

ANĪS AND THE MARSIYA

Mīr Babar 'Alī Anīs¹ was born in Faizabad in 1803 A.D., to a distinguished and fairly prosperous family. His great grandfather, Mīr Ghulām Ḥusain Zāhik, a contemporary of Saudā and Mīr Taqī Mīr, was famous in Delhi for his satirical and humorous verse, and was made the subject of a number of Saudā's satirical poems. Like many of the eighteenth-century Urdu poets, who depended for their livelihood on the patronage of rich nobles, Mīr Zāhik migrated to Faizabad which was rapidly taking the place of Delhi as a great cultural centre. Mīr Zāhik was accompanied by his son, Mīr Ghulām Ḥasan (Anīs' grandfather), the author of the famous Urdu masnavī, Sihṛ ul Bayān. Mīr Ḥasan also wrote a divān of Urdu poetry which was (and still is) much admired. When Āṣaf ud Daula transferred his capital from Faizabad to Lucknow, where the enormous Imāmbāra² was erected, Mīr Ḥasan changed his residence and lived in Lucknow for the rest of his life. He died in 1795 A.D. Mīr Ḥasan's son, Mīr Mustahassan Khaliq (Anīs' father) was highly regarded in his time as an Urdu poet and received instruction from Mushafī, the ustād of Navvāb Sulamān Shakoh. Although he wrote ghazals and other forms of lyric poetry, he was chiefly renowned for his marṣiyas which were rapidly becoming an integral part of the Muḥarram celebrations in Lucknow. Among his contemporaries were other famous marṣiya writers like Mīr Zamīr,³ Miyān Dilgīr and Mirzā Faṣīh, whose works are still available but tend to be known only by a select band of Shi'a devotees. Mīr Khaliq, however, is said to have surpassed them all. Anīs, had two illustrious brothers, Mīr Uns and Mīr Mūnis, who also followed the family tradition of marṣiyagōī.⁴

As is often the case with famous Urdu writers, little is known about Anīs' early life. He was no doubt given a traditional Shi'a education in

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1. babar - a Persian word meaning 'lion', cf. asad, haidar 'lion', particularly applied to 'Alī 'the Lion of God' - elements frequently found in Shi'a names.
 2. A building in which the ta'zias (replicas of Husain's tomb) are kept and where offerings are made to the dead. Meetings are held there in the month of Muḥarram.
 3. The ustād of Dabīr, discussed below. The word marṣiya is derived from an Arabic word meaning 'to weep' or 'to mourn', and means simply an 'elegy' on someone's death. In Urdu it usually, unless otherwise specified means an elegy on the death of Ḥusain.
 4. 'The composition of marṣiyas' as opposed to marṣiyaxwānī 'the recitation of marṣiyas.'

Faizabad and Lucknow, and it is clear from his poetry that he had a vast knowledge of Arabic and Persian as well as of the colloquial forms of his own mother tongue. One of his favourite devices is to use 'Hindi', Arabic and Persian words which are near synonyms in the same line or verse. For example:

sāvant burdbār falakmartabat diler
'ālī-manish vighā meñ sulemān sabā meñ sher¹

Such display of one's command over the language (even though some words would be incomprehensible to most) was greatly admired, and is a feature commonly found in the works of many Lucknow poets. In some cases, the correct interpretation of a verse depends upon knowing somewhat minor details of Arab history - especially those details to which mainly Shi'as give prominence.

It is known that Anīs studied with two great teachers of the time - Maulvī Najaf 'Alī, a Shi'a mujtahid² and Maulānā Haidar 'Alī, a Sunnī theologian. Nowhere does he mention the name of any poetic ustād, but one imagines that his verses would have been checked by his father to whom he occasionally refers affectionately.

Anīs was a Shi'a by religion and it is known that both his parents were religiously inclined. He seems to have been particularly attached to his mother, an educated lady, whose company may have inspired certain passages in his marṣiyas like the episode in which Zainab gently rebukes her two boys in language reminiscent of Lucknow womens' speech (verses 59-66). That Anīs was an ardent believer is confirmed by the obvious sincerity of his verse and the great respect he shows his heroes.

