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Desolate Victory: Shī'ī Women and the Marśiyah Texts of Lucknow

Amy Carol Bard

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

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ABSTRACT

Desolate Victory: Shī'ī Women and the Marsiyah Texts of Lucknow

Amy Carol Bard

This dissertation analyzes the poetic and social importance of the classical Urdu marsiyah (*marsiyah*) as it is recited in Shī'ī Muslim mourning assemblies in India and Pakistan. Marsiyahs commemorates the martyrdom, in 680 C.E., of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Imām Husain. Citing the cultural prestige, linguistic distinctiveness, and continued popularity throughout Shī'ī South Asia of nineteenth-century marsiyahs written in Lucknow, *Desolate Victory* assesses poetic texts and performance in multiple locations, including Lahore and Karachi in Pakistan, and Lucknow and Hyderabad in India. Marsiyah holds an important place in men's religious observances and in the Urdu literary canon, but this study uniquely situates the marsiyah in the women's mourning assembly (*majlis*). Although women are not predominantly writers of the marsiyah, their involvement with the genre is seen to powerfully point up women's survival narratives; dense thematic intertwining among the majlis's numerous prose and poetic forms; and identifications between contemporary mourners for Husain and Husain's family itself. Because of these features, and its basic story of virtuous, doomed struggle, marsiyah expresses a sense of community and identity for groups based on religion, region, and gender, but also serves as a marker of "difference," which on occasion becomes antagonistic. On the broadest level, this work shows how a linguistic community makes meaning and shapes itself through poetry.

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A NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

The letters of the Urdu alphabet have been transliterated as follows:

alif as a, i, u, ā

b	p	t	ṭ	ṡ
j	ch	h	kh	
d	ḍ	ż		
r	ṛ	z	zh	
s	sh			
s	z			
ṭ	ẓ			
‘	ġh			
f	q			
k	g			
l	m			
n				

vā'o as v, ū, o, au

h

ī

barīye as y, e, ai

nūn-e ġhunnah as ñ

hamzah as ’

izāfat as -e

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Frequently used Urdu words are shown in diacritics in parentheses after each word's first appearance, and are afterwards treated as English words. Most such words are also initially marked with an asterisk, indicating their inclusion in the glossary. Proper names of the Karbala cycle's protagonists and their enemies will be found in the "list of characters" (Part I) of Appendix A.

Transliteration of poetry: Older marsiyah manuscripts, including Naval Kishor's edition of Munis's *Lāsh Akbar kī*, contain a number of anachronisms and irregularites.[1] These include inconsistent indications of aspiration in commonly used words such as *tujh* and *mujh*, and spelling with long vowels words that would ordinarily be spelled, pronounced, and scanned with short ones (as in *dūlhā* for *dulhā* and *ūs* for *us*). In my discussion of this marsiyah and in Appendix C, I have transliterated the text as it appears in the Urdu manuscript. Transliterations also reflect alterations in spelling and pronunciation dictated by the rules of scansion, so that my transliteration, for example, renders *mere* (my/mine) as *mire* to correspond with the Urdu text in those cases when the word is spelled without the letter *ye*.

---

[1] *Majmū'ah-e Marsïyah-e Mīr Mūnis, Jild-e Suvvum (A Collection of the Marsiyahs of Mīr Mūnis, Volume 3)* Second edition, Naval Kishor Press, Lucknow, 1881, 217-222.

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Preface

I spent a number of years learning Urdu without taking any interest in what anyone who seriously studied the language touted as its glory: the poetry. I loved speaking Urdu, but my early encounters with native speakers in India and Pakistan and my teachers' stress on Partition-oriented short stories convinced me that "classical literature,"—especially the convoluted, encoded couplets recited by quaint scholarly types—was an elite, academic phenomenon and held little appeal for "real people." Only over the last decade, as I've become increasingly attuned to the nuances of Urdu culture and conversation and benefitted from the keen literary mind of Frances Pritchett, have I fully realized how much resonance poetry still carries for so many *Urdu-wāle*.

These *Urdu-wāle* are "educated" and "uneducated," and are not only native speakers, but speakers of other Indian languages who come into contact with Urdu through acquaintances or mass media. People throughout North India, Pakistan, and the South Asian diaspora delight in the ghazal (**ġhazal*), and in the **āzād naẓm* of modern poets such as Faiz. No matter the decline in the use of Urdu script among Urdu speakers in India or the obstacles faced by today's young people in learning traditional Urdu poetics, the ghazal's legacy is evident, even in the schlockiest of contemporary "Hindi" films.

Despite all of my exposure to Indian and Pakistani popular culture, though, I only ventured into the world of Urdu poetry when my friend Kirrin introduced me to Professor Pritchett at Columbia. Fran's enthusiasm is catching, and once induced to study poetry, I quickly became fascinated by the ghazal's vivid, complex metaphors, its formal

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parameters, and its compact intensity. Earlier, as a student on the Berkeley Urdu program in Lahore, I had chanced upon a genre that shared some of the ghazal's devices and tropes, but had a very different, narrative character: the Urdu marsiyah (**marsïyah*). The marsiyah's scenes of simple, tearful dialogue between the five-year-old Sakinah and her soon-to-be martyred father were accessible and intriguing to an intermediate student of the language, but I had little opportunity to place such vignettes in any context. Once I gained the basic tools to approach Urdu poetry, I was drawn even more to the marsiyah's elaborate, variegated text, its dramatic religious performance context, and all of the lore that surrounds it. I began to have a better sense of Urdu speakers' love for poetry and the values attached to poetry. With time, the genre's many forms—long published texts, abbreviated heartrending scenes in chapbooks, melodic performance, and declamatory recitation—revealed to me a rich, multifaceted tradition.

Even today, a substantial number of people older than about forty (and some younger folk) who grew up attending mourning assemblies in Shi'i (**Shī'ī*) communities can recite a surprising number of their favorite marsiyah verses off the top of their heads, making the most of flowing rhythms, masterful metaphors, and narrative twists. Sunni (**Sunnī*) Muslims or Hindus who grew up with Shi'i neighbors before the most recent waves of communal tension and distrust, or who take to the marsiyah out of literary interest, can sometimes do the same. Many of these aficionados, whether they hold degrees in Urdu or are trained exclusively in the school that is the mourning assembly, whether men or women, also relish punchy, instructive tales about the great nineteenth-century marsiyah poets. And they relate these anecdotes as though the famous Anis (*Anīs*)

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and Dabir (*Dabīr*) still lived next door. Indeed, some denizens of Lucknow's old city whom I know do live next door to Anis's house. or to his tomb.

In the marsiyah I seemed to have found my perfect subject for academic scrutiny: a treasured but understudied genre supplemented by substantial oral commentary; a performed poetry that would allow to me speak Urdu, what I most enjoyed doing, during my research. I could minimize the time spent leafing through books in dank libraries, and explore a tradition in which women figured significantly in both text and performance context.

Circumstances eventually made this "perfect" subject even more challenging than I had anticipated. Urdu scholars, with a few inspiring exceptions, cared little about the mourning assembly (the **majlis/majlis-e 'azā*) in which the marsiyah is recited and told me to seek help elsewhere if I wanted to study that, making it difficult for me to bind the text and context, the two halves of my project, together. Sunni-Shiah (**Shī'ah*) tensions on occasion made people of both communities suspicious and wary of my fieldwork, to the extent that I was on occasion interrogated extremely thoroughly while conducting participant observation in Shi'i neighborhoods, and while traveling between India and Pakistan. Toting audio and video recording equipment about with me predictably aggravated suspicions, but only when sectarian conflicts were at their worst or when conservative women worried that their images would be displayed in public elsewhere. Conversely, many majlis reciters and hostesses were quite thrilled to have their devotions documented; some even recorded majlis rites themselves to create personal keepsakes or to allow invalid relatives to partake of Muharram (**Muḥarram*) rituals.

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When I conducted participant observation with a small unobtrusive tape recorder or without equipment altogether, I learned as much as I did through systematic recording, even if I then lacked the capability to minutely recall and analyze it afterwards. Majlis participation includes communal chanting of poetry, symbolic breast-beating, or reverent visitation of symbolic battle standards, cradles, and tomb replicas. Because I generally did these things and spoke Urdu, many of my fellow majlis-goers assumed I was a Shiah or was well along the road to conversion.

In a sign of the antagonism and misunderstanding Shi'i communities face, and perhaps of increasing insularity on all sides, many believers could not conceive that someone would take the time to attend majlises (which required swathing oneself in black clothing, in temperatures of 100 F and up) unless she herself was a member of the community. Surprisingly often, those seated next to me would enquire, "Are you so-and-so Rizvī's niece?" or declare, "You must be Zakiyah's cousin," although I am an obvious "foreigner." While I found it unexpectedly awkward at times to admit I wasn't a Shiah, my closest companions took the situation in stride, murmuring to their friends and relatives, "She'll see the light eventually. Just give it time," or "Look how powerful the Imam's sacrifice is! It attracts even non-Muslims!"[1]

I did feel comfortable telling my interlocutors that I could not have taken up a study of the marsiyah in the mourning assembly for purely academic purposes, for it is

---

[1] The imam (**imām*) is a divinely appointed guide descended from the Prophet Muhammad (*Muḥammad*). For more on the imams, see Chapters One through Three, and Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism; The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*. Translated from the French by David Streight (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

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entirely true that the marsiyah's evocative power somehow compels one to confront the mysteries of life and death in their overwhelming magnitude. The sheer emotional intensity of the majlis moved me to tears more than once, and weeping, in its turn, distills complex, conflicting, sometimes intangible components of the tragedy of Karbala (**Karbalā*) into something touchable, tasteable, visible, and audible.

A final challenge I encountered on personal and analytical levels concerned the overt opinions I heard both men and women express about women's marsiyah recitation. These suggested that, though well-intentioned, women's recitation was a pale, tawdry, derivative, even degraded imitation of "the real thing," which I should witness in men's mourning assemblies. I heard this view expressed again and again, in dozens of women's mourning assemblies held in every community I visited or lived in over the course of two and a half years, and from the many women of all classes I met who recited and even wrote marsiyahs. Friends and consultants sometimes expressed this view with determined insistence, and sometimes rather reflexively as though repeating a lesson learned by rote. A certain tension seemed to underlie the reiterated formulae that diminished the women's mourning assembly and the literary hierarchies allied with those formulae, and this led me to dig deeper, discovering persistent affection for a still-vital tradition of marsiyah recitation.

The marsiyah, discourse about it, and perceptions of it speak to broad questions of community formation, poetic recitation as a religious performance, and narrative; the genre and its related traditions also tend to harbor veiled, inner messages, accessible to varying degrees to a range of audiences. These levels of meaning and knowledge, like the

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heroines of the marsiyah, aren't exactly "hidden"; they shine through despite the best efforts of those who denigrate the marsiyah, and I hope this work will provide a glimpse of them. It is with that goal in mind that I recall even a member of one of my funding agencies saying about my project, "Well, my wife recites marsiyahs, too, but that's nothing to write your dissertation about." I'm afraid I must disagree.

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Introduction

This study of contemporary South Asian poetic performance and ritual life focuses on the Urdu marsiyah tradition and its female participants, performers, and audiences. Marsiyahs, "elegies" for the Prophet Muhammad's martyred grandson Husain (*Husain*), like almost all Urdu poetry, are meant to be recited aloud, yet the synergy between marsiyah content and ritual performance has heretofore received scant attention in studies that analyze the marsiyah text. I have therefore elected to situate the marsiyah primarily in the Shi'i Muslim mourning assembly. A careful textual exegesis that engages with performance contributes both to literary knowledge and to the growing body of scholarship on Islam "on the ground" and popular piety.

I conducted field research for this project over the course of twenty-six months spent in India and Pakistan between 1996 and 1999, although I had begun reading marsiyahs and surveying Urdu literary criticism on the subject years before. Major research sites were four—Lahore, Karachi, Lucknow, and Hyderabad (Deccan), but I also carried out significant fieldwork in Multan and Shergarh in the Pakistani Panjab, Hyderabad Sindh, Mustafabad and Aligarh in Uttar Pradesh, Udaipur, Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta and Matiya Burj.[1] In the interests of controlling my data I made only occasional forays outside of "Twelver" (**Isnā 'Asharī*) Shi'i communities, although, as majlis performances among Udaipur's **Bohrā* community testify, other sects also extensively use

[1] When I mention "Hyderabad" in this work, it is to Hyderabad, India that I refer, unless otherwise specified.

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and appreciate marsiyahs in their rituals.[2]

The geographic range of my fieldwork presented certain challenges; while I lived in Lahore and Lucknow each for a year and documented whole cycles of Shi'i observances there, at other sites I obtained more limited samples of poetry. I also had to allow for factors aside from geography or regional customs that molded majlises and poetry recitation: social and economic class, mass-media, sectarian violence, and urban as opposed to small-town culture.

Fortunately, the classical marsiyah texts of Lucknow, especially those by the genre's two most famous exponents, Anis and Dabir, are such a powerful, ubiquitous presence throughout Shi'i South Asia that a number of key poems are recited across a huge spectrum of majlises. These marsiyahs can be heard in humble single family observances in the rural communities of Uttar Pradesh and imambarahs (**imāmbārah*s) in Multan; among impecunious hereditary reciters and college girl amateurs; in Karachi mansions and crumbling havelis in Lahore; among men and women; and among poets, scholars, social reformers, and unlettered devotees.[3]

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[2] See the beginning of Chapter One for a marsiyah performed by a *Bohrā* reciter. All Shiahs revere a lineage of imams, divine guides descended from the Prophet, but various sub-groups that developed distinct identities and beliefs over time dispute the chain of succession after the first few imams. The South Asian *Dāu'dī Bohrā*s are one of numerous factions classed as *Ismā'īlī*s because they broke off from the "twelvers" after the imamate of the sixth imam (d. 146 H.E./765 C.E.) to follow his son Ismā'il rather than another son Mūsā al-Kāẓim. See Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 55-56. For more on the *Bohrā*s, see the glossary.

[3] Imambarahs are the halls that house sacred relics related to the tragedy of Karbala and host mourning assemblies. Some of these are rooms or even closets, and others are palatial. Shiahs in the subcontinent's different regions call them by different names. For more on these terms, and the variation in the spelling and pronunciation of

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The range of performers and audiences observed and interviewed, and of research sites, nonetheless produces a constant movement in this work between attention to individual interpretations and schools or styles of performance, and between the most localized traditions and hybrid observances. To aid the reader unfamiliar with the broad framework of the events at Karbala and their myriad sub-plots as related in the marsiyah, I outline these, as well as the daily rites of Muharram familiar to South Asian Shiahs generally in Appendix A. For the most part, though, I allow the episodes featured in my analysis to unfold over the course of this work. My explanations, in both the body of the text and the appendix, generally assume a considerable range of local variation. Even in the face of tremendously diverse Shi'i ritual practice, majlis poetry has a curious ability to convey both the universality *and* the local rootedness of a South Asian mourning assembly.

Chapter One introduces the marsiyah and summarizes, as a prelude to my own performance-oriented presentation, central trends to date in textual and contextual analysis of the marsiyah. The fundamental ritual activities of the majlis, as the framework for marsiyah performance, take special prominence in chapters Two and Three, which describe a women's majlis from start to finish. The urban majlis in question is neither a tiny household one, nor a lavish, widely-publicized affair, but a popular neighborhood event held in a simple imambarah.

In Chapter Four, I introduce and translate a single full-length nineteenth-century marsiyah by Mir Munis (*Mīr Mūnis*) of Lucknow. This marsiyah does not boast all of the

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imambarah, see the glossary.

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poetic elaborations of the best-known marsiyahs of Anis or Dabir, but it shares many formulaic elements and narrative strategies with those poems. It is also every bit as popular throughout India and Pakistan as the poems of the two great masters, although it hardly receives as many accolades from literary critics.

Chapter Five discusses a variety of poetic figures and themes employed by Munis, but largely explores the presentation of narrative "incidents" as a foundation around which the marsiyah-writer builds a poetic edifice balanced carefully between conventionality and creativity. Chapter Six turns from the poet to the performer, analyzing the marsiyah as an "event" manipulated through lexical and topical choices, tune selection, and performer-listener interaction. Examples from five performances, which are discussed in greater detail in Appendix D, illustrate some of these variables and variations.

Chapter Seven discusses hierarchies, both aesthetic and affective, in performance, paying particular attention to the gendered categories that inform many analyses of the marsiyah's content and delivery. In Chapter Eight, I suggest that religious and affective "goals" form the basis for a "ritual criticism" of the marsiyah and majlis that is complex, at times even contradictory, but in many ways more useful and important than conventional literary criticism. This chapter concludes the study by examining factors that simultaneously challenge and insure the marsiyah's tenacious vitality in the twenty-first century: the poetry's mixed emotional contour, themes of kinship, community, and estrangement expressed throughout the majlis, and sectarian conflict in the wider environment.

My project focuses substantially on classical Urdu marsiyahs in everyday

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performance, and not on authenticating manuscripts or documenting the genre's historical development. I did, however, seek background information and guidance from libraries and literary scholars. Aligarh Muslim University, the Salar Jang Museum Library (Hyderabad), and the personal manuscript collection of the late Najīb Husain in Karachi yielded the most interesting nineteenth-century marsiyah texts, allowing me to survey textual and orthographic variation, and the range of marsiyahs collected in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Custodians of personal collections in Lucknow (often members of families descended from poets and princes) generally proved less forthcoming. Their possessiveness and clan rivalries, though, revealed a great deal about marsiyahs as commodities: the poetic texts have been bestowed as dowries and bequests, become the subjects of court battles, and today serve as potentially marketable emblems of family heritage and status.

My interactions with scholars and critics yielded a similar mixture of rewards and disappointments. Often, in this component of the research, comments that were illuminating proved to be so in rather perverse ways. They frequently revealed the utterer's utter lack of interest in marsiyah's performance context, as when a Panjab University professor in Lahore said that he would be happy to advise me in investigating "marsiyah writing," but could offer absolutely no assistance in dealing with the "separate field" of marsiyah recitation.

Urdu professors frequently treated me to lectures that basically recapitulated mainstream literary criticism, which, as we shall see, supports the view that the "narrow

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vision" inherent in women's interpretations endangers the marsiyah's "great tragic sense."[4] Some of these professors, like strict reformist Shiahs, declared that one of the marsiyah's marked merits was its historical authenticity; when they felt a poem failed to project such authenticity, the poem immediately became problematic. Traits admired by critics frequently jarred notably with the evocativeness, euphony, word-play, metrical force, and narrative leaps that seemed to delight and move even the most casual of marsiyah reciters.

Several scholars however, offered assessments of the form that went beyond received wisdom about this "elegiac epic" to probe characteristics of poetic style, the use of poetic figures, marsiyah's dual transmission through oral and written traditions, and interactions between the great Lucknow poets and those of other regions. Naiyar Masud (*Mas'ūd*), his own family legacy of marsiyah scholarship at his command, was foremost among these impressive critics, explicating the unique eloquence of Anis, the traditional matam (**mātam*) practices of Lucknow, and the popularity of certain marsiyahs at particular times in the ritual cycle.[5] His book *Marsiyah-khvānī kā fan* (*The Art of Marsiyah Recitation*) documents almost every important historical description of Lucknow recitation.[6] Rashīd Mūsavī, Riyāz Fāṭimah, and Sayyidah Ja'far offered very

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[4] For example, Mashkūr Husain Yād, personal communication, 2/9/97; Tasvīr Fāṭimah, "Khātūn Marsiyah-nigār kī diqqateñ," *Risa'i Adab* 3, 4 (1998) 68-69.

[5] *Mātam* means mourning, and in the context of Muharram refers to physical expressions of mourning, from scourging with knives and chains to walking on fire or the more common breast-beating. Individual modifiers delineate the various types of matam; among the most common are *zanjīr kā mātam* (matam with knives attached to chains), *āg kā mātam* (fire-walking), *shamshīr kā mātam* (striking oneself with a sword), and *sīnah-zānī* (breast-beating).

[6] (Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Urdu Academy, 1990).

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close readings of classical marsiyahs, intriguing insights into Deccani marsiyahs, and analyses of Lucknow texts as used in Hyderabad majlises.[7] I also received generous invitations to their family observances during Muharram.

My most numerous consultants were the reciters, majlis hostesses and attendees, preachers, and devout women of all ages who patiently suffered my questions about marsiyahs and the significance of Karbala in daily life. Despite my best-laid plans, male relatives of these consultants all too often simply hijacked my interviews to put forth their "expert" views on the marsiyah. When this initially happened, I strove for patience, acknowledging that this sort of methodological obstacle might arise with any number of projects, or almost anywhere in the world. I realized, too, that this interference proved in its own way instructive about gender roles and what passes for literary or religious expertise. Still, because these men generally had neither special literary training nor useful information about women's mourning assemblies, after numerous such "contributions," my frustration level rose to a simmer, and remained there.

The following incident was typical: A middle-aged man from Lucknow with no particular marsiyah expertise interrupted my conversation with his mother-in-law. The first half of my "book" about marsiyah must, he insisted, contain many chapters about

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[7] Rashid Mūsavī, *Dakan meñ marsïyah aur 'azādārī* (New Delhi: Taraqqī Urdu Bureau, 1989); "Dakan meñ marsiyah kī ravāyat 1700 ke ba'd," in Shārib Rudaulvī ed., *Urdu Marsiyah: Seminar meñ parhe ga'e maqālāt* (Delhi: Urdu Academy, 2nd ed. 1993), 71-87; and personal communication, June 2, 1998. Riyāz Fāṭimah, introduction to Begam Shuharat, *Hasht marāsī-e Shuharat* (Hyderabad: Bab-ul-'ilm Society, 1990); and personal communication, May 24, 1998 and June 3, 1998. Sayyidah Ja'far, "Anis ke do ist'āre," in *Mahak aur mihak* (Hyderabad: Idārah-e paikar, 1995), 103-117; "Dakanī marsiyah aur us kā pas manẓar," in Shārib Rudaulvī, 17-30 and personal communication, May 31, 1998.

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Islam's early history. Having already been informed of this "requirement" by others, I forbore to comment for some minutes, but finally derailed what promised to be a rambling, hours-long version of said history. In agitation, I overstated my objections, blurting, "but that's not the aspect I'm writing about!" This irreverence reduced the great pontificator to shocked silence. He desisted only long enough, however, to devise a new strategy.

Five minutes into my renewed conversation with his relative, he interjected, in a newly diplomatic tone, "Now, you must realize that the true glory of the marsiyah lies in its realistic depiction of historical events. For example, . . . oh! [sigh!] . . . I forgot . . ." And here the gentleman paused meaningfully and rolled his eyes. "You don't care about such things, . . . you poor thing." In cases like this, as when I intentionally set out to interview (mostly male) literary experts, I found that a whole school of marsiyah commentary relied heavily on reiterating "merits" that one had to strain to see, rather than elucidating those that are conspicuously present in the genre.

Luckily, I was able to learn from Shi'i women through structured and informal interviews, elicited and field recordings of poetry recitation, and a tremendous amount of shared time attending mourning assemblies, performing other household rituals, and studying poetry. The consultants about whom I report in this research are for the most part lower-middle-class, non-English speaking, pious women who attend many, many majlises for at least forty days after the tenth of Muharram. A number, however, are reciters of various social classes and levels of professionalism, while a handful, especially among the Karachi and Delhi consultants, were educated, moneyed world-travelers, members of a social strata who might hire professional female reciters to perform in their

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mourning assemblies.

Two families, in particular, in the old cities of Lahore and Lucknow, enabled me to observe the multitude of Muharram activities undertaken by women, including the practicing of poetry virtually all day, or all night, in preparation for majlises. I resided and worked in the home of the **hadīs-khvān* or lay preacher, Sofiya Nāsir, in 1998 and 1999, in Ghazi Mandi, Lucknow, and stayed for great lengths of time with the incredibly warm-hearted family of my research assistant, Sadaf Batūl, in Rang Mahal, Lahore in 1997. I have tried to weave the views and judgments of these and many more consultants through this work, against the backdrop of the mourning assembly.

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Chapter One: A Garden of Martyrdom: Shiahs, Scholars, and the Poets of Karbalā

Introduction

> The victimized Husain could not be aroused from this blow,
> For Asghar, all unknowing, had shaken his heart
> That milk-deprived infant's mother called out, in tears
> "What shall I do, oh people? My child has fainted
> And if he doesn't get water in the next few moments,
> My baby won't survive this thirst"
>
> In the end, they bedecked that innocent as a bridegroom
> Each lady in turn lifted him and hugged him to her breast
> But his helpless mother's heart overflowed with grief
> As he was taken away, his sister wept,
> "If you must go, then come back quickly, Asghar
> Don't be left behind on the battlefield like Akbar, Asghar"
>
> Then he[1] carried the child, transformed into a princely groom, through the wilderness
> Carried his beloved, clasped to his chest
> He carried that ray of moonlight cloistered neath his garments
> Carried the child, sheltering him from the sun's glare
> For he thought to ask the cruel army for water
> But, for his shame, couldn't utter the request

In a resonant, emotion-filled voice, a diminutive man from the *Bohrā* community in Udaipur, Rajasthan slowly recites a marsiyah poem about the tortured death of a six-month-old infant, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, on a desolate battlefield in Iraq.[2] The middle-aged reciter, Asġhar ʿAlī, invokes his namesake, the slain baby Ali Asghar (*ʿAlī Asġhar*), in a tenor resolute, yet swollen with barely restrained tears.[3] He

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[1] i.e., the infant's father, Imam Husain.

[2] Udaipur is home to a significant *Bohrā* population; for more on this community, see the introduction and the glossary.

[3] Asghar means "very little," or "smaller," and distinguishes the boy Ali in the poem from his two brothers, Ali Akbar ("the elder/bigger") and the Ali also known as *Sajjād* or

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appears driven by some tangible personal loss, rather than by an event that took place over thirteen centuries ago. Asghar Ali's listeners, two women and a slightly larger band of solemn men, weep softly as he renders the poem, but intersperse their doleful response with occasional exclamations of praise for an especially poignant, drawn-out note or a touching turn of phrase. The reciter continues:

> He managed to speak this much, "Oh, you misguided faction,
> Alas for your cruelty and torture of this innocent babe
> Who neither knows 'enemy' nor perceives 'friend'
> He is God's creature, so for God's sake, don't torment him!
> Already senseless, he'll not withstand further the pain of thirst
> No one can claim that he has any fault"
>
> Then, looking at his son, he said, "Asghar,
> I must accede to what God wills,
> But you make a plea through your gestures, as well, Ali Asghar
> Someone among their thousands must take pity on you
> Their hearts are hard, but you must stir their emotions
> Asghar, show them your tiny parched tongue
> Asghar, show them your tiny parched tongue"
>
> Then the insolent enemy, in ambush, loosed his arrow
> And as the chieftain trembled, the child swooned
> The oppressed Husain did not challenge even this atrocity
> Indeed, he even said the words, "Thanks be to you, God!"
> "But oh, Lord, when you know I myself consented to die
> Why did the arrow strike him?—Did my child commit any sin?
> Why did the arrow strike him?—Did my child commit any sin?"
>
> Then he cried out in tears, "My darling Ali Asghar
> What heart you had! I sacrifice myself to you, Ali Asghar
> May you proceed laughing into heaven, Ali Asghar
> Though you left home so thoroughly parched, Ali Asghar
> And pray don't express discontent to my grandfather or my father,[4] my son

---

Zain ul 'abidīn.

[4] The prophet Muhammad and Ali (the first Shi'i imam), respectively.

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And hide my condition from Zahrā,[5] my son
And hide my condition from Zahrā, my son[6]

The literary critic Muhammad Sadiq, whose *History of Urdu Literature* still enjoys considerable popularity today, charges that Urdu marsiyah poems such as this are marred by tearfulness and self-pity, and lack scope for subtlety.[7] If the marsiyah's "main defect" structurally is its "episodic character," Sadiq warns of a moral flaw that is far more "deleterious:" marsiyahs fail to "live up to the highest human ideals," namely "manliness, fortitude, and endurance."[8]

The marsiyah is a poetry of enchanting, surreal deserts, gardens, and skies, and it also depicts conflict, swordplay, and tear-jerking death scenes. It is a genre that many commentators seem to simultaneously cherish and disparage. This chapter explores perceptions of the marsiyah in literary and religious scholarship, and particularly the sort of grudging praise that characterizes critical works such as Sadiq's. For the most part, the ideas about the genre we will survey here build a selective and problematic portrait of the marsiyah as a kind of crippled epic. In their own way, though, the values that emerge in this discussion will provide useful clues to the Urdu marsiyah's appeal.

These values are so pervasive and influential that they merit our attention; if we are to apprehend what the marsiyah is, we must strip away layers of misconception to

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[5] Zahra (*Zahrā*), meaning "shining, white, resplendent, beautiful," is a name for Fatimah (*Fāṭimah*), the Prophet's daughter

[6] I recorded this marsiyah in Udaipur, Rajasthan on November 11, 1998.

[7] *A History of Urdu Literature*, 2nd ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press,1984).

[8] Sadiq 209; 212.

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understand what it is *not*. As we do so, one of the paradoxes that will emerge time and again is the puzzling status of a genre that reaps great attention and devotion, despite "weaknesses" from the scholarly point of view, and despite the increasing popularity among pious Shiahs of shorter, textually simpler, religious genres. Bit by bit, we will map the complex emotional contour that enshrines the Urdu marsiyah in the hearts of both scholars and ritual practitioners..

The critic Qamar A'ẓam Hāshmī, writing in Urdu, expresses somewhat less dismay over the marsiyah than does Sadiq, but betrays similar disappointment over how the form attains only an imperfect "epic" status. Hāshmī claims of the closing segment of the marsiyah that,

> . . . because it consists of the expression of grief and sorrow, sighing and crying, and lament and plaint, no sense of stirring fervor in its emotional mood is sustained. An atmosphere of loss and depression predominates, and it is not appropriate to the martial temperament and mode that the narrative should end in this way. [9]

Another critic, Masīh-us zamān, explains that the classical nineteenth-century Urdu marsiyah "has paid secondary attention to the requirements of art because of adhering to the comfort of sacred religious images, and accordingly its literary stature could not fully emerge."[10]

These writers exhibit a kind of discomfort with the marsiyah's mournful tenor, and seem compelled to cleave this genre into pairs of mutually exclusive elements: artistry versus religious devotion, and "epic poetry" versus "simple lament." For at least the last

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[9] "Marsiyah baṭaur razmiyah," in Shārib Rudaulvī, 287.

[10] *Urdū marsiye kā irtiqā* (Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Urdu Academy, 1992), 9.

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one hundred years, a number of commentators on the marsiyah have also aligned much of the form's emotionality, for better or worse, with the women who recite marsiyahs and related, melodic *soz (*soz*) poems while mourning Husain and his family in *majālis-e 'azā* (sing. majlis), mourning assemblies, and with the female characters in marsiyah texts themselves.

Writing in the second decade of the twentieth century, 'Abdul Halīm Sharar rhapsodized over women's presentations of majlis poems. Sharar, mainly a journalist and writer of romances, brought a palpable nostalgic longing to bear on his documentation of Lucknow's fading cultural glories. His description suffers from a certain lack of exactitude with regard to the very distinctive Shi'i poetic genres, referring to the same piece as a **nauḥah* (a short couplet-based dirge) at one point, as a soz or marsiyah at another, and sometimes simply as a *naġhmah*, a song or melody. What Sharar does do is effectively, and rather romantically, link women with lament

> Women are naturally more fond of music and singing than men and their voices are usually better modulated for the purposes of singing. When this regulated *nauhah-ḳhvānī* [nauhah recitation] became current among women, they invested it with incredible allure . . . Matters have now reached the stage that during Muharram and on most other days of religious observances, impassioned, plaintive tones and enchanting songs arise from every house in every lane of old Lucknow.[11]

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[11] Maulanā 'Abdul Halīm Sharar Lakhnavī, *Guzishtah Lakhna'ū* (New Delhi: Maktabah Jāmiah Ltd., 1992), 254. I have drawn on the translation of E.S. Harcourt and Fakhir Husain in *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 149-150, but modified it substantially, as it does not always reflect Sharar's actual use of genre names.

Muharram, the name of the first month of the Muslim calendar, is most commonly taken to connote the observances marking Husain's martyrdom. Official state holidays for Muharram acknowledge only the ninth and tenth days of these rites, while for Shiahs the commemorations last anywhere from ten days to two months and eight days.

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Sharar goes on to make a striking comparison between the scene memorialized in one verse of a soz poem (sozes are usually extracted from a longer marsiyah) and the women who perform the poem:

> Some cultured, decent, and educated women of Lucknow are such excellent *soz-ḳhvāns* [soz-reciters] that, but for the hindrance of *pardah*, they could never be outdone by male *soz-ḳhvāns*. One year, long ago now, I went with some friends and camped out at the Talkatora Karbala on *chihlum*.[12] I awoke at two AM to the sound of the most enchanting song, which wakened and stirred up all of my friends as well. Entranced by the voice, we all left the tent and saw, in the stillness of deepest night, in fields of moonlight, a procession of women carrying *ta'ziyahs* [paper models of the shrine of Husain]. All were bareheaded and their hair hung loose. One woman in the middle carried a candle, and by its light a lovely, cypress-statured beauty, reading from a few sheets of paper, recited nauhahs with other women accompanying. I cannot describe the scene created by that stillness, that moment, the moonlight, those bareheaded beauties, and that impassioned melody. As the graceful company passed through the gate of the Karbala the cypress-statured beauty began this nauhah in the tune of *parach*:[13]
>
> > When the caravan of Medīnah, having lost all
> > Arrived captive in the vicinity of Shām [Syria]
> > Foremost came the head of Husain, borne aloft on a spear
> > And in its wake a band of women, with heads bared.
>
> This marsiyah, so suitable to the occasion, conjured up an image such that one wondered if through the verse the lady was painting the actual events of Karbala or of her own mourning procession and its entry into the Karbala.[14]

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[12] *Chihlum* (known by the Arabic term *'arba'īn* in Hyderabad) is a day of major mourning observances marking the fortieth day after Imam Husain's martyrdom. Karbala, in present-day Iraq, is the place where Imam Husain was martyred, but here the name signifies a designated local burial-ground for the tomb replicas (taziyahs/**ta'ziyahs*) that mourners carry in processions in most South Asian communities where Muharram is observed.

[13] *Parach*, usually rendered *paraj* or *paraja*, is the name of a musical *rāg*, rare now but popular in the 19th century. See Patrick Moutal, *A Comparative Study of Selected Hindūstānī Ragas* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1991), 157, 207, 241.

[14] Sharar, 255. I use here Harcourt and Husain's translation for the poem only.

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Despite such sensualized images of feminine grief, even cursory observation of Shi'i mourning assemblies shows that a complex, variegated emotional texture, as well as tearful expressions of devotion, characterizes both men's and women's majlises. Most women perform marsiyah poems somewhat differently than most men perform them, but Asghar Ali's spine-chilling recitation thrives just as much on weeping and eerie beauty as any marsiyah rendered by women. The present work investigates the possibilities and the pitfalls of "gendered" analysis of poetry, highlighting interactions between contemporary South Asian Shi'i women and the classical marsiyah texts of nineteenth-century Lucknow.

Background

Muharram and the Majlis in South Asia

Remembrance of Ali the Prophet's son-in-law, Ali's son Imam Husain and his family, and the other *imams—the *imām* is a divinely appointed guide descended from Muhammad—dominate Shi'i religious life. This is so on the level of everyday observances (e.g. weekly mourning assemblies, pleas to the imams to protect travelers) and major ritual events, namely Muharram majlises and processions. The implications of special Shi'i devotion to the **ahl-e bait*, "the people of the household, the Prophet's family," are not minor, and their mourning practices, surnames, or fondness for wearing particular gemstones can render Shiahs readily identifiable. However, it should be borne in mind that although I do not dwell on these aspects of Islam in this work, pious Shiahs share regular *namāz* prayers, dietary restrictions, and adherence to the Quran and the main teachings of Islam with their observant Sunni neighbors. Despite Shi'i-Sunni differences and the exploitation of those differences in politically tense environments, the two communities

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share a great deal as Muslims, generally including a reverence for Imam Husain and his story of submission to God. The emphatic, artistic elaboration of that story, of which the marsiyah represents one key aspect, has for the most part been the province of Shiahs.

Marsiyahs can be poems of tribute and lament upon the death of a family member, friend, or patron, but most Urdu marsiyahs describe the sufferings of the third Shi'i imam, Husain, and his family at Karbala in 61 A.H./680 C.E. Taken as a corpus of poems, the genre relates the entire chain of events surrounding the "great sacrifice"(*qurbānī-e 'aẓīm*) of Husain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad. Shiahs commemorate this tragedy and its moral lessons through processions, self-flagellation, acts of obeisance to sacred objects, and highly structured mourning assemblies during Muharram.

The public processional aspects of Muharram rites have received considerable scholarly attention, much of it devoted to the bloody flagellation and other dramatic physical expressions of grief (matam) that so fascinate outsiders. Matam features in, but does not dominate, mourning assemblies, which attract more uniformly Shi'i participation than processions do. The "inward" focus of the mourning assembly versus the "outward" display of processions corresponds with elaborated verbal arts, including a whole spectrum of poetic forms, in the majlis, and simpler poetry alongside more dramatic matam in processions. A general alignment is also noticeable between large public observances, men's devotions, and intense physical matam, on one hand, and indoor or household rites, women's observances, and symbolic breast-beating.[15] These oppositions,

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[15] For more on this "inner-outer" and public/domestic dynamic, especially with reference to Shi'i vs. non-Shi'i audiences, see Frank J. Korom, *Hosay Trinidad: Muḥarram Performances in an Indo-Carribean Diaspora* (University of Pennsylvania: in

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however, are not rigidly delineated. Matam, for example, whether in the form of powerful or gentle *sīnah-zanī* (breast-beating), is a crucial component of almost every mourning assembly. Men, it must be emphasized, do hold majlises (which women may hear and observe from secluded rooms or floors), and women participate in processions, although they rarely have prominent roles.

South Asian majlises are today generally gender-segregated, as we know they have been in Lucknow for some two hundred years.[16] Poetry, however, is not the province of one sex or the other; the hierarchies I map over the course of this study in fact depend on establishing men's majlis recitations as different—namely more somber, literary-minded, and "authentic"—than women's. Neither are gender groups monolithic: young men and women may engage in breast-beating and other forms of matam with great fervor, while their elders devote more attention to careful renderings of poetry. David Pinault details a suggestive Muharram encounter between younger and older mourners in Hyderabad:

> The congregation was listening intently to a preacher's sermon when a crowd of teenaged boys came in from the street who'd clearly just left a procession where they had been scourging and cutting themselves. Their shirts were sticky with blood, their headcloths splotched red from forehead-gashing. The boys sat down quietly enough near the back of the courtyard, but I noticed several older

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press, 2002); Vernon Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam: Shi'i Devotional Rituals in South Asia* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 74; Keith Guy Hjortshoj, "Kerbala in Context: A Study of Muharram in Lucknow, India" (Cornell University: unpublished dissertation, 1977), 112;116-117.

