ANIS AND THE MARSIYA

Mir Rabbâr 'Ali Anîs was born in Faizabad in 1803 A.D., to a distinguished and fairly prosperous family. His great grandfather, Mir Gholâm Ḥusain Zâhîk, a contemporary of Saudâ and Mir Taqî Mir, was famous in Delhi for his satirical and humorous verse, and was made the subject of a number of Saudâ's satirical poems. Like many of the eighteenth-century Urdu poets, who depended for their livelihood on the patronage of rich nobles, Mir Zâhîk migrated to Faizabad which was rapidly taking the place of Delhi as a great cultural centre. Mir Zâhîk was accompanied by his son, Mir Gholâm Ḥasan (Anîs' grandfather), the author of the famous Urdu masyâvâ, Sihr ul Bayân. Mir Ḥasan also wrote a diwân of Urdu poetry which was (and still is) much admired. When Aṣâf ud Daula transferred his capital from Faizabad to Lucknow, where the enormous Imâmârâ was erected, Mir Ḥasan changed his residence and lived in Lucknow for the rest of his life. He died in 1795 A.D. Mir Ḥasan's son, Mir Mustâhassan Khalîq (Anîs' father) was highly regarded in his time as an Urdu poet and received instruction from Nushâfî, the ustâd of Nâvâb Sulemân Shakoh. Although he wrote ghazals and other forms of lyric poetry, he was chiefly renowned for his marsiyas which were rapidly becoming an integral part of the Muḥarram celebrations in Lucknow. Among his contemporaries were other famous marsiya writers like Mir Zamîr, Miyân Dilgîr and Mirzâ Faṣîh, whose works are still available but tend to be known only by a select band of Shi'a devotees. Mir Khalîq, however, is said to have surpassed them all. Anîs, had two illustrious brothers, MirUNs and Mir Mûnis, who also followed the family tradition of marsiya.
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:

sāvent burdār falakmarṭabat diler
‘ālī-manish vighā me🧰 sulemān sabā men ahar

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 Aṁīs studied with two great teachers of the time—Maulvi Najaf 'Alī, a Shi’a mujtahid 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.

Aṁīs 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 marṣiyyās like the episode in which Zainab gently rebukes her two boys in language reminiscent of Lucknow women’s speech (verses 59-66). That Aṁīs 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, 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