The majority of Shi'as, of course, firmly believe that 'Alī (the Prophet's cousin and, later, son-in-law) was the rightful successor to Muḥammad, and is thus regarded not as the fourth caliph,³ but as the first Imām. Muḥammad, 'Alī, Fāṭima (Muḥammad's daughter and 'Alī's wife) Ḥasan and Ḥusain ('Alī's two sons) are held in special respect and referred to as the panjtan (the five holy ones). They along with the nine other Imāms who succeeded Ḥusain

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1. Verse 6, translated on page 2 below. In the first line sāvant is a somewhat unusual Hindi word; burdbār and diler are Persian; falakmartabat and 'ālimanish are Arabic.
 2. A spiritual director, usually an expert in Islamic jurisprudence.
 3. Shi'as do not recognize Abū Bakar, Uṣmān and 'Umar, the first three caliphs.

are known as the 'fourteen innocent ones' (cauda ma'sūm) and are thought to have complete control over the world and the laws of nature. Although in this respect all the Imāms are equal and all are thought to be completely infallible, 'Alī and Ḥusain (the first and third Imāms respectively) are in practice given greater prominence by the Shi'as. The twelfth Imām, Muḥammad u' Mahdī is said to have disappeared from the world in 880 A.D. and will finally return to restore justice before the day of judgement.

The defeat and death (or according to both the Shi'as and the Sunnis the 'martyrdom') of Ḥusain at Karbala¹ at the hands of the evil Yazīd was a great blow to those who supported his cause. The Shi'as refused to recognise the caliphs after 'Alī but instead gave their allegiance to the twelve Imāms. Now many Shi'as look upon the battle of Karbala not as a political reversal but as a deeply felt personal tragedy in which wickedness triumphed over good. In the marsiyas which relate the story, therefore, Yazīd and his men are painted utterly black while Ḥusain and his faction are regarded as being completely beyond reproach. In general no attempt whatsoever is made to balance or analyse the historical facts which are interpreted solely from one point of view. According to the marsiya writers, 'Alī and Ḥasan were both killed in the most cowardly fashion, leaving only Ḥusain to protect the family of the Prophet, who were cut off from the waters of the Euphrates. With Zulfiqār, the miraculous sword of 'Alī, in his possession, Ḥusain could not fail to win the battle and it was only when he chose to lay down his arms that the enemy could defeat him.

The events leading up to Karbala took place during the first ten days ('ashra-e avval) of Muḥarram (the first month of the Muslim year). The mourning for Ḥusain's death ('azādārī) is thus carried out at this period of the year. For a convinced Shi'a, Muḥarram is second only to Ramḡān and by some may be considered even more important. During the first ten days of Muḥarram, each morning a meeting (majlis-i 'azā)² is attended often by thousands of people who congregate to hear the events of Karbala related by a professional reciter (zākir). Usually before the zākir's sermon, marsiyas and other shorter compositions such as salāms (which in form and rhyme scheme usually resemble the ghazal), nauhas (extremely pathetic laments) and rubā'īs are also recited by well known poets of the city. The audience participates in the proceedings, much as in mushā'iras, giving credit to particularly good verses (dād denā) or calling for them to be repeated (mukarrar). Since the

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1. A spiritual director, usually an expert in Islamic jurisprudence.
 2. Literally 'a meeting of mourning'.

time of Anīs, marsiyas have usually been written in six line stanzas (musaddas), the last two misra's of each stanza making a particularly forceful or pathetic point. The last verse of each stanza is usually the cue for those listening to beat their breasts or slap their heads and call on the name of Husain (yā husain, yā husain). In order to evoke the desired reaction in the audience, pathos is an essential ingredient of the marsiya and its related genres (salāms, nauhas etc). In general women do not appear in the main body of the congregation, but listen behind a curtain or a wall specially erected for the purpose. Majlises may be large public affairs or small intimate gatherings in private houses to which friends and acquaintances of the host are invited. Increasingly less frequently one hears soz, a short poem set to a classical rāga in which the singer is accompanied either by a musical instrument or a second voice. Many orthodox Muslims, who find music anathema in worship, deplore sozkhānī and for this reason perhaps the art is dying out. Since women cannot openly participate in public (or even private) majlises where men are present, they often arrange majlises for their own, occasionally composing and singing nauhas in their own local dialect (Avadhi and Bhojpuri in Eastern U.P.).