[16] See Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali, *Observations on the Mussalmauns of India* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1974 [1832]), 23-24; J.R.I. Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shī'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh, 1722-1859* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 107-110.

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> gentleman edge away with what I took to be distaste. Later, I asked one of these men about the boys. "Dirty." He made a face. "They rush in here like that without changing their clothes or washing away their blood. They want to show off how much they've been cutting themselves."[17]

Pinault analyzes this incident in terms of the significance of *niyyat* (personal intention) and of blood's purity or impurity in the performance of ritual. Fraught as it is with tension, his story also points up differences, even clashes, between junior and senior majlis-goers, and the interplay between inner focus and outer display in Muharram rites.

Most commentators, including some scholars of religion, attach the label Muharram to observances conducted by during the first ten days of the month of Muharram.[18] These culminate in Husain's death anniversary on ashurah (*'*ashūrah*, the tenth day); many newspaper reports and even some ethnographic accounts tend to leave one with the impression that the rites held after this date are sporadic and relatively unimportant. In solidly Shi'i enclaves, including parts of the old cities of Lucknow and Lahore, though, "Muharram" encompasses the months of Muharram and Safar, and the beginning of Rabī'-ul-awwal, lasting nearly seven times as long as most conventional descriptions suggest. The lengthy cycle of observances can provide dangerous fodder for tensions between Shiahs and Sunnis in these cities, and their newspapers tend to document sectarian rifts and negotiations, and plans for processions, in particular detail.[19] For the

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[17] David Pinault, *Horse of Karbala* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 46.

[18] Mary Frances Dunham, *Jarīgān: The Muslim Folk Epic of East Bengal* (Dacca: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4; Schubel, 1; Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali, 6.

[19] *Qaumī Āvāz* and *Sahāfat* newspapers, Lucknow, April - July 1998. For a survey of communal tensions in recent years, see Chapter Eight.

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many Shi'ahs who have the opportunity to sponsor their own majlises only after ashurah, the commemorations that continue for the following two months are nearly as intense as those of the first ten days. Processions, mourning assemblies, distribution of food, and the display of tomb replicas, battle standards and steeds, and cradles for the slain infant Ali Asghar are Shi'i rituals that manifest soteriological understanding. For Shi'i women, especially those who practice strict veiling and venture out of their homes or neighborhoods quite rarely, these activities are also the center of the most lively social activity of the year.

Husain at Karbala

Marsiyah recitation, one of several types of poetic performance in the majlis, typically precedes a sermon and matam, the rhythmic breast-beating that concludes each day's assembly during the Muharram period. Today's reciters still move listeners to tears as they recount the piety, valor, and sorrow of the noble characters who lost their temporal power, their families, and their lives at Karbala. According to both historical sources and Shi'i religious tradition, Imam Husain's entire family suffered bitterly, besieged without food or water, at the hands of the Ummayad ruler Yazid's henchmen because Husain refused to take an oath of fealty to the corrupt Yazid (*Yazīd*).

The Husain-Yazid conflict, in the Shi'i view, is far more than a battle over temporal power; it is the culmination of a timeless struggle between *Ḥusainiyat*, or Husain-ness, all that is good and virtuous, and *Yazīdiyat*, the world's evil counter-force. Its historical dimensions harken back to the early days of Islam when factions of Muslims supported either the first Caliph, Abū Bakr, or the Prophet's son-in-law and cousin, Ali

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(*'Alī*), as leader after the Prophet's demise in 13 A.H./632 C.E. The actual emergence of Shi'i and Sunni sects was a gradual process, during which followers of various descendants of Ali and the Prophet's daughter Fatimah also branched off from the main group partisans of Ali (Shiahs). Some of these groups (*Isma'ilīs*, *Bohrās*, etc.) maintain a separate identity today, while others have been re-aggregated into "Twelver Shi'ism," so called because of its lineage of twelve Imams.[20]

A rudimentary distinction between Shiahs and Sunnis lies in Sunnis' respect for Abū Bakr, Umar and Uśmān as the first three Caliphs (Ali attained power as the fourth Caliph only later), and Shi'i belief that Ali, the first imam, and his descendants were the legitimate and divinely-guided successors to the Prophet. Ali, the Shiahs feel, should have been appointed leader of the Muslims after the Prophet's death; he and his descendants after him are seen as having been denied their rightful role by the three Caliphs and their supporters.

Mu'āviyah, an erstwhile governor, assumed the Caliphate once Ali and his son Hasan (*Hasan*) had been deposed and murdered. Yazid, reputedly a drunken reprobate, came to power upon his father's death in 60A.H./680 C.E. The political and spiritual conflict between Ali's other son Husain and Yazid eventually came to a head at desolate Karbala, where Yazid's enormous army ultimately massacred Husain and his small band of fighters. Husain was at the time journeying to Kufah in response to a request for his leadership from Muslims disenchanted with Yazid. After Husain's enemies beheaded him

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[20] Momen, 45-60. Yann Richard, *Shi'ite Islam*, trans. Antonia Nevill (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 35-38; Amir-Moezzi, 61.

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as he bowed in prayer, the general Ibn Sa'd paraded the women of the imam's household, unveiled, to Damascus. Shiahs have for centuries related the whole Karbala story in minute detail; their renderings encompass the majesty and the human frailty of Husain as he fought tirelessly in the face of certain defeat, willingly sacrificed his life, and witnessed the painful persecution of every member of his family.[21]

The dozens of sub-plots elaborated in Muharram prose and poetry fall into several categories of attested "authenticity." Some careful historians, for example, omit a number of occurrences otherwise universally deemed central to the Karbala tragedy, such as Husain's death at the hands of Shimr. The earliest historical accounts attribute the deathblow to another man, but even the most informed of South Asian preachers usually name Shimr as Husain's murderer. [22] The veracity and details of other episodes, such as that of Husain's son Akbar's death, are disputed by a larger number of commentators, including some Shi'i clerics who accept as strictly true only the skeletal outlines of the Karbala story sketched above.[23] A third class of beloved incidents are fully embraced in popular piety, although many people realize that they are not historically attested; Husain's nephew Qāsim's battlefield wedding perhaps stands as the best example.

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[21] For a reference list of the Karbala characters and central events in the tragedy, see Appendix A.

[22] Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam* (New York: Mouton, 1978), 108,111, 127; Momen, 30.

[23] See Ayoub 117; Momen, 28-31; Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A Socio-Intellectual History of the Isnā 'Asharī Shī'īs in India*, vol. 1 (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1986), 43-47.

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The Marsiyah in Lucknow

Literary evidence shows that the Urdu marsiyah centered on Husain's sacrifice had precursors in Arabic and especially Persian laments of the same name, and probably first surfaced in India as a short dirge in the fifteenth-century Deccani kingdoms of south central India.[24] Although the marsiyah's form changed repeatedly as it traveled, it remained a central medium for relating and reiterating Husain's tragedy. Today marsiyahs, or something very like them by another name, are part of Muharram rituals from Iran to Bangladesh, and from Trinidad to North America. In the Indian subcontinent, where Shiahs make up 10-15% of Muslims, they recite marsiyahs and majlis poetry in Persian, Balti, Panjabi, Pashto, Urdu, Bengali, and other languages.[25] The genre's broad historical evolution and transformation make for fascinating study, but other writers have documented this progression reasonably well, and it is not my central concern here.[26] By the third decade of the nineteenth century, a narrative marsiyah distinct from its Arabic,

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[24] For the Deccani marsiyah, see Sadiq 204-208; 'Abdulra'ūf 'Urūj, *Urdū marsiyah ke pānch sau sāl* (Karachi: Shāriq Publishers, 1987), 30-31; Rashīd Mūsavī 1989, 13.

[25] Muslims are, in turn, about 25% of the total population. Assessments of the Shi'i population vary, but this is a fairly consistent estimate. In India, approximately 11% of the population are Muslim, and Shiahs account for perhaps 10% of that community. See Pinault 2001, 14; Momen, 277, and Richard K. Wolf, "Embodiment and Ambivalence: Emotion in South Asian Muharram Drumming," *Yearbook for Traditional Music 32* (2000): 81-116.

[26] See Korom and Masīh-us zamān, whose works map the development and transformation of Muharram observances and marsiyah in some detail. Shiblī and Dunham also discuss regional developments in South Asian majlis poetry. See Muhammad Shiblī Nu'mānī, *Muwāzanah-e Anīs o Dabīr* (Lahore: Maktabah-e Dīn o Duniyā, 1964 [1907]),10-27 and Dunham, 4-50. Almost every work written in Urdu on the marsiyah has lengthy chapters on the genre in Arabic and Persian.

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Persian, or Deccani counterparts emerged in Lucknow, the Shi'i-ruled north Indian center. It is this "classical" marsiyah in its own various manifestations that takes center stage in my study.

The rival Lucknow poets Anis (*Mīr Babar 'Alī Anīs* [1802-74]) and Dabir (*Mirzā Salāmat 'Alī Dabīr* [1803-75]), and their immediate mentors before them, are famous for crafting long, episodic marsiyahs characterized by six-line *band*s (verses), an *aaaabb* rhyme scheme, and several basic meters. Most literary critics say these poems are the ones that epitomize the marsiyah's transition from a "lowly elegy" to classical literature.[27] The lavish patronage of the Avadh region's *Nishāpūrī* lineage of navabs (*navāb*s), especially from the reign of *Shujā-ud Daulah* (d. 1775) to that of *Wājid 'Alī Shah* (ruled until 1856), is held largely responsible for the proliferation and elaboration of majlis poetry and indeed all aspects of Muharram ritual in Lucknow.[28] Some even argue that as the British encroached on Avadh, the Navabs poured ever more resources into flamboyant

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[27] Muhammad Husain Āzād, *Ab-e ḥayāt* (Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Urdu Academy, 1982 [1880]), 148-149; 523. Ram Babu Saksena, *A History of Urdu Literature* (Lahore: Sang-e Meel Publications, 1996 [1927]), 143. Although the continuity between the earliest South Asian marsiyahs and the classical marsiyah is only of a very general kind, 'Alī Javād Zaidī and D. J. suggest that Delhi marsiyah poets forged a crucial developmental link between the Deccan and Lucknow. See Ali Javad Zaidi, *Mir Anis* (New Delhi: Sahitya Academy: 1986), 17-18; *Dahlavī marsïyah-go*, (Karachi: Nafīs Academy, 1988), 31, and D.J. Matthews, *The Battle of Karbala: A Marsiya of Anis* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 1994), 15.

[28] C.M. Naim and Carla Petievich, "Urdu in Lucknow/Lucknow in Urdu," in Violette Graff, ed., *Lucknow: Memories of A City* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 167. John Norman Hollister, *The Shi'a of India* (New Delhi: Oriental Reprints, 1979 [1953]), 164-5; Sharar, 251-2; Pinault 2001, 17; Hjortshoj, 76-77.

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Muharram displays to compensate for their waning political power.[29]

Women's Majlises: An Introduction

In this golden age of the marsiyah, women's majlises were already well-established. Tradition credits a female survivor of the Karbala atrocity, Husain's eloquent sister *Hazrat* Zainab, with establishing mourning assemblies, replete with commemorative poetry, immediately after the tragedy.[30] This belief, and the travails of the female captives of Karbala as narrated in numerous marsiyahs, lend women's mourning assemblies a particular and powerful sense of continuity.[31] Women's lamentations fascinated Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali, resident in Lucknow for some years during the 1820s. "In commemorating this remarkable event in Mussulmaun history," she notes, "the expressions of grief, manifested by the ladies, are far greater, and appear to me more lasting than with the other sex."

Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali's observation that women "read the Dhie Mudgelluss, and chant the Musseeah with good effect," concurs with the memories of elderly ladies in

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[29] Hjortshoj, 82-83.

[30] *Hazrat* is an honorific title, something like "her excellency;" its literal meaning is "presence" or "dignity."

[31] On Zainab as the founder of majlises, see Syed Akbar Hyder, "To Die and Yet Live" (Harvard University: unpublished dissertation, 2000), 91-92, 112-113; David Pinault, *The Shiites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* (New York: St. Martin's1992),102; Schubel, 141. Shrines and special observances dedicated to Zainab in Lahore, Lucknow, and other cities show the imam's sister's prominence in popular piety. In 1998, for example, a Lucknow committee organized a program entitled "the day of Zainab" on the twelfth of Muharram. This day, the third day of Karbala martyrs' death rites, is sometimes devoted to more general mourning. See "Yom-e Zainab āj rauzah Zainabiyah meñ," *Sahāfat* newspaper, May 9, 1998.

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Lucknow, who also report that *Dah Majlis* and the marsiyah used to form the mainstay of women's assemblies. The *Dah Majlis* (*Ten Majlises*) are a range of texts in Persian or Urdu based on the Iranian Mullā Kamāl-ul-dīn Ḥusain Wāi'ẓ Kāshifī's famous *Rawẓat us-Shuhada* (*Garden of the Martyrs*, 908 AH./1502 CE).[32] *Rawẓat*, a poeticized rendering of the Karbala tragedy, designates certain segments for recitation during each of the first ten days of Muharram. The precedent for performing poems dedicated to specific martyrs on special assigned days seems to derive largely from this text.[33] In a few places, versions of *Dah Majlis*, usually read from a book, still survive in women's majlises.[34] Generally speaking, though, first the marsiyah and then, in the mid-twentieth century, sermons supplanted the centrality of *Dah Majlis*.

For nineteenth-century Shi'i ladies, conducting private majlises at home was the rule. Again, Mrs. Ali's remarks are pertinent:

The ladies celebrate the returning season of Muharrum with as much spirit and zeal

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[32] Husain Wāi'ẓ Kāshifī, *Rawẓat as-shuhada* (Kanpur: Naval Kishor, 1911). Another Persian source for early Urdu majlis poems was Muhtasham Kashānī's sixteenth-century marsiyah, known as the *Karbalā-nāmah*.

[33] S.A.A. Rizvi claims that when Kashīfī wrote this "elegy" intended for the mourning assembly, "all other works went out of circulation." Vol 1., 352.

[34] Prof. Hakīm Sayyid Muhammad Kamāl-ul-dīn Husain Hamdānī, in the introduction to *Yāzdah majlis-e Mīr Ḥasan Dehlavī* (Jalālī, Dist. Aligarh: Idārah-e Hamdāniyah, 1994) dates the first Urdu translation of *Dah majlis*, by Fazl 'alī Fazlī to 1145 A.H./1732 C.E. although according to Intiẓār Husain, Kālīdās Gupta Razā has traced a Deccani translation to 1092/1681 See Intizār Husain, "Hindu Contribution to the Marsiya," *Dawn*, March 24, 2002; Kālīdās Gupta Razā *Sha'ūr-e Ġham* (Unpublished booklet, n.d.). According to S.A.A. Rizvi, the 1092 translation is a poetic one, while Fazlī's is not the first prose translation, but an especially "lucid and idiomatic one intended for ladies "unable . . . to follow the Persian idioms." Rizvi vol. 2., 355.

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> as the confinement, in which they exist, can possibly admit of. There are but few, and those chiefly princesses, who have Emaum-baarahs [imambarahs] at command, within the boundaries of the zeenahnah; the largest and best establishment is therefore selected for the purpose of an Emaum-baarah, into which none but females are admitted, excepting the husband, father, son, or brother, of the lady; who having, on this occasion, full liberty to invite her female acquaintance, those who are her nearest male relatives even are not admitted until previous notice is given, in order that the female guests may secrete themselves from the sight of these relatives of their hostess.[35]

In 1941, Mrs. Zaheer Fatimah Raza, whom her daughter Azra describes as a "true feminist," faced considerable opposition when she proposed and managed "a function for ladies on a grand scale to commemorate the 1300th anniversary of Hussain's martyrdom" in Delhi. Azra Raza's account of this undertaking highlights the limitations on the movements of even elite women, and the important leadership roles of prominent Shi'i ladies like the tenacious Mrs. Raza:

> Through her mentor and great friend Lady Sultan Ahmed, wife of Sir Sultan Ahmed,Member of the Viceroy's Council, she was able to persuade Her Royal Highness, the Princess of Rampur to travel to Delhi and preside over the function. A gathering of ladies on such a large scale in the Muslim Shia community of Delhi was unheard of at the time. Zaheer worked tirelessly for months to organize various committees, invite respected speakers, arrange presentations by children and young adults, and above all, face, and convince others to face the opposition and criticism of the men in her community. . . .
>
> Following the fabulous success of this function, Zaheer Fatima naturally assumed the leadership role in every community and city she lived in for the next 60 years. . . Migrating to Pakistan in 1947, she established Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Hussaini in Karachi in1949 After moving to Islamabad, she founded Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Shia in Islamabad, and in order to promote harmony through social work among Shia-Sunni Muslims, she became the most active and vocal member of the well-known Bazm-e-Amina in Karachi.[36]

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[35] Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali, 23-24.

[36] Dr. Azra Raza, "Highly Respected Community Leader, Well Known Social Worker, Begum Zaheer Ali Raza Dies in Pakistan at 82" (e-mail obituary, March 13, 2002). "Anjuman-e Khavātīn-e Husainī" means roughly, "The Husaini Women's Society"

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Around the same time, in Hyderabad, India, Laṭīf-un-nissā, another zealous community leader, organized a group of women to raise funds for a Shi'i worship hall that is still administered entirely by women today.[37] At the turn of the twenty-first century, women's majlises in centralized imambarahs are burgeoning, yet the appeal of a large majlis addressed by a trained preacher vies with household majlises' perceived security and modesty. Attending either type of function qualifies as a virtuous act, and as Mary Elaine Hegland points out in her Peshawar research, while often "women must be in seclusion," male relatives can scarcely object to women attending mourning assemblies. Hegland feels that for women who do organize major assemblies, "Containing their developing assertiveness and capabilities within the framework defined by their male supervisors may become more problematic. Male political leaders among the Peshawar Shi'a who wish to keep women at their own disposal may meet with greater difficulty."[38]

Though I rarely saw the kind of perpetual female "resistance" Hegland's work centralizes, some of my own consultants certainly struggled with the practical implications of seclusion as a pious ideal. The famous marsiyah-reciter Kajjan Begam—who was herself in great demand in Karachi majlises until her death in 2000— favorably compared

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or "The Society of Women Dedicated to Husain," while "Anjuman-e Khavātīn-e Shī'ah" would be the "Shī'ī Women's [or "Ladies'] Society."

[37] Diane D'Souza, "Yādgār Husaynī—an All-Women Shī'ah Shrine in India," Paper presented at the International Congress of North African and Asian Studies, July 1997; Gulzār Nigār Khān, personal communication, June 12, 1998.

[38] Mary Elaine Hegland, Shi'a Women of Northwest Pakistan and Agency through Practice: Ritual, Resistance, Resilience," *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review 18* no. 2 (1995), 65-79.

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the private household majlises of her youth in rural Uttar Pradesh with modern Pakistani women's predilection for bustling hither and thither to attend large assemblies.[39]

Sadaf Batūl and her mother Rāhat offered a rather complex narrative, centered on one of their female ancestors, relative to this quandary. The seemingly daring lady in question, who dwelt in the old-fashioned house in Lahore where Sadaf and Rāhat still reside, petitioned her male relatives for permission to make a pilgrimage to Mecca. The men, explaining that there was no need for her to undergo such a treacherous journey, brought home images of the Ka'bah, enabling her to perform her visitation at home. Her relatives replicated holy sites within the *ḥavelī* again when the lady asked to go to Karbala and other Shi'i pilgrimage sites, and then finally to a majlis at a Lahore imambarah.[40] With each successive request, the substitute household worship sites became more elaborate, adorned with gold and so forth, and the woman's restlessness eventually subsided. This increasing sumptuousness appears to value, as a great deal of majlis literature does, the most local manifestations of Shi'i piety over the Mecca pilgrimage, but that sub-text may deflect the question of whether "male supervisors" had to offer grander and grander compensations to justify denying their sister or daughter a visit to even a local majlis.

The story, related with a mixture of pride and wistfulness, reinforced my friends' duty as *Sayyidānīs*, descendants of the Prophet, to maintain strict modesty, and recalled

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[39] Kajjan Begam, personal communication, 6/6/97.

[40] *Ḥavelī* is a word now used for a large, old-fashioned type of home, usually multi-storied and containing a courtyard.

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the relative wealth their clan had once enjoyed.[41] Although the cautionary tale also served as an explanation for why women in their family generally declined to attend large assemblies, when my research provided a rare pretext for them to participate in such events, they seized the resultant opportunities with evident excitement.

Text, Context, and the Constitution of Difference

In the contemporary Shi'i majlis and in its poetry, invocations of "unity" and "difference" operate in tandem to define the community that mourns Karbala. To the extent that huge swaths of the South Asian Shi'i population know, or at least recognize, major marsiyah texts, the poems mark out a unified society of mourners. Even beyond the Shi'i sect, the doomed heroism of Husain's men and the proud survival of his women have inspired the imaginations of poets and thinkers. A dozen years before partition, the marsiyah elicited this fascinated response from an Englishman in India:

> The marthiya of Mir Anis in spite of its extraordinary length, its manifest anachronisms and its hyperbole, is a piece of literature which, when recited during the ten days stirs the deepest emotions and rouses the strongest feelings. Its descriptive power is great and its appeal moves the strongest to tears.[42]

Muhammad Iqbal (*Iqbāl*,1876-1938), considered the poet-laureate and a founding father of Pakistan, is immensely popular in some Shi'i circles for exhibiting sensitivity, as a non-Shiah Muslim, to the broad appeal of Husain's story:

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[41] For observations on more rigid standards of ritual behavior and seclusion for Sayyid women outside of the subcontinent, see Mary Elaine Hegland, "Political Roles of Aliabad Women: The Public-Private Dichotomy Transcended," in Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron, eds. *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 216-218.

[42] J.W. Sweetman "Some Additional Notes on Muharram," (*News and Notes,* June 1935), 46. Cited in Hollister, 170.

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> . . . Muhammad Iqbal is a favorite of [the famous Shi'i preacher] Rashid Turabi. The reverence for Iqbal within Muslim communities of the subcontinent frequently cuts across communal lines. Shi'as have even written books exclusively on Iqbal's devotion to the Prophet's household, at times giving their readers the impression that the "Poet of the East" might actually be a Shi'a in disguise.[43] That Iqbal was the most well-known of reformers who drew from the support base of Shi'as and Sunnis helped the likes of Turabi in using Iqbal's authority to support their own. Hence Turabi's message to the Shi'as is that even knowledgeable Sunnis like Iqbal are in agreement as far as the privileged status of 'Ali and his household, especially his son Husayn, is concerned:
>
> *islām ke dāman meñ bas is ke sivā kyā hai*
> *ek ẓarb-e Yadullāhī ek sajda-e Shabbīrī*
>
> What else does the skirt of Islam contain, after all,
> Except a blow from the Hand of God ('Ali) and a prostration by Shabbīr (Husain)?[44]

Still, the primary way Shi'i communities identify themselves is through allegiance to and love for Husain and the Prophet's family, while Sunni Muslims generally dispute that leadership falls unquestionably to this lineage, or that its members wield intercessory power for their devotees. As Juan Cole documents, doctrinal differences, as well as more mundane political disputes, have fomented Shi'i-Sunni tensions in Iran, Iraq, and South

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[43] See Sayyid Mahbūb 'Alī Zaidī, *Iqbāl aur ḥubb-e ahl-e bait* (Lahore: Shaikh Ġhulām 'Alī and Sons Publishers, 1965); and Sayyid Afzal Husain Naqvī, *Midḥat-e āl-e Muḥammad aur Iqbāl* (Karachi: Anjuman-e Safīnah-e Adab, 1977).

[44] Poem cited in Rashīd Turabi, *Majālis-e Turābī*, sound cassette. Transcribed in Zamīr Akhtar Naqvī, ed. Rashīd Turabi, *Majālis-e Turābī*, vol. 2, (Karachi: Mahfūẓ Book Agency, 1987), 80. See also Syed Akbar Hyder 2000, 101-102. I have modified the translation of the couplet, which may not in fact even be one of Iqbal's. Iqbal did invoke Husain in many poems, though, and admirers frequently cite this one among them. See Sayyid Ahsan Imrānī, *Iqbal dar madḥ-e Muḥammad va āl-e Muḥammad* (Lahore: Haqq Brothers, n.d.) and Syed Akbar Hyder, "Iqbal and Karbala: Re-reading the Episteme of Martyrdom for a Poetics of Appropriation," *Cultural Dynamics* 13(3): 339-362.

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Asia for centuries.[45] In recent years, sectarian disputes have all to often erupted into widespread and bloody violence, with modern-day "martyrdoms" occurring in majlises in Lahore, for example, even as Shiahs recite marsiyahs for Husain.

Conflicting interpretations of the meaning of Husain's martyrdom in some ways lie at the core of rifts between sectarian groups, yet this is only one level of difference manifested in the marsiyah's text and context. Within the Shi'i community, for instance, distinctive regional performance styles come increasingly into contact with one another through mobile populations, intermarriage, and mass media. Still, listeners' judgements of a marsiyah's efficacy, of its power to move them to salvific tears, often hinge on locally favored tunes, dialects, or poets, and imply a distaste for the diction and performance styles of other regions.

"Expert" commentators on the marsiyah, meanwhile, often define the true spirit and proper rendering of the Urdu marsiyah within gendered categorizations. Muhammad Sadiq and his like zealously align the feminine, the mournful, and the emotional with a deviant or degraded poetic tradition in the interests of salvaging the marsiyah's literary, manly, moral quality.[46] Gender becomes a kind of superordinate organizing category that contains and polarizes problematic and praiseworthy aspects of the genre: tearful sentimentality versus undaunted martial valor; melodic presentation versus dramatic, declamatory delivery, miraculous narrative versus "authentic" Islamic history.

Though I focus more on women's assemblies and ordinary majlis-goers than on

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[45] 2; 22; 233.

[46] Sadiq, 203-225; Mashkūr Husain "Yād," personal communication 2/9/97.

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famous poets or performers, my depiction of the marsiyah is an expansive one that encompasses a number of perspectives, in contrast to the narrow view purveyed by most scholars of literature and of religion. Often, I find, the very inadequacy and evasiveness of the accusations leveled at the marsiyah by its critics direct us towards a more nuanced approach to the marsiyah text's characteristics, functions, and modes of delivery.

Marsiyah and Majlis Studies

Religious Scholars and the Marsiyah

On occasion, existing scholarship on the marsiyah, especially that available in English, is simply bedeviled by gaps; a noticeable one yawns between the spheres of literary criticism and scholarship on religion. Muhammad Sadiq's literature survey, though dated, is still almost inevitably a starting point for English-speakers investigating Urdu literature. We have already sampled his diagnosis of what ails the marsiyah, and performance figures as a major part of it:

> Why the marsiya writers have failed to achieve the heroic and, with a few exceptions, even the ideal in action and sentiment, is easily explained. With the Shiites mourning the martyrdom of al-Husain and his family is the sacred duty of all true believers. . . . Such being the object of the marsiyah, obviously it would not do to portray the heroic or the ideal, for these attitudes, instead of softening the heart, would arouse feelings of admiration and exultation . . .
>
> By assigning such a large place to pathos the poets as well as their readers and listeners appear to have overlooked a very important fact, namely, that if the characters are made to wallow in distress, they will come perilously close to losing their dignity, and therefore forfeit the reader's respect.[47]

Sadiq alludes to marsiyah's ritual context several times, only to dismiss it cursorily on each occasion. Religious scholars who document Shi'i piety, for their part, very seldom

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[47] Sadiq, 211.

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give marsiyah more than a passing mention; Keith Hjortshoj is something of an exception. Although his study of Lucknow's Muharram only devotes about four pages to the marsiyah, Hjortshoj elegantly underlines the inter-relatedness, even interdependence, of Husain's vulnerability and his virtue in the marsiyah text and other Karbala narratives:

> Husain is deeply revered by the Shi'a, and distinguished as the Imam, for the purity and projection of his emotional qualities, and not for his ability to conceal them. As a martyr, his courage is weighed against the extent of his loss and suffering. The poetic medium of *marsiya* is mobilized with the object of conveying both the nuances and degrees of that loss and suffering, as vividly and effectively as possible.[48]

With his insistence that an effective marsiyah should above all portray Husain and his companions as "august personages," Sadiq, says Hjortshoj, imposes "stiff and formal qualities" on the heroes of Karbala. Furthermore, Sadiq depicts marsiyahs as "disconnected and excessively emotional" when he assesses them "in isolation from their use in Muharram."[49]

Mahmoud Ayoub makes the important assertion that the lament element of the marsiyah serves vital and efficacious ritual functions, although his case for the mourning assembly as a forum for the experience of "redemptive suffering" to the virtual exclusion of all else is overstated, at least if applied to the South Asian context. Marshaling a good deal more textual and historical evidence than Sadiq does, Ayoub presents the Arabic marsiyah's ethos as one dominated by lament. He frames this grief-stricken spirit as appropriate, organic, and "powerfully and dramatically expressed," going so far as to add

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[48] 150.

[49] Hjortshoj,150-151.

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that, "Rarely is Husayn portrayed as the great warrior . . . The poetry we are considering is meant to evoke sorrow, *not* the spirit of heroism, in the mind of the faithful."[50] In most classical Urdu marsiyahs, I will argue, a sense of sorrow may predominate, but other emotions, stimulated by a range of supernatural, and also very accessible, life and death experiences, animate that sense of sorrow. Emotional strands that convey pride, tribute, affection, and loyalty, are woven throughout the marsiyah, not always cordoned off into segments that exclusively celebrate valor or bemoan tragedy.

The concept of "redemption"central to Ayoub's work proves a bit slippery when the writer expands on its manifestations. The process whereby the Prophet, the imams, and Fatimah (the fourteen masumin* [*ma'sūmīn*], or "impeccables") intervene with Allah for the benefit of Shi'i mourners, believers' own strivings for religious merit, and Husain's preservation of Islam all apparently hinge on redemptive suffering. Eager to construct a framework for the fruitful comparison of Islam with Christianity, Ayoub glosses over the absence of any actual term for "redemptive suffering" within the Shi'i tradition; no such term crops up even in the most reflexive and analytical of South Asian Shi'i discussions of the meaning of Karbala, as Akbar Hyder has also pointed out.[51]

Mourners' performative utterances and enactments of the humble roles of *faqīr*s (mendicants, beggars), slaves, and drummers in processions may, however, facilitate what Vernon Schubel calls a "subjunctive mood," in that they are transformative acts that recreate Karbala. Schubel documents the "salvific" powers that Shiahs attribute to tears

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[50] 160, emphasis mine.

[51] Personal communication, 8/01.

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shed for Husain in majlises, but stresses most a Turneresque analysis of Muharram ritual. In majlis lamentation, says Schubel, mourners behave as though transported to Karbala to stand by Husain, they thus earn forgiveness of their sins and compensate for Muslims' failure to defend Husain in his lifetime.[52] The "redemptive" dimension of this phenomenon, though, cannot be said to exceed in importance the feelings majlis-goers prioritize when they say that the masumin evoke intense devotion, tribute, sympathy, grief, and faith.

Because Schubel's data on marsiyah is relatively scanty, it is difficult to assess how poetry integrates into his ritual analysis; he does make a brief suggestion that it acts as a kind of emotional or psychological "doorway," ushering majlis-goers into the subjunctive mode.[53] Schubel so emphatically stresses the majlis sermon, with the marsiyah as an optional sort of preface, that one would not guess from reading his work that the marsiyah often formed the centerpiece of the mourning assembly as little as a generation ago, and in some quarters, still does so today.

As for women's perceptions of the Urdu marsiyah, David Pinault acknowledges a dearth of information on women's observances in his own 1992 work on Shi'i piety in Hyderabad; Schubel's work likewise contains just the occasional parenthetical note on women in majlises, although he does devote an entire chapter to women's household rituals, particularly miracle narratives.[54] This valuable data, unsupplemented by information on women's majlises, might appear to confirm a rather overstated division in

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[52] Vernon Schubel, 85; 112-113

[53] 100.

[54] Pinault 1992, 109-110; 35-70.

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academic literature between women's piety as folksy, "vernacular knowledge" and men's observances as orthodox and textually sanctioned. In the majlis, though, both men and women treasure the classical marsiyah, a unique expression of South Asian Shi'i piety in Urdu.

Pinault's more recent book also devotes a chapter to female figures in Shi'i "devotional literature," but does not discuss either female reciters or literary reception of these narratives.[55] In a rare literary study that touches on women's majlis, Salihah 'ābid Husain hints at alternative emphases to the masculine heroics typically admired by literary critics in women's versions of classical marsiyah, but her descriptions are limited.[56] Mary Hegland documents a process of community building through poetic competition and performance in women's majlises, while D'Souza examines the informal training that builds authority and confidence in female Shi'i lay preachers (*zākirahs*), "leaders among women," yet neither writer analyzes actual poetic texts or recitations.[57]

Given their broad focus on Shi'i piety, and, in a number of cases, their preference for conducting research in English, Persian, or Arabic, it is perhaps not surprising that Western scholars of Islam usually decline to delve into a lengthy genre such as the Urdu

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[55] Pinault 2001, 57-86.

[56] Sālihah 'ābid Ḥusain, *Khavātīn-e karbalā kalām-e Anīs meñ* (New Delhi: Maktabah Jām'iah, 1973).

[57] Mary Elaine Hegland,. "Popular Piety during Muharram: Shia Women and the Life Cycle in Peshawar, Pakistan." Paper presented at the 23rd annual conference on South Asia, University of Wisconsin, 1994; Diane D'Souza, "Leaders Among Women: The Dhākira and Shī'ī Women's Mourning Assemblies in India," paper presented at the Conference on Gender and Society in the Muslim World Since 1800, University of London, July 1997.

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marsiyah. While writers such as Pinault and Schubel certainly document the majlis with impressive ethnographic and historical thoroughness, they still maintain a distance from the rich literary and linguistic aspects of the mourning assembly. If we turn to the specific realm of poetic performance, we find that a survey by Regula Qureshi handily categorizes majlis genres, though literary criticism doesn't fall within its purview.[58] A few other works, notably Naiyar Masud's book on the art of classical marsiyah recitation and Sibt-e Jafar Zaidi's description of musical rendition of soz poetry, address standards and techniques for performing majlis poetry in informative but somewhat technical, circumscribed ways.[59]

Urdu Literary Critics and the Marsiyah

Those who have assessed the Urdu marsiyah as "literature" are by and large Indian and Pakistani scholars. A great number of these critics, including some active today, have fallen under the sway of a Victorian campaign to reform an Urdu literature perceived as decadent, sensual, and effeminate. Most Urdu critical works centered on the marsiyah dwell on a limited number of themes, which fit for the most part within the following topical categories: 1) the form's value as social documentary, i.e. its "realistic" depictions

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[58] Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, "Islamic Music in an Indian Environment: The Shi'a Majlis." *Ethnomusicology* 25, no. 1(1981): 41-71.

[59] Masud 1990; Sayyid Sibṭ-e Ja'far Zaidī, *Ṣautī 'ulūm o funūn-e islamī* (*Vocal Skills and the Islamic Arts*) (Karachi: Sayyid and Sayyid, 1995). Because Zaidi's and Masud's names appears numerous times in this and later chapters, I will henceforth render their names without diacritics.

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of nature, Islamic history, and Indian customs;[60] 2) marsiyah's "epic" characteristics (mainly its battle scenes and its featured heroic sacrifice), and potential parallels with Milton, and tales of King Arthur or Charlemagne;[61] 3) poetic style as a function of some group's categorical linkage with marsiyah, be it family lineage, local heritage, or religion[62] 4) marsiyah as a vehicle for "modern expression," "philosophy," and "universal character," qualities felt by critics to mitigate the influence of the "sensual" ghazal and usher Urdu poetry into a new age. These final characteristics receive the most attention from those drawn to the special possibilities of the modern (*jadīd*) marsiyahs produced between the mid-twentieth century and today.[63]

The polarized literary discourse to which I alluded earlier pits the marsiyah's "pathetic" vignettes against its lofty moral themes, sentimentality against rationality,

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[60] See for example Sayyid Sakhī Husain Naqvī, "Mir Anīs aur Hindūstāniyat," in his *Marāsī-e Anīs kā tajziyātī muṭāl'ah* (Karachi: Afreshiyā Printing Press, 1991); Sayyid Muntaẓar Ja'farī, *Marāsī-e Anīs meñ manāẓar-e qudrat* (Lucknow: al-Muntaẓar Society, 1988);'Alī Javād Zaidī, *Dahlavī Marsiyah-go*, (Karachi: Nafīs Academy, 1988), 18.

[61] See Sadiq, 208 and K.C. Kanda, *Masterpieces of Urdu Nazm* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1996), 143. Kanda, speaking of Anis's *Jab qaṭa' kī musāfat-e shab āftāb ne*, gushes "it is a piece of fine artistry, reminiscent of Tennyson, the poet of the 'Lotos-Eaters' and 'The Lady of Shalott.'

[62] See for example, Saksena, 138-140; Sayyidah Ja'far, 1993; Kālīdās Gupta Razā; Ẓamīr Akhtar Naqvī, *Khāndān-i Mīr Anīs ke nāmvar shu'arā'* (Karachi: Markaz-i 'Ulūm-i Islāmiyah), 1994; Mujāvar Husain Rizvī, "Urdu marsiye ke ġhair muslim shu'arā," in Rudaulvī; and Sayyid Mahmūd Naqvī, " 'ahd-e hāẓir ke ġhair muslim marsiyah-go shu'arā," also in Rudaulvī.

[63] Adīb Suhail in the introduction to Tasvīr Fāṭimah, *Ridā-e Sabr: Pānch Marāsī* (Karachi: Halqa-e Fikr-o-nazr, 1996), 28; Amy Bard, "Value and Vitality in a Literary Tradition: Female Poets and the Urdu Marsiyah," *Annual of Urdu Studies 15*, Part 1, 2000: 323-335.

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melody against speech, and elegiac doggerel with little regard for "the grammatical rules of poetry" (*qavā'id-e shā'irī*) against elegant presentation (*khūsh adā'ī*).[64] Such dichotomies rigidified partly in response to waves of Islamic reform that began to swell even before the events of 1857 and their "brutal aftermath . . . marked the real end of aristocratic Muslim culture in India."[65]

The motivations and goals of reformers were diverse, but part of the reform agenda shared by many and endorsed in one form or another by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Hālī, Āzād, and Aligarh intellectuals such as Shiblī Numani prioritized the purging of sensuality and superstitious customs from Indo-Muslim culture.[66] Hālī (1837-1914), for example, "wished to reform Urdu literature, especially the ghazal, basing it on high moral principles (*akhlaqi mazamin*) and 'admitted' that it might be difficult to incorporate and popularise such themes in a genre whose essence was 'erotic' (*ishqiya*)."[67] Reformers also often associated "Hindu accretions" and "low-brow" traits with the religious practices of female or uneducated Muslims.[68] This legacy today continues to influence contrasting

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[64] Muhammad Husain Āzād, 149; 526. See also Frances Pritchett, trans. and ed, *Āb-e ḥayāt: Shaping the Canon of Urdu Poetry* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 155; 428.

