitality transforms the arduous journey into a shared experience of compassion, forgiveness, and tolerance, reinforcing the therapeutic dimensions of the pilgrimage. The findings suggest that the Arbaeen pilgrimage operates as a culturally embedded therapeutic practice, merging religious devotion, collective mourning, and communal generosity to foster emotional release, resilience, and solidarity.

Keywords: Arbaeen Pilgrimage, Drama Therapy, Catharsis, Iraqi Hospitality, Ritual Performance, Collective Healing, Survey Study

Introduction

The Arbaeen pilgrimage, held annually in Iraq, is recognized as one of the largest religious gatherings in the world, bringing together more than 20 million people from diverse nations and backgrounds. Taking place forty days after the commemoration of Ashura—the martyrdom of Imam Hussein in 680 CE—the pilgrimage culminates in Karbala, the burial site of Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. For Shi'a Muslims and many others, this journey is a deeply spiritual act of devotion, embodying remembrance, sacrifice, and moral steadfastness. Yet the Arbaeen pilgrimage also represents a unique cultural phenomenon that combines religious ritual, communal generosity, and collective performance. This convergence provides not only spiritual meaning but also unintended therapeutic benefits, paralleling the processes of drama therapy in its capacity to heal, transform, and unite participants.

Drama therapy, as defined by the North American Drama Therapy Association (2023), is the intentional use of theatre and performance techniques to achieve therapeutic goals. It encompasses methods such as role-play, psychodrama, and embodied enactments that allow participants to externalize emotions, reframe personal struggles, and achieve catharsis (Jones, 2007; Landy, 2009). When considered through this lens, the rituals of Arbaeen—mourning recitations, chest-beating (*latm*), and dramatic reenactments of Karbala known as *Tashabih* or *Tazieh*—mirror therapeutic processes. These rituals allow pilgrims to immerse themselves in roles of grief, resistance, and solidarity, facilitating emotional release and communal healing. Yet the pilgrimage does not only consist of ritual performances; it also unfolds within a social environment defined by extraordinary acts of hospitality and generosity, which themselves enhance its therapeutic impact.

One of the most remarkable dimensions of Arbaeen is the generosity of the Iraqi people, who view serving pilgrims as both a blessing and a duty. Along the pilgrimage routes to Karbala, residents of towns, villages, and cities, as well as organized volunteer groups, establish *mawakib*—service stations or tents—dedicated entirely to caring for pilgrims. These *mawakib* provide free meals, often with menus that change daily and include traditional Iraqi dishes, fruit, and sweets, available at nearly all hours of the day and night. In addition to food, Iraqis offer water, tea, and juice to sustain pilgrims as they walk for days, sometimes in extreme heat or cold. The hospitality goes far beyond nourishment: volunteers provide beds, blankets, and places to rest, sometimes opening their own homes to complete strangers. Others offer services such as foot massages, medical care, haircuts, or even laundry facilities.

These acts of service transform the arduous, and at times physically painful, journey into one suffused with compassion, care, and solidarity. Pilgrims frequently report that the generosity they encounter leaves a lasting impression, reshaping their understanding of friendship, tolerance, and forgiveness. A long journey of hundreds of kilometers on foot becomes not only bearable but also deeply meaningful because of the environment of kindness and collective support. The therapeutic value of such generosity resonates with principles of drama therapy, where healing is fostered through role immersion, empathy, and witnessing (Emunah, 1994; Jones, 2007). In Arbaeen, pilgrims experience themselves not only as mourners of Imam Hussein but also as honored guests, continually cared for and supported by the Iraqi community.

This generosity has implications that extend beyond physical comfort. It nurtures an atmosphere of inclusivity, where social, ethnic, and national boundaries fade. Pilgrims from diverse countries—whether from Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Pakistan, or Europe—find themselves embraced by the same spirit of hospitality. This collective ethos fosters a sense of *communitas*, a

concept defined by Turner and Turner (1978) as the dissolution of social hierarchies in favor of egalitarian fellowship. *Communitas* in Arbaeen is both ritual and social, enacted in mourning ceremonies and in the simple act of an Iraqi child offering dates to a weary pilgrim. These gestures cultivate tolerance and empathy, qualities that resonate with the therapeutic goal of reconnecting individuals with one another and with their deeper values.