The celebration of the events of Karbala and the public mourning for the death of Husain were well established in India long before the time of Anīs. Muharram was given great importance by the Shi'a kings of the Deccan (16th, 17th centuries), who themselves composed short marsiyas for recitation in the majlises organised in Bijapur and Golkunda (Hyderabad). One of the earliest Urdu compositions we possess is the Nausarhār written by the Ahmadnagar poet Ashraf in the first half of the 16th century. Most Dakanī marsiyas like those of Muhammad Qulī and 'Alī 'Adil Shāh (rulers of Golkunda and Bijapur respectively) in form and rhyme scheme resemble the ghazal. Some later Dakanī compositions however are longer and are written in tarkīb-band form, with a poignant refrain (tīp) at the end of each stanza. One may assume that the tradition of composing marsiyas in Urdu was transmitted to the north during the 18th century after the fall of the Deccan kingdoms and the rise of Delhi as the cultural centre par excellence. It is not certain whether Anīs' great grandfather, Mīr Zāhik, actually wrote marsiyas, but his grandfather, Mīr Hasan, certainly did.

The development of the marsiya from a short lyrical poem expressing grief for the death of Husain into a lengthy narrative poem written in musaddas form, in which the whole story of the battle, the events leading up to it, or one famous episode of it, are treated in great detail, seems to have taken place

mainly in Faizabad and Lucknow during the last part of the 18th and first part of the 19th centuries, when the opulent Shi'a rulers, whose ancestors had come from Iran, (a predominantly Shi'a country), provided the stimulus and the money for 'azadārī' celebrations on a grand scale. The famous celebrations which take place in Lucknow, Hyderabad (where the old standards and banners are still in existence) and to some extent in other Indian and Pakistani cities are unparalleled in any other part of the Islamic world. Even the well known 'passion play' which is staged at Kāzimain in Iraq during Muḥarram has no real connection with the 'azādārī' of the subcontinent. More noteworthy is the fact that the Urdu marṣiya as we know it from the works of Anīs and his equally illustrious contemporary Dabīr has no counterpart in Arabic and Persian literature and is one of the few forms of poetry to which Urdu has an exclusive claim.

As we have pointed out, marṣiyas were mostly (though not exclusively) composed for recitation in the majlises organised for mourning the death of Ḥusain. No less important than the art of marṣiyagoī (the composition of marṣiyas) was the art of marṣiyaxwānī (the dramatic recitation of the poem before an audience). Often the great poets excelled in both. Many stories (some no doubt exaggerated) are told of Anīs' powers of recitation and during his performances he would frequently find himself in a state of ecstasy. It is said that on one occasion so many people came to hear him that the walls of the enclosure where the majlis was due to take place had to be torn down to accommodate the large crowd. Anīs is said to have had such a powerful voice that even those sitting farthest away from him could hear every word.

Like many of his famous Lucknow contemporaries, Anīs was a man of regular habits and was generally loath to change his way of life. He took daily exercise, rode and fenced. He was on the tall side, wore large moustaches and a neatly trimmed beard. He dressed meticulously, never going out without his angarkha and dome shaped Lakhnawī topī. Once he was invited to Hyderabad by Sir Āsmān Jāh Bahādūr to conduct a majlis (majlis parhānā). The organisers were keen that he should put on a turban in the Hyderabad fashion, but even when offered 10,000 rupees to do so he still refused.

During his lifetime Anīs hardly ever ventured outside Lucknow. After the fall of the kingdom of Avadh, however, like so many of his contemporaries, he was forced to go elsewhere in search of patronage, visiting Patna in 1859 and then Hyderabad. He died in 1874 A.D. His works consist entirely of Urdu marṣiyas, salāms and ruba'īs on the subject of the battle of Karbala.

There can be no doubt that Anīs was one of the greatest marṣiya writers and until recently the Urdu marṣiya has been regarded as being almost synonymous with the poetry of Anīs and his famous contemporary, Dabīr, who is discussed below. We have seen, however, that the tradition of composing marṣiyas for recitation goes back at least to the end of the 16th century, and some account must also be taken of the poets of Delhi and Faizabad like Ṣamīr and Khalīq who belonged to the generation before Anīs. Their works are for the most part unedited or untraceable, and comparatively little interest has been shown in them by modern scholars. There were also several notable contemporaries of Anīs who wrote marṣiyas in similar form and style. Among the greatest of these was Mirzā Salāmat 'Alī Dabīr, who was born in Delhi in 1803 (the same year as Anīs). He came to Lucknow with his family when he was still young and was educated there. Dabīr's ustād, Mīr Muḥaffar Ḥusain Ṣamīr (mentioned above) was himself a famous marṣiya writer and is usually credited with the invention of the vision of the marṣiya into its various sections:

- (1) cahra (the introduction in which the scene is set with a description of the morning, the difficulties of the journey to Karbala, verses in praise of God and the Prophet etc.);
- (2) rukhsat (verses in which the hero takes leave of Husain)
- (3) amad (the description of the hero mounting his horse, and frequently verses in praise of the horse);
- (4) rajaz (the hero's account of the exploits of his ancestors);
- (5) jang (a description of the battle often containing verses in praise of the hero's sword);
- (6) shahādat (the wounding and slaying of the hero by the enemy);
- (7) bain (the mourning of the dead hero).