[65] Frances W. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and its Critics* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994), 28.

[66] For an example of a denunciation of Urdu literature by one of Sir Sayyid's committees see Pritchett 1994, 187.

[67] Naim and Petievich, 178.

[68] See for example Kelly Pemberton, "Women, Ritual Life, and Sufi Shrines in North India" (Unpublished dissertation: Columbia University, 2000).

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images of the marsiyah as martial, epic, Islamic poetry, and as a formulaic lament. Unnecessarily sharp methodological separations between studies of written marsiyahs and of the same poems in performance contribute to these distinctions, as well.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER: "EPIC" VS. "LAMENT" AND THE "SECTIONS" SYSTEM

Literary critics' categorical distinctions interact in a complex way with a commentarial tradition that is also evasive. At times, critics in effect analyze the marsiyah in segments so as to marginalize and then dismiss undesirable aspects of the genre. Where discomfort and avoidance appear in critical texts, however, we find important clues to the truly salient features of Urdu poetry. Let us consider the claim that marsiyah is either, at best, a noble, "manly" epic, or, at worst, an embarrassingly plaintive, unmanly, lament in the voice of a beleaguered, helpless, and passive community. Contrast this perspective with the couplet attributed to Iqbal and hailed by Shi'i preachers and Sunni reformers alike:

> *islām ke dāman meñ bas is ke sivā kyā hai*
> *ek ẓarb-e Yadullāhī ek sajda-e Shabbīrī*
>
> What else does the skirt of Islam contain, after all,
> Except a blow from the Hand of God (Ali) and a prostration by Shabbīr (Husain)

The intimidating strength and the vulnerability entwined together here also lie at the crux of the marsiyah. The power of Islam, proclaims the poet, its strength and the devotion it inspires, can be encapsulated in Ali's power to strike out on behalf of God and Husain's humble submission, in prayer, to death.

This is a mixture of traits that most literary critics seem unable to recognize or accept; in the case of the marsiyah, they implicitly deny the possibility that valor and

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vulnerability can work in a complementary fashion to produce a textured work of poetry. The prevailing view strives to redeem "lament" by privileging the martial portions of the marsiyah. Segments containing women's ritualized laments in particular, are framed as a quaint legacy of a simpler, unsophisticated era before the marsiyah truly developed, or are simply ignored.

Critics very frequently invoke a whole scheme of poetic sections as a hallmark of the classical marsiyah in order to play up or play down martial and lament-oriented aspects of the genre. Most writers concur that a classical Urdu marsiyah includes the following sections:

- a prelude (*chihrah*) containing praise poems, descriptions of the morning or night before the Karbala battle, or a general introduction to the hardships faced by Husain;

- a description (literally "head to toe," *sarāpā*) of the poem's hero—whether Husain or one of his companions—and his virtues;

- the leave-taking or departure for the battlefield (*rukhsat*);

- the entry onto the field (*āmad*);

- a poetic declaration of the hero's antecedents and martial prowess (*rajaz*);

- the battle (*jang*);

- martyrdom (*shahādat)*;

- and, finally, the lament (*bain*).

Most critical works on the marsiyah assign great explanatory power to these sections, although many marsiyahs do not adhere particularly closely to this framework.[69] Qamar

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[69] In fact, although these sections were most prominent in the marsiyahs of the two great classical masters, it seems to have been a remarkable, rather than an everyday

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A'ẓam Hāshmī, in his discussion of the marsiyah as an epic, airily dispenses with the *bain* (usually a lament by women over the fallen hero) as follows:

> . . . marsiyah has its own structural segments: the *chihrah, sarāpā, rukhsat, āmad, rajaz, jang, shahādat*, and *bain*. Once we omit the last of the aforementioned sections, that is, the *bain*, all of the remaining seven sections, if examined closely, support the production of the epic.[70]

Kenneth Bryant indicates that there are tendencies in modern literary criticism of medieval Hindi poetry, also, to flatten emotionally mixed texture and prioritize "realism." Concern with the purity of *rasa* ("essences" or stylized sentiments) is a value in much Hindi criticism, so admittedly the overall environment of this simplification differs somewhat from that in Muslim ritual poetry. Still, in Bryant's examples, mainstream critics focus consistently on "realistic" depictions of the child Krishna toddling and tumbling. Bryant counters that Sur's true achievement is a powerful "epiphany," brought

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occurrence, for all of them to be included in a majlis recitation. Shād 'Āẓīmābādī reports of a majlis that Anīs addressed:

> He read the fourth line . . . so beautifully that people rose up praising him . . . . Ultimately he read from the prelude to the forming of the ranks, the departure for the battlefield, the battle, the martyrdom, the lament—all of it. In the end, sweat adhered his soaked *kurtā* to his body, his hat to his head."

See Naqī Ahmad Khān ed., *Fikr-e Balīgh* (Lucknow: Nasīm Book Depot, 1974); also cited in Naiyar Mas'ūd, ed. *Bazm-e Anīs* (Lahore: Packager Ltd., 1990), ن

Matthews also doubts that most poets adhere to the sections scheme in terms of sequence, terminology, or the maintenance of firm divisions. See D.J. Matthews, *The Battle of Karbala*, 15. For variations on the sections framework and levels of adherence to it, see also 'Urūj, 18-19; Amy Bard, "From Elegiac Lament to Heroic Masterpiece: The Urdu Marsiyah Re-examined" (Master's Essay, Columbia University, 1996), 56-61.

[70] 286.

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about by the juxtaposition of elements of the commonplace, especially the familiar emotion of parental love, with the divine. Sūrdās's audience is well aware of the child Krishna's divinity, says Bryant, but the poet uses sketches of endearing childhood mannerisms to lull his readers or listeners into a state of ignorance or "forgetfulness" of that divinity, and then unexpectedly reveals it. Consequently, what is "known" still holds the power to amaze.

NATURE AND REALISM

Bryant claims, rather precariously, critics such as K. B. Jindal and Premnarāyan Tandan excise the magical, the divine, and the miraculous in Sur so consistently that the absence of these elements in critical recensions actually proves their importance: "By their deletions, the critics confirm part of my thesis: that audience experience of these poems—not just mine, but theirs also—is complex, is composed of conflicting elements."[71] This may well be stating more than can be convincingly demonstrated, but the pattern Bryant hypothesizes is important in that it identifies appealing, interestingly complex poetry where the critical literature reveals systematic elisions and contradictions.

The data I will present on the marsiyah and other majlis forms reveals majlis poetry's own blending of the commonplace and the cosmic, especially in depictions of the kinship bonds among Karbala heroes and heroines. What I wish to stress here, though, is that in both Hindi and Urdu critical practice, a pronounced desire to valorize "naturalistic," "realistic" description has truncated and distorted poetic traditions almost beyond recognition.

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[71] 34-35

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Aġhā Salmān Bāqir, discussing the marsiyah, praises the value of "natural" poetry in much the same words dozens of other critics use: ". . . a poet's personal sentiments prove useful in depicting people's feelings on a general level, scenes of nature, or aspects of all that makes up human life."[72] K.C. Kanda also distills the views of many like-minded commentators writing in English and in Urdu when he says that the glories of Mir Anis's marsiyahs lie in ". . . realistic scenes of the battlefield, graphic delineations of the hero's face and figure, lively portrayals of the emotional states of the combatants, accurate descriptions of the landscape," and so forth.[73]

Critics devote an enormous amount of attention to "scenes from nature," in particular to Anis's descriptions of the morning of the Karbala battle, the night, and the searing heat of the desert. Shiblī Nu'mānī set the tone for virtually all further commentary on this topic, which has burgeoned into dozens of articles and books that incorporate *manāẓar-e qudrat* ("scenes of nature") into their titles in one way or another.

The following is an often-anthologized "heat" verse of Mir Anis's most famous marsiyah; selections like these are typically full of puns and can be quite playfully embroidered:

> Animals didn't stir from the lakes until eve
> The salamander [or "the sea" itself] resorted to the fishes' abode[74]

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[72] Introduction to Dr. Mas'ūd Raza Khākī, *Jadīd Marsiye* (Lahore: Iftikhār Book Depot, 1994), 5.

[73] K.C. Kanda, 142.

[74] *Samandar* is a common word (from Sanskrit and Prakrit sources) for "sea," but it also means "salamander." This second meaning comes to Urdu from Persian. See Platts, 677.

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If the deer were languid, the cheetahs were burnt black
The rocks melted down like molten wax
The crimson fled the flowers, the verdure the grass
Water hunkered down in wells, it longed so for shade[75]

Jhīloñ se chārpā'e nah uṭhte the tā bah shām
Maskin meñ machhliyoñ ke samandar kā thā muqām
Āhū jo kahile the to chīte syāh fām
Patthar pighal ke rah ga'e the masīl-e mom-e khām
Surkhī urī thī phūloñ se sabzī gyāh se
Pānī kuñvoñ me utrā thā sā'e kī chāh se

Shiblī, devoted to Anis though he is, encounters a little difficulty in molding desert lakes and melting rocks to his "naturalistic" priorities, yet he brazens his way through. Persian poets, he explains disapprovingly, made use of "extreme exaggeration" when depicting desert heat; in Anis's case, "although he exceeds the bounds of natural ["necharal"] conditions," he does so only "because of the influence of popular custom," and "his true mastery is still evident."[76]

Poetic landscapes provide Muhammad Sadiq with the opportunity to muse that marsiyahs, "grow out of a natural setting. Hence the charming vignettes of dawn, sunset, rivers, trees, birds, with which some of the poems are interspersed or preluded. . . . some of them have a fine evocative power. This is because nature is the same the world over . . ."[77] Ja'farī, a younger member of the nature brigade, excerpts verse upon verse of description, followed by exegeses that consist largely of sentences like, "Upon surveying

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[75] Mir Anis, "*Jab qaṭa' kī musāfat-e shab āftāb ne*," in *Bazm-e Anīs* 352, verse 117. Kanda is one of numerous writers who excerpt this verse and those immediately adjacent to it as a classic example of "heat scenes" in the marsiyah.

[76] Shiblī 149;150.

[77] 210

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all of these verses, it becomes abundantly clear that Anis reigns supreme in depicting scenes of nature," and marshal few specifics as they progress. Like his predecessors, Ja'farī grapples half-heartedly with the decidedly (and enjoyably) *un*natural flavor of Karbala's heat in Anis's "nature" scenes:

> Different poets have presented scenes of heat in different manners, but the authenticity and realism that appears in Mir Anis's works is not to be found in others', although the objection can be made that when he is bent upon showing the extremity of heat, he extends himself into the realm of painting imaginary scenes now and then.[78]

A different perspective might allow that while such stanzas impressively conjure up the unbearable heat in which Husain suffered, they also clearly provide something of an artistically challenging, entertaining, virtuosic interlude amidst scenes of separation, battle, and death. This viewpoint, though, might require abandoning Sadiq's credo that realism is "the touchstone of good poetry."[79]

MANLY HEROISM, ISLAMIC HISTORY, AND THE "EPIC"

Qamar A'ẓam Hāshmī ups the stakes of poetic "realism" further, warning that marsiyah is duty-bound to adhere to historical truth:

> Marsiyah presents the events of Karbala, and all of the Karbala events are historically documented and preserved. The marsiyah-writer doesn't enjoy the convenience of being able to omit or add events or characters according to his will, to display the force of his imaginative powers, or to exhibit his quick wit and continually meddle with or edit fixed historical events. Because these events are generally well-known, deviation from history opens one up to charges of exaggerated embellishment. The determinants of [effective] presentation, then, are the marsiyah-writer's artistry, historical insight, keen vision, and sense of historical events. It's no easy matter to remain within the limits of known historical events

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[78] Ja'farī 230; 235.

[79] Sadiq, 217.

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and famed characters and still render them animated and affecting.[80]

Accordingly, when critics fault the marsiyah, the term *mubālaġhāh* ("exaggeration," "hyperbole") liberally peppers their analyses. "Exaggeration," supposedly a particular liability of Lucknow poets, compromises all-important realism, and since the marsiyah flourished in Lucknow, it is ever in danger of succumbing to "senseless extravagances and stupid hyperbole."[81] Hāshmī provides an example of ineffective battle scenes written by Dabir's teacher, Mir Zamīr (d. 1855). In a poem in which two child warriors are aided on the battlefield by their winged ancestor *Ja'far*, Zamīr, says Hāshmī, "couldn't attain real success in presenting the true atmosphere of battle." Apparently, Ja'far's miraculous intervention is too unbelievable to make for good poetry:

> This is the most important battle situation in the aforementioned marsiyah . . . , but its description is completely flat. There's no life to this battle scene, because the writer's [religious] faith dominates the arts of war and their relevant details. The power of faith cloaks the true circumstances of the battle's stages in exaggeration.[82]

Many Urdu critics replicate this sort of gambit whether they are assessing the marsiyah or other forms that have less of a basis in historical events. Frances Pritchett's work suggests that literary reformers such as Hālī and Āzād advocated naturalism partially as a response to colonial critiques of sensual, artificial qualities in Urdu poetry (especially the ghazal) and in the "decadent" sensibility of the Indo-Muslim elite. Indeed, natural poetry (*necharal shā'irī* or *necharal po'itrī*) became something of a watchword for much

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[80] 289.

[81] Saksena, 145.

[82] Hāshmī, 289.

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of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Urdu criticism.[83] The marsiyah, with its clash of good and evil and scope for martial episodes, must have seemed ready-made to counter ghazal sensuality. When skillfully re-imagined (and purged of ghazal-like conceits!), marsiyah texts prove just the right antidote to the "florid vacuum and turgid bombast" that Saksena and other critics so despise in "artificial" nineteenth-century Lucknow poetry. Even the marsiyah's "didacticism," Saksena avers,

> . . . is a pleasant welcome from the revolting sensualism of the court muse. A marsia howmuchsoever [!] inferior it may be in point of artistic workmanship, is moral in its tone and Urdu poetry much needed this corrective.[84]

Literary concern with realism and authenticity in the marsiyah also correlates with an interest in asserting what is most majestic and vital in Islamic history. Qamar A'ẓam Hāshmī, for example, exclaims, "It's very unlikely that a doleful and great tragedy the like of the Karbala incident can be found elsewhere in the history of Islam, and indeed, in the history of humankind."[85] For at least the past fifty years, analyses of the Urdu marsiyah have prioritized not only historically validated sacred events, but a muscular, proactive, morally upright identity that resonates with the idea of a martial epic. Proponents of the *jadīd* (modern) marsiyah are often particularly keen to invigorate the form with rehabilitated, manly heroes:

> The old marsiyah poets, in most cases, went on presenting the martyrs of Karbala as helpless and oppressed, so that piteous sentiments would dominate the listeners. Twentieth-century marsiyah poets, though, have portrayed the loftily positioned

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[83] Pritchett 1994, preface; 34-35; 38;134-135.

[84] Saksena, 149.

[85] 285. See also 'Urūj, 23.

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> imam and his companions as living images of resolution and perseverance, able to joyfully offer the greatest sacrifice in order to defeat falsehood and promote truth. Here they are not victims, but warriors, and this is the true nature of those great men's characters.[86]

The modern school of "manliness" concerns itself less with the swordplay and battle scenes so appreciated in the classical marsiyah than with such ideas of "resolution and perseverance." S.A.A. Rizvi goes so far as to imply that the decline of hand-to-hand-combat has influenced this shift: "Modern marsiya poets, who are not conversant with medieval war-techniques, have given predominance to philosophical, ethical and revolutionary themes in their verse."[87] It is open to question, of course, whether even the classical poets were really expert in fighting techniques, though the lore attributing great martial skill to Anis, in particular, is substantial.[88]

Asad Arīb, whose study culminates with the marsiyahs of modern Pakistani marsiyah poets, coins a startling metaphor of invigoration in his section on marsiyah's epic qualities: "The epic's character," he says, "serves to inject life's dead veins with blood."[89] Arīb and many others labor endlessly to fit the marsiyah to definitions of epic poetry, or even tailor the notion of an epic to describe the marsiyah. [90] The prolific scholar Akbar Haidarī explains that the categorization works because ". . .epic poetry is a narrative form

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[86] Sharīf al-Hasan Naqvī, "Marsiyah—kal aur āj," in Shārib Rudaulvī, 356.

[87] 362.

[88] See, for example, Saksena, 140.

[89] Dr. Asad Arīb, *Urdū marsiye kī sar guzasht, āġāz se zamanah-e ḥāl tak* (Delhi: 'ākif Book Depot, 1992), 18.

[90] See also 'Urūj, 17.

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with a broad sphere of influence, and in which the circumstances and importance of historical actions by pure-hearted characters and hardened evil-doing ones are poetically rendered."[91]

The critics' obsession with the martial epic category is all too clear; as Hāshmī puts it, "The literary truism that the marsiyah is the sole form of Urdu poetry that holds the potential to realize the epic is no longer even a matter for debate."[92] Hāshmī bolsters his argument by citing the respected writer Ihtishām Husain:

> Those who have sought out the characteristics of the epic in the marsiyah have not gone far wrong; in terms of meaning, it has been declared that the display of great goals, lofty morals, the struggle of right and wrong, the clash of grand powers, examples of good and evil morals, all should be evident in an epic. Despite minor objections, these qualities are all found in the marsiyah. It can even be said that the grandeur of Imam Husain's personality and the extraordinary uniqueness of the Karbala event have assisted poetry in fulfilling its potential.[93]

There is no harm in framing the marsiyah as an "epic," especially if doing so allows for meaningful comparison with literature elsewhere in South Asia and beyond. When such substantive analysis has not been carried out, however, the obsessive nature of debates over whether the marsiyah is or is not an "epic" become rather fruitless. Why, aside from its perceived "corrective" value, does this category matter?

The liabilities of this approach are rather clearer. Critical insistence on establishing

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[91] "Mir Anis ba haiśiyat-e razmiyah shā'ir," in *Adabistan 12* (Srinagar), cited in Hāshmī, 284.

[92] Qamar A'ẓam Hāshmī, 271.

[93] Introduction to *Marāśī-e Anīs, mukammal* (Lahore: Ġhulām 'Alī and Sons, 1959), 16-17. In contrast to most commentators, who translate epic as *razmiyah*, Husain repeatedly uses the English word.

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the marsiyah as a martial epic fossilizes analytical categories that are both questionable and unimaginative. The genre is assigned a set of limited, conditional assets and a series of "defects" that continually threaten to dilute these potential virtues of realism, lofty moral themes, universality, and historical veracity. The result is the odd combination of dismay and admiration directed at the marsiyah. Sadiq, typically, takes the most extreme view, pronouncing the marsiyah promising, but ultimately unredeemable: ". . .the marsiya remains, first and last, a lament. The descriptions of chargers, swords, and personal combats—some of the set themes on the strength of which marsiyas are made to claim kinship with the epic, are unreal and are no better than verbal fireworks."[94]

HINDŪSTĀNIYAT

The issue of "authenticity" re-emerges at yet another level, for Indian accretions in the marsiyah also seem to produce a certain angst for critics.[95] Commentators on the marsiyah regularly resort to ingenious apologia for the Indian idioms, exclamations, and social customs, as well as flora and fauna, that ornament the Urdu marsiyah, potentially compromising a realistic historical depiction of seventh-century Arabia and Iraq. 'alī Javād Zaidī allows that,

> In their attempt to highlight the universal and psychological aspects of this great human tragedy, Indian marsiyah-writers made many assorted deviations and additions. Those additions lent a slight Indian coloring to the atmosphere and characters of Karbala. They compromised the event's true historical status, but they also were largely responsible for marsiyahs making progress as a literary

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[94] Sadiq, 210-211.

[95] Critics use a range of terms, including *fak o iṣāfah* ("looseness" and "additions"), *rad o badal* ("alterations," "truncation') to denote adaptations to the Indian context.

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form.[96]

S.A.A. Rizvi, who is a historian of Islam rather than a literary critic, joins in the chorus, commenting on how "Anis transported the Avadh landscape to the desert of Karbalā to the great admiration of his audience."[97]

Sayyid Sakhī Husain Naqvī and others imply rightly that by embroidering their poetry with Indian customs that are not strictly Islamic marsiyah poets made the genre inclusive and widely appealing. Naqvī also finds that "Hindu" images augment Anis's descriptions, particularly those of terrifying encounters on the battlefield.[98] He draws distinctions, though, between "Indianized" social customs as depicted by Anis and properly Islamic ones. He lauds realistic "Indian" details as devices that help the South Asian listener or reader relate to the unfolding narrative, yet ironically cautions against them as models for behavior. Some of the examples he uses are so general, or so formulaic, that they fail to convey any sense of the larger poem's artistry, let alone convincingly illustrate the use of uniquely Indian sentiments or beliefs. Consider this allusion to the young bride Fatimah Kubrā:

> In India, a bride whose husband dies right after the wedding is considered inauspicious. This is a purely Indian fancy with which Islamic society has nothing to do. Hazrat Qāsim's bride, a wife for one night only, articulates these feelings [of unluckiness] upon her groom's enthusiastic martyrdom:
>
> Oh, God, I've spent just a single night as a bride
> What will they all say of [or "to"] me now that the groom is dead!

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[96] 'Āli Javād Zaidī 1998, 18.

[97] 1986, vol. 2, 361-62.

[98] 53.

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Yā rabb dulhan bane mujhe guzarī hai ek shab
Dūlhā jo mar gayā to mujhe kyā kahenge sab[99]

While they might possibly reflect the influence of the ill-regarded state of Hindu widowhood, the lines are just as likely meant to represent the generally distraught sentiments of any woman in such a situation.

Urdu literary critics on the whole devote little attention to the development or the unfolding of the marsiyah, with the exception of identifying a pair of positive and negative structural traits. The "sections" scheme described above is touted as a unique and progressive development in the Indian marsiyah, but it only serves to make the best of a "defective" overall structure marred by disjointed episodes. Sadiq again proves the most efficient representative of a general school of thought, commenting assuredly that poets who "never contemplated the subject as a whole and went to work in different moods" are responsible for the marsiyah's "absence of unity" in characterization, theme, and plot.[100] Ironically, Sadiq himself chooses to analyze by randomly extracting short portions of long marsiyah poems and identifying the fragments as illustrations of natural beauty or martial valor. Students who study the classical marsiyah in Pakistani colleges are also exposed to selected snippets that embody "martial poetry" or display Lucknow-style "rhetorical flourishes and ornaments."[101] Carla Petievich has shown a similar process at work in

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[99] 54.

[100] 209.

[101] Photocopy of college textbook (Lahore: 1997), 579-581. Title and publication information unavailable.

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broader critical efforts to establish a positively-valued Delhi school of poetry completely distinct from the "decayed" Lucknow school.[102]

THE MARSIYAH AT ITS "BEST:" ANĪSIYAT AND DABĪRIYAT

On the whole, Sadiq's impatient critique leaves us baffled as to why the marsiyah should even deserve an entire chapter in a literary history; he examines individual poems only piecemeal, and with dull insistence pronounces judgement on the genre as a whole. He finds that marsiyahs as a class had need of "rehabilitation" as far back as the nineteenth century.[103] His prescriptions for how the marsiyah might better convey the "lofty" character of the imam and his companions derive from assumptions about the female survivors of Karbala (far too noble to indulge in "cries and lamentation") and about the marsiyah's potential resemblance to tales of King Arthur and Charlemagne, or the Iliad. He grudgingly concedes that some of Anis's images "have an almost Miltonic ring,"[104] citing a couplet that proves rather mystifying when taken out of context:

> Marhab he was in impiety and irreligion, and Gev in might
> Was he a villain on horseback or a demon atop a hill?[105]
>
> *Marhab thā kufr o shark meñ ṭāqat meñ gev thā*
> *Ghore pah thā shaqī kih pahārī pah dev thā*[106]

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[102] *Assembly of Rivals: Delhi, Lucknow, and the Urdu Ghazal* (Delhi: Manohar, 1992).

[103] 203.

[104] 208-209.

[105] Gev, the son of Gūdarz, was a Persian mythological champion. Steingass, 1109.

[106] 217.

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According to Ayoub, the traditional and central motivation for writing marsiyahs is "not simply to display artistic talent, but more importantly to induce sorrow and weeping." He also observes, though, that a deliberate blend of artful sensibility and tearfulness is a pronounced and persistent trait in even venerable Arabic marsiyahs : " . . . a poem that does not describe in tender and highly artistic language some aspect or episode of the tragedy would not have fulfilled it purpose. This gives the *marāthi* genre of poetry a unique character."[107] Considerable evidence, including claims and challenges in the works of marsiyah poets themselves, supports the idea of a developed "art" or "craft" of marsiyah-gō'ī , marsiyah-writing, that applies across eras and at least some linguistic boundaries.[108] Urdu literary critics, though, persistently configure Mir Anis, in his use of martial description, elegant diction, and profound meaning, as the exceptional artist among otherwise showy, repetitive marsiyah-writers.

Shiblī Nu'mānī takes an unapologetic pro-Anis stance in his early-twentieth-

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[107] 158.

[108] Anis and Dabir, probably due in part to their much-touted rivalry, were notable masters of a sort of poetic introduction that declaimed their powers of eloquence, rhetoric, and ability to inspire imitation. Among the many examples are Anis's, "My Eloquence is the Finishing Touch ("Salt') on the Art of Speech," (*Namak-e ḳhvān-e takallum hai faṣāhat merī*), *Bazm-e Anīs*, 418- 443, and Dabir's "My Mind has Made Language Ascend the Heights" (*Mi'rāj sukhan ko hai mire ẓahan rasā se*), Hilāl Naqvī, ed., *Daftar-e Dabīr: 25 Marsī*(Karachi: Muhammadī Education and Publishers, 1995), 45-62. Both marsiyah writers also made allegations within their that others stole their ideas; see, for example, Hyder 2000, 154. Modern poets like the young Tasvīr Fāṭimah (see Chapter Eight) continue to assert their bona fides and links to the great tradition in poetic form. If Ayoub's comments are suggestive of poetic craftsmanship in Arabic marsiyahs, the Bangladeshi counterparts of marsiyah also apparently provided a lively forum for poetic competition (although more in performance than in writing); see Dunham.

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century, extensive comparison of Anis and Dabir, although he draws far fewer simplistic oppositions between the rival poets and between "artificial" and "simple, elegant" poetic styles than most later critics. Shiblī appreciates, with just a slight wariness, how skillfully the great master could portray historically unattested Karbala episodes as though they were "real." Anis's best-known marsiyah, for example, describes Zainab's two sons, *'Aūn* and Muhammad, martyred at such a tender age that their tiny hands could barely grip a battle standard. Shiblī comments that Anis presents this "tradition" so authentically that "everyone was deceived as to its [historical] truth."[109] The relentless Sadiq too seems compelled to praise, with reservations, virtuosic poetic craftsmanship in the case of Anis, even if his stated fidelity is to starker, unelaborated expression.

It is the marsiyah's emotional tone and texture, however, and its expressive modes, more than its historical details, that beguile most audiences. Perhaps sensing this, literary commentators also highly value an "authenticity," or "sincerity," of expression.[110] These concepts are shored up by the innumerable anecdotes about Mir Anis and Mirza Dabir as great poetic rivals. The two poets were almost exact contemporaries, and thus well positioned for spirited contests spurred on by large groups of admirers. Āzād (1830-1910), in his early masterwork of criticism *Āb-e ḥayāt*, offers accounts that portray not only Anis and Dabir, but Anis and his younger brother Munis (*Mūnis*) jockeying for status when egged on by their fans. Others who knew the poets specified that all three of them

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[109] Shiblī, 55.

[110] Saksena calls Anis's verse "chaste, sincere and polished," 145. See also Kanda, 143.

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displayed mutual congeniality and admiration, as well as great talent. Depictions of cordial, respectful relations, though, are humdrum beside stories of exciting competition between Mir Anis's God-given, simple, direct expression and Mirza Dabir's pedantic, over-elaborated diction.[111]

Anis's poetry is said to be characterized by *salāsat* (simplicity, plainness) and *faṣāhat* (chastity, purity, clarity) and Dabir's by *shaukat-e alfāẓ* (grandeur of words). As Saksena so pithily puts it, "Eloquence is the watchword of Anis. Grandeur is the motto of Dabir." [112] Anis's admirers consistently link his eloquence with his family's ties to Delhi, and distance from the linguistic extravagance of Lucknow and the Avadh region. Shiblī reports Anis's statements on this Delhi heritage, lifting a few lines verbatim from Āzād's earlier account (in which Anis comes off as a humbler man) in *Āb-e ḥayāt*:[113]

> Mir Anis's family was a Delhi family. Even though his great-grandfather Mīr Zāhik had migrated from Delhi to Faizābād, that family stuck to the traits of Delhi to the end. On many occasions, Mir Anis would say proudly, "Friends! The gentleman of Lucknow do not speak like this; this is the language of my house." Accordingly, at times he wrote "jāgah" for "jagah" (place/space), and not only in written language, he spoke just like that. I've heard from my dear friends who used regularly to attend Mīr Sāhab's gatherings that when people came and seated themselves (in a horseshoe-shaped formation) in his majlises, he would say, "Friends! There's space ["jāgah"] over there." [114]

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[111] For accounts of rivalry, including brother versus brother competition, see Āzād, 522-523. For courteous relations between Anis and Dabir, see Saksena, 146, and for the respectful sociability among all three poets, see Shād, 146.

[112] See Āzād, 521; Saksena,147.

[113] Shiblī, 28. See Āzād, 525. Shiblī and Saksena, along with numerous other writers have lifted Āzād's opinions and anecdotes without attribution.

[114] It's difficult to establish whether this pronunication actually reflected actual practice of high-class Delhi residents of Anis's era. Certainly this is not a preferred

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The Shiblī who here portrays Anis as unbesmirched by Lakhnaviyat ("Lucknow-ness") also, recall, implied that Lucknow's "popular" influences were to blames for Anis's lapses from poetic realism.

Āzād's version marks Anis's Delhi identity even more clearly, suggesting that the speech above shows "that up until this time Anis did not want to call himself a resident of Lucknow." Āzād generally depicts Anis as discreet and decorous, rather than boastful, and some other accounts and letters echo the poet's famed humility, even in terms of his own poetic production. Naiyar Masud cites one example:

> Mir Anis would often say, "Alas, I can't render fully in writing what is in my heart. It just doesn't come out as I want it to." Mir Hāmid 'Āli replied, "What could be better than the rank your work has achieved?" But Mir Anis maintained still, "I know in my heart that whatever I really want to say doesn't come out properly."[115]

When it came to public marsiyah recitation, though, Anis seems to have asserted his rank on numerous occasions, demanding the respect that was his due. Mahdī Hasan Ahsan reports that "men of very great stature bowed their gaze when he got angry," and gives an example:[116]

> Mīr Anis always used to recite at a majlis at Navab 'alī Naqī Sahab's house on the eighth of Muharram. One time, when the accustomed hour for the majlis arrived, the Navab Sahab sent a message to Mir Anis through Vazīr Khān Chele, saying "I'm very ill with a headache just now; please excuse me from attending the majlis." Mir Sahab replied, "I'm not quite myself today either, so it would be appropriate to postpone the majlis. We can pursue the matter in the future,

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pronunciaton today, and in any case the point of the incident is that Anis's family adhered to an ideal of refined Delhi speech.

[115] *Bazm-e Anīs*, ش

[116] From *Vaqi'āt-e Āh*.

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insha'allah." The Navab Sahab came out, all worried, and asked forgiveness of Mir Sahab, and sat there until the end of the majlis despite his bothersome ailment.[117]

The self-esteem of Anis's rival Dabir is shown in a less sympathetic light. Āzād tells of how Dabir gradually excelled his own teacher Mir Zamīr, at one point outperforming him in public.

> Navab Sharaf ud-Daulah was a great admirer of Mir Zamīr. He used to present him with gifts worth thousands of rupees. In the beginning for Mir Zamīr's sake, and then because of the qualities of his own accomplishment, he used to admire Mirza Dabir also. In his majlis, first Mirzā, then Mir Zamīr, used to recite.
>
> On one occasion, Mirza Dabir wrote a marsiyah of which the opening verse is, /The strength of the hand of God's arm is Husain/.[118] When he presented it for correction before Mir Zamīr, its new thoughts and style of expression and arrangement of themes pleased Mir Zamīr. Mir Zamīr did the marsiyah with care. At that time, a majlis was about to be held at the Navab's. He said to his devoted pupil, "My boy, I will recite this elegy in that majlis." Mirza Dabir saluted him by way of consent, and gave him the elegy.
>
> When Mirza Dabir came home, he told some companions about the situation. The draft was with him. He recited that too. Partly because his friends incited him, partly because the flowers of enthusiasm and taste are always thirsty for the dew of praise—and word had reached the Navab. In hints from that side, the breeze of reward came. Finally, the result was that the ustad [teacher] made a fair copy of the marsiyah and took it away, to recite it himself.
>
> As usual, first Mirza Dabir mounted the pulpit. And he recited that very marsiyah. Great praises were heard, and the marsiyah was a flourishing success. The ustad always overflowed with joy when the pupil recited, and praised and encouraged him. Now he sat silently. Some anger, some thoughts of the fickleness of the times. And the thought, "Now when I recite, what will I recite? And what will I recite that is beyond that, such that it will advance the rank of ustad-ship–or if not, that at least will not fall below my own level?" In short, he recited after him, and keeping the turban of accomplishment safely on his head, he descended from the pulpit. But from that day he lost affection for him. People set them up as rivals, and through their own judgement changed Dabir's title "pupil" into that of "ustad;" and such a situation indeed developed that both of them never appeared in

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[117] *Vaqi'āt-e Ānīs*.

[118] Compare with the verse attributed to Iqbal, above, that dubs Husain's father, 'Ali, the "hand of God." Many consider this marsiyah one of Dabir's best.

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the same majlis.[119]

Although Zamīr is perhaps a bit high-handed himself, and Āzād seems to view the emergence of junior poets and their elders' decline as part of a natural order, Dabir still displays a certain effrontery in the anecdote. Another story lightly mocks Dabir's reliance on bookish knowledge in a tradition that held up the ustad as the highest authority. The story capitalizes on the association commonly made between Dabir's arrogance and his elaborated poetry:

> When Dabir was just beginning his practice, his ustad's correction about some word displeased him. Sheikh Nasikh [a famous Lucknow poet, but not a marsiyah-writer] was alive, but he had grown old. Dabir went to him. At that time he was amidst a group of people, sitting on cushioned stools, gathered in his courtyard. Dabir petitioned, "Your Excellency! In this verse I said such-and-such and my ustad gave such-and-such a correction." He replied, Your ustad gave the proper correction." Dabir again petitioned, "Your Excellency, please just look at this book." The Sheikh Sahib grew irritated and said, "What! What do *you* know about books? In my presence you invoke books! I've looked at so many books, I've become a book myself!" He was so angry that he picked up a cane that lay before him and rose. Dabir fled. Sheikh Nasikh was so excited that he pursued him as far as the door.[120]

Just as the critical tradition links Dabir's pedantic ways with his poetic embellishments, it couples Mir Anis's genteel humility with his straightforward, elegant diction. Both poets, though, could boast impressive literary backgrounds. Critics attribute to Mir Zamīr, Dabir's teacher, the almost single-handed transformation of the marsiyah into its classical literary form; "Muẓafar Husain Zamīr," says Qamar Aʿẓam Hāshmī, "was the one who first labored to implement these elements [namely the sections] of the

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[119] Āzād, 516-517. Frances Pritchett's translation is used here; see 420.

[120] Āzād, 516. Pritchett translation, 419-420.

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marsiyah systematically."[121] Anis hailed from a family of poets, including his father Mīr Ḳhalīq and his grandfather Mīr Ḥasan; both critics and popular commentators make much of Anis's cultivated but emphatically "natural" poetic talent, in contrast to the erudition for which Dabir strained in compensation for his less illustrious heritage. Āzād observes of Anis that, "In his ancestral art [of poetry] he was his father's pupil," while Dabir "was not a poet by family background, but was the devoted pupil of Mir Zamīr." [122] Āzād also mentions, but does not necessarily endorse, rumors that Dabir's father was a lowly "paper seller."[123] The very existence of such rumors indicates what a liability a less-than-sterling background could be for a poet. Popular translator K.C. Kanda parrots very efficiently the conventional wisdom on the two rivals'poetic styles, supposedly so closely bound to their origins:

> While Dabir tried to impress his audience with the force and flourish of his style, embellished with Persian words and phrases, and a rich wealth of innovative metaphors and imagery, made to look all the more ponderous with occasional scriptural quotation and allusion, Anees followed a simple, natural style, artistic and adequate to his needs, but not affected.[124]

Some puzzling contradictions underlie critics' ceaseless praise of Anis's family lineage and allegiance to "Delhi Urdu," and patronizing attitude towards Dabir's humbler pedigree and hard-won skill. "Simple" expressions of grief, which critics list as a crucial, if

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[121] Hāshmī, 287. See also Saksena 138; Āzād 366-67; Akbar Haiderī Kashmirī, ed. *Mīr Ẓamīr*: *Taḥqīqī muṭāl'ah* (Lucknow, Nasīm Book Depot, 1982).

[122] Āzād 519-520; Pritchett translation 422-423; On Anis's "legacy" of poetry, see also Shiblī 28; Saksena 142; Kanda 142.

[123] Āzād 515.

[124] 134.

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understandable liability in the marsiyah's early South Asian incarnations, are glorified when the same writers praise Anis. Received wisdom portrays the medieval marsiyah as an unmediated cry from the heart, which later poets' innovations and artistry transformed into "literature." Says Āzād

> . . . in earlier times the proverb became famous, "An inept poet becomes an elegy composer, an inept singer becomes an elegy reciter." The truth is that the poet who composes elegies is like one stricken with misfortune who bewails his misery. When some loved one dies, the poor bereaved person, in a state of grief and sorrow, says whatever comes to his lips. Who is so heartless as to find fault? How can one seek out soundness and error, verbal devices and wondrous creations? These people keeping in view nothing but religious faith, composed marsiyahs and salams.[125]

"Originally," adds Saksena, the marsiyah was "a genuine expression of sorrow."[126] Although we cannot be sure what "originally" or "genuine" mean here, apparently brevity, the couplet or four-line format, and lack of "sections" in pre-nineteenth-century marsiyahs are somehow deemed indicative of honest sentiment.