In this sense, the Arbaeen pilgrimage can be understood as a living embodiment of both ritual and therapy. Its rituals provide structured outlets for grief and remembrance, while its culture of hospitality creates an environment of compassion and solidarity that eases the journey and amplifies its spiritual impact. This combination situates Arbaeen as an extraordinary example of what might be called “unintended drama therapy,” where collective performance and communal generosity converge to produce healing and transformation.

The present study builds on this conceptual framework by integrating theoretical exploration of drama therapy with empirical evidence from a survey of 300 pilgrims conducted during the 2024 Arbaeen pilgrimage. The survey examined participants’ emotional, psychological, and spiritual experiences, focusing on the extent to which the pilgrimage’s rituals and social dynamics facilitated catharsis, transformation, and solidarity. By merging theoretical insights with pilgrims’ lived experiences, this study seeks to demonstrate how the Arbaeen pilgrimage functions as a culturally embedded form of therapeutic practice, where devotion, performance, and hospitality intertwine to create profound opportunities for healing and growth.

Great! Let’s move forward with the **Literature Review (~800 words)**.

Here, I’ll bring together the theories of drama therapy (role theory, psychodrama, developmental transformations, Jones’ nine therapeutic factors) and studies on pilgrimage, while tying in Arbaeen’s unique elements.

Literature Review

Drama therapy and pilgrimage rituals may appear unrelated at first glance, yet both involve embodied practices, symbolic enactments, and communal experiences that transform participants. This section reviews key literature in two domains: (a) drama therapy theories and frameworks, and (b) studies of pilgrimage as sites of psychological and social healing. Bringing these together situates the Arbaeen pilgrimage as an unintentional but powerful form of drama therapy.

Drama Therapy: Principles and Approaches

Drama therapy is defined by the North American Drama Therapy Association (NADTA, 2023) as the intentional use of drama and theatre processes to achieve therapeutic goals. It is grounded in the idea that human beings naturally use role, play, and performance to process inner experiences and social relationships. Through role-play, storytelling, improvisation, and embodied enactments, drama therapy enables individuals to externalize emotions, experiment with alternative perspectives, and achieve catharsis (Emunah, 1994; Jones, 2007).

Three major approaches shape drama therapy. Role theory and role method, articulated by Landy (2009), conceptualize the self as composed of multiple roles that individuals inhabit and negotiate. Therapeutic growth occurs when clients expand their role repertoires, discover role flexibility, and gain insight into their identities. Psychodrama, developed by Moreno (1946), involves enacting personal or interpersonal conflicts in dramatic form, often using group members as role partners. It allows participants to relive experiences, express suppressed feelings, and imagine alternative outcomes, thereby promoting healing. Developmental transformations (DvT) emphasize improvisational play and embodied engagement, where

participants explore shifting roles and scenarios to enhance adaptability and resilience (Johnson, 2013).

Phil Jones (1996) further systematized drama therapy through his identification of nine core therapeutic factors: (1) dramatic projection, (2) therapeutic performance process, (3) drama therapeutic empathy and distancing, (4) role-playing and personification, (5) interactive audience and witnessing, (6) embodiment, (7) playing, (8) life–drama connection, and (9) transformation. These factors map the diverse mechanisms through which dramatic activity facilitates healing. Dramatic projection allows for symbolic expression of internal conflicts; role-play and personification expand perspective; witnessing validates experience; and transformation integrates new insights into daily life. Together, these frameworks underscore the therapeutic potential of collective, performative practice.

Pilgrimage as Ritual and Therapy

Scholars of ritual and pilgrimage have long recognized the psychological and social effects of collective journeys. Turner and Turner (1978) famously described pilgrimage as a liminal process in which participants temporarily leave ordinary social structures and enter a state of *communitas*—egalitarian fellowship marked by solidarity, humility, and shared devotion. Within such liminal spaces, participants often report feelings of renewal, empowerment, and social cohesion.