Poets, however, rarely follow this scheme as set out, and although many marṣiyas contain most of the elements described above, it was not felt obligatory to introduce them in strict sequence or to include them all. Verses in praise of the horse (ghore ki ta'rīf) and the hero's sword (talyār kī ta'rīf) are, however, usually found, and often provide the poet with the opportunity to display his talents.

Dabīr was undoubtedly one of the greatest marṣiya writers of his age and his fame soon eclipsed that of his eminent ustād. It was not long before he was recognised by the Avadh court which extended its patronage to him. When the kingdom of Avadh was at its height, Dabīr proved to be Anīs' most formidable

rival, though, in spite of the famous contests which took place between them, the two poets (whose names are often mentioned together in contemporary accounts) always maintained a very cordial relationship with each other. It is even said that when Anīs died, Dabīr gave up writing poetry out of respect for his friend, and composed the following chronogram (tārīkh) for him:

ṭūr-i sīnā be kalīm ullāh o mimbar be anīs

'Mount Sinai is bereft of Moses and the pulpit of Anīs.'

Largely because of the unfavourable comparisons made by later critics like Āzād and Shiblī, Dabīr's poetry became much less popular than that of Anīs, though a number of modern scholars are now beginning to reassess its worth. Dabīr died in 1877 having composed (according to some accounts) something in the region of 3,000 marṣiyas.

Muḥarram is still celebrated in Lucknow and elsewhere much in the way described above. For the first ten days of the month, Shi'as (and some Sunnis as well) fast or eat only simple food, and regularly attend majlises. Marṣiyas are still composed not only by Muslims but even by Hindus, some of whose compositions are highly thought of. On the tenth day, ta'zias (replicas of Husain's tomb) are paraded through the streets and are taken to one of the many imābaras or 'Karbala' in the city. Celebrations also take place in Āsaf ud Daula's Imābāra and at the Shāh Najaf, an ornate replica of the tomb of 'Alī (who is buried at Najaf in Iraq) built in Lucknow. Rivalry between Sunnis and Shi'as is such that when their respective ta'zia processions meet fights often ensue and it is common for a curfew to be imposed on Lucknow until the tenth day!

Throughout Muḥarram, but especially on the tenth day, a number of colourful (and sometimes distasteful) acts of mourning (mātam) take place, one of the most famous being the āg kā mātam, in which the faithful are invited to call upon the name of Husain and walk barefoot on live embers in the court-yard of the Āsafiya Imābāra. Others like chhuri kā mātam, in which people cut themselves with knives (often sustaining serious injury) and zanjīr kā mātam (flagellation with chains to which blades are attached) are also popular, though usually frowned upon by more enlightened people. According to what seems a peculiarly Indian tradition, Qāsim is said to have been married at Karbala (cf. verses 80-81). For this reason in Lucknow on the eighth day, a boy, dressed as a bridegroom, is seated on an elephant and songs known as menhdi ('henna' applied to the hands and feet of bridegrooms) are composed for the occasion. Allusions to the wedding of Qāsim are frequently made in 19th century marṣiyas.

The following marṣiyas - one of Anīs' best known and most often quoted - is an account of the battle of Karbala from the early morning, when the heroes wake up and prepare for war, to the late afternoon when Ḥusain is finally martyred. It culminates in Zainab's impassioned cry to the soul of her dead brother before she is taken captive by the enemy. The account proceeds episodically from start to finish, though the poem cannot easily be divided according to the ideal scheme set out above. This is in fact the case with most marṣiyas, whatever their subject, and it is often difficult to say exactly where the cahrā ends and the āmad begins, or indeed if any of the sections can be termed cahrā, āmad etc. in accordance with the traditional definition.

We have already pointed out that historical accuracy was not given great priority by marṣiya writers, and in this poem, the events that Anīs chooses to describe or the facts that he throws into relief are those calculated to arouse the emotion of his audience, who in turn would not expect or even desire an unbiased historical analysis of the battle of Karbala.