The work of Āzād, as Frances Pritchett has shown, effortfully constructs a trajectory from "sincere" to "artificial" in Urdu literature as a whole; marsiyah critics almost invariably posit a parallel arc according to which a pious lament gradually blossoms into an fully literary genre, and then quickly decays into an over-elaborated, artificial form in need of rehabilitation. Hāshmī echoes the comments of many other critics when he explains, for example, that the marsiyah's "structural sections," (the *chihrah*, *sarāpā*, *rukhsat*, etc.) which underlie so much of his analysis, "are not found in the Urdu marsiyah

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[125] Āzād, 148-149. Pritchett translation, 154-155. See also Sadiq 203.

[126] 137.

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of every age. They show the artistic consciousness of the [genre's] developed period."[127] The marsiyah has undoubtedly evolved over the ages and continues to do so, but even critics' own selective praise of the marsiyah contradicts the simplistic assertion that the genre went from displaying appealing, inartistic sincerity to reveling in bombast.

Critics contrive to have it both ways: intense grief is an uncomplicated, simple emotion given voice in the marsiyah. and yet, when articulated by Anis, it becomes the ultimate in artistry. Anis somehow succeeds in harnessing a heretofore unremarkable genre so that it inspiringly articulates martial, masculine values, but retains the direct, heartfelt lament of early poetry to just the appropriate degree. Things go rapidly downhill after Anis's heyday, and critics find little to praise in the marsiyah we will examine in Chapters Four and Five, *Lāsh Akbar kī.* This marsiyah—an extremely popular one with majlis audiences— problematizes the critical trajectory further because it is more lament-oriented, and less "developed" in terms of "sections," than Anis's masterpieces, though its author is Anis's younger brother and protege.

In the case of virtually every marsiyah poet except Anis, commentators value works for their elegiac mood or their artistic excellence, but not for both. In the case of the eighteenth-century poet Saudā, for example, S.A.A. Rizvi comments,

> Sawdā also deeply resented the low standard of poetry found in the marsiyahs of his contemporary poets. . . Sawdā tried to make the marsiyahs more artistic. For about forty years in his life he composed marsiyahs but he was not satisfied with his own efforts. His audience was also not impressed. He says,
>
> "Marsiyah is a form of poetry which makes people cry when it is recited before

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[127] 287.

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them, When Sawdā recites his marsiya, people keep mum."[128]

Āzād concurs that although Saudā's marsiyahs are unartistic by later standards, "The funny thing is that the people of that time [i.e. Saudā's own era] used to say that Saudā's elegies [marsiyahs] contained not elegiac-ness [*marasīyat*], but poetry."[129] Asad Arīb comments more generally that a marsiyah that doesn't strive to stir the emotions, that "targets just metaphorical power and a fluctuation of vocabulary," is "simply literature," not "a true marsiyah."[130] Present-day reciters of the marsiyah, too, sometimes invoke the artistic/emotional divide. Shujā'at Hāshmī, for one, announced in the popular Urdu press in Pakistan, "I don't consider marsiyah-writing an art, because I dive into a sea of emotions when I recite a marsiyah."[131]

One often gains the impression, then, that a marsiyah-writer, if not a simple, pious soul, is necessarily a master of florid verse, determined only to establish a grand reputation and earn rewards from the Shi'i nobility. The Anis-Dabir "incidents" are often a shorthand allusion to this dichotomy. Mirza Dabir, though an improvement in some ways on the poets of earlier eras, strains too laboriously towards "artistry" to play more than a lackluster second fiddle to Mir Anis.

Dichotomies in the critical tradition, though starkly painted, do on occasion

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[128] Rizvi, 269.

[129] Āzād 149; Pritchett translation155..

[130] 21.

[131] "Marsiyah-khvānī mushkiltarīn fan hai, 'umdah sh'ir fahmī aur 'aqidat o ahtarām ke baġhair mumkin nahīñ," *Jang*, May 1, 1997.

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articulate a core theme that is so pronounced, so unanimously asserted, that it merits careful scrutiny. In the case of the Anis-Dabir debate, the theme is that of Anis's incomparable artistic stature, After all, commentators who prize Anis as one of the very greatest Urdu poets include, alongside the most drearily mainstream voices, perceptive, critical thinkers such as C.M. Naim and Shams ur-Rahman Fārūqī.[132] It is in fact hard not to draw the conclusion that Anis is a superior poet, but any serious examination of the poetry itself shows that vaunting his "simplicity," "naturalism," or "eloquence" in opposition to Dabir's (or other poets') "exaggeration," artificiality," or "scholarly erudition" does not establish his greatness.

Books upon books have aspired to explicate the unique appeal of Anis's works; to attempt that feat is not remotely within the scope of my project here, but there are clear indications of where one might begin to demonstrate his unique talents. Often they burst forth in multivalent metaphors and sustained imagery. The very sound of his poetic lines—their euphony, rhythm, end rhyme, internal rhyme, and vowel repetitions—also makes a tremendous impression. Anis was reputed to be an especially gifted reader of marsiyahs, and occasionally, though performance, he won over some of Dabir's followers, who were moved upon hearing him in a way they never had been by his texts on the page.[133]

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[132] C.M. Naim, personal communication, 9/28/01; Shams ur-Rahman Fārūqī, "Dabīr ke marsiyoñ meñ bayāniyah," *Andāz-e gufugū kyā hai* (Delhi: Maktabah Jami'ah, 1993), 105.

[133] See, for example, *Bazm-e Anīs*, س

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It makes little sense to claim that Anis's poetry succeeds because it is more "martial," freer of tearful sentiment, or more appropriate in its depiction of characters of different ranks, than Dabir's. First and foremost, these values have little to do with either literary merit or with the criteria for effectiveness in the mourning assembly. Furthermore, as even the usually blinkered Sadiq has shown, these sorts of oppositions unravel easily because examples always emerge that can illustrate how that times Dabir is "no worse" than Anis, or Anis is "no better" than Dabir.[134]

Formal and Informal Commentarial Traditions

Classical marsiyah poems and related commentarial literature both reach their audiences through chains of written and oral transmission. The manner in which these forms play off of and enhance one another gives us a glimpse of how multi-faceted the world of marsiyah appreciation is. One can easily enjoy acerbic **vāqi'ah*s (incidents or anecdotes) about dueling poets on the level of sheer amusement and entertainment. Anecdotes that compare Anis and Dabir, however, do more than enliven critical discourse or betray reformist biases, for they exemplify analytical schemes that transcend scholarly circles. The little tales have a reach beyond the two great writers' lives and works, encapsulating as they do cultural patterns of humor, hierarchy, aesthetic appreciation, and values such as the morality that inheres in kinship, loyalty, humility, and faith in the imamite lineage. Even the unlettered continue to enjoy and contribute to this popular class of literature that implicitly evaluates the marsiyah. While mainstream Urdu criticism sometimes seeks to separate marsiyah's ritual context from its literary value, anecdotes

[134] Sadiq 220-226.

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provide hints about how deeply piety, affect, and aesthetics are intertwined.

The sources for "incidents" in critical works are said to be reputable eyewitness accounts and oral transmission. Meanwhile, some of the anecdotes related by today's marsiyah reciters and aficionados, and attributed to relatives or neighbors of the great poets from generations past, bear a strikingly close resemblance to textual accounts. Perpetuating a similar sort of cycle, dozens of Shiahs from Lahore to Hyderabad recited for me a couplet of Anis's—significantly, one that again invokes his family lineage—highlighted by Āzād in *Āb-e ḥayāt*:

> My life has passed in traveling this field/
> I am in the fifth generation of praisers of Shabbīr
>
> *'Umr guarī hai isī dasht kī sayyāḥī meñ*
> *Pānchvīñ pusht hai Shabbīr kī muddāḥī meñ*[135]

Evidently many "traditions" transit from oral tellings to the scholarly literature, and back again. Their unflagging appeal and the values they consistently articulate help maintain interest in the marsiyah as a living tradition of poetry.

Marsiyah afficionados might, for example, validate their loyalty to Anis or Dabir by citing their chosen poet's divine inspiration, or the approval bestowed on him by Ali or Husain.

> The late Qurbān Ḥusain Shāh Kāẓmī from the settlement of "Sayyid Kasrān"[in Panjāb] said, "The residents of our colony have been [majlis] mourners for centuries, and from the times of our fathers and forefathers, we've been hearing the name and works of Mirzā Ṣahab. We have hundred-year old printed copies of Dabir's marsiyahs in our houses, but haven't seen any such old treasury of Anis's works anywhere. Among us, it's well-known that the blessed Imam Husain

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[135] Āzād 524; Pritchett translation, 427. This couplet is from the opening verse of *Namak-e ḳhvān-e takallum hai faṣāḥat merī, Bazm-e Anīs*, 418.

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himself approved Dabir's marsiyahs."[136]

Anis's fans have an ingenious explanation for any praise the imams might have bestowed on Dabir, one that underlines Anis's status as a Sayyid descended from the Prophet, in addition to asserting his superior poetic talent. (Many Shiahs reserve a special reverence for Sayyid families, however poor they may be.) Consider this anecdote told in 1997 by Sayyid Bāqir Ahmad Shamsī of Lahore:

> This was the way of it: Anis and Dabir used to compete. Consequently, two parties were formed, and there was always a fight going on. In order to end the fight, two elders said, "You [each] write a marsiyah, a 'top' marsiyah." [Having written them] they sealed those up, and took them off to Hazrat Ali's tomb in Najaf. There they submitted this prayer: "Maulah, place your seal (*mohur*) on whichever is the best marsiyah."[137] That night the imam came in a dream to those who had gone there [to Najaf], and to the ones in Lucknow, too, and said, "Anis, yours is better, but you're a Sayyid, so I won't stamp [yours with] my seal, or Dabir will say, 'Oh, he's a Sayyid [i.e. a "relative"of the imams], so that's why he applied his seal . . .'" He applied it to Dabir's. Anis's was the better marsiyah, though; he [the imam] came in a dream and said it!

Petievich shows that literary commentators have often associated a poet's *sharāfat* (hereditary and cultural "nobility") with refined poetic diction.[138] The pattern is repeated in the Anis and Dabir stories, and amplified in this case by the special resonance a Sayyid lineage holds in Shi'i piety: Anis, devoted to and descended from the imams, remains untouched by the need for obvious approval that the imam attributes to Dabir in the story.

The hapless Dabir cannot win out even when he takes the tactic of claiming a

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[136] Sayyid Murtaza Husain Fāzil, ed. *Javāhar-e Dabīr* (Lahore: Shaikh Ghulam 'Alī and sons, 1986), 13.

[137] Maulah, "the master," or "the lord," usually refers in the majlis to one of the imams, most often Husain or Ali.

[138] 1992, 185-188

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heavenly partnership of his own, Zakiya Sulṭānah, a women's majlis preacher, recounts:

> . . . Each [Anis and Dabir] wanted to prove the superiority of his own poetry. Dabir wrote an excellent marsiyah. Everyone was listening to it, appreciating it. When asked how he produced such a wonderful creation, a poem that made such good points, Dabir said casually, "Well, Jabrīl [the angel Gabriel] continually relates poems to me, and I just go on writing them down." Well, among the people there were some followers of Anis too, his partisans, Anis's partisans. They went to Anis and said, "Dabir pulled off a great one today! No one could equal such a high claim . . . that Gabriel continually relates poems, while he takes them down!" Anis responded, "Well, no matter . . . in my case, the fact is that Gabriel notes them down while I relate them!"[139]

In anecdotes like these, Anis's and Dabir's respective loyalists, acting as their mouthpieces, may ritually blunt the boastfulness of the poets themselves, but there is no mistaking the fierceness of the rivalry. Poets' boasts (on occasion boasts couched in humility), as well as charges of plagiarism, form central motifs both in this sort of popular tale and in anecdotes from literary biographies. Such challenges even work their way into the poetic prefaces of marsiyahs.[140] In fact, although no one marsiyah was mentioned in connection with this anecdote, in all likelihood the idea for it launched from Dabir's marsiyah *Mi'rāj sukhan ko hai mire zahan rasā se*. This poem's second verse contains the couplet, "My pen is a key to the lock on heaven's door/ It writes praises just as Gabriel relates them."[141]

The little story needles Mirza Dabir both overtly and subtly. Dabir's boast betrays

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[139] Recorded in Hyderabad, India, on June 3, 1998.

[140] See the discussion of challenges, competition, and the art of marsiyah-writing in f.n. 109 above. On the likelihood of Anis and Dabir interacting with and imitating one another, see Shiblī, 29-30.

[141] *Khāmah hai mirā qafal-e dar-e 'arsh kī mifta'/Jibrīl jo batlāte hai so likthā hai madda'*, *Daftar-e Dabīr*, 45.

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an arrogance that also purportedly characterizes his poetry. To add insult to injury, he affects modesty while making his incredible claim. Of course Anis's sharper wits win out in verbal sparring, just as his poetry outshines Dabir's. Less obvious is the play on Dabir's name that spices up the anecdote: "Dabīr," can mean "a writer," or "a master/teacher of writing," but it also translates as "secretary," and here Dabir Sahab manages to reduce himself from the former to the latter.

Such stories typically imply that a jumped-up commoner like Dabir strives for sophistication and embellishment to compensate for what he lacks—the instinctive elegance that comes naturally to the well-bred Anis. An impeccable lineage and Sayyid status confer respect on a poet, and Anis is felt to posses the real merit that makes him worthy of this respect. Poetic pride, it also becomes evident, has its place when supported by great work, cloaked in modesty, or unveiled in response to a challenge. The motif of the truly superior personage who rises above his rivals despite their swaggering subtly echoes the virtuous comportment of those at Karbala, recognition of which distinguishes the faithful and perceptive from the "blind." A similar line of thinking, framed in an overtly religious manner, surfaces in the poetry and prose of the female preacher Shabih-uz-Zahra, whom we will meet in Chapters Two and Three.

The largely apocryphal Anis and Dabir tales are usually set in Lucknow, but Shiahs all over the subcontinent relate them, suggesting how much influence Lucknow's poets, and perceptions of them, retain in the popular imagination. I recorded the "mohur" story in Lahore, Pakistan and the Jibril story in Hyderabad, India.. Near the great poets' old stomping grounds, the oral lore surrounding the marsiyah takes decidedly home-grown

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twists rarely seen in written sources. The Persian and Urdu scholar Naiyar Masud joked that Lucknow Shiahs take their poetic partisanship so seriously that some clans avoid marriage between "Anisian" and "Dabirian" families. Masud and his father before him have produced illustrious scholarship on the work of Anis, motivated in part by their family's historic associations with the poet. Masud's wife's clan harbors a fondness for Dabir, and supposedly this tension almost interfered with their own wedding plans.

Despite this bit of levity, "Anisian" and "Dabirian" sentiments can wax surprisingly strong in Lucknow even today; in farther-flung communities, loyalties are rarely quite as impassioned. Other Lucknow marsiyah lore revolves around purely local geography. A cheerful neighbor of mine in the old city who frequently visited Anis's house (in which his descendants still reside), spoke nostalgically of how the poet used to bathe in the large tank in its courtyard, dictating marsiyahs to a scribe the while. One would have thought from her vivid description that she had actually witnessed the scene. However fanciful the story, its "dictation" motif, like that in the more supernatural "Jibrīl" anecdote above, does concur with published descriptions of marsiyah poets narrating their poems to scribes.[142]

In the case of both anecdotes and poems themselves, documenting fixed "original" texts is quite difficult, although most classical marsiyahs are only about 150 years old. Authenticating manuscripts is not among the purposes of this study; in fact, I assert that in the majlis, the text's appeal lies largely in its manipulability. Versions of the same marsiyah nearly always vary somewhat on the levels of poetic line, verse, and whole stanzas or

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[142] Naiyar Masud, personal communication 3/19/98; Najīb Husain, personal communication, 1/11/99; 1998, No. 1..

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sections. My case study in chapters Four through Six provides examples of these variations, as well as other important factors that individualize performances of one poem. In keeping with majlis practices, I accept a range of popular renderings as "the same marsiyah," provided they share a core of verses and one or two recognizable episodes. Majlis participants themselves, I show, dynamically relate and re-create the marsiyah, balancing textual fixity and fluidity, and prioritizing the overall emotional impact of marsiyah recitation.

Entering a Majlis

Given still-vital, intriguingly varied traditions of marsiyah performance and oral commentarial literature, only the sort of genre study that seeks to authenticate manuscripts could be complete without some element of fieldwork. I believe that we will perceive the marsiyah in its fullest form by situating it in the majlis, as Schubel and Pinault do, while also studying and explicating the text closely, which only the rare critic like Naiyar Masud has done to date. Following his lead, we must consider the marsiyah text not only in a fixed form on the page, but in performance. Here the classificatory approach of ethnomusicologists like Regula Qureshi, the ritual analysis of religious scholars like Schubel, and the perspectives of researchers on affect and emotion such as William Reddy, will be of assistance.

Gender is a key factor that influences the performance style of a poem and an individual's broader relationship to the marsiyah. For many women, mourning assemblies are social as well as religious high points of the year, and as indicated earlier, they participate zealously. Relatively few women write marsiyahs, however, even if they are

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fond of relating stories about the great poets or commenting on poems. The few female poets who do emerge are often known for their piety, fortitude in hardship, and humility.[143] These qualities, exemplified by the very heroes and heroines of the marsiyah, are not exactly absent in oral and written anecdotes about famous male marsiyah-writers, but they are hardly stressed as much. Tales of poetic competition, wondrously prolific production of marsiyahs, and dramatic costumes and performances flesh out traditions about the male poets in a way that has no counterpart for female marsiyah-writers.

Majlis lore among women tends to favor the miraculous and spiritual; a professional marsiyah-reciter from Lucknow, for example, told me of an enormous mourning assembly some years ago in which a white light from the heavens bathed the face of the hostess, a woman of renowned piety, during the marsiyah recitation. Several other women who attended the same hostess's majlis with me in 1998 said they had also witnessed the event. Other acquaintances reported instances of the women of Karbala appearing at a pious person's deathbed or at a majlis. Vernon Schubel notes that, "It is commonly believed that Fatimah and Zainab appear at the *majalis*, that after the *matam* they gather the tears of the mourners in their skirts, and that on the Day of Judgement they will present these tears to God as proof of the sincere faith of that person."[144] Pinault details one version of a popular miracle tale that features an impoverished Shi'i woman providing hospitality to strangers, only to find, when they participate in her dutiful

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[143] See Bard, "Value and Vitality."

[144] 85.

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mourning rituals, that they are Fatimah, Zainab and other women of Husain's clan.[145]

In marsiyah texts themselves, women's lament, or *bain*, is a feature so ubiquitous that critics generally classify it as a compulsory segment of the marsiyah.[146] The marsiyah translated in Chapter Four includes typical examples of bain. As we have seen, critical works tend to imply that the lament element of the marsiyah is confined to a single, female-oriented ,disposable section of the poem. They generally neglect to explain either that lament surfaces throughout the marsiyah, or that numerous marsiyahs center on the heroines of the Karbala tragedy.[147]

Existing literary criticism devotes limited attention to women's survival narratives, but after ashurah day they often come to the fore in the majlis, with important implications for understanding the marsiyah tradition as a whole. Implicitly gendered analyses of the marsiyah are very prevalent, but my focus from the marginal position of the women's majlis de-centers traditional critical fixations on marsiyah as a poetry of martial masculinity, illuminating the mixed emotional contour of the genre and its performance context. In that context, we also begin to see that some of the same core values underlie religious beliefs, aesthetic appreciation, and affective response. These three cultural expressions may sometimes seem to operate quite independently, but they are often melded or conflated. With that in mind, let us enter a majlis in middle-class Lahore.

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[145] Pinault 2001, 60-61. See also Schubel, 35-70.

[146] Abbas 1983, 42; Matthews 19,23 ; C.M. Naim, "The Art of the Urdu Marsiya," (University of Chicago, unpublished paper, 1978), 1-2; Shiblī , 195; Bard 1996, 51-69.

[147] See Chapter Eight.

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Chapter Two: "The Trappings of Death, the Passion for Battle, and the Remembrance of God"; A Women's Majlis

Lahore, May 1997

The neighborhood is one of large, light-colored concrete homes, a once-affluent area just a short ride from Lahore's central shopping district and the lush Jinnah gardens. The roads are broad, without much in the way of greenery to mitigate the bright, searing heat of May. Beyond Shabāb Chauk's ramshackle bazaar, the roads become lanes and the houses either shrink into slightly shabby two-room units or remain large shells containing several such units. One of the broader thoroughfares on the way to this warren of lanes boasts a massive, almost palatial white imambarah. This gathering hall, dedicated to the remembrance of a chain of spiritual leaders descended from the Prophet Muhammad , is ornamented with a large metal hand. The five fingers outspread atop a lofty dome mark the neighborhood as a predominantly Shi'i Muslim one.

On the hot, quiet, narrow street where the day's first majlis will be held, a few black-clad women are still making their way toward a very small, nondescript building. A simple black and white poster near the entrance-way provides the only immediate clue that religious functions are held here, as well as in the grander structure around the corner. Today, because of the recent spate of shootings in Lahore between members of Shi'i and Sunni Muslim sects, there are several soldiers posted outside this modest imambarah. Tall, skinny, lazy-limbed, and with guns slung over their shoulders, they sprawl, on folding metal chairs, eyes watchful. Female voices from inside the hall suggest that most of the majlis participants have already arrived, and the low drone of women's voices somehow

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renders the male soldiers' fidgeting even more awkward.

Along the entrance passage that runs against the building's side wall, dozens and dozens of pairs of shoes, flip-flops, merrily sequined high-heeled sandals, scuffed black pumps, and leather slippers form careless piles. Inside *Qaṣr-e Zainab* ("The Palace of Zainab"), sit at least a hundred fifty women of all ages, crushed into cramped, cross-legged positions on the floor. Crowded into two fourteen-by-sixteen foot rooms, they chuckle and chatter, or soothe sweaty babies, or finger prayer-beads. *Chādar* cloths or more closely-fitted black *burq 'as* enfold many of the women, and even the younger girls in loose *shalvār* trousers and tunic *qamīz*es wear a limited range of colors, mostly black, white or grey; there is no red, orange or pink to be seen. Everyone has a black georgette *dopaṭṭah* veiling her hair and neck, or at least draped over her shoulders.

All the women face the end of the hall closest to the lane, where a large, white-draped chair sits vacant next to a wooden platform about the size of a single bed, atop which two middle-aged women page through various aged-looking books written in Urdu script, and hold a murmured discussion. To the left of them, two large glass cases contain rows of metal *'alam*s, replicas of the battle-standard of Imam Husain; some of these 'alams bear hands like the one that crowns the Al-Fatimah imambarah down the street, while others display crescent moons or calligraphic designs. Most are inscribed with a name or names of the *panjatan pāk*, the "holy five," represented by the five-fingered motif: The Prophet Muhammad; Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law and cousin; Fatimah, the Prophet's daughter; and Hasan and Husain, two martyred sons of Ali and Fatimah. Richly colored, gold-edged cloths in maroon, pink, orange and green adorn all of the 'alams.

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On Qasr-e Zainab's side walls hang a few depictions of unforgettable moments from the tragedy of Karbala; one shows Imam Husain's blood-streaked horse arriving at camp from the battlefield, riderless, to be received with heart-broken laments by Husain's female relatives. The room, though, is clearly oriented towards the stately, eye-catching display of 'alams and the wooden "stage." A number of older, bossier and more prominent women make their presence felt in this part of the room; they lean against walls—though no one turns her back to the 'alams—and relax their limbs comfortably, despite the space restrictions. As the last of the crowd straggles in, newcomers who gravitate to the front of the room expect others to make way for them, while the younger or more timid make for the back of the hall. By this time, a few minutes after the assembly's planned starting hour, the building is packed; women spill out of the back of the building into the courtyard and stand in the passageway, straining to see in from the doorway.

Still the majlis doesn't begin; some of the older women up front, regular attendees, become impatient. One of the women whose poetry recitations form a key early part of the majlis is late, again. They debate about starting without her and gripe about the crowd's general lack of punctuality. Another cluster of women isn't bothered in the least by the delay; they are too busy heatedly discussing the sectarian strife raging through the city. Almost everyone claims to have a relative who's been injured or killed, or at least to know someone whose family has been affected.

> "Some of the men have stopped wearing black, so they won't be identified, the situation is so bad."

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> "We can't cave in to that; you'll never convince me. Women are braver than men, in any case."
>
> "Right, if they attack us, they attack us. If you have to go, you might as well go while you're engaged in something meritorious, attending a majlis."

The conversation in the knot of older women takes a turn for the sharper and louder,

> "Where is she? If the starting time is 8:30 it should be 8:30. Punctuality is crucial; otherwise we'll be late to the majlis after this, and the one after that will start even later."
>
> "I don't know why people can't come when they're told."

These last statements segue from private commentary to public announcement as the errant reciter Zahidah (*Zāhidah*) comes bustling through the crowd. One of the organizers, stiff of posture and firm of voice, takes the opportunity to rebuke the whole crowd:

> "Please make an effort to arrive on time at the majlis; by starting late, we inconvenience others and delay the whole day's schedule of observances. Tomorrow our starting time is 8:30 AM. I would be grateful if you would arrive by 8:15."

Introductory Poetry

Zahidah is still making her way through the crowd, adjusting her *dopaṭṭah* and shuffling her poetry books. In the meantime, a thin and pallid girl of about seventeen, head modestly covered, has quietly seated herself in front of the wooden platform. As she glances up at the room full of women, the whole congregation intones, formulaically but energetically, "*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!" ("Blessings on Muhammad and on the family of Muhammad"). Some strong voices resound throughout the hall, others mutter almost unintelligibly, some rush along with fervor where others lag

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wearily behind. As the thin girl begins her melodic recitation in a reedy but resonant voice, the general noise level diminishes, although the murmur of whispered gossip and negotiations over sitting space from the back of the hall never die down entirely.[1]

Oh Daughter of the Prophet, Fatimah, enter our midst
The mourners are seated, so enter our mourning-place

The majlis hour has struck, so enter our midst
Accept our plea, and enter our midst

We'll weep, wrapped around the 'alam of 'Abbās
And call together, "Yā Husain!"

Accept our plea, and enter our midst

The mourners say, "Zahrā will come here;
There'll be a sermon from the pulpit, telling of the King of Faith"
Accept our plea, and enter our midst

For Zainab's sake, let us endure no pain or sorrow
Cure quickly whoever among us ails
Accept our plea, and enter our midst

Allow for the peace and comfort of those who hold you dear:
Let us be sacrificed, like Hasan and Husain
Accept our plea, and enter our midst

May the hostess of this majlis stand honored forever:
Just bestow your prayers on the Master's mourners
Accept our plea, and enter our midst

Acknowledge our majlis, and enter our midst
Accept our condolences in heaven, and then enter our midst
Accept our plea, and enter our midst

Oh Daughter of the Prophet, Fatimah . . .

This salam (**salām*) poem is a simply constructed invocation in rhyming couplets

[1] For more information on the different genres of majlis poetry, see Appendix B, and on recitation, see Appendix D.

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(*aa, bb, cc,* etc.) with a refrain following the second line of every couplet. The vocabulary is simple, the pace slow, and the recitation loosely rhythmic and song-like, rather than chanted. By the time the girl has finished and sidled quietly to the side, plump, cheerful-looking *Bājī* Zahidah has assumed her position on the edge of the *chaukī* or wooden platform.[2] She calls out the **darūd* (the "alla huma . . ." chant of salutation and praise) in such a deep and musical voice that the crowd seems roused and more enthusiastic than before; they shout out the slogan along with her as she cries, "and again!"[3]

Zahidah holds her place on the chaukī with bright alacrity; she appears a composed performer, brimming with professional energy. Unlike the reciters of marsiyah poems who will later take the stage, she is indeed a consummate professional and hails from a musically talented family. Others may make a point of refusing the cash honorariums, **nazrānah*, that congregations offer reciters, saying that their spiritual rewards and the appreciation of the pious are acknowledgment enough. Zahidah has little choice but to rely on the *nazrānah* provided by Rāhat, who owns the building that houses Qasr-e Zainab, and by the sponsors of other imambarahs where she recites. Her performances support her crippled, unemployed husband, and contribute towards the dowries of several unmarried daughters. It's plain, nonetheless, that she is proud of her melodious voice and the appealing, infectious rhythm of her tunes. These generate so much demand that Zahidah is often ferried from one majlis to another in a rich Shi'i family's car, though the driver must squeeze and scrape through the constricted lanes to collect her from Qasr-e

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[2] *Bājī*, older sister, is a title affixed to the names of many majlis performers.

[3] The *darūd* is not rendered with a tune, rather it is spoken, often shouted.

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Zainab for a majlis in the spacious, relatively cool facilities of a well-endowed imambarah in Shadman Colony.

"Please the blessed panjatan pāk and recite the *darūd*," Zahidah intones levelly.

"*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!" the women chorus.

"Say the salavat (**ṣalavāt*) in the names of Muhammad and Muhammad's family!"[4]

"*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!"

The chant is louder now; it seems to bounce off the walls in the narrow space.

"The invocation of greatness!"

"*Allāhū Akbar!*" ("God is great!") comes the response

"The invocation of Prophecy!" Zahidah's voice rises higher and louder.

"*Ya, rasūlallāh!*" ("Hail, Prophet of God!"), cry the women with matched increases in pitch and volume.

"N'arah-e Haidarī!!" ("The slogan of Haidar!"[5])

"*Yā Ali!!*" (Hail, Ali!) The shout rings even louder here.

"Haidarī!"

"*Yā Ali!!*" The cry crescendoes.

Zahidah calls out more restrainedly for one more blessing: "In the name of the eternal well-being of Muhammad's family, say the salavat."

"*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!"

Zahidah now formally begins her recitation, in a mixture of Urdu and Panjabi, with

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[4] Literally, "blessings" or benedictions." In this context, these always take the form of the "*allah huma*" chant. *Ṣalavāt* is a more commonly-used term for the *darūd*.

[5] "The lion," another name for Ali.

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her signature invocation to Hazrat Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law and the first Shi'i imam, or divine guide.

> Once you acknowledge that Ali is the Solver of Difficulties
> Then just see what Ali accomplishes
> All of our problems move aside
> When we call "Yā Ali!" with sincerity!

"Salavāt!" cries someone.

"*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!"

The response erupts passionately from some listeners, is emitted automatically by others.

> There's no one anywhere to compare with Ali!
> There's no one anywhere to compare with Ali!
> Searching all God's creation in vain has exhausted me
> There's no one anywhere to compare with Ali!
>
> Even as the Beloved of God[6] acknowledged light to be light
> So he defined ordinary mortals as mortals and special intimates as such
> He called the rose the rose, and the bud the bud
> You'd clearly be lofty, since he called you "Ali!"[7]

"N'arah-e Haidarī!"

"*Ya Ali!*"

"Haidarī!" This time the prompt comes shrilly and excitedly from a little girl.

"*Ya Ali!*" The ladies call, some smothering chuckles at the child's quivering enthusiasm.

> God, the only Truth, made me his vehicle
> He made me able to light up the gathering
> When Ali broke the images the House of God said,

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[6] i.e. Muhammad.

[7] '*Alī* means "great" or "exalted."

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"You made circumambulation my due!"[8]

The women continue to call out confirmations, praises and blessings as Zahidah recites; she dramatically emphasizes high points in the text, melody, and rhythm through hand gestures and meaningful eye contact with the women seated before her. To the extent that this is a performance, it presupposes and flourishes with the active participation of the audience. Zahidah herself intermittently shouts out "*N'arah-e Haidarī*!" ("the slogan of Haidar (Ali)!)," or "*ṣalavāt parho*" ("recite the salavat") after invoking Ali or other members of the holy five. She may do so to whip up more fervor, or because she needs a quick breather or a gulp of water.

> The People asked Adam, Noah and Jesus
> They asked Joseph and Jacob
> That is to say, they asked all of the prophets,
> All of them answered as one voice: "There's no one anywhere to compare with 'Ali!"

Zahidah Bājī's texts always center on the *ahi-e bait* ("people of the [Prophet's] household"), or the Prophet's lineage, and her initial poems convey lively praise with upbeat tunes. As she continues, though, Zahidah deftly moves from invocatory praise to narrative, heart-wrenchingly sad verses centered on the martyrdom of Imam Husain, the Prophet's grandson, at Karbala. Simultaneously, the tune and tempo change dramatically, and the language even shifts from Urdu to Panjabi. These verses allude to Husain's ailing daughter Sughra's (*Ṣuġhrā*'s) dismay when the rest of the family embark on their ill-fated trip to Kufah, leaving her behind in Medina:

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[8]An allusion to Ali's eminence in shattering the idols in the K'abah at the behest of the Prophet.

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The King addressed Bībī Sughra,[9]
"Your *burqa'* is red all through"
Said she "My Father dear,
I'm in a state of complete despair!"

"Seeing my brothers depart
I smashed my head against the wall's niches
My head is wounded, oh Father,
That's why my *burqa'* is red all through"

Without pause, Zahidah moves into an Urdu soz in rhyming couplets. This particular soz shares a poetic meter with the best-known poems of the more elaborate Urdu marsiyah genre, although its language is far simpler. It captures a certain dramatic moment in the Karbala cycle that is familiar to all of those present, rather than relating narrative episodes as the marsiyah poem will. One of Zahidah's favorite pieces, the poem recalls the anguish of Husain's wife Bano (*Bāno*), when her eighteen-year-old son dies in battle.[10] In addition to the sheer heartbreak of parental loss, the text draws on the idea of wasted potential and investment, of the unique horror of a life destroyed on the verge of its prime. These themes reinforce the supreme nature of the sacrifice Imam Husain and his followers willingly made to uphold true Islam. Zahidah's listeners respond with sobs and moans of increasing intensity as the poem builds.

When Bano heard that Ali Akbar had passed on
She said, weeping, "Today it's me, not you, that's died"

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[9] Sughra is communicating with her father either in a sort of vision before the Karbala battle, or after his death when she is still languishing in Medina.

[10] Although the accounts considered most credible state that *Umm-e Laila* was in fact Akbar's mother, popular rites in South Asia often represents Bano/Shahr Bano (who was also the mother of the fourth imam Zain ul-abidin) as Akbar's mother and main female mourner. This discrepancy will emerge noticeably in Chapter Four, but is not of great import to most majlis-goers, who would probably name Bano as Akbar's mother.

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Oh, my darling, oh light of my eyes,
How can I describe my loss since you've gone?
I can't make out where the one who illumined my sight has gone
When Bano heard that Ali Akbar had passed on . . .

When the cruel one's dagger struck Akbar's chest
The Prophet uttered a sigh and Ali broke into tears
All of his mother's hopes were scattered
When Bano heard that Ali Akbar had passed on

Didn't you think a bit of your mother's sufferings,
That you didn't let her know when you took the dagger in the chest?
And where have you gone, leaving her in this helpless state?
When Bano heard that Ali Akbar had passed on . . .

You've left us and settled down forever in this wasteland of pain and torment[11]
You've left your mother distraught in exile
My eyes await you Ali Akbar; where have you gone?
When Bano heard that Ali Akbar had passed on

Now we're helpless; your father's alone, this is war
The Syrian army's besieging us; they're falling upon the king
Where are you Akbar? Muhammad, where have you gone?
When Bano heard that 'Ali Akbar had passed on

Son, watch over your father; hundreds of thousands fight him
The day fades, a doomsday war rages on the battlefield
Akbar, do you know Abbas is dead?[12]
When Bano heard that 'Ali Akbar had passed on

Suddenly Zahidah shifts again to from Urdu to Panjabi, and simultaneously makes

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Karb-o-balā ke dasht ko ābād kar ga'e. The name of the place where Husain, Akbar and others of the party were slaughtered, "Karbalā," when drawn out in pronunciation as "Karb-o-bala," means "pain and torment."

[12] Abbas (*'Abbās*) was Ali's son and the half-brother of Imam Husain. The Karbala narrative relates how Abbas died valiantly trying to fetch water from the Euphrates for the children in Husain's camp. In most Shi'i communities, one day of the first ten days of Muharram is dedicated to "*'Abbās 'ālamdār*," the army standard-bearer. Prayers for Abbas's intercession on the behalf of the ill or needy are often offered before his 'alam is taken out in processions.

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a narrative leap to an episode of the tragedy in which Akbar's female relatives travel to Syria as prisoners of the cruel Yazid after Akbar, Imam Husain and virtually all of their male supporters have been killed. The tune slows as the text fascinatingly compares the distraught, funereal "caravan" to a wedding procession for Akbar, killed at an age where he should have been beginning married life.

If a reciter wished to conjure up the major events of the Muharram narrative in sequence here, dozens, or even hundreds of well-known scenes—including the martyrdom and decapitation of Husain himself—could occur between Akbar's death and the forced march to Damascus. Listeners, however, have such familiarity with the whole Karbala encounter, its prologue and its aftermath, that they easily accommodate the way poets and reciters skip temporally between "scenes" of the story. Often, as in this transition, mixtures of foreshadowing and poignant recall link the tragedy's every element and character, saturating each episode with a complex sadness.

This poem spurs the listener to imagine the insult and humiliation that compound the agony of the Karbala survivors, Islam's most noble family, as their troop is stoned in Syria when mistaken for a clan of unknown outsiders. The image of noble and righteous personages so tormented and overwrought that they are unrecognizable to those who would otherwise honor them—and of the "blindness" of those who fail to identify the Prophet's family's manifest virtue—pervades the Karbala story.

> Oh, when Akbar's sacred procession
> Entered those narrow lanes in Syria
> They hailed it with a deluge of stones,
> Thinking it some foreigner's wedding parade
> It halted at every single turn

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The Sayyids in the procession grew tremulous[13]
It took a full long night to pass one single turn in the road . . .

When Bano heard that Ali Akbar had passed on
In that battle at mid-day in the glare of *Karb-o-balā*, (she said)
"Your flower-like lips withered and your complexion blackened
I hear that your locks were scattered about in that wasteland"

Up until now, Zahidah's listeners have been sobbing and sniffling intermittently. At this point, the weeping and wailing intensify so that the recitation is hardly audible, despite the microphone. Zahidah repeats the final Urdu lines:

"I hear that your locks were scattered about in that wasteland"
When Bano heard that Ali Akbar had passed on

After the women recite the *darūd* an additional time or two, Zahidah chants a prayer in simple Panjabi prose:

> Oh, God, please grant all of our needs. Please, in the name of the imam's sister Zainab, bless the fates of all of the girls here. Please grant a happy fortune, as quickly as possible, to my daughters and to the young (marriageable) daughters of all here. Bless this imambarah and the mourners, and destroy and eliminate our enemies. In the name of the Ailing One of Karbala,[14] grant health to whomever is ill: to my husband, to Salihah's aunt . . . Oh, God, give them life, give them strength. Let there be splendor in the Master's mourning assembly.

Bājī Zahidah scuttles out of the room as hurriedly as she had entered; the car for the big majlis in Shadman Colony awaits her outside. Meanwhile, this majlis proceeds along with its familiar routine. The modest observances at Qasr-e Zainab share a basic, fast-paced format with mourning assemblies in richer colonies in Lahore or in Karachi.