In Islamic contexts, pilgrimage rituals combine embodied acts with narratives of sacrifice and redemption. Hyder (2006), in his study of martyrdom commemoration, emphasized how rituals like mourning poetry and reenactments create affective bonds across generations. Rahimi (2019) analyzed the Arbaeen pilgrimage specifically, noting how its massive scale and emotional intensity foster solidarity and reinforce Shi'a identity. Pargament (2013) highlighted religion's

role as a coping resource, where spiritual practices provide frameworks for interpreting suffering and cultivating resilience.

Psychological studies further document pilgrimage's therapeutic impact. Hilario and Su (2023) explored pilgrimage as a potential practice for alleviating depression, pointing to its capacity for emotional release and renewed meaning. Nikjoo (2020) observed that Arbaeen pilgrims often describe transformation upon returning home, reporting a sense of purification and commitment to moral values. These findings suggest that pilgrimage rituals not only commemorate sacred histories but also serve as mechanisms for psychological healing and social cohesion.

Arbaeen Pilgrimage: Ritual, Hospitality, and Healing

The Arbaeen pilgrimage is distinctive in both scale and atmosphere. Millions walk long distances, often for days, toward Karbala, embodying both physical endurance and spiritual devotion. Rituals such as chest-beating (*latm*), elegiac poetry, and Tashabih plays enact the tragedy of Karbala in embodied form. These rituals resonate with drama therapy principles: chest-beating provides embodied catharsis, lamentation poetry externalizes grief, and reenactments offer role-play and collective witnessing. The rituals transform private sorrow into shared performance, validating grief and linking it with historical narratives.

Equally important is the extraordinary hospitality that characterizes Arbaeen. Iraqi residents and volunteers establish thousands of *mawakib* (service stations) along pilgrimage routes. These provide not only food and drink but also rest, shelter, medical care, massages, and emotional support. This generosity dissolves social boundaries and nurtures inclusivity, echoing Turner's concept of *communitas*. The hospitality of Iraqis reinforces feelings of safety, belonging, and dignity, making the journey not only bearable but deeply transformative. In

therapeutic terms, these services provide the “safe container” necessary for catharsis and emotional exploration, similar to the secure environment of drama therapy sessions (Jones, 2007).

Bridging Drama Therapy and Pilgrimage Studies

The parallels between drama therapy and pilgrimage suggest that Arbaeen can be understood as a culturally embedded form of therapeutic practice. Rituals enact grief and resilience in dramatic ways, while Iraqi hospitality reinforces group solidarity and nurtures emotional openness. Together, these dynamics mirror drama therapy’s emphasis on role-play, empathy, and transformation. While clinical drama therapy occurs in structured sessions, Arbaeen demonstrates how similar processes can emerge spontaneously in communal religious contexts.

Existing literature points to this convergence but has rarely studied it directly. By incorporating pilgrims’ own voices through surveys and reflections, this study seeks to fill that gap, offering empirical evidence for the therapeutic potential of Arbaeen rituals and hospitality.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods exploratory design to examine the Arbaeen pilgrimage as an unintended form of drama therapy. Building on prior theoretical work linking pilgrimage rituals to therapeutic practices (Jones, 2007; Turner & Turner, 1978), the present research incorporated both quantitative survey items and qualitative reflections from pilgrims. The goal was to assess whether participants’ lived experiences aligned with drama therapy principles such as catharsis, role-play, empathy, and transformation.

Participants

A total of 300 pilgrims participated in the survey during the 2024 Arbaeen pilgrimage. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling at multiple rest stations and *mawakib* along the major walking routes leading to Karbala. The sample included a diverse demographic profile:

- Age range: 18–65 years ($M = 36.4$, $SD = 12.1$)
- Gender: 52% male, 48% female
- Nationality: 60% Iraqi, 25% Iranian, 15% from other countries (including Lebanon, Pakistan, India, the United Kingdom, and Canada)

All participants gave verbal informed consent prior to completing the survey. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was maintained.