1. Verse 6, translated on page 2 below. In the first line sāvent is a somewhat unusual Hindi word; burdār and diler are Persian; falakmarṭabat and ‘ālī-manish are Arabic.
2. A spiritual director, usually an expert in Islamic jurisprudence.
3. Shi’as do not recognize Abū Bakar, Ugmān and ‘Umar, the first three caliph.
are known as the 'fourteen innocent ones' (causa ma'sum) and are thought to have complete control over the world and the laws of nature. Although in this respect all the Imams are equal and all are thought to be completely infallible, 'Ali and Husain (the first and third Imams respectively) are in practice given greater prominence by the Shi'as. The twelfth Imam, Muhammad b' Mahdi 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 Husain at Karbala at the hands of the evil Yazid was a great blow to those who supported his cause. The Shi'as refused to recognise the caliphs after 'Ali but instead gave their allegiance to the twelve Imams. 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 marjia'as which relate the story, therefore, Yazid and his men are painted utterly black while Husain 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 marjia' writers, 'Ali and Husain were both killed in the most cowardly fashion, leaving only Husain to protect the family of the Prophet, who were cut off from the waters of the Euphrates. With Zulfiqar, the miraculous sword of 'Ali, in his possession, Husain 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 ('ashe-e arwal) of Muharram (the first month of the Muslim year). The mourning for Husain's death ('azadari) is thus carried out at this period of the year. For a convinced Shi'a, Muharram is second only to Ramzan and by some may be considered even more important. During the first ten days of Muharram, each morning a meeting (mallis-i 'azâ) is attended often by thousands of people who congregate to hear the events of Karbala related by a professional reciter (zakir). Usually before the zakir's sermon, marjia'as and other shorter compositions such as selams (which in form and rhyme scheme usually resemble the ghazal), neuhas (extremely pathetic laments) and ruba'is are also recited by well known poets of the city. The audience participates in the proceedings, much as in musha'ires, giving credit to particularly good verses (dnd dem) 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 Anis, marsiya have usually been written in six line stanzas (musaddas), the last two migra 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 (ya husain, ya husain). In order to evoke the desired reaction in the audience, pathos is an essential ingredient of the marsiya and its related genres (salams, naubas 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 raga 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 sozwan 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 naubas 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 Anis. Muḥarram was given great importance by the Shi'a kings of the Deccan (16th, 17th centuries), who themselves composed short marsiya for recitation in the majlises organised in Bijapur and Golconda (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 Dakani marsiya like those of Muhammad Quli and 'Ali 'Adil Shah (rulers of Golconda and Bijapur respectively) in form and rhyme scheme resemble the ghazal. Some later Dakani compositions however are longer and are written in tarkib-band form, with a poignant refrain (tip) at the end of each stanza. One may assume that the tradition of composing marsiya 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 Anis' great grandfather, Mir Zāhik, actually wrote marsiya, but his grandfather, Mir Ḥasan, 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 'azādārī 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 marsiya as we know it from the works of Anīṣ 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, marsiyas were mostly (though not exclusively) composed for recitation in the majlisīs organised for mourning the death of Ḥusain. No less important than the art of marsiyagōl (the composition of marsiyas) was the art of marsiyaywānī (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 Anīṣ' 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. Anīṣ 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, Anīṣ 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, were large moustaches and a neatly trimmed beard. He dressed meticulously, never going out without his angarkha and dome shaped Lakhnavī topī. Once he was invited to Hyderabad by Sir Ḥasan Jāh Bahādur to conduct a majlis (majlis nakhūnī). 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 Anīṣ 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 marsiyas, salāms and rubā'īs on the subject of the battle of Karbala.
There can be no doubt that Anîs was one of the greatest mārgiāva writers and until recently the Urdu mārgiāva has been regarded as being almost synonomous with the poetry of Anîs and his famous contemporary, Dabîr, who is discussed below. We have seen, however, that the tradition of composing mārgiāvas 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 Žamîr and Khâljî who belonged to the generation before Anîs. 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 Anîs who wrote mārgiāvas in similar form and style. Among the greatest of these was Mîrâ Salâmat 'Alî Dabîr, who was born in Delhi in 1803 (the same year as Anîs). He came to Lucknow with his family when he was still young and was educated there. Dabîr's ustad, Mîr MuÎaffar Husain Žamîr (mentioned above) was himself a famous mārgiāva writer and is usually credited with the invention of the mārgiāva 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) ruksat (verses in which the hero takes leave of Husain);
(3) ţâmad (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) shubhâsat (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 mārgiāvas 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'rif) and the hero's sword (talvâîr ki ta'rif) are, however, usually found, and often provide the poet with the opportunity to display his talents.

Dabîr was undoubtedly one of the greatest mārgiāva writers of his age and his fame soon eclipsed that of his eminent ustad. 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, Dabîr proved to be Anîs' 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 (tārikh) for him:

тур-и сине бекалим уллах о мимбар а анис
'Mount Sinai is bereft of Moses and the pulpit of Anīs.'

Largely because of the unfavourable comparisons made by later critics like
Azād and Shibli, 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'is (and some
Sunnis as well) fast or eat only simple food, and regularly attend majlisas.
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'zis (replicas
of Husain's tomb) are paraded through the streets and are taken to one of the
many imāmbaras or 'Karbalas' in the city. Celebrations also take place in
Aṣaf ud Daula's Imāmbara and at the Shah Najaf, an ornate replica of the tomb
of 'Ali (who is buried at Najaf in Iraq) built in Lucknow. Rivalry between
Sunnis and Shi'is is such that when their respective ta'zis 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 (mātan) take place, one
of the most famous being the āq kā mātan, 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 Āṣafiya Imāmbara. Others like chhuri kā mātan, in which people cut
themselves with knives (often sustaining serious injury) and zanjīr kā mātan
(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 mehbād
('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 centu
marṣiyas.
The following marziyas - 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 marziyas, 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 marziya 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 marziya 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 Nāsīkh - contemporaries or near contemporaries of Anīs. The marziya 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 marajiya 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 marajiya 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 marajiya 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 marajiya 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
recherche 'Hindi' words employed in this masiya cannot be found in standard Urdu dictionaries. Tradition and constant attendance of majlis 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 masiya sprang. 1

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1. Some years ago I attended a majlis in a village near Jaunpur, given by a famous zākir from Lucknow. The audience was large and consisted for the most part of farmers and labourers. The zākir 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 zākir's rhetoric had been lost on them and many were able to give detailed accounts of masiyān. Everyone I spoke to had heard the name of Anī, and some (who otherwise had only a hazy idea of the rest of Urdu literature) could quote verses from his poems.