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[13] Descendants of the Prophet.

[14] Zain ul-'abidīn, also known as Sajjād or 'Ābid, a young son of Husain, was the sole male to survive the slaughter at Karbala because he was too sick to fight. He is often invoked as the *Bīmār-e Karbalā*, the Ailing One of Karbala.

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Indeed, the women's majlis throughout the subcontinent shares a common framework, although the Karachi milieu lacks Lahore's piquant Panjabi influence on Urdu speakers' majlis customs, and sites such as Hyderabad, Lucknow, and Mustafabad in India all have their own prominent poetic styles, local rituals, and leading patron families.

Marsiyah

Everyone now awaits the more detailed portrayal of Husain's story that will come in the form of a marsiyah poem. Time is still a concern, though, because the majlis started late. As the marsiyah reciters take their place, they mutter about how many verses of the marsiyah they can fit in; one women complains she'll be late arriving home if the recitation runs too long. "So what?," scolds her companion, "It's Muharram, it's a majlis! No one can be expected to sit idly around the house half the day during Muharram! Go ahead and read the marsiyah; this is a majlis. Besides, in these circumstances, who knows what tomorrow will bring? You may not get the chance!" The group of five women, ranging in age from about forty-five to sixty-five, make less of a production of introducing their performance than did Zahidah, and their faces are relatively severe. They chant the marsiyah text to a simple "tune" that allows for little embellishment and a limited vocal range; it is also more repetitive and predictable than Zahidah's tunes.

"*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!"

When Shabbir in his glory reached that first halting-point
Shabbir went on foot, for his horse did not stir further
"Shabbir has entered the slaying-ground," called a mysterious voice
"Shabbir, the quarrels among Muslims are through!
May you be blessed in the realm of martyrdom on the tenth day
And may your blessed intercession exonerate all Muslims on doomsday"

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It was at the onset of Muharram month that our Master arrived
Halting his mount, he questioned his companions,
"Well, my exiled ones, we've come upon this wild desert;
Shall we pitch the tents all here?" They said, "Well and good."
"But how many days, King of Faith, is it your intention to stay?"
Replied the King, "This spot will be our place until doomsday!"

All of the sudden, enemies approached the tents!
All over, the sounds of tambourines, kettle-drums and horns rang out!
Zainab cried out, "Oh, exalted King,
Is that perhaps the band come to welcome you over there?
These folk must have come to fetch us strangers!
It must be a message of hospitality they're sending you"

"It's death that will come to fetch us," said the King
He asked his brother, "What are they all doing here?"
When Abbas approached them, the enemies called,
"Get your tents away from the banks of the river!
We'll see whether this waterway is ours or if it's the holding of your king!
Why have you seized it? It's not as if it's the fountain of Paradise"

Abbas asked civilly, "What is this you're saying?!"
"What kind of decency is this, for God's sake, and what sort of people are you?
This river, praise God, is part of Zahra's bridewealth;
No one's ever obstructed access to the water!
It doesn't behoove a man to do evil unto others
We're already camped here; now you go settle yourselves over there"

"We don't claim authority over the channel; we cede it to you,
But now we've brought our water-skins, and there's no water to be had
Not giving guests food and drink in itself is an offense
And you'll not even permit us to stay by the river
Where's the concern that ordinary folk show strangers?
Asghar, on his first journey, is only six months old"

"We've been on the road, in the sun, since leaving last night's camp
It was incumbent upon you to greet us with water for ablutions
And serve us, as guests, with food
And what do you do instead but uproot our tents from the riverside?
Tomorrow morning we'll go ahead and move our tents,
Although shifting our camp will trouble us greatly"

"Now the Sayyid women are performing devotions; the children sleep

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My ailing nephew lies on his bedding, insensible"
They responded, "Enough, don't describe any more!
We're ready to trample your tents and their furnishings underfoot right now!"
Saying thus, the evil ones brandished their lances and standards
"God's Sword" grasped Ali's sword[15]

Seeing this, the scion of the Prophet arose from his seat,
"All right, my warrior, my chief!," he cried
"Consider, brother, my state of exile and helplessness, and
Display instead the mettle of the sword of my patience
What difference will it make if you don't fight the community today?[16]
It won't change Haidar's reputation for valor a bit"

Abbas turned back, trembling before the great King
"As you wish," he said
"My duty is with you, what does the river matter?
Still, the challenge I made out of devotion to you was hardly misplaced:
You and I have both heard from Haidar
That the banks of the river will be my gravesite."

Fizzah woke the sleeping children[17]
And Bano lifted Asghar out of his cradle
All the carpets spread in the tent were taken up
But Zainab didn't move the King's couch
When anyone, seeing the household goods of the harem, made inquiry
The king would say, "The river didn't prove hospitable to us."

The King had the illustrious tent pitched in the sands

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[15] Here, Abbas. "The arm of God," "the strength of the hand of God," "the sword of God," and so forth are popular epithets for Ali and for the Karbala heroes, mainly Husain and Abbas. In popular Shi'ism, as in this poem to some extent, Abbas is portrayed as a bit impulsive, and quick to anger. He is considered a powerful enemy, and an equally powerful agent for the forces of right.

[16] The ummat, "the community of Muslims." Often invoked as a call to pan-Islamic unity in other contexts, in marsiyahs, the ummat usually refers to the majority of Muslims who claimed faith in Islam, but—in the Shi'i view—spurned the Prophet's family and true Islam.

[17] A maidservant of Husain's family.

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But remained anxious night and day until the eve of *'ashūr* [18]
When the morn of his murder dawned our Lord became joyful
He said, "Now I'll be removed from everyone"
In the tent of his companions a celebration was under way as well
A celebration with the trappings of death, the passion for battle,
and the remembrance of God

When Shabbir in his glory . . .

The hoarse, impassioned, barely unified chanting, powerful until now, fades plaintively as the women conclude.

The poem's author is Mirza Dabir, one of the two most famous Indian marsiyah writers. While the marsiyah canon centers around the battlefield martyrdoms of Husain and his party in Karbala in 680 CE, this portion of this poem prefaces their tragic fates, emphasizing respect and devotion among Husain's family and sympathizers, and unremitting cruelty on the part of those who oppose Husain's claims to the Islamic caliphate.

This short version of one of Dabir's hundreds of marsiyahs highlights Imam Husain's arrival near Karbala, where the massive forces of the Ummayad caliph Yazid will slaughter his small party (traditionally said to consist of seventy-two men). Even though all involved know the clash must end this way, Husain's enemies inflict as much prolonged suffering as possible on him by denying his women and children rest and water. Establishing this extreme cruelty, and the contrasting tolerance and gentleness of Husain, during the first few days of Muharram sets the stage for the many depictions of depravity,

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[18] Ashurah, the tenth day of the month of Muharram; the day upon which Husain was slain.

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and of virtue, that will intensify as the tenth day of Muharram draws near.

Marsiyahs recited during each day of Muharram adhere to the Karbala chronology and in so doing they tend to usher in an awareness of time that is distinct from more mundane concerns and scheduling. One day's poem might describe Husain setting out from Medina, the next day's the brutal killing of the messenger, Muslim, sent ahead to Kufah to assess the level of support for Husain as a leader. Reciters at many majlises perform more than one marsiyah, but the inclusion of more than three is unusual. During the first few days of observances, marsiyahs often center on the trials and deprivations that precede the battlefield massacre on the tenth day. After about the fifth day, however, poems often turn to the remembrance of individual characters in the Karbala drama, setting aside time and attention for major figures such as Husain's sons Ali Asghar and Ali Akbar, and his half-brother Abbas. Each mourning assembly weaves these daily individual commemorations through its progression.

For many of the women at the majlis, the spiritual significance and daily relevance of marsiyah poems are both so ingrained that the marsiyah's allusions are almost too fundamental to linger over. The congregation knows the events of Karbala backwards and forwards and can, almost to a woman, provide an exegesis of the battle between good and evil enacted by rival parties laying claim to Islamic authority. There is no need at the moment to set aside contemplative time for the lessons inherent in this history, especially since the women are now about to receive an explicit interpretation of the events at Karbala and of the links that bind the tragedy to Quranic teachings and so provide guidelines for modern living. This sermon will be lengthy and at times paradoxical or

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elusive to the audience. It is, however, the core of the mourning assembly, and the marsiyah must be viewed within this larger performance context.

The Sermon (*Majlis*)

A hush descends on the crowd for a moment as the zakirah or preacher makes her way through the tightly-packed imambarah towards the throne-like chair, vacant until now at the front of the room. Although most of the famed female preachers who travel from one Indian or Pakistani city to another to deliver sermons during Muharram tend to be middle-aged women with adult children, and are often professors with Ph.D.s, publications, and substantial physical presences, this local zakirah is a slim, very young woman who still attends college. She cuts a dramatic figure and somehow commands a respectful silence from the ever-murmuring crowd with her austere black robes and her tall, erect posture. As she seats herself slowly and theatrically on the minbar (**minbar*) she turns to face the crowd with huge, snapping eyes and strong, attractive features in a narrow face.[19] The seated women acknowledge her with cries of "*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!"

As this preacher, Shabih-uz-Zahra (*Shabīh-uz-Zahrā*), whose name means "replica of Zahra," exhorts the crowd yet again to recite the *darūd* together, her voice proves surprisingly deep and authoritative for such a youngster. Her intonations are hypnotic, slower, and more rhythmically exaggerated than all of the earlier calls for response:

Recite the salavat for the one who is a piece of Ali's heart and the light of his

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[19] The *minbar*, in Qaṣr-e Zainab, is a carefully draped household chair but would be an actual staired pulpit in a larger imambarah

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eyes.[20]

Recite the salavat for the Prophet's thirsty grandson, Husain.

Shabih-us-Zahra calls for the familiar range of slogans, with the women responding accordingly, for another minute or so. Then she instructs them to recite the opening passage of the Quran (*Qur'ān*), the *surah-e fātiḥah*. The recitation of this surah is associated with prayers for the departed and generally occurs both at the beginning and the end of a majlis. The women murmur the verse and then repeat the *darūd* aloud.

Poetry and the Sermon

Shabih-us-Zahra then introduces her lecture with a six-line verse that echoes the marsiyah poem's verse structure, and follows this with several other poems. Zakirahs typically intersperse their sermons with bits of poetry, whether marsiyah verses and four-line *rubā'īs* from the great Shi'i poets Anis and Dabir, or inspirational lines from the twentieth-century poet Iqbal, but Shabih lavishes poetry on her listeners from the outset today. They respond as usual with the *darūd* at regular intervals and whenever Shabih mentions the names of the Prophet's family members, but also with other verbal approbation, and even by joining in to finish the second line of some of the couplets.

I begin my speech in the name of Allah
I manifest my meaning on a sheet of paper
I praise and extol the perfection of the Master of the world
I bring the verse that declares God's unity to my lips

A handful of alert listeners chime in at the end of this line, after which the whole crowd recites the *darūd*.

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[20] Husain.

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Remembrance of God's unity is wealth, a treasure
God's praises mow down miscreants

Almost without pause Shabih moves from this poem, which reaffirms the declaration of faith that all Muslims share, to one that points up the tensions between orthodox Sunnis—who discourage extreme reverence for individuals, as it might verge on equating them with God—and Shi'ahs, with their special devotion to the family of the Prophet:

Should someone ask "Who is Muhammad?" what shall I say by way of explanation?
Should someone ask–
"Who is Muhammad?" what shall I say by way of explanation?
My intellect is stunned; God knows what I should say

"Wāh, wāh!" one woman exclaims, relishing the line.

If I say, "God," I'll be afraid of being a[21]
And I'll have misgivings about being an infidel if I declare him apart from God

This last line, *aur is meñ kufr kā khaṭkā agar ḥaq se judā kah dūñ*, could also be rendered in English as, "And I'll have misgivings about being an infidel if I say that which is other than the truth." In Urdu, the two possibilities subtly invigorate the quatrain. After an interval of more invocations, Shabih announces, still in slow, clear tones, exaggerating the poetic meter:

Islam is a bounty bestowed by Batūl[22]
The character of Fatimah is itself the religion of the Prophet

"No doubt, no doubt!" comment two older ladies

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[21] Specifically, one who elevates another person or being to the status of God (*mushrik*).

[22] Fatimah. *Batūl* is a pure or chaste woman.

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Fatimah is the fulfillment of all Prophethoods
That is to say, she is the flower of chastity upon the Prophet's branch

The listeners call out the *darūd* again at this point.

Even if someone disapproves, I'll say unhesitatingly,
In the world of women, she too is a Prophet!

"Subḥānallāh!" someone says.

This phrase, often used to praise a visual masterpiece or a virtuoso performance in music or poetry, expresses appreciation for the perfection of God's creation. Now the poetry, having progressed from general Islamic themes to the Prophet's family as models and ideals, shifts towards specific events of the Karbala tragedy and women's roles in them, just the sort of trajectory that the sermon as a whole will follow in its turn:

If the Sister hadn't been along on the journey to Karbala
There would never have been speeches in Syria's marketplaces[23]
It's only due to Zainab's sacrifice that Islam survived
If it weren't for Zainab, there'd be no respect for Islam today

Now Shabih intones a minute's worth of Arabic blessings and praises, which succinctly and clearly reinforce the sources of authority she has invoked in her poetry :

I take refuge in God from Satan. In the name of God the beneficent, the all-merciful, all praise to the Lord of the Worlds! Benedictions and salutations to the greatest and most noble of the Prophets and the messengers and [he who is] the seal of prophecy, the leader and Prophet and intercessor for our sins, Muhammad.

And let God purify us through the infallible ones,[24] save us from condemnation on the day of judgement. And now to the point: God most high, in his clear book/revelation [the Quran] is the root of all existence and truth. Say the salavat!

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[23] i.e. speeches commemorating Husain's sacrifice and vilifying Yazid.

[24] i.e. those considered in Shi'i tradition to be the fourteen *ma'sūmīn*, the "blameless ones:" the twelve imams, Fatimah, and Muhammad.

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These invocations, in sacred language rather than in the vernacular, form a launching point for the presentation Shabih herself has prepared, and signal a transition from the poetry-dominated early portion of the majlis to a prose sermon replete with rhetorical flourishes, theatrical cadences, Quranic allusions, and brief poetic embellishments at strategic points.

Only after the zakirah completes her forty-five minutes of teaching, reminiscing, hectoring, and enacting the Karbala tragedy will poetry—in the form of the dirges called nauhe (sing. *nauḥah*)—again come overtly to the fore as a vehicle for invocation, tribute, remembrance, and mourning. Nonetheless, the early majlis poetry and the sermon are thoroughly intertwined thematically and sometimes stylistically; we shall see, for example, that some of Shabih's narrative descriptions seem to draw directly on incidents depicted in the marsiyah. This continual interpenetration, cross-referencing, and reminding are important enough to merit the inclusion of the body of the sermon here, rather than just a summary of it.

Preacher-Audience Interaction

Shabih retains her audience throughout the sermon by varying the tempo, rhythm and pitch of her words to great dramatic effect. For each anecdote or section of the majlis, her strategy tends to be to start out with the first line of a dialogue between two characters, or a general statement or rhetorical question addressed slowly and carefully to the audience, to speed up the tempo and pitch during repetition and paraphrases of the conversation or commentary, and then to conclude the section in a loud, triumphant, emphatic tone. The slowness of her presentation at the end of each small section and at some critical building points, the intense emphasis and inflection used when speaking in

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the voices of the imams or the Prophet, allow Shabih's audience the thrill of predicting what will come next, and they often indicate their foreknowledge of conversational climaxes with anticipatory "hmmmmmmm"s and "ahhhhhhhhhh"s.

Just as they have during poetic recitations, the women attending the majlis continue to call out bits of poetry, to echo the zakirah's sentences, to praise Ali, Husain, and the other members of the Prophet's family, and to commend Shabih on her eloquence. In some parts of India, such lustily vocal female participation is not the norm; listeners might respond softly, nod approvingly, or simply weep during the most graphic parts of the Karbala narrative. In this part of Lahore, though, an absence of chanting interruptions by the listeners would probably indicate dissatisfaction with the zakirah's level of efficacy, and limited emotional involvement on the part of both main speaker and listener-participants. Nonetheless, it is apparent from the way the zakirah interacts with her listeners that their contributions can compete with, as well as complement, her performance.

Shabih will only gradually disclose revelations on one of her major themes, the importance of Muhammad's daughter Fatimah. For the most part, the messages framed by the shouting of the attendees and by the zakirah's rhetorical and mnemonic uses of repetition emerge as a collection of episodically sketched lessons and anecdotes, and not as one continuous, single-themed narrative. Tacitly understood allusions to Shi'i history, religious metaphors, or wordplay connect the threads of the sermon (also called a majlis), and Shabih will return time and again to a key Quranic verse about "The Night of Power." One result of the stress on repetition, paraphrasing, and audience response is that it

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sometimes takes the zakirah considerable time to relate one incident or make one point to her satisfaction; in actual presentation, then, many of the statements, or even paragraphs, that appear below occur many times in an only slightly varied form. Except at the beginning of the sermon, or in instances where inclusion of repetition and audience response seems helpful to convey stress on a particular point, in the interests of brevity I have eliminated at least half of the audience's exclamations, as well as the zakirah's paraphrasing.

The "Virtues" (Faẓā'il)

THE NIGHT OF POWER

Shabih begins in earnest now, calling her audience to attention with a typical formulaic address immediately after she solemnly intones the Quranic verse she has taken as her theme:

> "Bismillah ar-rahman ur rahim ina anzal nahu fī lailat ul qadr." ["In the name of God the all merciful, Lo! We revealed it on the Night of Power!"[25]]
> Respected listeners, learned listeners, you and I are aware of the fact that any of the Prophet's issue that we see on the breast of the earth today, or any that we'll ever see, derive from that personage in the world of women whose blessed bosom cradled the Prophet's descendants!

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[25] *Lailat-il-qadr*, the night of power, probably refers to 27th of Ramzan when the first verses of the Quran were revealed on Mt. Hira. On this day, God's decrees for the year are brought down to the earthly plane. This is the Quranic verse (Surah 97), as translated by M.M. Pickthall, *The Glorious Qur'ān* (New York: Muslim World League, 1977), 725:

> In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.
> 1. We revealed it on the Night of Power
> 2. Ah, what will convey unto thee what the Night of Power is!
> 3. The Night of Power is better than a thousand months.
> 4. The angels and the Spirit descend therein, by the permission of their Lord, with all decrees.
> 5. (That night is) Peace until the rising of the dawn.

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"Salavat!"

> I mean that the name of the very origin of all of the Prophet's offspring present at this time upon the breast of the earth, the origin of the whole garden of the Prophet which will be perfumed forever with these blooms, is "Fatimah."

"Salavat!"

> That is why I have made this Quranic verse the subject of my speech today: "ina anzal nahu fī lailat ul qadr." *Ham ne is ko lailat-ul-qadr meñ nāzil kiyā.* Lo! We revealed it on the Night of Power!

As do most zakirahs, Shabih periodically invokes the original Arabic for verses from the Quran, *sunnat* or hadis (*ḥadīs*),[26] but almost every time she does so, carefully repeats and stresses the Urdu translation, and takes care to use basic, comprehensible Urdu, even when discussing fine points of interpretation or touching on details of Arabic grammar.

> So now, listeners, you must pay attention, for there's no mention at first, no foremention, so how do we know what "it" is that the Provider is revealing? There's no mention . . . for example, if I were to say, "Mrs. Zahidah just recited a soz, and in that soz she said such and such a thing,' there's no possibility of misunderstanding the 'she,' because I mentioned her name beforehand. Well, in Arabic speech, when there's a personal pronoun mentioned, there's always a referent before each personal pronoun, to which the personal pronoun refers, responds, and is drawn. This is the pronoun's referent. Recite the salavat!

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[26] A hadis (Arabic *hadith*), is one of the sayings or behavioral precedents of the Prophet, as reported to his intimates. As the literary form that transmits the Prophet's sunnat (Arabic *sunnah*), his collected "traditions" or modes of behavior, hadis have authority that supplement the revealed word of the Quran, but religious scholars often debate their authenticity. Disputes between the different schools of jurisprudence, and between Sunni and Shi'i presentations of Islam, often hinge on the reliability of certain "unimpeachable" or "biased" reporters of the hadis. In Sunni-Shi'i disputes much is made of whether the sources of the hadis are members of the Prophet's family or his close companions. See Frederick Denny, *An Introduction to Islam* (NY: Macmillan, 1985), 180-186; John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdū, Classical Hindī, and English* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1997 [1884]), 680.

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"*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!"

So, then, with "she said such and such a thing," there's no possibility of misunderstanding the "she," because I mentioned her name beforehand. But in this case, what we have is the will of God the Great: "Lo! We revealed it on the Night of Power!"

"*Subḥānallah!*"

So there is no mention at all, no mention of this, that or the other thing. Absolutely no mention. So how do we know what He revealed? It turns out that Sunni and Shi'i scholars have agreed that the referent for the *hū* pronoun in "ina anzal nahū," the thing to which it is alluding, responding, towards which it is attracted, is the all-knowing Quran, the glorious decree of truth and falsity, the manifest Book.

"No doubt!"

The manifest Book. But then, friend, how did you come to know that this *hū* pronoun's referent is the Quran, the lauded decree of truth and falsity? It turns out that they found out from a hadis of the Prophet that this *hū* pronoun's referent is the all-knowing Quran. But, friend, if a verse of the Quran can't stand on its own without one of the Prophet's hadises, how can we claim that the Quran is in itself sufficient without the complete collection of hadis?! Recite the salavat!

"*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!"

Recite it, all together! So, how can we say . . . no, the sound system is OK . . . Recite the salavat, all together!

"*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!"

How can we claim that the Quran is sufficient in itself without all of the hadis? Let's proceed on:"Lo! We revealed it on the Night of Power!"

Having executed her jab at Sunnis—for if they admit the necessity of guidance from the hadis to interpret the Quran, why is it that they fail to see the analogous need to respect and venerate the Prophet's family and their traditions to fully value the Prophet and God's Book?— Shabih embarks on an analysis of the Arabic grammar of the phrase

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"on the night of Power."[27] Employing her understanding of Arabic prepositions, and governed and governing nouns, she asserts that constructions that grammatically parallel that used in "night *of* power," and that refer to Allah, God, can show both proximity and distinction between God and other entities. Her many examples include "The abode *of* God," "The Prophet *of* God," and the "Deputy *of* God." Ultimately she emphasizes that Ali is the special deputy of God and thus has a unique status, but denies that to say this is to equate Ali with God. In so doing she responds to an understanding —common to her whole audience, but never explicitly stated—that many Sunnis view Shi'i veneration for Ali as heretical.

"OUR TEACHING IS ARDUOUS . . ."; OVERT AND HIDDEN MEANINGS

The next phase of the young preacher's talk is also a micro-level textual analysis, and relates to the original Quranic verse in a similarly oblique way. Here, though, to approach the chosen verse Shabih uses an anecdote about Ali himself explaining the nature of Quranic meaning, instead of launching from the words of the *lailat il qadr* verse:

> Every letter [of the Quran] holds within itself some overt meaning and some secret meaning. It retains a secret meaning. Now, someone among the companions [of Ali], one of the people, asked, "Oh Leader of the Faithful,[28] does every letter–not 'every word,' mind you, but 'every letter!'–of the Quran really hold an overt meaning and a secret one?!"
>
> He said, "Yes!"
>
> That gentleman was the very picture of amazement! People began to

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[27] Shabih basically suggests that those who would rely on this hadis to interpret a statement in and about the Quran undermine their own belief that the Quran is perfect as it stands. As Denny points out, ". . . no universally 'official' collection of Hadith has ever been recognized by the Muslims. After all, the Qur'an is unquestionably fundamental, perfect and beyond question for all believers;" 182.

[28] *Amīr-ul mominīn*, that is, Ali.

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question amazedly, "Well, then, oh, Leader of the Faithful, just how many overt meanings does every letter of the Quran have, and how many secret meanings?"

Our Master said, "Listen! Every letter of the Quran has not one, not two, not seventy meanings . . ."

When he said "seventy," people became further amazed and asked, "Oh, Master, more than seventy?!"

He replied, "Yes, . . . not seventy, but rather, each letter of the Quran holds within it one thousand overt meanings and holds one thousand inner meanings . . . It holds a thousand inner meanings."

Then ibn-e Abbas[29] asked, "Oh, Leader of the Faithful, is there any learned person who would know both the thousand overt meanings of each word of the Quran and the thousand inner meanings?"

He became silent. He didn't answer. Abbas asked the question twice, and what does our Master do by way of answer but smile faintly and say, "Well, ibn-e Abbas, everyone asks this question, but it doesn't befit *you* to have done so."

"Master," he [Abbas] said, "Master," he submitted, "it's beyond my understanding. Is there really any learned person who is so attuned to every letter, to the overt and secret meanings?"

He said, "Abbas, have you not read the verse of the Quran that says,'We have secured in the person of the manifest imam the knowledge of all things?'"[30]

"Salavat!"

So, now here is a hadis of the Prophet; don't be amazed, a hadis of the Prophet: "Fatimah is a part of myself, and Ali also."[31]

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[29] A cousin of the Prophet who reported a number of Muhammad's sayings and actions. Sunni collections of hadis include some of his accounts. Ibn-e Abbas is also said to have entreated Husain to refrain from bringing his family along to Karbala. Husain disregarded his advice because he knew the sufferings of his kin would publicize Yazid's wrongs and shock the Muslim community into returning to righteous ways.

[30] *Wa-kull shay' ahsaynahu fī imām mubīn*, from Quran 36:12, a surah especially well known to the audience, as it is commonly recited for the dying. "By his ontological status, the imam is the Gate or the Threshold that allows the passage into Divine Knowledge, the knowledge contained in the messages brought by the lawgiving prophets . . . each time the Quran refers, in different ways, to 'those who have Knowledge,' it is alluding to the prophets and their imams in general, or else to the Fourteen Impeccables in particular." Amir-Moezzi, 70

[31] See al-Majlisī, Muhammad Bāqir, *Bihār ul-anwar* (Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyah, 1957), vol. 43, 54; Muhammad 'abd al-Baqī's Quranic concordance, *Al-m'ujam al-mufharas*, (Cairo: Dar wa-Matabi al-Shab,1968), vol. 12, 8721.

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"Salavat!"

> "And Ali also." So, I tell you that in the battlefield with the Prophet was Ali, and at home with him, too, Ali; in the mosque, Ali; at his bosom was Ali, and by his side, Ali . . . To the point that in splendor he had with him Ali, in solitude also, Ali. To the point that when they lowered the Prophet into his grave Ali was with the Prophet!

Subḥānallah!

> So, the world that couldn't understand Ali's place. . . how could the world that couldn't understand the place of Ali ever understand, "Fatimah is a piece of myself?" How could they understand the place of that cloistered lady, sitting at home?"

When she translates the Quran, hadis, or Shi'i traditions of the imams, Shabih's phrasing usually retains many of the key Arabic terms, although the Urdu diction is comprehensible to those with middling education and a knowledge of Arabic based on memorized Quranic verses. The words Shabih uses for overt/outer and hidden/inner are zahiri (**ẓāhirī*) and batini (**bāṭinī*). Doctrinal emphasis on zahiri (apparent, exoteric) and batini (hidden, esoteric) aspects of all reality have long pervaded Shi'i thought.[32]

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[32] See, for example, Amir-Moezzi, 43. Frank Korom speculates that in ethnically and religiously diverse settings today, ever-present "hidden texts" facilitate different readings of Muharram rituals at different levels by the various groups participating in Muharram observances. Contemporary ethnographic work reveals that often during Muharram divergent interpretations or modes of performance lead to conflict. See Korom 2002, xiv.; Wolf 2000. However, my research in Hyderabad, for example, suggests that knowledge of their own access to hidden messages may under certain circumstances encourage the "initiated," the Shiahs, to tolerate other communities' participation in Muharram.

Korom tends to imply that Shi'i interpretations of the Karbala tragedy value esoteric interpretations and lessons almost exclusively, while the overt lessons, which he aligns with public, outward displays, is more the province of non-Shiahs. It is clear, however, that not all, or even most, Shiahs are privy to extremely esoteric knowledge, as Shabih's sermon explicitly states. I suggest that the very idea of a whole wide range of zahiri and batini meanings, rather than exclusive access to esoteric knowledge, enrich Shi'i

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Shabih here equates Ali with an overt textual message, while Fatimah's status is a secret one. The obvious and hidden meanings of Quranic text communicate what are, in the Shi'i view, the crucial and revelatory relationships of Ali and Fatimah with the Prophet.

On another level, however, the tie between Ali, the manifest imam with "knowledge of all things," and the Quranic texts is so intense that it is more an identification between the two than a comparison. It is almost as though he is a human version of the book.[33] The point Shabih emphasizes, though, is that the blighted world can't read a relatively obvious message, let alone the hidden one, the sanctity of Fatimah. This claim resonates with Shabih's poetic declarations earlier in the majlis that, "even if someone disapproves," the female figures Fatimah (the Prophet's daughter, Ali's wife, and Husain's mother) and Zainab (daughter of Ali and Fatimah, sister to Imam Husain) are central to the perpetuation of Islam.

In fact, several of Shabih's earlier themes intertwine at this point in the lecture. Her initial poetic recitations, as we have seen, proffered key themes of unity and division in Islam. The notion of one God and the declaration of faith in Him epitomizes Islamic unity, while Shiahs' sense of closeness to the Prophet's family produces difference or separation by virtue of the distinction it makes between "true" and misguided Muslims. In a sense Shi'i devotion ruptures one kind of unity by asserting another. Shabih's poem,

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views of Muharram.

[33] Indeed, in the battle of Siffin, Ali reportedly kept his forces fighting despite his enemy Mu'awiya's tactic of festooning his fighters' lances with pages of the Quran by declaring, "I am the speaking Quran!" In a lighter variation on this theme, the identification of a hero or beloved with a page, or with the text of the Quran, is a popular motif in Indo-Muslim poetry of both devotional and secular strains.

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recited early in the majlis, about Husain's sister Zainab recalls familial loyalty and remembrance in separation, a much beloved counterpoint in majlis discourse to the theme of unity. Discussions of hidden and overt Quranic meanings also play on issues of difference and close identification, since only Shiahs, the select group that knows enough to venerate the imams and the Prophet's family, can perceive hidden messages. Ideas of separation, identification, and unity structure the questions of what sort of reality God and God's book have without the Prophet and the hadis, or the Prophet has without Ali and Fatimah, as well.

Continuing her talk, Shabih again repeats the hadis about Ali and Fatimah, again stresses Ali's intimate companionship with the Prophet, and drives home one more time the flaws of "the world that couldn't understand Ali's place" before beginning her next anecdote:

> So if the world couldn't perceive the overt meaning, how could it understand Fatimah, hidden away in the house? Now, do you think there is anyone who can tell even the thousand overt meanings of the letter "alif," forgetting about the secret ones? Gather together all of the Quranic commentators of the learned world and ask them to explain the thousand overt meanings of just one letter of the Quran, the letter "fe."[34] Recite the salavat!

""*Allahumma saleh 'ala Muhammadin va āl-e Muhammad*!"

> "ina anzal nahu fī lailat ul qadr." My subject is *lailat ul qadr*, the night of power. The blessed Imam Ja'far-e Sadīq . . ."[35]

"Salavat!"

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[34] "Fe," the first letter of Fatimah's name, is hardly a random letter selection.

[35] The sixth Shi'i imam, grandson of the fourth imam Zain-ul 'abidīn, said to be the only male survivor of the Karbala massacre. Ja'far-us Sadīq is renowned for his scholarship and contributions to Islamic jurisprudence.

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> Someone asked the blessed Imam Ja'far-us Sadīq, "Master, oh Imam, tell me this, please: to what night does 'lailat-ul-qadr' refer?"
>
> He said, "Oh, questioner, tell me: Do you want to hear the overt meaning, or the hidden meaning?"
>
> The man said, "Today since I'm hearing these words for the first time directly from your lips, first tell me the secret meaning, the interior one, the one at the core, the veiled one. First tell me that meaning."
>
> Then the imam said . . . "Oh, questioner . . ."
>
> Now, if this saying was that of a sage or a documenter of a hadis, or a Quranic commentator, or an interpreter of the Quran, I wouldn't relate it, but this saying is a saying from the learned son of the Gateway to Knowledge about a Quranic matter, a matter of knowledge.[36]
>
> So what did our Master say? "It's difficult to understand our [the Prophet's immediate family members'] concerns; they're demanding; everyone does not have the capacity to understand the nature of our special knowledge simply by hearing of it. Not everyone can comprehend it."[37]

"Salavat!"

Now the listening women overwhelm what has become a substantial series of anecdotes with their own verbal zeal; an older woman cries out in a tremulous but penetrating tone:

"The Prophet said, 'Flesh of my flesh, body of my body;' I beg your pardon . . . The Prophet said, 'Flesh of my flesh, body of my body;' of whom would he have said this but Ali? God's ways . . . Maulā Ali knows. Whether or not anyone else will say it, Shi'ahs will: Ali! Ali! Ali!"

"The truth is in the slogan of Haidar!"

All: *"Yā Ali!"*

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[36] "The Gateway to Knowledge" is Ali. The term "son" is often applied to any linear male descendant of the Prophet or the imams.

[37] A key and often-invoked statement attributed to various of the imams, including Ali himself. See Amir-Moezzi 5; 52-54: "Our teaching is arduous, very difficult, the only ones who can understand it are a prophet sent from God, an angel of Proximity, or a faithful believer whose heart has been tested for faith by God." See *Bihār ul-anwar*, vol.52, 318.

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> If this saying was that of a sage, I wouldn't relate it, if it was that of a commentator I wouldn't relate it, but it's a question about knowledge put to the learned son of the Gateway to Knowledge! So to be the school of knowledge, the rose-garden of knowledge, the essence of knowledge, the fount of knowledge, to be pervaded with knowledge, is the mandate of the true imam.

"No Doubt! Allah!"

> "Our concerns are difficult, they're demanding; it's not within everyone's capability that they should go on hearing of our special knowledge and understand it."

"That they should go on . . . go on . . .," repeats someone in the audience in an undertone.

> "See here, if there comes a point where your wits cannot approach our wisdom, then leave it to us; don't vex yourself!"

"Don't do it!"

"*Wāh!*"

While Shabih's last sentence is, in her overt narrative, uttered by the all-knowing Jafar-e Sādiq to a simple, sincere follower, the statement is also meant to be taken to heart by the women themselves. It is, on one hand, a challenge issued to listeners to prove themselves worthy of their faith in the imams, their status as true believers, and on the other a reassurance that they need not always trouble themselves unduly over complicated matters of doctrinal or theological interpretation—the innermost meanings—such as are dealt with by the imams. There is perhaps also a subtle suggestion here that they may encounter difficulty understanding even the matters Shabih takes up for discussion.

> "How could your wits have the scope to know the heights of our wisdom! Who, after all, can know our heights of knowledge, our heights of greatness? The nurturing Lord . . ."

"*Wāh!*"

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"Or a sent Prophet, His final Prophet, or an Angel of Proximity, or that believer, not an ordinary believer, but that believer whose heart shall have been tested."[38] On this point, God had to say even to Abraham, "laiyuk fa ainī qalbi [Arabic]," "First achieve equanimity in your *heart*,"[39] then *knowledge* will come to you of the stature of Muhammad's family. So the imam declares that the meaning of *Lailat ul qadr*, night of *lail* and *qadr*, "the meaning of *lail, lail, lail*, is our ancestor, our grandmother, the chaste woman of Medina. . ."[40]

"Subḥānallah!"

"That mistress of women in all the worlds !"

"Salavat!"

"And the meaning of *qadr* is Allah's own person."

Now the listening interrogator trembled, he trembled, and fell at his [Imam Ja'far us-Sādiq's] feet: "Oh, Imam, what is this that you have stated? That the meaning of *lail* ["night"] is Fatimah, and that the meaning of *qadr* ["power"] is Allah's own person? Master, what have you said?!"

Then the imam said smilingly [Shabih delivers this line with a triumphant smile of her own], "O, questioner, I said, didn't I, that our concerns are difficult ones, that they're demanding, that not everyone has the capability, having heard our special knowledge, to also understand it?"

All: *"Wāh! Wāh!"*

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[38]Another direct allusion to the famous imamite saying in note 35 above. Amir-Moezzi suggests that "that believer whose heart shall have been tested" refers to "the disciple who has passed the test of initiation into the techniques of vision with the heart." He comments that one who has had his heart tested can be considered equal to a prophet (*nabī mursal*) and an angel of Proximity. "Is this not because such a faithful servant has had the vision of the light of the imam, the manifestation of God, and attained the source of Knowledge, that he is always placed by the imams on a level of equality with a prophet (nabī mursal) and an angel of Proximity (malak muqarrab)?" 53-54.

[39]Probably extracted from Quran 2:260, in which Allah says he will demonstrate to Abraham how He can give life to the dead so that Abraham's "heart may be at ease." Abraham states that he already believes in God's powers of resurrection.

[40] Fatimah.

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Recite the salavat one more time!

"*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!"

> "Not everyone has the capability, having heard our special knowledge, to also understand it." I tell you that, *Bismillah ar-rahman ur rahīm* [In the name of God the merciful], from the "b" of the verse "bismillah," from the "b" of bismillah to the "s" of "va-an-nas,"[41] it is the miracle of the Messenger's message-bearing . Each and every letter of the Quran (*Quran kā har har ḥarf*) is the miracle of the Messenger's message-bearing. If we believe that, if our faith is that, someone who denies one verse of the Quran denies the Quran entirely . . .then, tell me, a person who denies *Fatimah to bizate mini*, that "Fatimah is part of me," who denies *Ali o mini*, that "Ali also is part of me," is that person a Muslim or not?! Recite the salavat!"

"*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!"

PRIDE AND PIETY; THE ZAKIRAH AS PERFORMER AND AUTHORITY

In this segment, Shabih brings her showmanship to new heights, ornamenting her message with precise pronunciation and showy alliterations. In the phrase, "the miracle of the Messenger's message-bearing (*rasūl kī risālat kā mu'ajazāh*) she rolls her "r"s lavishly and finishes off her delivery with a rising intonation. In the next sentence, she barks out each word of the phrase "each and every letter of the Quran" (*Quran kā har har ḥarf*) so that they are rigidly differentiated. This vocal individuation of the sounds echoes the meaning of the word *har* (each), and the alliteration draws attention to her point about how indubitably special the status of the Messenger and his family is. This all leads Shabih to another resounding assertion of Shi'ism as true Islam and of the falsity of those who would deny the importance of these personages.

The themes of unity and separation, true and false Islam, and even the motifs of

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[41] The last letter and words of the last surah of the Quran, 114.