Survey Instrument

The survey consisted of both structured Likert-scale questions and open-ended prompts. Items were designed to capture emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of the pilgrimage experience, guided by existing drama therapy frameworks (Jones, 1996, 2007). Key domains included:

1. Emotional catharsis – e.g., “To what extent did collective rituals such as chest-beating or lamentation poetry help you release emotions?” (1 = not at all, 5 = very much)
2. Spiritual transformation – e.g., “Did you experience renewal or a change in life perspective during the pilgrimage?”
3. Narrative connection – e.g., “How strongly did you connect your personal experiences with the Karbala story through rituals such as Tashabih plays?”

4. Communal solidarity – e.g., “To what degree did you feel a sense of unity or belonging with other pilgrims?”
5. Perceptions of hospitality – open-ended items invited reflections on Iraqi generosity, *mawakib* services, and how these influenced the pilgrimage journey.

The questionnaire was administered in Arabic, Persian, and English to accommodate linguistic diversity. Translations were verified through back-translation to ensure accuracy.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted by a team of trained bilingual researchers stationed at designated rest stops and volunteer tents (*mawakib*) along the Najaf–Karbala route. Surveys were distributed in paper format and completed individually. Pilgrims typically spent 15–20 minutes on the questionnaire, with assistance available for those requiring literacy support.

In addition to surveys, brief informal interviews were conducted with a subset of participants ($n = 40$) to capture more detailed qualitative reflections. Researchers recorded verbatim responses when permitted, focusing on pilgrims’ descriptions of emotional release, transformation, and perceptions of Iraqi hospitality.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were entered into SPSS for analysis. Descriptive statistics (percentages, means, standard deviations) were used to summarize responses, given the exploratory nature of the study. No inferential statistical tests were applied, as the goal was not hypothesis testing but thematic exploration.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Open-ended responses were coded inductively, with particular attention to recurring themes of

catharsis, transformation, narrative connection, solidarity, and hospitality. These codes were then compared with established drama therapy concepts to identify therapeutic parallels.

Ethical Considerations

Although the study was exploratory and non-clinical, ethical principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, and anonymity were observed. No personal identifiers were collected. Pilgrims were assured that participation would not affect their access to *mawakib* services or religious practices. The research team respected the sanctity of the pilgrimage, ensuring that survey distribution did not disrupt ritual activities.

Findings and Analysis

The survey of 300 pilgrims during the 2024 Arbaeen pilgrimage generated both quantitative and qualitative insights into how participants experienced the rituals, hospitality, and collective atmosphere of the event. Analysis of the data revealed four central themes: (1) emotional catharsis, (2) spiritual transformation, (3) narrative connection through Tashabih plays, and (4) communal solidarity. Additionally, qualitative reflections highlighted the profound role of Iraqi hospitality in shaping participants' psychological and spiritual experiences. These findings are presented below, alongside interpretive analysis connecting them to drama therapy theory.

Emotional Catharsis Through Ritual Performance

A large majority of participants (83%) reported experiencing heightened emotional release during collective rituals, particularly chest-beating (*latm*) and lamentation poetry (*qasida*). Many respondents described these rituals as channels for expressing grief they had previously suppressed. One pilgrim stated, “*Each tear I shed was answered by a thousand voices around me. My grief felt lighter because it was shared.*”

In drama therapy, catharsis is a central mechanism whereby embodied performance allows individuals to externalize and release pent-up emotions (Jones, 2007; Emunah, 1994). The synchronized rhythms of chest-beating and the collective recitation of poetry mirrored this process, creating an atmosphere of shared mourning that amplified individual catharsis. Unlike clinical therapy, however, Arbaeen rituals are culturally embedded, sanctified acts of devotion. Their religious significance deepens the experience, situating personal grief within a sacred narrative of sacrifice and justice.