Perhaps one of the most notable features of the marṣiya from the point of view of the western reader is the lack of realism and the apparently blatant contradictions which occur in the poem. For example, Anīs sees no difficulty in describing the desert where his heroes are stated to be suffering from thirst and heat as a green and verdant garden planted with luxuriant trees and flowers where nightingales sing, perched on the dew-filled roses (verses 15-17). Some modern Urdu critics, who are perhaps over-zealous in pointing out the shortcomings of their literature vis-à-vis that of the west, have often made the same reflection, though such lavish descriptions would have delighted rather than disappointed Anīs' audience, and even now would be regarded by most people as testimony to Anīs' great poetic art. The fact that they are lacking in reality would be considered irrelevant, and it can always be argued that it is Ḥusain's miraculous presence which transforms the sand of Karbala into such a wonderful paradise.

Exaggeration, plays on words and puns which might seem outrageous to the modern westerner, oxymorons (violations of logic) and the occasional forcing of reasonable syntax are features found in the Urdu poetry of most periods, but are perhaps more often associated with the poets belonging to the 'Lucknow school' such as Inshā, Ātish and Nāsikh - contemporaries or near contemporaries of Anīs. The marṣiya writers, who aimed to dazzle an already ecstatic

audience with their command of language and rhetoric (cf. verse 7) put all these devices to good use and sometimes indulged in the most extraordinary flights of fancy. Because of Husain's presence, the lowly desert of Karbala appears to be higher than the empyrean itself, and Saturn (the planet of the seventh heaven) is mystified to see a tenth and hitherto non-existent sky above him (verse 21). The heat which Husain valiantly suffers is so burning that the pupils of the eyes, with blistered feet, take refuge behind the fragrant-grass screens of the eyelashes (verse 118). Salamanders, which normally prefer the hot sand and shun water, are obliged to hide themselves with the fish in the waves of the Euphrates, which turn into skewers in order to roast them alive (verse 116). Examples of such amazing metaphors and similes, which were, and still are, very much admired can be multiplied ad infinitum.

The main purpose of the marṣiya was to remind people of the sad events of Karbala and hence (as far as the Shi'a are concerned) of their own desperate plight which can be directly ascribed to those events. Thus, an important aspect of the marṣiya is the unashamed pathos which is achieved in a number of ways. The final verse of the six-line stanza, to which the audience would react most strongly, often contains a direct and poignant summary of the rest of the verse. Every opportunity is taken to mention the pathetic state of the little children (with emotive, simple Urdu phrases like nanhe nanhe bacce) suffering from the heat or killed by the arrows of the heartless foe. The women, like Zainab (verses 20, 31, 62 etc.), are made to speak in a simple, almost colloquial, form of Urdu which everyone in Lucknow who has heard a dying mother or grief-stricken sister would instantly recognize. Husain's reasonable entreaties for peace are met with the gruff insults of the unprincipled enemy, who are not content merely to kill the hero but must decapitate him and stick his head on a pole for his captive relations to see (verses 188-193).

The audience, consisting mostly of convinced Shi'as, would of course be thoroughly acquainted with all the events described in the poem and would have heard them repeated over and over again since their childhood. Even now, however, the pathos achieved by the great marṣiya writers like Anis rarely fails to produce genuine tears and sincere exclamations of grief even among ordinary people with little formal education or literary training.

The language, allusions and figures of speech used by marṣiya writers are undoubtedly difficult even for many Urdu speaking scholars who have not been brought up in the tradition. Some of the high-flown Arabic expressions and

recherché 'Hindi' words employed in this marsiya cannot be found in standard Urdu dictionaries. Tradition and constant attendance of majlises from childhood, however, provide the special education required for appreciating the poetry, and although it would be an exaggeration to say that a Shi'a peasant from a small town like Jaunpur would be able to understand every word, he may in some cases be able to provide a clearer exegesis than a Sunni professor from Delhi who had never taken the trouble or had the inclination to enquire into the background from which the marsiya sprang.¹

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1. Some years ago I attended a majlis in a village near Jaunpur, given by a famous zakir from Lucknow. The audience was large and consisted for the most part of farmers and labourers. The zakir spoke clearly but, apart from taking the trouble to translate Arabic quotations, made no special attempt to simplify his Urdu. The audience listened almost spellbound for well over three hours. Conversations with people afterwards revealed that little of the zakir's rhetoric had been lost on them and many were able to give detailed accounts of marsiya gōi. Everyone I spoke to had heard the name of Anis, and some (who otherwise had only a hazy idea of the rest of Urdu literature) could quote verses from his poems.