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dark and light, culminate in Shabih's revelation of the "hidden meaning" of *lailat-il-qadr*. The saying, "Fatimah is part of me," not only reinforces the intimate familial and metaphysical connection between the Prophet and his family, and thus their entitlement to the role of leaders and guides, but is a touchstone for identifying true Muslims—those who acknowledge Fatimah—and non-believers. At the same time, when Shabih relates Fatimah to "Allah's own person," through the phrase *lailat-ul-qadr*, "night *of* power," she summons the listener back to her early lesson about Arabic grammar. Whether a personage is the "deputy of Allah," the "Prophet of Allah," or "Fatimah, the veil of Allah," they are intimately, powerfully linked with God, but remain distinct. However much reverence Shiahs hold for the *ahl-e bait*, Shabih reinforces, they do not conflate the Prophet or the Prophet's family with God.

This chapter and the next both contain examples of Shabih speaking authoritatively, almost as though she were a surrogate for the imam, as she did while discussing the esoteric matters that were too "demanding" for the wits of ordinary folk, and other examples of her exhorting the audience in her own "voice." The complex strategies employed by zakirahs–and sometimes by literarily skilled female marsiyah writers and reciters–to display and consolidate their authority, mirror larger tensions in the conceptualization and performance of "propriety" or "decorum" in a majlis.

Cautioning the female audience (widely labeled by educated men and educated women as superstitious, emotional, and ignorant of basic Islamic teachings) not to "vex themselves" with complicated interpretation, Shabih aligns them with the wide-eyed, devout interrogator of the imam. This positioning suggests a precarious identification of

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the speaker herself with the imam, the one who knows. By drawing these veiled parallels and exhibiting their confidence, many zakirahs challenge popular discourse about female ignorance, even as they themselves sometimes patronize the mass of female majlis participants.

In the roles of the zakirah and the more skilled of the majlis poetry reciters, a powerful, often productive, tension emerges between the ideal of humility on the part of those who remember Husain and the spirit of competition and pride engendered by being an articulate, charismatic performer. This tension can become a source for lively debate and discussion wherever skilled or socially important individuals play visible roles in South Asian Muharram rituals. In public processions, members of middle-class families sometimes dress as *faqīr*s, prisoners, drummers, or other seemingly lowly figures to demonstrate loyalty or gratitude to the Karbala heroes and heroines, or identification with their story. Up until a generation or two ago, Lucknow's Sunni and Shi'i royalty still routinely took part in these exhibitions of humility.[42]

In the more uniformly Shi'i environs of the mourning assembly, many participants articulate the ideal that they judge ritual performances solely on the ability of text and performer to humbly evoke the torments faced by Husain, so that listeners weep copiously. Poets, preachers, and reciters who employ their special training and talents to commemorate Muharram regularly assert that they do so only to honor Husain; they attribute all of their skill to his grace, and deny any desire for personal recognition. These

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[42] The current rajah of Jahangiribad, for example, remembers leading Muharram processions playing the *tāshā* drum as a child.

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avowals are perhaps especially frequent among South Asian Shi'i women in communities where they have otherwise limited opportunities for prominence in the public realm. A counter discourse of aesthetics and judgement, however, establishes standards for performance and supports robust competition in eloquence, rhetoric, mellifluousness, and dramatic skill.

Most majlis participants in Lahore's Zafar Colony are fully prepared to rank the delivery style and preparedness of majlis performers, and quick to laud their own preachers and reciters, though some of the older women might venture to question the boldness of a youthful speaker like Shabih or cast indirect aspersions on the reciter Zahidah's background as a "performer" in non-religious contexts. "Performers" themselves often downplay their skills one moment, and recount tales of praise and appreciation the next. Zahidah Baji insists that she is forced to accept invitations to recite at "other people's majlises" only when her finances become impossibly straitened, but she also revels in her popularity. For majlis performers, as for Shi'ahs more generally, one implicit way to moderate tensions between pride/authority and humility/decorum is to look to the judicious mix of pride and humility, strength and vulnerability, in the imams and the Karbala personages themselves. From the perspective of the majlis-goer, these revered figures can model assertive pride, self-effacement, and the co-existence of both ideals.

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Chapter Three: "The Acknowledgment of Fāṭimah"

The Sermon: Part II

The "Virtues" (Faẓā'il)

THE MEANING OF THE BLACK VEIL; ASSEMBLIING AND DELIVERING A SERMON

Some twenty minutes into her sermon, Shabih-uz-Zahra suddenly interrogates her audience, almost mimicking the role taken by Imam Jafar-us-Sādiq in the anecdote she has just related about the Imam's stunned followers, and the "hidden meaning" of lailat-ul-qadr.

Are you perplexed?!

"No!"

You're not tired? Because today, no matter what, I must finish up my topic of *Lailat il qadr*, the night of power.

"Go ahead, definitely . . ."

Alright, please call out the salavat!!

"*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!"

Now, the Quran says "lailat il qadr." It wasn't recognized; people could not identify what it was. *Lailat il qadr* was not recognized by people. And what is the significance of *lailat il qadr?*! The night of *lailat il qadr* is not just an excuse to light up lanterns or set up illuminations, it's not for the purpose of distributing sweets or for presenting gifts within the home! But rather, *lailat il qadr* is an occasion and a time for the acknowledgment of Fatimah!

The wordplay in this latest section of the speech develops a rhyming pattern, reinforcing memorably what *lailat il qadr* is, and what it is not. For the activities Shabih trivializes, she uses the phrases, *nām nahīn* ("it doesn't mean," "it's not an excuse for"), and *kām nahīn* ("it's not for the purpose of," "it's not purposeful to"). The counterposed

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expressions are *nām hai*, ("[its] name is," i.e., "it means," "it's epitomized by") and *muqām hai* ("it's a place, an occasion, a time, a point," or "the purpose is"). The zakirah seems to draw reflexively on aurally appealing patterns like these, as well as on formulaic repetition and paraphrasing, allowing a sort of "breather" from segments filled with narrative.

The efficiency of manipulable formulae is evident when one considers that this particular zakirah, for example, gives sermons twice a day for at the very least ten days, and then at least ten more during the most significant days of the Muharram commemorations that last in all about sixty-eight days. Famous male and female preachers often conduct at least twenty days of majalis, and are frequently compensated handsomely for their efforts. In Shabih-uz-Zahrah's case, since her mother opposes the idea of earning money from pious activity, no *nazrānah* (offerings of cash or gifts) are accepted.

Each day's sermon launches from a Quranic verse, and contains allusions to the particular Karbala figures associated with that day. Usually a speaker offers a series of lectures, wherein each day's lectures relate to an overall topic such as *'ilm* ("knowledge," a term with a wide range of overt and esoteric valences) or *'iṣmat* (the infallibility that makes the imams, Muhammad, and Fatimah "impeccable," incapable of sin or error). Even a young zakirah like Shabih recites majlises at two different imambargahs daily during Muharram, and so must develop two lecture series for the season, in addition to whatever majlises she reads in the homes of neighborhood women at their request.

An experienced zakirah does not rely on notes of any sort, although she may write down portions of her sermons while preparing them. The best zakirahs engage their

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listeners with eye contact and attention-getting gestures, and notes would certainly detract from the active contact between reciter and listener, and from the feel of spontaneity that the most vibrant zakirahs convey, even though their verbal and paralinguistic embellishments may be carefully planned. In some small communities, and usually among very young girls or older women, a reciter may read directly from a book of sermons scripted by a famous male preacher. The term Shi'ahs use for what the zakirah does, *majlis paṛhnā*, encompasses both actual reading and more creative sermonizing A woman in her sixties in Zafar Colony, Shabih's neighborhood, championed her own practice of reading published speeches (written by men) in household assemblies, insisting that these texts permitted no scope for straying into the realm of superstition or ignorant exaggeration (a not-too-veiled-criticism of Shabih and other precocious female preachers).

Clearly, however, the rhetorical skills, memory, and breadth of knowledge of a charismatic zakirah who prepares her own lectures reap admiration and fame that would hardly accrue to the nameless women who read from books. For Shabih and for most popular urban zakirahs, pre-constructed texts were a preparatory tool, used at the age of ten or so to imbibe the information, verbal flourishes, and narrative strategies needed to develop one's own sermons. She outgrew these in a few short years.

> If there is a time for the acknowledgment of Fatimah, it's *lailat il qadr*, the night of power, because the meaning of "lail" is Fatimah! *Lailat il qadr* is NOT cooking *halvā* in the home, distributing sweets, lighting up lights, illuminating things, but rather it is the knowing of Fatimah! And this *lailat il qadr* wasn't recognized. It couldn't be identified [for what it is] by anyone else [except the imams]. Now we approach our real subject, "lail." "Lail?" Curtain. Curtain. What "lail" is, is another name for "veil." You get me, don't you?

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"We get it!"

> Another name for "curtain" is "veil."

" 'Veil,' *wāh*!"

> Look, two pages [i.e. sides of paper] put together are called a leaf [sheet]. We call the name of two pages put together a leaf. Cleave this side apart from that one; do it! It will be rent, it will be shredded to bits, it will be torn, but never, ever will one side be separated from the other!

"No doubt!"

> So the other name for 'lail' (night) is veil. The veil and the curtain are names for each other. They are names for each other. I have to say, then, that all of the veiling [modesty] of the world, all of it that there is, is due to Fatimah.

"No doubt!"

> It is *all* due to Fatimah.

"Subḥānallah!"

Shabih explains that the sixth imam's equation of night ("lail") with Fatimah rests on the image of night as an obscuring cloak or a veil; since Fatimah epitomizes women's veiled modesty, it only makes sense that the "lail" in *lailat-il-qadr* should be taken to refer to Fatimah. And this hidden meaning of "night" is "veiled" indeed. Not only is it one of a number of inner meanings revealed only to the true *mominīn*, Shi'i believers, but the claim about Fatimah could be construed as contradicting a Sunni Muslim precept tracing the injunction to veil to the revelation of Quran 33:53, a verse usually associated with one of the Prophet's wives, Zainab bint Jahsh.[1] The idea of veiling does not apply merely to

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[1] "And when ye ask of them (the wives of the Prophet) anything, ask it of them from behind a curtain. That is purer for your hearts and for their hearts." Translation

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worldly behavior, however; the early part of the sermon has suggested that "night" relates to "power," as Fatimah relates to God. Fatimah, then, is a sort of cloak for the luminous divine, a curtained entryway to the all-powerful.

Shabih is also appealing once more, with her exclamations about the inseparable sides of a sheet of paper, to the ideas of unity and separateness. The symbol drives home the oneness of "curtain," "veil," "night," modesty," and "Fatimah," as well as Fatimah's proximity to the Prophet, securing Fatimah's stature as the ultimate in modesty. It also speaks, however, to the importance of community, and to Shi'ah-Sunni differences, always fundamentally affirming the indivisibility of Muhammad, his immediate family members, and the twelve imams descended from him. As before, when Shabih mentions the imams and the Prophet's family alongside a book, an association is almost automatically made with pages of *the* book, the Quran (the first verses of which, as Shabih noted earlier, were revealed on the *lailat-il-qadr,* "night of power," and within which, of course, the surah *lailat il qadr* is embedded).

A TEST OF FAITH; FATIMAH AS MODEL OF MODESTY, SOURCE OF ALL IMAMS, FULFILLMENT OF ALL PROPHETHOODS

Next, Shabih refers to the "first page" or the "head of a page," continuing to thread through the speech the motif of Fatimah and Ali embodying the Quran. This leads into another example of the appealing dialogue form that enables the zakirah to virtually act out an anecdote.

> If you want to summon forth the first page, the pre-eminent example, first you'll have to look to the character of Fatimah:

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from Pickthall, 448.

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"Subḥānallah!"

"Daughter, may I come in?"

"Wāh, wāh!"

"Who's stopping you father, dear? This is your home. Please enter."
"Daughter, a blind companion is with me."
There was a pause. He asked again, "Daughter, may I come in?"

"Ah! Hmmmm!" The women now issue a joint exclamation, a thrilled hum of recognition at the quandary that Fatimah faces. The audience, in fact, perks up rather noticeably.

"Father, I yearn to make obeisance at your feet. Please enter. Who is stopping you? This is your very own home."
"Daughter, I also have a blind companion along with me," his voice came again.

"Hmmmmm!"

It's not that the Prophet didn't know what was going on; he knew absolutely everything, but . . . he wanted to demonstrate the stature of Fatimah. He wanted to demonstrate the greatness of Fatimah.

"Salavat!"

Her voice came: "Father, I'm most helpless. Father, I'm terribly helpless. My *chādar* is so torn and patched that if I cover my face, my body shows, and if I cover my body, my face appears. Father, how can I bid the blind man to enter?"
"Daughter, he's *blind.* He doesn't even have eyes."
She said, "Father dear, what does it matter if he doesn't have eyes; I do! *I* do!"

Shabih's voice rings out exultantly. These last few lines contain dense references to themes her audience cherishes, and move the sermon forward with dialogue and action that contrasts intensely with the many passages of repetition and paraphrasing. Segments of description, wordplay, and formulaic iteration both provide a respite from lessons and anecdotes, and set the stage for them, bracketing them emphatically: who can compare with Fatimah's unimpeachable modesty and chastity, when she insists upon *pardah* even

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before a blind man?

The implication in this story that *female* eyes could commit some impropriety suggests that modesty is not exclusively a matter of sheltering a woman from the male gaze. More important, though, is the penetrating vision that the Prophet's family wields. Just as Muhammad has supernatural knowledge, including the ability to know, or "see" Fatimah's total purity, the imams perceive past, present and future, hold "manifest knowledge of all things," and exercise "vision with the heart."[2] Fatimah's flawless perception of the bounds and depth of modesty, her true "eyes," echoes the imams' special ability to "see." Also key to Shi'i idealizations of the Prophet's family is the role of Fatimah's torn and patched cloak in signaling the poverty and simplicity espoused by Muhammad.

Listeners . . .

"Blessings in the name of Her Honor, the mistress of women, Her Honor, Lady Fatimah Zahra!!" one of the robust-voiced poetry reciters cries out.

"*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!"

Shabih-uz-Zahra resumes her discussion of *lailat-il-qadr*, still speaking loudly, but very, very rapidly:

> Folks, why was the example of Fatimah given through *lailat-ul-qadr*? There are other terms, "Tree of the Great Lady," "Abundance"(*kausar*), the verse of *Kubra*.[3]

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[2] With reference to supernatural knowledge that transcends time and "vision with the heart" see Amir-Moezzi, 78; 40, 48, 50; for "manifest knowledge of all things," see Chapter One.

[3] "Tree of the Great Lady," *shujarah-e sayyidah*, is possibly meant to recall one of the "blessed" or "pure" trees mentioned in the Quran, as in for example the *shujarah*

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> As many of these names as there are in the Quran, I declare to you, they are names of *Janāb-e Sayyidah.*[4]

"No doubt!

> There is no segment [of the Quran] that doesn't relate the virtues of this household. Please recite the salavat.

"*Allahumma saleh 'ala Muhammadin va āl-e Muhammad*!"

But *lailat-il-qadr* was not recognized, it could not be identified what night *lailat-*

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mubarakah in surah 24:35. That verse lends itself to an interpretation venerating Muhammad's lineage and his daughter specifically: "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as it were a shining star. (This lamp is) kindled from a blessed tree . . ." Translation by Pickthall, 364. Pinault also points that, starting with early hadis literature, this verse has been a rich source of interpretation and analogy in Shi'ism. Pinault 2001, 64-5. Light imagery pervades this verse and continues to echo in much later majlis poetry.

Just as Muharram poetry frequently refers to the "light of the lamp" of faith, of Islam, kept alive by the Imams, the idea of a lamp on earth kindled by a "blessed tree" would serve as a potent Shi'i symbol for faith, belief, Islam, kept alive by Fatimah's lineage. The "lamp" and "glass" also are imbued with qualities that mesh with the meanings of a common name for Fatimah, *Zahrā*: "shining," "bright" "white" "resplendent." Shabih (whose own name means "replica of Zahra") develops her exegesis of the hidden meaning of the Quranic text *lailat-ul qadr*, with "night" as synonymous with Fatimah, against this very familiar idea of Fatimah Zahra as white and pure.

For *kausar*, see surah 108: "Lo! We have given thee Abundance; So pray unto thy Lord and Sacrifice. Lo! It is thy insulter (and not thou) who is without posterity." Pickthall's commentary asserts that "disbelievers used to taunt the Prophet with the fact that he had no son, and therefore none to uphold religion after him." 734. In the Shi'i view, the person of Fatimah as the source of the imamite lineage would refute this taunt, embodying the "abundance" of the Quranic text.

For *kubra*, see surah 79:18-22: "And say (unto him): Hast thou (will) to grow (in grace?) Then I will guide thee to thy Lord and thou shalt fear (Him). And he showed him the tremendous token. But he denied and disobeyed." These verses are embedded in a passage about Moses' attempts, at Allah's behest, to warn Pharaoh away from his wickedness. In the majlis context, Shabih apparently equates Fatimah with "the tremendous token," implying that those who disavow her importance turn their faces from Allah.

[4] A very common epithet for Fatimah, especially in Shi'i story literature.

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il-qadr was. And, up until today, the history of the world is testament to the fact that *lailat-il-qadr* has not been recognized by people. Sunni and Shi'i scholars are agreed that it hasn't been established whether the verse *lailat-il-qadr* means the night of the twenty-seventh of Ramzān, the night of the fifteenth of Shabān, the night of the twenty-first of Ramzān, or the night of the nineteenth of Ramzān. So, *lailat-il-qadr* was not recognized by people.

Shabih's voice then slows profoundly and emphatically:

Now, I put it to you that if we had attained true knowledge of Fatimah, then every Muslim would have the faith that Fatimah held after the Prophet [passed on].

"*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!"

And even such a world as has turned its face from Fatimah's way, a world that has rejected it, and will continue to reject it, could have had faith just the same [as Fatimah's]. Its faith would have been the same."

"This is true . . ."

All creation could have been [willingly] abandoned, if true knowledge of Fatimah had been attained. All creation could have been abandoned, and Fatimah would not have been abandoned. All creation could have ground to a halt, and Fatimah would not have been eliminated. So, now, listeners, what is *lailat-il-qadr*? Please recite the salavat!

"*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!"

This is not the title of any ordinary night: "*Ar-ruh fihab-e iz ne rabehim min kul-e amr.*"[5] "During this [night], angels and spirits, by the permission of their Creator, descend to earth bearing decrees," they descend to earth.
"'Lo! We have revealed it on the night of Power!" "*Enda lailat-il-qadr yufreqā.*" "*Lailat-il-qadr* constructs differences." It tells us, when angels and spirits descend at the orders of Providence, what instruction is Allah's, and what instruction is <u>not</u> Allah's. That is, this night distinguishes whose an order is. This order is not an order of this, that, or the other one, but an order of Allah's. "*Va qazālika Fatimah,*"[6] "In the same way [with] Fatimah," and this is the very reason that

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[5] Surah 97: 4. The English translation is from the Urdu version Shabih delivers, rather than from the Arabic original.

[6] " *Va qazā lika,*" simply means "and in the same way," a common phrase in the Quran.

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> Fatimah constructs differences. If someone knows Fatimah, he knows, the knowledge tells him, it clarifies the difference, that he is a believer while that one is an unbeliever.

"Praise God, *wāh*! Praise God!"

Shabih has by this point elaborated the significance of Fatimah, *lailat-il-qadr*, and the equation of the two from several angles, and for those in the audience well-versed in Shi'i traditions, the belief that the imams receive celestially inspired knowledge throughout the night of power adds another dimension to the richness of the subject.[7] Despite the multi-leveled text and Shabih's theatrics, however, the audience starts to betray distraction and restlessness. As the young zakirah builds to her thundering comparison of Fatimah with the Quranic verse itself, prolonging every word, the low mumblings among some of the women become too disruptive for her taste. The curt scolding she looses on the chatterers, most of whom are some thirty years her senior, suggests nothing so much as an exasperated and tyrannical schoolteacher in a roomful of irrepressibly naughty pupils.

> *Lailat-il-qadr* is a vessel, a receptacle for all of the verses of the Quran, for all of the chapters of the Quran. I am compelled, then, to say—PAY ATTENTION TO ME!!— that Janāb-e Fatimah, Fatimah, is . . . the . . . name . . . of the source of any of the imams that have attained the level of the imamate, or of any of the saints that have attained the level of sainthood. The name of the source of all of the imams, with the exception of Ali, from Imam Hasan on up through the last imam, is . . . Fatimah. Recite the salavat!

"*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!"

> The name of the source of all of the imams is Fatimah. And in what does the greatness of this night reside?! Look to the level of greatness of Fatimah!!

Shabih's delivery alternates between measured shouts at climactic moments and a

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[7] Amir-Moezzi, 71; 191.

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brisk staccato as she makes her way to these high points. Although she utters the last two lines with unusual speed, her articulation remains crisp and clear. After intertwining a lengthy series of stories with invocations of Shi'i authority, Shabih is drawing her listeners back to her very first proclamation at the start of the sermon, making good on her claim:

> You and I are aware of the fact that any of the Prophet's issue that we see on the breast of the earth today, or any that we'll ever see, derive from that personage in the world of women whose blessed bosom cradled the Prophet's descendants![8]

Now, as is typical whenever she explains something, she draws out her words, carefully, insistently, and, if possible, even more loudly.

> What is the greatness of this night? It is that whatever you pray for, whatever you pray for, if you are sick, if you are feeble, if you are penniless, if you desire worldly wealth, if you desire spiritual wealth, whatever you pray for on this night, having sincerely repented the blackness of your past sins, whatever you pray for, the Provider says, "If I haven't absolutely fulfilled it all by the next Eve of Power, then don't even call me the All-Powerful. Do not even call me the All-Powerful."

"*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!"

Lailat-ul-qadr, then, is the name, the sign, of the knowledge of Fatimah.

Shabih utters her next statement even more slowly and mysteriously, working up to an important revelation:

> We now know that the Provider doesn't accept your prayers unless you pray with the intercession of Fatimah.

"No doubt, no doubt!" chime in several older women, with conviction.

> Who is Adam? Our father. He is giving a testimony. And in it what is it that he's saying [to God]? "*alahuma ini asaluqā behaq-e Muḥammad va 'Alī*," "I ask you in the name of Muhammad and of Ali." Then what does he say? "Hasan and Husain?" But no! My friend, Muhammad is the Prophet among Prophets, and this [Ali] the Imam among Imams, so he should say "in the name of Muhammad and

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[8] See page 101.

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> Ali and Hasan and Husain." But he says, "*alahuma ini asaluqā behaq-e Muḥammad (in) va Ali (in) va behaq-e Fāṭimah to val-Ḥasan-e val-Ḥusain.*" Then we come to know that God doesn't accept the intercession of these four at all until Fatimah acts as intercessor.
>
> . . . until Fatimah acts as intercessor. And *lailat-il-qadr* is more excellent than all the nights of a thousand months, better. If you sit and worship for just one night, during this night, that night becomes more valuable than the nights of a thousand months. So, the other name for *lailat-il-qadr* is Fatimah. We have come to know the status of Fatimah; as Janāb-e Fatimah instructed, "If there's one Fatimah in all creation, then it's me. It is me."

"*Wāh! Subḥānallah!*"

> "My light has been positioned in the heights of Paradise!"

"No doubt!"

"*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!"

> You get me, don't you? "My light has been positioned in the heights of Paradise!" Now look, Muhammad's light existed in the loins of Adam and Noah, and Muhammad's light descended through Abraham, and then Ismail. But not Fatimah's light. Why?! Because it is lail, night, a curtain, a veil; it has been placed in a position at the heights of Paradise, Fatimah Zahra's light. Now, this light kept on flowing, the light of Muhammad and of Ali, through the loins of Adam to the loins of Noah, passed on from Noah to the line of Abraham, passed on from the line of Abraham to the line of Ismail. But not Fatimah's light.

"*Subḥānallah!*"

Recalling the glory of Muhammad's light, a mysterious entity that pre-existed Adam, or even all creation, and eventually was manifested in the Prophet, Shabih paves the way for a discussion of Fatimah's light as distinctive, but of no lesser significance.[9] A much-elaborated belief in eternal, luminous manifestations of Muhammad, Ali, and indeed

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[9] Various sects of Muslims have developed doctrines of Muhammad's perfection and pre-existence in their own ways, as even a basic text such as Denny's points out; 176.

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of all of the imams, stands among the oldest Shi'i traditions.[10] Mahmoud Ayoub explains that, according to Shi'i thought, the imams existed as "luminous conventicles of light in the loins of prophets and wombs of holy women."[11] Amir-Moezzi selects a specific hadis concerning "the Superiority of the Prophet and the Proofs [i.e. the imams] over the angels," to illustrate this belief. "At the time of the creation of the human race, the single and dual Light of prophecy [the imamate], also called the Light of Muhammad and Ali, was placed in Adam by God . . . ." The hadis itself reads (in Amir-Moezzi's translation),

> . . . Then God created Adam and deposited us in his loins and commanded the angels to prostrate themselves before him so that we might be glorified (through Adam); their prostration was the proof of their adoration of God and their respect and obedience towards Adam because of our presence in his loins . . .[12]

The motifs of Fatimah as an encompassing light and the source of spiritual leadership, however, have little precedent in early Shi'i sources. Early texts "suggest that the transmission of the legacy of light takes place . . . via the seminal substance," identifying Fatimah as "the confluence of the two lights" (of Muhammad and Ali), but do not contain detailed information on her person.[13] Shabih elects to illustrate the Prophet's daughter's "heavenly" nature by tying the intimate interaction between father and daughter

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[10] Amir-Moezzi documents treatises on the concept as far back as at least 903 C.E.

[11] 54.

[12] Recounted by Ibn Babuye al Saduq, *Ilal al-sharā'i wa l- aḥkām* (Najaf, 1385/1966), vol. 1, 209. Amir-Moezzi, 40.

[13] Amir-Moezzi, 40-41; 29:159.

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to a key scene in the Prophet's life: his miraculous nocturnal ascent to heaven.[14] In this segment, too, Shabih repeats the pattern of a relatively soft, conversational build-up to a crowing finish that demands a response from her audience.

> And on the night of the *Mi'rāj*, He called him and said, "O, Prophet, come this night and claim from me that which I have held in trust for you."
> "On this night . . . claim from me that which I have held in trust for you!"
> Now, when the Prophet used to bend down to kiss the head of Fatimah, he used to remain bent over her for some time.
>
> Someone asked, "Oh, Prophet of God, why do you bend over like that for so long?"
>
> He said, "Don't you know that from Fatimah's head I imbibe the fragrance of Paradise?"

"Aaaaaah! Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad!"

> ". . . from Fatimah's head I imbibe the fragrance of Paradise!" So, *lailat-il-qadr* is more excellent than the nights of a thousand months. Her honor, the mistress of women of all worlds . . . Hey, I'm not making this up myself here! I'm telling you the importance of the knowledge of Fatimah, from the Quran, from the hadis, with the voice of history. We don't just talk among ourselves about the importance of knowing Fatimah. People say, they say, "Shi'ahs say that Ali excels the Prophets, Ali is loftier than the Prophets." Well *I* say that, since *lailat il qadr* excels the nights of a thousand months, *we* believe also that, let alone Ali, Fatimah, the mistress of women of all worlds . . . SHE, the mistress of women of all worlds, also excels every Prophet, from Adam to Jesus!"

Shabih pauses on a rising tone, with the definite anticipation of a salavat from the women. The unspoken demand for her claim to be appreciated contrasts notably with other moments during the speech, when either spontaneous audience exclamations threaten to derail the sermon's development, or Shabih directly instructs listeners to recite the salavat. This is clearly a moment that she invests with high significance.

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[14] The Mi'rāj, frequently employed by Muslims as a metaphor for mystical experience, parallels *lailat-il-qadr* in that the opening of a passageway for sacred knowledge between heaven and earth sanctifies both nights.

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The mockery with which Shabih alludes to those (i.e. Sunnis) who are distressed by Ali's status vis-a-vis the prophets serves to heighten her praise of Fatimah, and it turns on a broader tacit understanding among Shi'ahs of the superior status of all fourteen of the *ma'sūmīn*, not just Ali: " . . . the Impeccables are ontologically superior to the prophets since they were created from a more noble 'matter,' which implies, among other things, that they have a more important role than the prophets in the universal sacred economy."[15]

Shabih has saturated her discussion of *lailat-ul-qadr* with Quranic references that hold resonance for all Muslims, and imbued these same references with Shi'i significance by aligning them with the family of the Prophet, and ultimately the female source of the imamite lineage. Shabih's lessons or anecdotes might upon first examination appear episodic or unrelated, but an insistent pattern drives her sermons. She establishes the Shi'i imams' spiritual authority and esoteric knowledge, then provides illustrations of that authority and knowledge, and then traces some dimensions of these special qualifications to other descendants of the Prophet, especially women.

Even as she celebrates Shi'i devotion to the Prophet's lineage of imams, the young preacher fulfills her poetically rendered promise at the outset of the majlis to reveal Fatimah's eminence:

> Fatimah is the fulfillment of all Prophethoods
> That is to say, she is the flower of chastity upon the Prophet's branch
> Even if someone disapproves, I'll say unhesitatingly,
> In the world of women, she too is a Prophet![16]

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[15] Amir-Moezzi, p. 71.

[16] See Chapter Two, p. 98..

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Over the course of her talk thus far, Shabih has shown how Fatimah's status is inscribed in the Quran, how it recalls Muhammad to his heavenly encounter, and how it surpasses that of prophets. In the process, she has striven to appeal to women on a range of levels; she cites Quranic authority and hadis, animatedly acts out scenes of esoteric revelations and domestic encounters, and lauds the possibilities of a night on which any prayer can be fulfilled. Fatimah's importance, she shows, encompasses the male lineage of Shi'i imams and pervades the Quran itself. In fact Fatimah is virtually presented as a part of, or a partner in, the Quran (*shark-ul-Qur'ān)*. Her intercession is also crucial in the prayers, requests, and rites that are especially prominent in most female piety.

Constantly harkening back to concepts of unity and separateness, Shabih has also posited hidden and overt texts, unity that can never be torn asunder, and distinctions—especially those between Shi'ahs and Sunnis—that matter.

The Torments (Maṣā'ib)

As Shabih makes the transition from the first portion of the sermon—called the fazail (*faẓā'il*)—concerning the virtues of the Prophet's family, to the masaib (*maṣā'ib*), the torments of Imam Husain, she graciously begs her audience's indulgence. A reference to her tender years both implies apology for any limitations, and courts appreciation, illustrating again the delicate blend of humility and pride that shapes the comportment of prominent "performers" in Muharram rites.

> But I have taken much time, and I myself am still just a schoolgirl. The Nurturer bestows effectiveness upon those who preach of Muhammad's family according to their abilities. According to their individual abilities. If anyone is able to understand some of this information or just listen to it, many thanks to them. Please recite the salavat together.

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So, listeners, the subject of *lailat-il-qadr* is moving towards its conclusion. In tomorrow's majlis, God willing, we'll continue to progress towards our theme. Please just recite the salavat together.

Herewith, the emotionally-charged masaib starts. Preachers tend to mark the transition between the parts of the majlis very clearly. Some will formally close the fazail, as Shabih has just done, while others will simply plunge suddenly into the masaib, often by urging listeners to imagine what Husain and his companions would have been doing on that particular date in 680 C.E. While Quranic, historical, and Shi'i textual allusions thread through both parts of the majlis, the fazail has a strongly instructional, frequently celebratory tone, and the masaib culminates in hysterical weeping over the sufferings of Husain. Zakirahs often mark the beginning of the masaib by uncovering their heads, letting their *dopaṭṭah*s slip down gradually, or casting them aside suddenly and violently. Bareheadedness, and even disheveled hair, which identify women with the mourning female survivors of Husain's party, intensify the final breast-beating that accompanies recitations of nauhah poetry.

The fazail and the masaib are manifestations on a broad level of the powerful blend of triumph, tribute, and virtuous pride, on one hand, and vulnerability, desolation, and sorrow, on the other, that characterize the emotional contour of Muharram observances.[17] This variegated emotional tenor persists throughout the majlis, evident in related performance forms, texts, and material culture, and it belies what might seem to

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[17] "Emotional contour" is a term I have borrowed from R. K. Wolf, "Emotional Dimensions of Ritual Music Among the Kotas, a South Indian tribe," *Ethnomusicology* 45 (3), 2001, 379. For more analysis of the balance–and especially the tension–between celebration and sorrow in Muharram, and on notions of its historical transformation "from a predominantly solemn 'observance' to a public 'celebration,'"see Korom 2002, xiii.

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the outsider an emotional monochrome of lament. The marsiyah, too, is a form that is actually replete with fazail, masaib, and indeed a wide and complex emotional range. Stereotyped interpretations of the majlis on the part of non-Shi'ahs, though, and a strain within the Shi'i community that simplifies Sunni and Shi'i differences in the interpretation of Muharram events, have both tended to privilege an unremitting sadness in the commemoration of Karbala. These tendencies downplay celebratory aspects of the proceedings, especially public processional ones.[18] Literary critics' depictions of majlis poetry as embarrassingly sentimental lament or austere martial epic play into this broader affective "flattening."

The difference in the presentation style of the fazail and the masaib is so pronounced that even a novice listener would immediately identify the two segments as distinct entities. Generally, each section of the fazail alternates in tempo and volume, loudest at the conclusion of each anecdote or lesson, but with the overall volume increasing throughout the fazail. Although non-Shi'ahs often picture the majlis as an endless litany of sufferings, the fazail in many cases exceeds the masaib in length. The masaib does tend to take up a growing proportion of the majlis day by day, until it dominates the sermons of the tenth day.

Historical descriptions of Shi'i mourning assemblies reveal that many characteristics of the ritual's atmosphere transcend specifics of local geography, gender,

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[18] On the complexity of emotional contour in two entirely different South Asian ritual complexes, and especially the possibility of broad, reform-influenced trends that "flatten" and unify emotional contour, see R. K. Wolf, "Return to Tears: Musical Mourning, Emotion, and Religious Reform in Two South Asian Minority Communities," forthcoming.

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and language. Compare for example, this description of a nineteenth-century Iranian men's majlis with the masaib at Qasr-e Zainab as it unfolds:

> . . . [he] sits and recites for about an hour an anecdote of the martyrdom in a sing-song manner, interspersed with quotations from the Qoran and his commentaries on them. He has such fluency of speech and such volubility, that he recites sometimes for hours together without stopping even to think. In order to dispel fatigue after every sentence or couplet he draws in his breath with a noise produced at the back of his throat . . . His serious and grave features, his lachrymose voice, his gestures of helplessness and deep mourning, combined with the crescendo tempo, in which he reaches the climax of the tragic stuff of his recital, is sufficient to make even hard-hearted men cry despairingly like babies and women beat their thighs hysterically, shed bitter tears and shriek incessantly *Husein, Husein.*[19]

HUSAIN'S TRAGEDY PREFIGURED

Shabih starts the masaib in a muted, almost choked, voice. She now speaks with passion, but not nearly as distinctly as during any part of the fazail. Her strong voice wavers and screeches alternately, and her words melt quickly into quavering sobs:

> When all of the prophets, all of the heirs [i.e. the imams], all of the angels were present in the world of the spirits, and the Lord of the World [God] was exacting a promise from Husain to withstand the supreme cruelty of Karbala . . . "O, Husain, O Husain! Husain, would have your companions and aides martyred?"
>
> "I accept this, O Provider. Provider, I accept it."
>
> "Husain, you will have to extract the dagger's blade from young Akbar's breast."

Here, Husain's eighteen-year-old son is mentioned, the son mourned in Zahidah's poem, "When Bano heard that Ali Akbar had passed on . . .," early in the majlis.[20]

> His voice came: "Yes, Provider, I accept that."
>
> "Husain, are you capable of picking up the fragments of Qasim's corpse . .

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[19] J.M. Unvala, "The Moharram Festival in Persia," *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religione* 3, 86.

[20] See Chapter Two.

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. and gathering them up in a bundle?"

The women's sobs intensify here, affecting more and more people throughout the hall as Shabih's descriptions foreshadow, and then detail, further horrors.

"Provider, for love of you, I accept even that."

Now the wall of sobbing diversifies into whimpering, wailing, and groaning from all sides.

> "Husain! Husain, will you be able . . . to give up a brother such as Abbas, in the prime of his youth?"
> "Provider, I require your approval; I accept that, too."
> "Husain . . . Husain, you have accepted everything!"

Shabih's listeners, knowing there is worse to come, weep even more loudly. Some start exclaiming hoarsely, "Hai! Hai!" ("Alas!") The dialogue between the Creator and Husain resumes, with Allah now anticipating Husain's entry into the realm of heaven.

> "You've agreed to everything. Welcome, welcome, to you, Fatimah's jewel, Husain, . . ." The voices welcoming Husain began to rise aloft.
> "Husain, you have accepted everything, but I still have one thing to say to you."

Now there are even more voices sobbing, more cries of "hai, hai!"

> "But I still have one thing to say to you, Husain."
> Husain says, "Provider, tell me, what is it you want to say to me."
> "Husain, can you offer up Zainab's veil?"

Shabih-uz-Zahra hits the letter "Z" in Zainab's name harshly, and elongating its sound, plays on the audience's dread. In response comes a broad swell of groans, and more physical expressions of grief: the women rock in place, slapping their hands hard against their thighs and crying "Hai hai!" in a range of pitches.

"Can you offer up Zainab's . . . veil? Can you offer up the cloaks of your sisters?

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> Will you be able to seat them, cloakless, without their long veils, on their camels?" O, Mourners, Husain did not reply. Husain fell silent. He does not answer his Lord. Just that once, stillness spread throughout creation, through the world of the spirits. All at once, among all of those souls, one tiny little soul —
>
> Here, during a long and pregnant pause, the women cry even more.
>
> "Dear Faaaaather, dear Faaaaather, you must accept this, too!'"

Shabih, now crying freely herself, wails her vowel sounds in the vocative and imperative forms. The technique charges the already volatile atmosphere, heightening the moment when her audience realizes that the little spirit voice is that of the child, Zain-ul 'abidīn, the only male survivor of the Karbala battle. Shabih, making the most of the pathos of Karbala, is alluding to the supernatural powers of the imam even as she foreshadows the evils that befall Husain's party, the threatened modesty of the women foremost among them. Husain knows what lies in store at Karbala, communicates directly with Allah about it, and he and his son Zain-ul 'abidīn, also an Imam, interact in a spirit world in which the slaughter at Karbala is prefigured. Their extraordinary foreknowledge is part and parcel of the luminous spiritual existence of the Imams, which transcends all time.

> "'Dear Father, you must acquiesce to this, too! Dear Father, don't worry! I will take my mother. . . I will take my sisters . . . I will take my aunts—oh!—through the bazaars of Kufah and Syria, to the—the royal courts. Father, dear, accept this, too!'"