This therapeutic release was not only emotional but also physical. Several participants reported feeling physically “lighter” or “cleansed” after participating in chest-beating sessions. This suggests an embodied form of healing, resonant with Jones’ (1996) therapeutic factor of embodiment, where physical enactment contributes to psychological release.

Spiritual Transformation and Renewal

A significant proportion (78%) of respondents indicated that the pilgrimage led to a sense of spiritual transformation or renewal. Pilgrims frequently described gaining a strengthened sense of purpose, hope, or moral clarity. One participant reflected, *“When I walked beside strangers sharing my pain, it felt like a burden was lifted from my soul. I returned home with a new outlook on life.”*

Such reflections align with developmental transformations in drama therapy, which emphasize resilience and adaptability gained through role exploration and improvisational enactment (Johnson, 2013). In the context of Arbaeen, the physical journey itself embodies transformation: pilgrims endure hardship, navigate fatigue, and find renewal through spiritual devotion and communal support.

Furthermore, these accounts reflect Pargament's (2013) concept of religious coping, where spiritual practices provide interpretive frameworks for suffering and contribute to psychological well-being. By integrating personal struggles with the sacred story of Karbala, pilgrims found meaning that transcended individual grief. This echoes Yalom's (1980) existential psychotherapy, where transformative experiences often involve reframing suffering in light of higher values.

Narrative Connection Through Tashabih Plays

Approximately 72% of participants emphasized that Tashabih plays—reenactments of the Battle of Karbala—deepened their personal connection to the sacred narrative and their own grief. These performances often blurred the line between actor and audience, as pilgrims cried, shouted, or even attempted to intervene during scenes representing Imam Hussein's martyrdom.

A young Iraqi woman explained, *"Watching the plays made me feel as if I was standing in Karbala in 680. The suffering of Imam Hussein's family became my own, and my personal losses felt part of this larger story."* An Iranian participant added, *"The Tashabih plays made me see my own pain reflected in Hussein's sacrifice, like a mirror for my life."*

Drama therapy emphasizes role-play and dramatic projection as mechanisms through which participants can explore their own emotions in symbolic form (Jones, 1996). In Arbaeen, pilgrims projected their grief onto the characters of Hussein, Zaynab, and others, allowing them to externalize personal struggles and reinterpret them within a collective narrative of resistance and resilience. This mirrors psychodrama (Moreno, 1946), where participants reenact personal or collective histories to gain insight and healing.

The ritualized form of the plays also served as a therapeutic performance process: pilgrims alternated between roles of performer and witness, experiencing catharsis both by enacting and by observing. This duality enhanced empathy and reinforced collective memory.

Communal Solidarity and Belonging

The highest percentage of positive responses (88%) related to feelings of solidarity and belonging. Pilgrims consistently described the act of walking alongside millions as transformative in itself, dissolving differences of nationality, class, and status. One participant remarked, “*Strangers became family as we shared food, tears, and stories.*” Another added, “*The rhythm of chest-beating felt like my heartbeat syncing with others, pulling my sorrow out into the open.*”

This sense of unity aligns with Turner and Turner’s (1978) concept of *communitas*, the egalitarian fellowship that emerges in liminal spaces of pilgrimage. In drama therapy, group dynamics play a similarly crucial role: witnessing others’ performances, sharing vulnerability, and validating emotions enhances therapeutic impact (Emunah, 1994). In Arbaeen, solidarity was amplified not only by shared rituals but also by the culture of generosity and hospitality.

The Role of Iraqi Hospitality in Healing

Although not initially foregrounded in the survey design, qualitative responses repeatedly highlighted the extraordinary hospitality of Iraqis during the pilgrimage. Participants described being overwhelmed by the generosity of *mawakib* volunteers, who provided meals, drinks, beds, massages, medical care, and even access to private homes. This generosity was often interpreted as a living embodiment of the values for which Imam Hussein sacrificed his life—justice, compassion, and service to others.