"TODAY IS THE THIRD OF MUHARRAM . . ."; STRUCTURE AND SYMMETRY IN A MAJLIS

In this rendition of the words of Husain's son, the sentences end on a rising, incredibly loud wail. Shabih sobs and wheezes throughout her delivery, pausing after naming each category of female relative whose seclusion will be compromised in the

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public places controlled by their enemies. Feverish, loud weeping on the part of the mourners, her listeners, accompanies her own lamenting, and one lady settled up in front beside Shabih's seat of honor is almost hysterical. Shabih, in a state of high agitation herself, closes this preview of Husain's incomparable devotion and willingness to sacrifice, and moves to the temporally particular, a scene straight out of the marsiyah that preceded her sermon. The majlis draws to a close, then, with a series of endings that recall its series of openings, displaying a pronounced symmetry.

> Oh Mourners for Husaaaaaain . . . Husain accepted even this.
> Today is the third of Muharram. Our Master's caravan has arrived at a place where his horse refused to advance any further.[21] They changed horses several times, but not one of them would take one step further. Husain, helplessly alighting from his horse, sent up clouds of dust from the earth and . . . he saaaaaaaid helplessly, "*inā lilah vah ina allah ar raju*" ("We belong to God and we return to him.")
>
> Oh, Mourners, he gives the order: " Abbas, Abbas, stop right heeeeeere!"
>
> Abbas says, "My lord, in this desolate wilderness? This fearsome wilderness? Don't, please, put up the tents here. We have women with us, and innocent children. Please don't put up the tents here!"
>
> Oh, Mourners, our Master says, "'Abbas, 'Abbas, this very thing is the will of God! We have to halt here, we have to settle ourselves down right here."
> Oh, Mourners, Husain set up his encampment.

Shabih is crying copiously throughout this still swiftly flowing narrative. As each member of Husain's party and their individual sufferings are recalled—or, reflecting the affective presence of the mourners at Karbala, "foretold"—Shabih and the audience break down even more visibly. This progressive distress follows a pattern throughout the remainder of the majlis, with the names of venerated figures eliciting the loudest sobs and cries, just as the names of Ali and Fatimah were met with blessings and praise during the

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[21] A reference to this moment occurs in the very first verse of the marsiyah text recited at the beginning of the mourning assembly. See Chapter Two, p. 91.

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fazail section of the assembly.

> The Honorable Zainab was informed. She said, "Brother Husain, Sakinah is trembling; 'Ali Asghar refuses to nurse. Brother, don't camp here!"
>
> Said he, 'Oh, daughter of my mother, this itself is the will of God. We are to halt right here, be martyred right here, lift up Akbar's corpse right here.'" [22]

As Ali Akbar is mentioned the crying becomes, if possible, more anguished, and the zakirah ends this sentence in a hoarse scream, smashing her palms audibly against her thighs. The alternating sighing, sobbing, and wailing persist, waxing and waning, but on the whole increasing as the majlis moves towards its close.

> Oh, Mourners! Our Master summoned the people, he summoned the local clans:
>
> "Oh, People! Tell me this, what is the naaaame of this land? What is the name of this land?"
>
> Someone said, "It is called Nainevah."
>
> Our Master said, "Is there any other name?" They said "Yes, they call it Karb o bala."

The revelation of the name that signifies "pain and torment" ends on a veritable scream, punctuated by the zakirah's repeated slaps.

> Oh, Mourners, that was it! Maula says, "Oh, People, oh, you tribes and clans, I want to buy this land."
>
> They respectfully said to him, "Oh, Maulah . . . Maulah, don't purchase this land. This land is such that anyone who has come to it has suffered grief and sorrow."[23]

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[22] The day's marsiyah performance has already introduced a version of the discussions among Husain and his party upon their arrival at ill-omened Karbala:

> It was at the onset of Muharram month that our Master arrived
> Halting his mount, he questioned his companions,
> "Well, my exiled ones, we've come upon this wild desert;
> Shall we pitch the tents all here?" They said, "Well and good."
> "But how many days, King of Faith, is it your intention to stay?"
> Replied the King, "This spot will be our place until doomsday!"

[23] Maulah often means "Lord" or "Master;" here, it refers to Husain.

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> Maula says, "Oh, you tribes and clans, I will buy this land and having drenched it with Akbar's blood, I'll settle it in my Akbar's name before I go."

It is incidents such as these which, historically authentic or not, flesh out the broad canvas of the events at Karbala. Here, a relatively succinct dramatization of the purchase of the land to be "inhabited" forever with the martyrs' graves gives Shabih scope to re-emphasize the terrible foreknowledge Husain holds and the depths of familial devotion amongst the Prophet's relatives.

The classical marsiyah writers often found in such episodes a fruitful seed for the development of their lengthy poems, and the poets' artful elaborations in turn promoted Shi'i audiences' intimacy with every possible heart-wringing detail. In the marsiyah *Dast-e khudā ka quvvat-e bāzu Ḥusain hai*, for example, Mirza Dabir draws out the negotiations over the land for about twenty verses, using dialogue that matches Shabih's prose extremely closely.[24] One of Dabir's verses reads, for example:

> The King said, "Alas, these are my sister's words to me:
> 'Brother, the deed should be in the name of my Akbar'
> She means this land to be under his control
> Abbas, go and say that the imam can do nothing:
> At eighteen, he'll leave the world:
> The only place that Ali Akbar will obtain is a grave"[25]

And some verses later, Abbas tells Zainab,

> "The King has bequeathed this land to his Shi'ahs
> Please now refrain from putting forth Akbar's name"[26]

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[24] Mirzā Salāmat Ali Dabīr, in Rashīd Ḥasan Khān, ed. *Intikhāb-e Marāsī* (New Delhi: Maktabah Jāmi'ah Limited, 1970), 275-278.

[25] Dabīr 1970, verse 51 p. 277.

[26] Dabīr 1970, verse 57., p. 278.

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It's quite possible here that Shabih, given her taste for poetry, has even adapted Dabir's marsiyah, or another similar one, to build her striking description:

> Oh, Mourners for Husain! When Zainab was informed that Maulah was buying the land, she said [to one of the loyal women retainers], "Oh, Aunty Fizzah, please summon my brother Abbas."
>
> Abbas arrived: "Madam, what are your orders for this slave?"
>
> "Brother Abbas, tell Brother Husain that the deed of sale for this land shall be in my Akbar's name. A settlement named after Akbar will be established here" Oh, mourners, when Maulah received this message of his sister's, he shook.

The hoarse cry of "he shook" is more ragged than ever, because Shabih's voice by this point is raw from shouting.

> Husain said, "Oh, sister Zainaaaab, . . . I deed this land to my followers (*Shi'ahs*). I am deeding this land to my followers. Akbar will obtain a place six feet down in this earth along with me."

Shabih's next description, of Zainab pleading for help from Husain's supporters, spurs more distressed tears. The scene shows how much of the Karbala tragedy's impact lies in the betrayal of Husain by those who should have been loyal to the descendants of the Prophet, and in the doomed devotion of those few who stood by him.

> Oh, mourners for Husain. Army upon army [of the enemies] is coming. The earth of Karb-o-balā is trembling.
> Zainab is agitated; she said, "Brother Husain, why don't you also summon some of your own supporters?"

The terrible irony of the imam and the chaste and dignified female descendants of the Prophet having to stoop to requesting favors provokes bitter sorrow.

> [Meanwhile] Habīb ibn-e Mazāhir is buying dye in the Kufah bazaar.[27]

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[27] Habīb is known for being one of the few Kufans who honored their word, and fought and died beside Husain, rather than abandoning him. See Ayoub, 115-116. A few popular South Asian poetry anthologies contain marsiyahs in his honor. See, for example,

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> Oh, mourners, when Husain's emissary came bearing this message of my Master's, Habīb rent his collar, rubbed his head with earth, and set out towards his house.[28]
>
> When his wife asked, he said, "All is not well! Husain has summoned me. Who can say what evil times have befallen him, and with Fatimah's daughters accompanying him?"
>
> Oh, mourners, Habib girded his aged loins. Mounted upon his horse, he set off for Karbala, did Habīb. There waited Zainab, beside herself, Zainab was beside herself. Fizzah Aunty informed her that Habīb had arrived.
>
> Zainab said, "Oh, Aunty Fizzah, go and give my greetings to Habīb."
>
> Oh, mourners for Husain, upon having to hear this, Habīb ripped off his turban and threw it down, and began beating upon his head in mourning, he hit his head.
>
> He said, "Has such a time actually come, has even such a moment as this come, when the daughters of Fatimah—oh!—send their salāms to this slave!?" Mourners, what did Habīb know . . . what knowledge did Habīb have, of the fact that there would be these same daughters, . . . there would be a royal court, . . . and those cruel beasts, calling each one by name, would say, "That is Zainab, that Um-e Kulśum, and that Sakīnah, that Rabāb . . .!"

This allusion to the "final" calamity of the Prophet's distraught progeny paraded in chains before their oppressors after Husain's death in fact introduces an entire additional cycle of tragedy. In one of Zahidah Bājī's poems at the beginning of the majlis, too, the female survivors of the Karbala battle tramp through Syria, unveiled yet unrecognized—much as Husain's sacrifice and his family's nobility are unveiled and unrecognized—and tormented.[29] Zainab, Bano, Um Kulśum, Rabāb, and Sakīnah share the horror of viewing their menfolk's corpses, marching in procession to Damascus with Husain's head, aloft on a pike, in full view, and suffering and more death in the Syrian

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"Jab ran meñ Ḥabīb ibn-e Maẓāhir ga'e māre" ("When Ḥabīb ibn-e Maẓāhir was Slain on the Battlefield"), in Sayyid Qaiṣar Husain "Qaiṣar" Mashhadī ed., *Navā-e Ġham* (Karachi: Mahfūẓ Agency, n.d.) vol. 1, 62-66.

[28] Rending the collar and rubbing the head with dust are conventionalized expressions of mourning.

[29] See Chapter Two, p. 89.

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prison. Majlises and marsiyahs after the tenth of Muharram largely focus on these graphic cruelties.

Rather than depictions of Husain's male soldiers and their lingering deaths, or of the innocent children in the encampment, then, it is the description of the potential indignity in store for "Fatimah's daughters" that caps Shabih's presentation this day. The public spectacle of the Ummayad rulers and their supporters watching and pointing at these virtuous women is almost unbearable for Shabih's listeners.

Closing Poetry

At this point, Shabih herself lapses into muffled, unintelligible speech. Gradually, the crying fades, subsiding into coughing and snuffling, and Shabih slips away. The women wipe their eyes with their scarves, bestir themselves in the crowded hall, and rise to an expectant standing position. Within a minute or two, the ladies are lined up against the walls of the room. At the start of the matam segment of the majlis, in which the most physical expressions of mourning (also called matam) are exhibited, the ladies face each other in two rough lines. As the reciting of nauhahs progresses, small groups of women lead individual pieces in an alternating, subtly competitive pattern.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, nauhahs have eclipsed the longer, more textually difficult marsiyah in popularity in most urban Indian and Pakistani Shi'i communities. Each of the two genres has its own functional, temporal placement, poetic format, and level of diction, and majlis audiences have responded to both for decades. While nauhahs have probably always been more accessible to the typical majlis-goer than the specialized marsiyah, it appears that fewer and fewer attendees can now fully relish the

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textually complex marsiyah.

Nauhahs, more than other majlis poetry, resemble popular secular songs in terms of their textual simplicity and tunefulness. The nauhahs current among young girls tend to feature modern tarz (*ṭarz corresponds to the English "tune," which term is problematic in the majlis because of its association with "music") and showcase their strong, enthusiastic voices. In Pakistan, and in Hyderabad, India, the novelty of freshly-minted nauhahs is so prized that groups of reciters write and practice the poems in deepest secrecy.[30] Often, famed groups perform the new pieces for the first time on a special night—in Lahore it is the night of the sixth of Muharram, when cradles representing the slain infant Ali Asghar are paraded through the lanes of the old city—and the successful ones spread like wildfire from that point on.

Generally, these "top nauhahs" appear among men's *anjumans*, or recitation groups, and filter from these to the women, taken up first by the young girls. Teenaged girls in Rang Mahal, Lahore, boasted that their networks were so good that they could prepare a scrawled version of a brand new nauhah the night they first heard it, and be performing it themselves the following day. The most beloved dirges are conveyed from city to city, and across the Indian-Pakistani border.

Today, of course, texts and tunes are even circulated on the Internet, but up until recently most transmission has occurred through Shi'ahs who travel from one place to another, through Indians and Pakistanis residing temporarily in the Gulf countries who

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[30] On the intense competition between groups of male reciters in Hyderabad, see Pinault 1992, 126.

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attend majlises together there, and through Shi'i bookstores and bookstalls that purvey bound collections of classical marsiyahs and hastily printed nauhah pamphlets. In the Nakkhās section of the old city of Lucknow, India, for example, the leaflets *Faryādī Nauhe* ("Nauhahs of Plaint," or "Beseeching Nauhahs"), *Pakistan ke Mushhūr Nauhe* ("Famous Nauhas of Pakistan"), *and Shām-e ġharībāñ meñ al-e Mustafā* ("the People/Family of Mustafā on the Night of the Exiles[31] were on sale for the very modest price of three or four rupees apiece in 1998-99. Due to the diminishing currency of the Arabic-derived Urdu script in much of India, almost as many of such leaflets appear in Hindi's *devānāgarī* script as in Urdu.

Genre Categories, Majlis Etiquette, and "Ritual Criticism"

In the women's majlises addressed by Shabih-uz-Zahra, the initial matam formation of two lines, or a large uneven circle of mourners, shifts as groups of reciters form clusters to initiate favorite nauhahs. Older women often enjoy the privilege of starting the cycle of nauhah recitations, and their tunes and texts are likely to be old standbys. Teenage girls tend to dominate as the matam builds, though. In Lahore, leaders among the girls accompany their recitations with flamboyant breast-beating; flailing arms swing the palms so powerfully against the girls' necks and chests that their skin quickly turns a burning red,

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[31] Mustafā is a name for Muhammad, and the *shām-e ġharībāñ* is the night of the tenth of Muharram. The *shām-e ġharībañ* majlis commemorates the devastation and mourning of the Karbala survivors, that is, of the women of Husain's party and Zain-ul-'abidīn. This majlis often takes place in an unilluminated imambarah, or a small household version thereof, after dark. Only the tenth of Muharram (or sometimes the ninth and tenth) is observed as an official holiday in India and Pakistan. The official recognition accorded to the tenth also extends to the *shām-e ġharībāñ* majlis, a version of which usually appears on television, featuring a well-known male *ẓākir*.

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and the imambargahs echo with thunderous slaps.

In most Indian majlises, however, women execute a more gentle, symbolic beating of the right palm above the left breast, and this is the form of matam favored by many women all over the subcontinent. It is important that the pattern of slaps fit the rhythm of the poem being recited, and that the beats sound unified. Otherwise, women say, the "matam is broken," a breach that is aesthetically discordant and spiritually disrespectful.[32] Occasionally an older woman mildly criticizes the carelessness of younger girls, who in their fevered excitement and lusty reciting, lose the beat.

A middle-aged leader starts the matam by intoning deeply and dolorously, "Husain Husain." A call and response evolves, with one group calling "Husain, Husain," and another repeating this after them at a slightly higher pitch. At this point, the word "Husain," is an almost angry cry, and the women's voices hold nothing of the hysteria that characterized them at the end of the sermon. The call and response repeats, its speed increasing gradually, at least fifteen times, and then a lone voice, in this case a young girl's, starts off the first nauhah:

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[32] The breach may also be socially symbolic, given Regula Qureshi's suggestion that "communal chest beating" in the South Asian Shi'i majlis articulates "solidarity"; see "Musical Gesture and Extra-Musical Meaning: Words and Music in the Urdu Ghazal," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 28 (3), 1990, 478. For further analyses of performative synchronicity and its linkages with social unity, see Schutz, "Making Music Together: A Study in Social Relationship," in A. Broderson, ed. *Collected Papers II: Studies in Social Theory* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 177, and Thomas Turino "Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircian Semiotic Theory for Music," *Ethnomusicology* 43 (2) 1999, 241. Wolf poses the question of whether synchronized expressions of mourning during Muharram by participants from different communities "instantiates a genuine feeling of unity or merely registers a degree of mutual. accommodation"2000, 96.

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This is the beginning of Karbal's story[33]
This is the beginning of Karbal's story
O people, this funeral procession is that of Islam's founder
This is the beginning of Karbal's story

Even the arms of the loyal Abbas will be severed
Even the arms of the loyal Abbas will be severed
Arrows will turn his waterskin into but a sieve
Arrows will turn his waterskin into but a sieve
This is the beginning of Karbal's story

This is the beginning of Karbal's story
O people, this funeral procession is that of Islam's founder
This is the beginning of Karbal's story . . .

Even before the nauhah fades out completely, the older women resume their "Husain, Husain," their voices contrasting stridently with the quick, high-pitched recitation of the ten- to twelve-year-old girls. However, they have a chance to chant the refrain only once before a group of somewhat older girls, their voices more robust than those of the first group, start a new nauhah. A few of the senior women, including Shabih-uz-Zahrah's mother, who presides over the imambargah, carry on a muttered gossip session and critique of the majlis during most of the nauhah recitation.

Although strongly discouraged during the sermon itself, a generous bit of socializing and discussion often occurs during the beginning and end of the majlis. The level of monitoring of majlis etiquette varies from majlis to majlis and, noticeably, from city to city. Hyderabad, in India, has a reputation for very organized, "disciplined"

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[33] Karbal is a variant of Karbala. It may be used in poetry to meet metric requirements, or simply for euphony; in the framework of certain tunes, "Karbal" is probably easier to articulate with another letter following it (as in the phrase here, "Karbal kī kahānī") than "Karbala." The word "Karbalā" appears frequently, with the "ā" drawn out, at the ends of poetic lines.

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majlises, and indeed, there are in Hyderabad women appointed to admonish, and even expel, the talkative. Women called *razākār*s distribute tokens for mourners' shoes so that they can be easily claimed and don't disappear during the proceedings, as happens on occasion in other cities.

It is at times the zakirah herself who—after admonishing the less-than-attentive during her own presentation—presides over a casual chat session during the matam, at the periphery of the imambargah. Some of the senior zakirahs in Lucknow, for example, ignore the ongoing matam entirely while they catch up on family news or ask members of the audience how they liked the sermon. Respectful of the zakirah's exertions, most majlis-goers don't object to this. While most of those engaged in matam are fully involved, some may slip away at this time, or hold low conversations while absentmindedly continuing their breast-beating. The Qasr-e Zainab majlis is followed by three successive majlises in the same neighborhood, with largely the same attendees, so some of the hostesses may use this time to orchestrate the rest of the day's activities. While these older women talk, the next nauhah rises boisterously.

> What kind of Muharram is this that's befallen those at Karbala!
> What kind of Muharram is this that's befallen those at Karbala
> What kind of Muharram is this that's befallen those at Karbala
> What kind of Muharram is this that's befallen those at Karbala
> The flag of Abbas, dripping blood, appears
> What kind of Muharram is this that's befallen those at Karbala!
> What kind of Muharram is this that's befallen those at Karbala!
>
> O cruel ones, give him just two drops of water to drink!
> O cruel ones, give him just two drops of water to drink!
> My little one, without milk, is breathing his last
>
> The flag of Abbas, dripping blood, appears

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What kind of Muharram is this that's befallen those at Karbala!

All the seasons come and go, but
All the seasons come and go, but
Now the season of mourning for our King has arrived

The flag of Abbas, dripping blood, appears
What kind of Muharram is this that's befallen those at Karbala!

O cruel ones, give him just two drops of water to drink!
O cruel ones, give him just two drops of water to drink!
My little one, without milk, is breathing his last

The flag of Abbas, dripping blood, appears
What kind of Muharram is this that's befallen those at Karbala!

For those outside of the majlis tradition, identifying nauhahs and the other poetic genres requires a engagement with literary, musical, and popular classification systems. What lower-middle-class Lahori women term a soz, for example, does not always match with written descriptions of the genre, which usually stipulate a five- or six-line stanza and a conventional Urdu meter. Regula Qureshi has helpfully categorized the majlis genres, especially on the musical level, but the *mātam* genre she documented in 1968-69 was little known among my Indian and Pakistani consultants thirty years later, and few majlis-goers would relate to Qureshi's discussion of the nauhah as one of a number of ghazal "genres."[34]

The nauhah format does match that of the ghazal, which Urdu-speakers usually think of as a love lyric; although the first couplet re-appears as a refrain, the poems basically consist of couplets rhyming aa, ba, ca, etc. In the "a" lines, they include both a

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[34] For *mātam*, see Regula Qureshi 1981, 45; 60. On the "majlis chants" as ghazal genres, see Qureshi 1990, 458-459; 476-479.

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rhyming syllable (**qāfiyah*) and an identical word (often words) that follow the qāfiyah as a refrain (**radīf*). In the first nauhah example from this majlis the rhyme scheme is "ānī kā." The qāfiyah occurs in such words as "kahānī" (story), "bānī" ("founder"), "javānī," ("youth") and "pānī" ("water"). "Kā," a genitive post-position, is the last word in each couplet. The lines end with the phrases "kahānī kā," "bānī kā," etc. The second nauhah takes the rhyme scheme "am āyā," with sample lines ending "parcham āyā" ("the flag; or the token (on a lance) came") and "mātam āyā" (". . . mourning came").

Although the matam portion of the majlis typically lasts a minimum of fifteen or twenty minutes, today's local majlis rushes to completion with a few short nauhahs. The girls' ability to quickly bring the physical mourning to a peak with vigorous recitation and athletic breast-beating accords with a fastidious attention to punctuality and pacing in the assemblies. While stragglers or unavoidable delays sometimes disrupt the best-laid plans, a successful majlis blends careful planning and an intuitive sense of timing.

Many majlis-goers plan their attendance based on printed seasonal schedules for the majlises held in their neighborhoods or local imambarahs. Some South Asian majlis observers (and even participants) have questioned the "authenticity" of participants' grief when their weeping appears so routinized or when mourners are crying one moment and gossiping or eyeing potential brides for their sons the next. David Pinault, for example, mentions "matam on schedule," contrasted with an idealized "spontaneous show of grief," as a criticism some Hyderabadi Shi'ahs leveled against late-twentieth-century majlises.[35] Yet in Attia Hosain's semi-autobiographical novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, which

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[35] Pinault 148.

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takes place during the 1930s, the characters Asghar and Zahid also voice a critique of what they consider the hollow drama of majlis weeping:

> Can genuine grief be organized? The crowd cries in rhythm, tears flow at the will of the man who chants the dirges, then people cry for crying's sake only. That is why seconds after they have been weeping and beating their breasts they are chewing *pan* and talking casually about their incomes and their indigestion.[36]

In contemporary India and Pakistan, too, the "artificiality" of ritual weeping troubles a number of reform-minded Shi'ahs, while others offer Western psychological explanations of the need for "catharsis" to explain the responsiveness of majlis audiences.

The dozens of female majlis participants I knew never expressed concern that talking or socializing after the sermon or showing happy animation right after the matam compromised the sincerity of their grief for the imam and his family. What they did sometimes worry about was that poor timing, uninspiring recitations, or lackluster participation on the part of an audience would despoil the meritorious execution of a majlis. Attendees and hostesses, such as the senior ladies waiting for Zahidah, the soz-reciter, to arrive, often express considerable anxiety when activities don't adhere to schedule. Zakirahs may address this concern for punctuality in their sermons, noting periodically, "I can't go into detail about this now because I don't have time," or, as Shabih said, "But I have taken up much time . . ." with the implication that things must be kept moving.

The popularity that the better zakirahs enjoy in itself encourages punctuality. It is more often preachers than reciters like Zahidah who are whisked from majlis to majlis.

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[36] Attia Hosain, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 69.

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Zakirahs who read several majlises every day become extremely adept at pacing the climax of their sermons according to the time available. The sheer increase in number of majlises also accounts for tight planning; I was told over and over again, all over India and Pakistan, as was Pinault in Hyderabad, that the number of majlises is burgeoning year by year.[37] While some relish the idea that the manifold increase reflects the growth of Shi'ism, more likely explanations are an improved ability of classes other than the most moneyed to sponsor assemblies and the growing acceptance of women attending public majlises rather than very small family versions of the ritual.

In any case, an etiquette, or at least an ideal, of "timeliness" on the part of reciters, zakirahs, and the mourners participating in the assemblies predominates. Failure to attend or display due respect at the many majlises sponsored by one's friends or prominent families in the community violates both norms of politeness and ideals of devotion.

At Qaṣr-e Zainab's majlis on the third of Muharram, the majlis concludes with the short, but intense matam session following the nauhahs, and then a recitation of the *ziyārat*, a compulsory series of blessings, benedictions, and praises in Arabic addressed to the Karbala martyrs and to Muhammad, Fatimah, and the twelve imams. The matam consists of the rapid call and response of "Husain, Husain" about fifteen times, accompanied by loud, resounding breast-beating. At this point in the majlis, the women are unveiled, and some have their hair loose, not bound up in a braid or bun as it tends to be in public. Rather than weep, they evince expressions of intense concentration, proud endurance, or even rapture.

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[37] Pinault 1992, 86.

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The breast-beating concludes, far more abruptly than it would during an evening majlis, or a major assembly in an imambarah, and one of the senior women immediately chants the *ziyārat*. This blessing, each of its lines beginning with the phrase "as-salam o alekaya" ("salutations" or "peace be with you") signals the formal closure of the majlis. The women assemble and face Karbala, heads bowed, each individual's left hand clasping her right before her; the right index finger points straight ahead. Midway through the *ziyārat*, the women make a quarter turn to the right (towards the tomb of the eighth Imam, al-Razā, d. 818 C.E., in Mashad), bow slightly, and then turn back to their original position.

> Peace be with you, O Abu Abdullah[38]
> Peace be with you, oh son of the Prophet of God
> Peace be with you, son of the Prince of Believers and son of the Chief of Successors
> Peace be with you, oh Son of Fāṭimah us Zahrah, Mistress among women of the world
> Peace be with you, oh Abu'l Fazl 'Abbās, son of the Prince of Believers
> Peace be with you, supporters of God's religion in the land of Karbala
> Peace, and the mercy of God and blessings

"*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!" someone calls, and everyone makes a quarter turn to the right to face the tomb of the eighth Imam.

> Peace be with you, exiles of all exiles[39]
> Peace be with you, helper of the weak and the poor
> Peace be with you, sun of suns and confidant of souls
> Peace be with you, the one interred in Ṭūs
> Peace be with you, Sultan of Arabia and Persia
> Peace be with you, oh, Abu'l Ḥasan 'alī ibn-e Mūsā al-Razā,

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[38] The various titles and epithets in the first four of the lines beginning with "peace be with you" (*asalām o 'alekeya*) all refer to Imam Husain.

[39] This line and the following four lines are all refer to the eighth imam, al-Razā.

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And the Mercy of God, and blessings

The women turn back towards Karbala and invoke the twelfth Imam, he who is hidden, but guides believers from his invisible "occultation," in expectation of his return to the world.[40]

> Peace be with you, oh Master of the Age and of the World, and grant us security, security, security[41]
> Peace be with you, Caliph of the all-merciful
> Peace be with you, Imam of humans and jinns
> Peace be with you, Manifester of Faith
> Peace be with you, oh, partner in the Quran
> Peace be with you, Imam of the age.
> May Allah hasten and facilitate your reappearance
> Peace, and the mercy of God and blessings

The majlis closes with a call for a recitation of the surah-e Fātihah, the Quranic verse that the women also recited at the start of Shabih's speech. This time, however, the senior mourner who recited the *ziyārat* makes a formulaic request, in the names of all of the fourteen impeccables, for the recitation, barely pausing for a breath between her two chants. She hardly changes her chanted tune, but the language is now Urdu instead of Arabic:

> For the Prophet and Ali and Batūl; for the flowers in the garden of the Prophet;[42] for Sajjād and Bāqir, the kings among companions of God; for Ja'far and Qāsim, and for Razā; for Taqī and Naqī and Hasan; for the reappearance of the Imam of the age, recite one surah-e Fātihah with the darūd so that the loving God is pleased with you.

The mourners calmly and quickly mouth the words of the fatihah, their heads now

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[40] In some majlises, the attendees face the *qiblah*, Mecca, at this point.

[41] i.e. "Grant us refuge from the tribulations of the world through your re-appearance."

[42] i.e. Hasan and Husain

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demurely covered. They pass their palms over their faces as they complete the recitation, then chorus one final time:

"*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!"

One woman calls out,

"Give me one slogan of Haidar, with the voice of the holy five!"

"*Ya Ali!*"

The majlis's final exhortation is one that points up the intense distinctions drawn throughout all of the morning's poetry and prose. Some find such exclamations provocative in that they emphasize divisions among Muslims; from a rigid Shi'i point of view, the division is one between true believers and hypocritical, false Muslims. Common against the backdrop of Lahore's intense communal strife in 1997, such bold cries sometimes startled visitors, including visiting Shi'ahs from the many cities in the subcontinent where such flagrant communal conflict is rare:[43]

"Heaven for Husain, curses upon Yazid!"

"Innumerable!!" shout the women as one.

After an entire series of closures, the majlis is now definitively at an end. The crowd breaks up into small groups, some remaining to talk, some reverentially touching

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[43] In a few of the dozens of Lahore majalis I attended, I had unusual access to the perspectives of "outsiders" to the majlis scene (some of whom were local Sunnis, some Shi'ahs from other cities) who accompanied me. Often, these visitors were surprised, even intimidated, by the challenges, such as "Shout it [the curses upon Yazīd, or the darūd] out, so that it falls upon our enemies' ears!" They interpreted these as issued to Sunnis. One friend, an inveterate majlis-goer in Karachi and North America, said she had never heard such antagonistic slogans as we heard in a majlis in Karbalā Gameshah, Lahore.

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the 'alams in their glass cases, while most of the assembly moves in a body towards the private home down the street where the next majlis will be held. Each woman, between ferreting through the chaotic heaps of shoes to find her own, and proceeding on her way, collects her packet of **tabbaruk*, a "portion" or "share" distributed in Husain's name at every majlis. In this relatively humble majlis, the tabbaruk consists of a packet of biscuits, though later in the majlis cycle, meals of *halīm*, a lentil and meat stew commonly served during Muharram, tend to follow Zafar Colony majlises.

Biscuits, salty snacks, small baked goods, or meals of spinach, halim, or meat curry are popular forms of tabbaruk for most, while organizers in affluent neighborhoods serve a wider variety of dishes. Among the Karachi elite, it is not unheard of for lavish meals of chicken curry, soft drinks and ice cream to follow a mourning assembly, though attendees might debate about whether such extravagance detracts from the solemn rites of Husain's martyrdom or honors his memory. In Lucknow, the source of so many of today's subcontinental Shi'i mourning practices, tabarruk sometimes consists of sweets or a special milk-infused, red-colored bread called *shīrmal*, but quite often of dishes, cups, or kitchen utensils.

The distribution of tabarruk usually allows for extra portions for the zakirah or especially honored guests, to demonstrate respect. On the receiving end, this "*hissā*" (the "portion," a colloquial term) is not only an agreeable benefit of majlis attendance, but a right, indeed a duty. Shi'i women repeatedly said that to fail to ask for one's share of the tabarruk (and shares for one's family members) if the distributers overlooked one was an insult to Husain. Discarding one's portion, failing to eat it or give it to someone else to

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eat, are of course more serious affronts.

The basic rules or understandings of what a majlis involves—demonstrations of allegiance to the right side in the basic struggle between good and evil at Karbala; an essential sequence of remembrances performed; the respected role of reciters; the reverence for relics and tabarruk associated with Husain and his family—characterize women's majlis throughout South Asia. It is also true that hybridization in Muharram rites, as in many other sorts of South Asian rituals, is on the rise, and that "the dialectics of the local and the global" that Frank Korom emphasizes in his analysis of Muharram, are constantly evolving.[44] Yet localized customs shape the majlis's emotional contour so integrally that deviations from a familiar regional or linguistic format may hinder the social or spiritual efficacy of a majlis for women habituated to their local ritual settings.

The Qasr-e Zainab mourners, like almost all Shi'i women I met, had very firm linguistically and regionally determined notions of what makes Muharram rites effective. Majlis effectiveness was largely determined by which renderings of Husain's tragedy stirred listeners to free-flowing tears.[45] However, women often defined norms for

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[44]Korom 2002, x.

[45] Schubel comments on regional standards for the effective majlis, citing the famous anecdote (which my consultants also told me) about how a visiting preacher's depictions of the anguished thirst of Husain and his companions in the desert of Karbala left a male Pakistani Pathan audience unmoved. Struck by inspiration, the orator finally began improvising on Husain's grievous lack of tobacco, which drove the listeners into paroxysms of grief. See Schubel, 106. Schubel puts great emphasis on the skills and perceptiveness of the preacher in assessing and addressing what will appeal to various regional or ethnic audiences; the preacher's prominence far outstrips that of any other "performer" in his analysis. My consultants—preachers, reciters, and audiences alike—tended to see standards for majlis effectiveness as correct and inflexible. The female preacher, the zakirah, while important, was not invariably singled out as the one

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"effectiveness" against what Grimes calls "the possibility of ritual failure." Grimes suggests that "Engaging in ritual criticism presupposes that rites can exploit, denigrate, or simply not do what people claim they do."[46] My consultants as often evaluated effectiveness by sketching descriptions of "ineffective majlises" as by pinpointing ingredients for the successful majlis. Rāhat, the hostess in Qasr-e Zainab, commented repeatedly that she could listen to a majlis in Saraiki for hours and never shed a tear. I heard similar comments from women around the subcontinent who disapproved of, and even mocked, the majlis styles of other regions.

Local standards affect every aspect of Muharram rites from apparel to typical foods to the days on which mourners commemorate particular martyrs and the symbols—horses, bloodied cloths, cradles, flower garlands, battle standards, tomb and coffin replicas—they use to do so. Many aesthetic and customary preferences, though, revolve directly around poetry, including the labels and qualities of appropriate majlis genres. In Karachi, Anjum, a stylish and popular amateur reciter expressed dismay, even disbelief, when I happened to mention recitations of *qasīde*, praise poems, that sometimes open Lahore mourning rituals. After doubtfully assimilating my documentation of Lahori women's majlis qasīde—many of which resemble the piece rendered by Zahidah Baji in Chapter Two—Anjum countered with descriptions of how discrete qasīdah and majlis recitations are in Karachi. She finally accepted that Lahori majlis reciters might employ the

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key to success or failure of a majlis.

[46] Ronald L. Grimes, "Ritual Criticism and Infelicitous Performances," *Readings in Ritual Studies* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall,1996), 282.

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praise pieces that she felt were properly retrieved from entirely separate anthologies and notebooks (designated for celebratory rituals), but implied that such practices were unappealing, almost deviant.

Other local majlis preferences point up the special richness and flexibility of the marsiyah: which poets' works are chosen; whether hostesses recite themselves or invite hereditary professionals; whether they select melodic or declamatory delivery, solo or group performance, "classical" or popular melodic settings. Kulsum of Hyderabad remembered how, shortly after her marriage into a prominent Lucknow family, she found herself forced to hurriedly exit a majlis: the Lucknow style of marsiyah recitation struck her as so odd that she was stricken by laughter instead of tears. Sūfiyā, a professional Lucknow sozkhvan (**sozkhvān*), countered that Hyderbadi majlis performers were skilled, but recited far too quickly and stridently to elicit tears. Today, Kulsum and Sūfiyā recite one after another in Lucknow majlises. The resultant encounter of styles and social classes is part of a process that has been going on in women's rituals for decades through marriage and migration, professional invitations to reciters, and the circulation of beloved anthologies of majlis poems. Today's technologically-mediated transmission of poems is a phase of the process that would seem to presage more homogeneity in texts and recitation styles, yet different performances of a single marsiyah still reveal a rich interpretive variety supported by pronounced regional traditions and the presence of amateur as well as professional classes of reciters.

While the majlis sermon serves an exegetical function for the hidden, *batini*, meanings that pervade the Karbala tragedy, outside of literary criticism there is little to be

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found in the way of a specific, formalized exegetical tradition for the marsiyah. With few exceptions, "vernacular knowledge" reflects more of what audiences respond to in the marsiyah than do the critical standards of "realism," "manliness," and "simplicity," that we surveyed in Chapter One. As David Matthews points out,

> Tradition and constant attendance of majlises from childhood . . . provide a 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 in eastern Uttar Pradesh would be able to understand every word, he may be able to provide a clearer explanation than an educated Sunni from the city, on whose life Muharram has only marginally impinged.[47]

The next set of chapters proposes that much of the appeal of the marsiyah today lies in specific, evocative narrative episodes. Because the Karbala frame narrative is both fixed and flexible to some extent, much of the art of the marsiyah lies in configuring and re-configuring episodes while simultaneously capitalizing on thematic links that cross the bounds of episodes, poems, and genres.

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[47] Matthews, 24.

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Chapter Four: "When Husain Carried Akbar's Body From the Slaying-Ground": A Marsiyah of Mīr Navāb al-Mustalḥaṣan Mūnis

Introduction

My friend Amera Raza says of Mir Munis's nineteenth-century marsiyah *Lāsh Akbar kījo maqtal se uṭhā la'e Husain*, "I remember listening to that wonderful marsiyah all my life. It is so touching. And I remember everyone crying a lot when it was recited." Raza, who has lived in the US for over twenty tears, attended majlises in Karachi as a teenager. She returns to her neighborhood imambarah once in a while on visits to Pakistan, but nowadays more often observes Muharram in Toronto or Buffalo. Amera and her fellow majlis-goers cherish marsiyahs like Munis's so much that they are ubiquitous wherever Urdu language majlises are held.

Lāsh Akbar kī illustrates some of the most basic techniques used in nineteenth-century marsiyah writing (**marsïyah-nigārī*) . My translation of the poem in this chapter is prefaced by considerable background material, especially accounts of Ali Akbar's martyrdom, the key event of the poem as rendered in performance. Chapter Five will discuss the poetic figures and structure of this marsiyah in its fullest published form, while Chapter Six addresses textual fixity and fluidity, and interpretive creativity in the individual performances of the text that listeners find so memorable.