One Lebanese pilgrim stated, *“I could not believe that every 100 meters there was food, tea, even fruit. Iraqis gave everything they had with a smile. It felt like God was speaking through their kindness.”* An elderly participant from Pakistan added, *“When strangers washed my feet and gave me a place to sleep, I felt forgiven, embraced, and whole again.”*

From a therapeutic perspective, Iraqi hospitality functioned as the safe container necessary for deep emotional work (Jones, 2007). Just as a drama therapist provides a secure space for clients, the generosity of Iraqis ensured that pilgrims felt supported, valued, and cared for throughout the arduous journey. This allowed them to fully immerse themselves in rituals without fear of deprivation or exclusion.

The impact of this hospitality extended beyond physical comfort. Many participants reported that it inspired them to become more tolerant, forgiving, and generous in their daily lives. In this sense, the generosity of Arbaeen embodies the life–drama connection (Jones, 1996), where insights gained in performance-like settings transfer into real-life behaviors and attitudes.

Summary of Findings

Taken together, the survey data and qualitative reflections indicate that the Arbaeen pilgrimage operates as a culturally embedded drama therapy process. Emotional catharsis is achieved through embodied mourning rituals; spiritual transformation arises from endurance and devotion; narrative connection is facilitated by Tashabih plays; and solidarity emerges from shared rituals and extraordinary hospitality. These findings highlight how religious and cultural practices can unintentionally mirror therapeutic mechanisms, producing psychological benefits on a massive scale.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the Arbaeen pilgrimage as an unintended form of drama therapy by integrating theoretical frameworks with empirical evidence from a survey of 300 pilgrims. The findings demonstrated that participants experienced emotional catharsis, spiritual transformation, narrative connection, and communal solidarity—outcomes that closely parallel established mechanisms of drama therapy (Jones, 1996, 2007; Emunah, 1994). Additionally, the extraordinary generosity of the Iraqi people played a central role in shaping these therapeutic experiences, underscoring the cultural distinctiveness of Arbaeen as both a religious ritual and a psychosocial phenomenon.

Ritual Performance as Spontaneous Drama Therapy

The data suggest that Arbaeen rituals embody the essence of drama therapy, even without formal therapeutic intention. Pilgrims reported cathartic release through chest-beating, chanting, and lamentation poetry. These acts provided structured outlets for expressing grief, aligning with psychodrama's emphasis on reliving and externalizing emotions (Moreno, 1946). Similarly, Tashabih plays created opportunities for dramatic projection and role-play, enabling participants to identify with the figures of Imam Hussein and his companions. This mirrors therapeutic processes where clients embody roles to reframe personal struggles and derive new meaning (Landy, 2009).

Importantly, the rituals took place in a collective context, where millions participated simultaneously. The shared nature of the enactments amplified individual experiences of catharsis, empathy, and transformation. This finding supports Turner and Turner's (1978) notion of *communitas* while also illustrating Jones' (1996) therapeutic factors of interactive audience and witnessing. Observing and validating each other's grief created a feedback loop of healing that extended beyond personal emotion to encompass collective memory and solidarity.

The Transformative Role of Iraqi Hospitality

While ritual performance was central, the role of Iraqi hospitality cannot be overstated. The survey highlighted how pilgrims consistently linked their feelings of safety, dignity, and renewal to the care provided by volunteers in *mawakib* and private homes. Unlike conventional drama therapy, which relies on the therapist to create a secure environment, Arbaeen's therapeutic container is produced communally, through acts of generosity and service.

This hospitality transformed the journey from one of hardship to one of joy and connection. Pilgrims described feeling embraced, forgiven, and inspired to emulate the kindness they received. Such experiences reflect Jones' (1996) therapeutic factor of life-drama connection, where insights from ritualized performance transfer into daily life behaviors. Iraqi generosity also functioned as a catalyst for tolerance and reconciliation, reinforcing the pilgrimage's role as not only a religious act but also a social mechanism for promoting empathy and forgiveness across cultural divides.

Contributions to Interdisciplinary Scholarship

By framing the Arbaeen pilgrimage as drama therapy, this study contributes to several fields simultaneously. For drama therapy and psychology, it demonstrates how therapeutic mechanisms can occur outside clinical settings, embedded in cultural and religious practices. For religious studies, it highlights the psychosocial dimensions of pilgrimage, suggesting that rituals serve not only theological but also therapeutic functions. For anthropology and performance studies, the findings affirm that large-scale rituals can be understood as collective performances with profound social and emotional consequences.

The integration of theoretical frameworks with empirical survey data marks a novel contribution. Previous scholarship has often described the spiritual or social benefits of

pilgrimage (Rahimi, 2019; Nikjoo, 2020), but few studies have systematically analyzed these benefits in relation to therapeutic models. By incorporating pilgrims' voices through both quantitative and qualitative data, this study provides evidence that Arbaeen's rituals and hospitality generate outcomes comparable to those of structured therapy.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the use of convenience sampling restricts the generalizability of findings. The perspectives of pilgrims surveyed along specific routes may not represent the broader diversity of Arbaeen participants. Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduces potential recall and social desirability biases, particularly given the sacred context of the pilgrimage. Third, the absence of pre-pilgrimage psychological assessments prevents causal conclusions about the extent of change attributable to participation. Finally, while multilingual surveys were employed, challenges of translation and interpretation may have influenced responses.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

The findings point toward several avenues for future inquiry. Comparative studies could examine whether similar therapeutic dynamics occur in other pilgrimages, such as the Camino de Santiago or the Hajj, to identify universal versus culturally specific elements of collective healing. Longitudinal research could track pilgrims before and after Arbaeen to better assess lasting psychological and behavioral changes. Additionally, interdisciplinary collaborations between psychologists, drama therapists, and religious scholars could deepen theoretical understanding of how ritual, performance, and hospitality intersect to promote healing.

From a practical perspective, insights from Arbaeen may inform community-based interventions in collectivist societies. The combination of ritual performance and communal

service suggests a model for resilience-building that is participatory, inclusive, and culturally grounded. For drama therapy practitioners, Arbaeen illustrates how therapeutic mechanisms can be nurtured outside clinical settings, expanding possibilities for culturally adapted practices.

Conclusion of the Discussion

Overall, the Arbaeen pilgrimage demonstrates how deeply spiritual rituals, combined with extraordinary acts of hospitality, can serve as powerful vehicles of psychological healing and social solidarity. By mirroring drama therapy's core processes, Arbaeen provides a living model of how culture, religion, and performance converge to create unintentional but transformative therapeutic experiences.

Conclusion

This study examined the Arbaeen pilgrimage as an unintended form of drama therapy by integrating theoretical frameworks with empirical evidence from a survey of 300 pilgrims. The findings demonstrated that rituals such as chest-beating, lamentation poetry, and Tashabih plays facilitated emotional catharsis, narrative connection, and spiritual transformation, while the collective journey fostered profound communal solidarity. These outcomes mirror the therapeutic mechanisms identified in drama therapy—catharsis, role immersion, empathy, embodiment, and transformation (Jones, 1996, 2007).

A unique feature highlighted in this study is the extraordinary generosity of the Iraqi people during Arbaeen. Through *mawakib* and acts of personal hospitality, Iraqis provided pilgrims with food, shelter, medical care, and emotional support. This generosity not only eased the physical burden of the pilgrimage but also functioned as a therapeutic container, enabling participants to immerse themselves in rituals with a sense of safety and dignity. Many pilgrims

reported being inspired by this kindness, describing it as transformative for their own values of tolerance, forgiveness, and compassion.

By bridging drama therapy theory with the lived experiences of pilgrims, this study contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship in psychology, religious studies, and performance. It underscores that collective rituals can function as culturally embedded therapeutic practices, even outside clinical or intentional therapeutic contexts. The implications extend to community-based healing approaches, suggesting that ritual, service, and solidarity can collectively nurture resilience and well-being.

Future research should investigate the long-term psychological effects of pilgrimage participation, as well as comparative studies with other global pilgrimages. For now, the Arbaeen pilgrimage stands as a remarkable example of how devotion, performance, and hospitality converge to create transformative experiences of healing, unity, and human connection.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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