Mir Munis

Those who have just a passing familiarity with marsiyah would likely associate the names Anis and Dabir with the genre and recognize no other poets, but among many marsiyah aficionados, Mir Munis (*Mīr Navāb al-Mustalḥaṣan Mūnis* [d. 1875]) would

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probably run a close third in popularity. Munis, who often performed soz or salam before the marsiyah recitations of Anis, was the pupil and younger brother of the great poet.[1] Shād 'Aẓīmābādī ranked him alongside Anis and Dabir in talent and refinement, while Saksena calls him "a brilliant writer of marsias," who "led a retired life and was eclipsed by his brother."[2]

Although he receives but middling appreciation in most Urdu literary criticism, Munis does garner praise for his presence on the pulpit and recitative skill: "When he got up to read," remarks Zamīr Akhtar Naqvī, "you knew he was made for the minbar and it was made for him." Saksena also comments on the poet's "attractive and effective manner" of recitation.[3] Munis earned the distinction of serving as ustad for Rajah Amīr Hasan Khān Sāhab, of the kingdom of Mahmudabad outside of Lucknow; the Rajah Sahab's descendants are known for their marsiyah recitation up to the present day.[4]

Several of Munis's poems are mainstays in Shi'i majlises all over India and Pakistan. The poems include one about the death of Hazrat Muslim, *Insān ke liye maut*

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[1] Zamīr Akhtar Naqvī, *Khāndān-e Mīr Anīs ke nāmvar shu'ara'*(Karachi : Markaz-e 'Ulum-e Islamiyah, 1994), 261.

[2] Shād 'Aẓīmābādī, 146; Saksena, 150.

[3] Naqvī, 264; Saksena, 150.

[4] See Saksena, 150, and Zamīr Akhtar Naqvī 1994, 262. Since Munis had no son of his own, this royal lineage of *shagirds* was perhaps especially important in preserving his works. In recent generations, Maharajkumar Muhammad Amīr Haidar Khān was a distinguished performer of soz and marsiyah, and a composer of sozes in classical Hindustani ragas. See Qureshi,1981, 41-71. As I was able to observe in 1998, Muharram processions and majlises in Mahmudabad even now are tradition-steeped affairs sponsored by the Rajah, who has distinct personal tastes in soz and marsiyah-khvani.

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hai ġham bevaṭanī kā ("The Sorrow of Exile is Death To Humanity "). Muslim, Husain's cousin and messenger to the imam's supporters in Kufah, was killed at the orders of the Kufan governor before Husain reached Karbala.[5]

Another of Munis's marsiyah plots involves the torture and beheading of Muslim's two young sons on the same journey. While the rudimentary facts of Muslim's role in the encounter at Karbala are historically attested, the children's story is not. It can be found, though, in classic Persian majlis poetry, including Mullā Husain Wāi'ẓ Kāshifī's sixteenth-century *Rauẓat al-Shuhadā* (*The Garden of the Martyrs*).[6] Munis's tragic and, it must be said, gory version of the boys' martyrdoms, *Pardes meñ muslim ke yatīmoñ pe ja'fā hai* ("Muslim's Orphans Are Victimized in Exile!"), along with the marsiyah about Muslim himself, appears in a number of popular majlis anthologies; both are often recited sometime during the first three days of Muharram. *Lāsh Akbar kī jo maqtal se uṭhā la'e Ḥusain* ("When Husain Carried Akbar's Body From the Slaying-Ground") is, however, the best-known of Munis's works, and a standard item in the repertoires of professional and non-professional reciters, Indians and Pakistanis alike.[7]

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[5] Momen 28-29; Ayoub 99-106; S.A.A. Rizvi, vol. 1, 44.

[6] See Hakīm Sayyid Muhammad Kamāl-ul-dīn Husain Hamdānī, 1994, 16. Another traditional version of Muslim's story has Muslim's sons—who are quite a bit older than the mere children depicted in popular Karbala lore in South Asia—fighting with Husain at Karbala to avenge their father's death. See Ayoub, 112. Maulvi Mirza Ghulam Abbas Ali absorbs both traditions, maintaining that Muslim's two younger sons accompanied him to Kufah and were indeed slain, while two older ones fought and died at Karbala to avenge those murders. See *The Life of Husain (The Saviour)* (Madras: Anjuman-e Husaini, 1957), 118; 128; 205-6; 216-217.

[7] "The Sorrow of Exile is Death To Humanity," appears in the collections *Hilāl-e Muḥarram* (Hyderabad: Kutubkhānah-e Ḥaidarī, 1995), 121; *Armān-e Zainab 'azā-e*

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Lāsh Akbar kī's favored status in majlises around the subcontinent makes it a useful case study, but the poem also offers an unusual slant on the status of Anis, arguably the greatest marsiyah poet of them all. Those who study the contributions made to the genre by the many marsiyah poets in Anis's family, and not just the master himself, might suggest that this poem, albeit not Anis's own work, is of his *dabistān*, or "school."[8] Probably because of its immense popularity, performers sometimes even attribute this marsiyah to Anis, though a clear majority of sources assert credibly that it is one of Munis's works.[9]

Debates over the attribution of marsiyahs, it emerges, inflame literary passions rather startlingly; within Anis's lineage, some poems are variously credited to Khalīq (Anis's father), Anis himself, or to Munis or Anis's son Nafīs. Dr. Naiyar Masud worries that poorly-argued disputes over authorship have dominated marsiyah scholarship to the

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Ḥusain (Bangalore: Qais Academy, 1995), 68; *Soz-e Karbalā* (Karachi: Ahmad Book Depot, 1983), vol. 1, 76, and *Mumtāz Bastah* (Bombay: Ḥaidarī Kutubkhānah, n.d.), 51. "Muslim's Orphans Are Victimized in Exile!" appears in *Armān-e Zainab 'azā-e Ḥusain*, 71; *Soz-e Karbalā* vol. 1, 80, and *Mumtāz Bastah*, 57. My recordings of these marsiyahs were all made during the first few days of Muharram in 1996-1998.

Lāsh Akbar kī is often performed towards the *end* of the first ten days of Muharram, but reciters also recycle it during the long subsequent mourning period that extends through the eighth of the month of Rabbī'-ul-awwal. The poem, like Munis's others, appears in too many anthologies to list exhaustively, but they include *Soz-e Karbalā* vol. 1, 251; *Kāmyāb Bastah* (Lucknow: Kutubkhānah-e iṡnā 'asharī, 1994), 108; and *Tanvīr-e Ġham* (Karachi: Mahfūẓ Agency, 1990) vol. 1,131.

[8] See Zamīr Akhtar Naqvī and Saksena, 150 for examples of the study of the works of Anis's family and the clan's collective contribution to the marsiyah genre.

[9] The texts cited above all attribute the marsiyah to Munis, and it is included in the three-volume edition of his poems, but some reciters, including Sikandar Jahāñ of Lucknow, were either unsure about its authorship, or attributed it to Anis.

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detriment of more substantive analysis:

> . . . true discussions about the attribution of marsiyahs demand extreme care, patience, and exacting research. Otherwise, finding a version of *Phūla shafaq se charkh pah jab lālah-zār-e ṣubḥ* amidst Mir Munis's oeuvre, and the fact that twice during Mir Anis's lifetime versions of *Bah ḳhudā fāris-e maidān-e tahawwur thā Ḥur* were copied down with Munis's signature are deemed sufficient to make the "amazing revelation" that these marsiyahs were by Munis and not Anis.[10]

Those who maintain the superiority and integrity of Anis's style say there would be no mistaking the works of others, even those in the family, for his, but consideration of this claim must be tempered by the fact that basic topics and conceits in the marsiyah, if not the subtleties of diction, are usually very formulaic.[11]

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[10] *Risā'ī Adab* 3, 1 (1998), 4. The marsiyahs mentioned are among Anis's most famous. The first is "When The Tulip-bed of Dawn Bloomed with Redness Across the Heavens," (where the word for "redness" can also mean "affection" or "love," suggesting the cosmos coloring either to display devotion to Husain or to foreshadow his bloodshed). The title of the second, much-loved marsiyah is "By God, What a Rider on the Field of Valor was Ḥurr!"

Masud attempts to deflect a seemingly interminable debate, imploring other scholars to give analytical and artistic issues in marsiyah studies precedence over squabbles about attribution such as occur throughout the 3,1 (1998) edition of *Risā'ī Adab* (personal communication 3/99). Almost the entirety of this volume (and indeed the several previous volumes of the journal) is consumed with debates over the authorship, attribution, and publication status of marsiyah manuscripts, namely those of Anis. The contributions, which center on one Anis marsiyah, "Do sheroñ ke nezoñ ke nīstāñ meñ hai āmad," ("The Two Lions Enter A Field Full of Spears"), include Khvājah Razī Ḥaidar's "This Marsiyah is the Work of One of Anis's Incompetent Contemporaries in Anis's Style," 7-8, and Dr. Naqī 'Abidī's "Is This Marsiyah By Mir Anis or Not?! Some Basic Points of Discussion," 41-53. 'Alī Aḥmad Dānish, a descendant of Anis, also enters the fray.

[11] Khvājah Razī Ḥaidar, for example, asserts that "natural intelligence and investigative insight" reveal Samad Husain Rizvi's attribution of "The Two Lions Enter A Field Full of Spears" to Mir Anis to be spurious, based on the marsiyah's "topic, diction, portrayal of martyrdom, and semantic range," *Risā'ī* 3, 1, p. 7.

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"When the cruel one's dagger struck Akbar's chest . . . ;" Ali Akbar's Martyrdom

Lāsh Akbar kī centers on Ali Akbar's death, one of the most wrenching moments in the whole Karbala cycle. Syed Akbar Hyder summarizes the tragedy's significance as follows:

> 'Ali Akbar is Husayn's beloved son. Zaynab [Husain's sister] has raised him as a foster mother for eighteen years. He resembles the Prophet Muhammad in every respect. Those majlises of Rashid Turabi in which he recites the martyrdom of 'Ali Akbar are considered especially poignant.[12] Turabi asserts that at times when the *zākir* [preacher] is discussing any aspect of Karbala there is an indication to the *zākir* (perhaps from the Imam himself) that 'Ali Akbar's martyrdom must be narrated. Also, in 'Ali Akbar, Rashid Turabi sees the continuation of the family tradition of safeguarding the truth. 'Ali Akbar was willing to give up his life while protecting his father just as his great-grandfather Abu Talib had protected the Prophet, his nephew, till the very end.[13]

Early accounts of Ali Akbar's death are relatively sparse, and recent scholarly works report mainly that Akbar was one of the last of Husain's warriors left, that he fought valiantly, and that his death was one of the final tragedies Husain witnessed before his own murder.[14] Popular piety has fleshed out and altered Akbar's tale to include details of the young man's request for permission to engage in combat, an elaborate leave-taking from his female relatives, his slaying of at least 81 enemies in a single sortie, and a death

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[12] Rashid Turabi, probably South Asia's best-known *zākir*, or majlis preacher, emigrated from Hyderabad, India to Pakistan shortly after partition. Although Turabi died in 1973, his sermons still find so much favor among devout Shiahs that quite a few people prefer listening to a vintage recording of one of his talks at home to attending a majlis.

[13] Akbar Hyder 2000, 78-79.

[14] Ayoub states only that, "After all the companions of Husayn were killed, his son 'Alī al-Akbar fell; then all his male relatives died in battle one by one," 117. Neither S.A.A. Rizvi's nor Momen's brief, but dense account of the basic Karbala incident even mentions Ali Akbar, and Rizvi's sources designate the infant Ali Asghar, rather than Ali Akbar, as "the last but one martyr." .Momen, 28-31; Rizvī, 43-47.

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from myriad wounds on the scorching battlefield.[15]

Much South Asian majlis literature, including Munis's poem and others cited throughout this work, represent the Persian Bano as Akbar's mother and his chief female mourner, as well as Husain's primary wife. More careful accounts cite another wife, Umm-e Laila, an Ummayad noblewoman and relative of Yazid himself, as the mother.[16]

Given its various embellishments and elaborations, Akbar's story has become one that calls for multiple, episodic tellings in prose and poetry. Whereas Munis takes up Akbar's story after the battle, *Majālis-e Ḳhātūn*, a published handbook of prepared sermons for women's majlises, narrates his martyrdom with considerable emphasis on his final combat and the events that preface it.[17] The narrative is worth citing at some length, since it provides substantial context, from the perspective of the mourning assembly, for the episodes dramatized in *Lāsh Akbar kī.*

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> Suddenly, Prince Ali Akbar presented himself to the sacred service [of Imam Husain] for permission to depart for the battlefield. At the time, the Prince

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[15] For a number of these details, and especially Akbar's killing of the enemies, see, for example, Mohammad Zainul Abedin Rizvi, *Tragedy of Karbala* (Lahore: no publisher, n.d.), 152. Maulvi Mirza Ghulam Abbas Ali's *The Life of Husain (The Saviour)*, in English matches Sayyid Ghulam Haidar Tirmizī's Urdu account on the following pages in almost every respect, including the marsiyah selections and the dialogue between Akbar and Husain.

[16] See for example, Parvānah Rudaulvī, *Karbalā kī Bahādur Ḳhāvatīn* (Lahore: no publisher, n.d.), p. 112; Maulvi Mirza Ghulam Abbas Ali, 231.

[17] Sayyid Ġhulām Ḥaidar Tirmizī, *Majālis-e Ḳhatūn, Har do ḥiṣṣe kāmil* (Lahore: Kutubkhānah-e iṡnā 'asharī, n.d.), 166-175. The English version here is my translation from the Urdu.

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of Martyrs was expressing his gratefulness to God, wearing on his holy head a pink turban. As soon as he saw Ali Akbar bound for the battlefield, an arrow of sorrow struck his heart. Said he, "Oh, Ali Akbar, oh, light of my eyes, the pain of separation from you is more than can be borne!"

Husain accordingly prepared for his own death, and arrayed his body with the weapons of war. Ali Akbar came at a run and dropped to kiss his feet, saying, "Beloved Father, what will people say of me?! That the aged father was martyred and the young son stood looking on?! Are you willing for Akbar to be humiliated in the eyes of his peers?" His father replied, "Well, Ali Akbar my son, first at least take leave of the mother and aunts who spared no efforts in your upbringing."

Having heard this speech, Ali Akbar betook himself to his dear mother, Umm-e Laila. After submitting his respectful greetings, he said humbly, "Oh Mother, you can see that my beloved Father has been left all alone and has no supporter or helper but for me. Therefore kindly favor me with leave to fight." When she heard this, it was as though a knife had stabbed his mother's heart. Covering her face, she began to weep, saying, "Oh, son, you would understand my suffering if only you were the father of children yourself." The fine young Ali Akbar responded, "Oh, mother dear, what would you then say to my grandmother Lady Fatimah Zahra on the day of resurrection, when she inquires, 'Oh, Umm-e Laila, did you hold your own son dearer to you than my son?'"[18] At this, Lady Umm-e Laila fell silent with her hand upon her heart, and Ali Akbar perceived that there was nothing to be done for his dear mother but for him to take his leave.

Leaving her there, he presented himself in the service of the Lady Zainab. He knew in his heart that his dear aunt would not readily grant him permission to do battle, no matter how eloquent he was or how much of a right he might assume. He was, though, extremely quick-witted. When he finally reached his aunt, he greeted her with a bow, and she blessed him.

"How is it that you have come here, my son?" she asked.

"I came to ask you a question, Aunt," he submitted.

"Speak, my son, what question is that?"

Said Ali Akbar, "Tell me this, is your status greater or that of my grandmother, the Lady Fatimah Zahra?"

The Lady Zainab said, "What sort of talk is this you are making today? How could you compare me with Lady Fatimah Zahra? I am but her ignoble slave!"

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[18] i.e. "Did you love Ali Akbar more than your own husband, the imam and grandson of the Prophet?"

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At this Ali Akbar said, "If you are her slave, then do you hold your son[19] dear or Grandmother Fatimah Zahra's son?"

Allah! Allah! Forced to hear such a question, Lady Zainab heaved a chill sigh, saying, "Oh, Ali Akbar, I follow your implications; this was all a pretext for permission to take to the battlefield! What can I, who am merely one of your caretakers, do, when your own mother, her womb left desolate, has already bidden you farewell? If I could exercise any right over you, your mother would have consulted me before granting you permission." At this Ali Akbar clasped his aunt in his arms and commenced weeping. Just then the Prince of Martyrs entered the tent; he had heard, from behind the draperies, all that Akbar uttered. He said, "Oh, Sister Zainab, refrain from saddening Ali Akbar's heart further. He has thoroughly readied himself for death." At this, Akbar's aunt could see there was no option but for him to depart.

At last, having taken leave of them all, he was setting out for the battlefield, when his mother came running, grasped his garment hem, and said, "Oh, my son, I have one wish; just wait for a moment and fulfill it." Well, of course, Ali Akbar paused at this. The Lady Umm-e Laila then requested from within the tent a trunk in which garments for Ali Akbar's wedding had been stored. Extracting them all one by one, she kept gazing hopefully at the face of that light-of-her-eyes. Master Ali Akbar plucked one robe from among them all and said, "This will be sufficient for my shroud!" The reporter of this incident remarks that this speech loosed weeping and wailing in the tent.[20]

At last, Ali Akbar took leave of them all, weeping and beating themselves as they were, and for the last time presented himself before his esteemed father to take leave. The Prince of Martyrs with his own hand outfitted Ali Akbar's body with weapons. Raising his head towards the skies, he addressed the abode of God: "Oh, Lord God, you know that I am about to be separated from such a son as is the replica of your Prophet in face and features, in comportment and speech." And

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[19] i.e. Ali Akbar.

[20] Tirmizī here grounds his narrative in an "authentic" Arabic tradition. Ḥamīd ibn-e Muslim, his "commentator,"gave an eyewitness account of the Karbala battle, according to the historians al-Tabarī and Shaikh Mufīd. Ayoub highlights the intriguing information that Ḥamīd, "though allegedly in the enemy camp, is made to play an important role in staying the violence of the mobs against the women and surviving son of Ḥusayn." See Abū Ja'far Muḥammad Ibn Jarīr al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh al-Umam w-al-Mulūk*. (Cairo: Ḥusaynīyah Press, n.d.) vol. 6, 259; al-Sayyid Kāẓim al-Mīyamawī ed., Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Mufīd al Nu'man, *al-Irshād* (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub, 1377 A.H./1957), 226; Ayoub, 118-119.

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then afterwards he addressed the accursed Umr Sa'd,[21] "Oh, Umr Sa'd, may God annihilate your lineage, even as you have done with mine," following which he clung to Ali Akbar, and then bid him farewell:

[*Here a single marsiyah verse is inserted into the account*]

Jacob knows what the love of a son is:
Love for the light-of-one's-eyes rends the heart
Every tree has this love for its fruit
To what lengths would one not go, for this love of a piece of one's heart[22]

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[21] The general, usually alluded to as ibn Sa'd, dispatched by Kufan governor ibn Ziyād to either obtain Husain's oath of allegiance or kill him. See S.A.A. Rizvi vol. 1, 46; Ayoub 109; Momen 29-30. While in the early accounts considered most historical there is some controversy over who among Husain's enemies actually killed him, the roles of Yazid as vengeful Caliph, Ibn Ziyād as ruthless, opportunistic governor, and ibn-Sa'd as on-site military commander, are consistently established. The presence of Shimr, blamed in later pietistic interpretations of the Karbala tragedy for the deathblow to Husain, is also attested quite early on. See Ayoub, 127. However, in early accounts, Shimr is known mainly as the most ruthless of Ziyād's henchman, who egged ibn Sa'd on, threatening that he would usurp command of the operation against Husain unless ibn Sa'd acted more forcefully. Ayoub 108;111; Momen, 30. See also Appendix A in this work on the Karbala characters and chronology.

[22] This line, *kyā kyā kūveñ jhakātī hai lakht-e jigar kī chāh* contains a fairly complex allusion and play on words. A literal translation of the line would be something like, "What all (what number of) wells does love for the piece of one's heart [liver] make one scour/search?" The word used for "love" in the first four lines "*chāh*," also means a "well," and in this line the idiom for "to force (someone) to go to extremes," "to make (someone) search for something high and low," is *kūveñ jhakānā*, to have to search in a well.

The expression tightens the stanza's internal structure on several levels. It again alludes neatly to Jacob's grief, from line one, as he mourned Joseph, who had been thrown down a well. See Quran 11: 15, and James W. Morris, "Surat Yusuf," in John Renard, ed., *Windows on the House of Islam: Muslim Sources on Spirituality and Religious Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 6-23. Moreover, in a typical poetic gambit, a comparison is made between a mythical or Quranic figure closely identified with a strong sentiment—in this case, paternal love—and the hero of the poem. Both Ali Akbar and Joseph are commonly represented as unbearably beautiful "beloveds," even in their roles as sons, so that a comparison between Ali Akbar and Joseph is an adroit play. Whereas Joseph's beauty drove the women of Egypt mad, Akbar's countenance, in the words of Maulvi Mirza Ghulam Abbas Ali was such that, "Whether Hashimite or Omiade, man or woman, whoever once cast a glance on his charming face, he or she became a

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And it is a mountain of grief that descends on the helpless Husain
Such that even the forbearance of Husain meets its limit

Ya'qūb jante hai jahāñ meñ pisar kī chāh
Dil ko figār kartī hai nūr-e nazar kī chāh
Hotī hai har darakht ko apne samar kī chāh
Kyā kyā kūveñ jhakātī hai lakht-e jigar kī chāh
Ġham kā pahār girtā hai be kas Ḥusain par
Is ṣabr kā bhī khātama hai bas Ḥusain par

Then, listeners, as soon as that prince took leave from his renowned father and entered the battlefield, just after the public recitation of his ancestry and feats, he fought such a valiant battle that the enemies were stunned. Whichever direction he faced, the enemies had no choice but to flee. When he had scattered Yazid's army, he rounded smartly and presented himself once again to the imam. Said he, "Father, I am slain by thirst, and the weight of these weapons torments me excruciatingly. Is there any possibility of finding a place where I can get just a sip of water?[23] This brought tears to that lord's [Husain's] eyes, and he spoke as follows: "Oh, God, my son, what is Husain to do when a son such as you makes a request for water and I can't fulfill it? This is unbearably difficult for me. Still, Ali Akbar, you can place your tongue in my mouth for a bit of relief."[24] So Ali Akbar placed his tongue in our lord's mouth, but withdrew it instantly, saying, "Beloved Father, your tongue is even drier than my own!" So, proffering one of his fingers, the lord said, "Here, my boy, place this in your mouth and proceed on the path of God to perform *jihād*. Accordingly, having taken that finger into his mouth, Ali Akbar again betook himself to the field.

Ḥamīd ibn-e Muslim reports here that Ali Akbar's second attack threw

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slave of him;" 231.

Often, such a comparative strategy does not merely establish the intensity of the poetic hero's or lover's emotions, but serves the cause of one-upmanship. One could read the verse as implying that we all know how desperate Jacob's love and longing for Joseph was, but that the pain of Husain over *his* son, with which the verse culminates, exceeds even that. In the ghazal, of course, we see countless examples of such one-upmanship, with the lover comparing himself to the bereft Majnūñ, to Adam exiled from the garden of Paradise, and so forth.

[23] Tirmiżī presents this speech by Akbar in both Arabic and Urdu.

[24] This image of a desperate Husain trying to provide Ali Akbar with some moisture from his own mouth is not unusual in popular Shi'i piety. A similar tradition has Husain fortifying his troops before the final battle with a heavenly nectar dispensed from his finger or thumb, which resembles the next development in this account. Ayoub, 125

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Yazid's army into disarray.[25] The cavalry, foot soldiers, and even the officers were all completely dispirited. The situation disturbed Umr Sa'd mightily, so he gathered the army chiefs and proceeded to say, "What a point of intense shame, that a single hungering, thirsting youth should wander the battlefield, scattering such a massive army! If none of you can take him in single combat, turn by turn, oh cowards, then surround this valiant lion as a group, and earn your reward for killing him!" Being so compelled, that doubly-accursed locust-swarm of an army fell upon the prince. Sinān bin Anas Nakh'ī then set out from among them, and, finding his opportunity, the wretch struck Ali Akbar's chest such a lance blow that our hero couldn't keep himself steady upon his horse.[26] He called out, "Oh, Father dear, take note that I have sacrificed my life in your cause!"[27]

[*Here the author inserts two more marsiyah verses.*]

The moment he heard that voice, the world darkened before his eyes
He said, "Tell me, my son, where shall I seek you?
At every step I falter, oh lofty Akbar
My sight fails me—what can I do, alas, my prince?[28]
At least continue calling out to me time and again,

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[25] Hamīd ibn-e Muslim, the "commentator" alluded to earlier in this account.

[26] Sinān ibn Anas al-Nakh'ī is the fighter blamed in early traditions for the deathblow to Husain. See Ayoub 119;127, based on al-Tabarī, vol. 6, 262. Maulvi Mirza Ghulam 'Abbas Ali portrays Sinān as even more craven than his attack on Akbar from within a whole crowd of men would indicate: " . . . Sinan bin Anas, craftily coming *behind* him, drove his lance so forcefully in Ali Akbar's back that its head came out of his chest"; 233, emphasis mine.

[27] This line, too, is rendered in Arabic, signifying its source in an "authentic" tradition.

[28] More will be said presently on the subject of how the loss of Akbar enfeebles and even "kills" Husain; as Maulvi Mirza Ghulam Abbas Ali puts it, Akbar's death "deprived him [Husain] of almost all of his faculties." 235. Munis, too, prominently uses the conceit of Akbar as a bright, luminous "star," or "light of the eyes" of his father, in the absence of which the world blackens, in verses one and two of *Lāsh Akbar kī*. Recall also the epithets used by Bano in Zahidah Baji's poem on Akbar including *ānkhoñ kī roshnī* and *nūr-e naẓar*, both meaning "light of my eyes." See Chapter Two. Such formulations are conventional, but they are used remarkably densely in majlis poetry to convey deep affection. They secondarily evoke a mystical imagery of light that figures prominently in esoteric Shi'i and Sufi knowledge. See for example Amir al-Moezzi, 115-116; Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1978).

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And your father will somehow reach your side"

"My life will become as so much dust when you're gone
I will meld with that dust, and depart this world, my dear
I've been slain without dying, oh star of my eyes!
Of all my clan, you alone were the very soul of my soul
And as soon as the sound of your voice was heard
A doomsday tumult of plaint and weeping burst out in the tent"[29]

Alas, alas, the broken imam proceeded miserably on his way, enduring blows from every side, but he could not locate the body, for when the wretched Sinān attacked Akbar with his lance, Akbar's horse had carried him off, away from the crowd of infidels. So then Husain came to stand upon a small hill and addressed those accursed ones:

[*Here the sermon terminates with a nauhah poem*]

"Just point me to his corpse, or bring it to me yourselves
Unite me with my darling, oh Kufah-dwellers"

"If any among you is the parent of a child,
Then extinguish the flames that sear my breast"

When no one responded to the King,
He commenced to say, "Akbar, you call out to me"

"Is your treachery of in my old age your father's rightful harvest,[30]
After raising you with care for eighteen years?"

Thereupon, a voice issued suddenly from one side:

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[29] Munis's poem also makes a constant narrative return to the tent of Husain's women. The incorporation of allusions to the "interior" world of the **zanānah* foreshadow the dramatic, stylized, role of women in mourning the martyred.

[30] The idea of Akbar's death as "treachery," against his parents after eighteen years of their loving care occurs in Munis's poem, too. The couplet here reads, in Urdu:

Aṭṭhārah baras bap ne nazoñ se jo pālā
Kyā uskā yahī phal thā kih pīrī meñ daġhā do

In Munis's marsiyah, the same word, *daġhā*, is used for Akbar's "betrayal" or "treachery," but it is Bano who issues the accusation. See this chapter, p. 186, v. 45.

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"Your son is sacrificed; please show yourself to me!"

When this cry befell his ears, the King uttered the words,
"Here is my Akbar! Now you can lower your surrendered head"

"I've wandered about searching blindly, subjected to blows,
I've even a spare horse for you; pray, just show me where you've alighted"

"Is it pain that smites you, that your hands are placed so?
Just remove those hands from your breast, my son"[31]

"Oh, Lord, my son is sacrificed in all the glory of his youth!
Now all that remains is for the preacher to illuminate his tomb with glory!"

* * * * * * * * * * *

Such intricate mixtures of prose and poetry cultivate in the typical female majlis audience an intimate familiarity with minute narrative details. Their powerful impact on communal piety is manifest in the majlis, and the narratives can carry deeply personal resonances as well. A friend in Delhi, for example, told me of how she always centralizes poems about Akbar in her devotions, primarily because they accommodate her personal grief over the tragic death of her own son in his young adulthood as well as her duty to observe Shi'i ritual For this highly educated, affluent woman (and for a whole range of majlis-goers) Akbar's fate epitomizes both the worst possible nightmare, and a glorious heroic end. As Zahidah Baji's lament, *Bāno Ne Jab Sunā 'Alī Akbar Guzar Ga'e,* demonstrated in Chapter Two's majlis description, texts about Akbar, a devoted son in the prime of his youth, incorporate the anguish of parental loss, the general tragedy of wasted potential and investment, and the horror of a life destroyed just when a young man would

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[31] Akbar's covering of his shattered chest—staunching the flow of blood and simultaneously hiding the extent of his wounds— is almost a requisite element of the narrative. Compare with Munis's poem below, verses, p. 180, 15-16.

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be marriageable and ready to establish his own lineage.

The Architecture of "Lāsh Akbar kī; " Text Sources, Format, and Narrative Structure

I provide below a translation of Munis's marsiyah from the fullest readily available version (fifty-three verses), published in *Mujmū'a- Marsïyah-e Mīr Mūnis.*[32] A full transliteration of the poem appears in Appendix C. My chosen "standard version," Naval Kishor's, has been cross-referenced with several shorter versions from current inexpensive anthologies, most notably *Kāmyāb Bastah* ("A Favored Collection"), a hardcover publication from Lucknow, India.

The marsiyah's meter is = - = = / - - = = / - - = = / = =, where = is a long syllable and - is a short one. In the last foot the two long syllables may be replaced with two short syllables followed by one long one (- - =). The first verse, for example, would be scanned:

= - = = /- - = = /- - = = /- - =
Lā sh Ak bar kī jo maq tal se u ṭhā lā′ e Hu sain

= - = = /- - = = /- - = = /- - =
Nau ja vāñ ko ṣa f-e aw wal se u ṭhā lā′ e Hu sain

= - = = /- - = = /- - = = /- - =
Chān d ko shā m ke bā dal se u ṭhā lā′ e Hu sain

= - = = /- - = = /- - = = /- - =
Jāñ ba lab she r ko jan gal se u ṭhā lā′ e Hu sain

= - = = /- - = = /- - = = /= =
Dī ṣa dā lā sh-e pi sar ā n ke le jā Bā no

= - = = /- - = = /- - = = /= =
Chhid ga yā bar chhī se Ak bar kā ka le jah Bā no

---

[32] *Majmū'ah-e Marsïyah-e Mīr Mūnis, Jild-e Suvvum (A Collection of the Marsiyahs of Mīr Mūnis, Volume 3)* 2[d] edition, Naval Kishor Press, Lucknow, 1881.

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Different versions of the poem and reciters' individual preferences result in lexical variations—usually minor ones—from verses in the full printed text, but with few exceptions the various renditions scan properly.

In terms of diction and figures of speech, Mir Munis resorts occasionally to specialized metaphors (most notably in verse 28), Persian locutions (verse 39), and liberal strings of high-flown epithets (verse 37), but most of the poem capitalizes on simple, emotive language, lament-oriented content, and dialogue between characters. These characteristics contrast with the running imagery, elaborate set-pieces, and multivalent, subtly-layered metaphors so famed in the work of Munis's brother Mir Anis. And yet, as I have pointed out elsewhere, many sections of Anis's marsiyahs contain conceits and diction that resemble the works of less sophisticated poets, and this poem of Munis's, very closely.[33] These sections are often those which literary critics tend to deprecate or ignore.

Some of the notable qualities of Munis's poem are *ravānī*, or rhythmic, euphonious "flowingness," dialogic exchange that extends over many verses and to an unusual number of characters, and nuanced emphasis on themes of exposure and veiling, strength and vulnerability, and the morality that inheres in kinship. These are highlighted by symmetry at the beginning and end of the marsiyah.

The symmetry anchors the poem's two-part structure, which consists of distinct,

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[33] See Bard, "Value and Vitality," in which I argue that the poems of female marsiyah-writers, stereotyped as simplistic and mournful, have more in common with the work of masters such as Anis than many literary critics would have us believe.

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but linked, vaqiahs (*vāqi'ah*s, incidents, episodes or sub-plots). [34] In many marsiyahs, these detailed, imaginative, story-lines are almost completely self-contained or episodic. In this marsiyah of Munis's, however, the two sub-plots are of a piece, and the secondary dramatic episode plays on, and successfully augments, the sorrowful content and tone of the first. This despite the fact that the major incident is well-known and popular among reciters, while the secondary one is not typically anthologized or recited in today's majlises.

Munis's marsiyah takes up Ali Akbar's narrative just where Tirmizī's prose/poetry account leaves off. In the familiar primary episode, Munis describes Husain's agonizing trip from the battlefield back to the tent where his sisters and wives wait apprehensively. Husain carries the dying Ali Akbar, who bids a lingering farewell to his heartbroken mother.

The second "incident," which starts almost exactly at the poem's mid-point, introduces a distraught message from Medinah, where Imam Husain's daughter Sughra languishes. Sughra, too ill to travel when the rest of her family departed for Kufah, nonetheless begged to accompany them. Left behind, the young girl faces a unique ordeal of suffering in isolation; the rest of the clan at least endure their torments together. For majlis-goers, mention of Sughra immediately brings to mind this whole mood of frightening, frustrating isolation. In the majlis from Chapter Two, for example, even the brief piece Zahidah Bājī introduces between longer poems effectively summons up

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[34] In discussions of the "sections" system, literary critics sometimes substitute another word meaning "incident," **mājarā*, for *vāqi'ah*.

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Sughra's distress, and foreshadows more sorrow and separation to come:

> The King addressed Bībī Sughrā,
> "Your *burqa'* is red all through"
> Said she "My Father dear,
> I'm in a state of complete despair!"
>
> "Seeing my brothers depart
> I smashed my head against the wall's niches
> My head is wounded, oh Father,
> That's why my *burqa'* is red all through"[35]

In Munis's poem, Sughra's missive of devotion and plaint, which culminates in a plea for her beloved brother to rescue her from her lonely vigil, arrives just after Akbar breathes his last.

Verses 1-23 contain what I have termed the primary incident, which opens with Husain lifting the "corpse" of his son from the battlefield. The imam carries the youth towards the tent, crying out to his wife to come take a last look at the "light of her eyes." Once in the tent, Akbar bids farewell to Bano, initially pretending that his dying agony is but a passing weakness. Here Munis incorporates lengthy stretches of dialogue between Akbar, Husain, and Bano. In verse #19, Akbar finally dies, and full-blown lament ensues. Verse #23 bemoans all that Akbar might have hoped to obtain in the flower of his youth.

In verse #24, Husain is delayed in bearing his son's corpse out of the tent by the appearance of Sughra's messenger. The contents of her letters, the intensified laments they elicit, and the irony of the messenger only belatedly realizing that the intended recipient is dead, consume the second half of the poem. Ultimately, after a final interruption in removing Akbar's body (verse #46), Husain finally does carry the boy off,

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[35] See Chapter Two, 86.

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and proceed to his own martyrdom, his welcome release condensed into just one line of the poem. In the poem's last verse, the **maqṭa'*, Munis formulaically signs off with his poetic signature (**takhallus*) after signaling his own dissolution into tears and entry into a realm of sorrow where words are simply inadequate.

"When Husain Carried Akbar's Body From the Slaying-Ground"

1.
When Husain carried Akbar's body from the slaying-ground
Husain carried that youth from the front lines of battle
Husain drew out the moon from the evening clouds
Husain lifted up that lion, his last breath on his lips, and brought him from the wilderness
He cried out "Come take the corpse of your son, Bano!"
"Akbar's heart has been pierced by the dagger, Bano!"

2.
"Have your last look, our son is dying
Before our eyes, this light of our lives is dying
Now, at any moment, your son, the envy of the moon, shall die
His tongue lolling out of his mouth, thirsting to the bone, he dies
His breath halts in his breast, blood flows from his wound
Oh, Bano, the pillaging of your household is underway"

3.
When that lord's pain-ridden voice reached the tent
The female progeny of the Prophet of both worlds were aghast
Sakīnah shrieked, "Alas! Alas! My brother!"
Fizzah ran for the threshold, casting the veil from her head
Zainab, striking herself, rushed outside in agitation
Bano rushed out, distraught and bareheaded

4.
When she (Bano) saw Ali Akbar motionless upon the King's shoulder
She flung out her hands and screamed, "Alas, alas, my precious one!
What tragedy has occurred, oh virtuous emperor?
My boy's eighteenth year didn't do well by him
Daggers have cut his entire body to pieces, hai, hai!
Who was it that murdered my lion, hai, hai!"

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5.
"I thought that he would turn round and come back safe
I thought our chieftain would come, bringing my son along with him
What I didn't know was that Akbar would arrive in this state
This is the very image of the Prophet, come drowned in blood
This is the glory my son has given me, oh people!
The wretched, lamenting Bano has been robbed, oh people!"

6.
The leader of the faith, crying, now said to Bano
"Don't strike your head, my moon-browed one still lives!
He breathes but each breath seems the last
He departs and I am close to death myself
I've lost all, now I have no one left, Bano
My grief for this young son has slain me, Bano"

7.
"When I approached him on the slaying-ground, striking my head in grief,
What love he displayed, for even at that moment he thought of you
Pressing his bloody palms together and weeping, this is what he said,[36]
'I'm breathing my last; let Mother see me
Ready for me a screened palanquin, Sir
Go and rouse her and show her my face, Sir'"

8.
Saying this, the chieftain (Husain) brought his son's body into the tent
With someone tending to Akbar's hands, and someone to his head
The king went and gently lay his son down
His broken-hearted mother fell in anguish at his side
Said she, "You've taken the cruel spear in your heart, my son[37]
Open your eyes, or your mother will die, my son"

---

[36] i.e. joining his hands in supplication.

[37] *Kahtī thī dil pah sinān zulm kī khā'ī beṭā*
Ānkhoñ kholo nahīñ martī hai yih dā'ī beṭā

This line, since it has no specified subject, could also be read as "*I've* taken a cruel spear in the heart, my son," equating Akbar's death throes with Bano's grief for him. There is some precedent for such a reading in similar verses.

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9.
"Even in your dying agony, you asked for me; your love earns my devotion!
This blood-drenched face of yours earns your mother's devotion!
You battled thousands alone; your bravery earns my devotion!
I sacrifice myself over your suffering; your misery earns my devotion
Your mouth never even uttered the word 'water,' my precious!
Stabbed by the dagger's blade, you came back stoically silent, my precious!"

10.
Hearing his mother's voice, he opened his watering eye
Lifting his hand, he said, "By my head, I beg you don't cry
Just come close and embrace me this minute
I've come from the battlefield just to see you
I'm viewing this household once again, due to his (Husain's) auspices
But now that I've come, I find you in a very strange state"

11.
"Why is your hair disheveled and why have you cast the cloak from your head?
Why is your breast besmeared with dirt and your clothing rent?[38]
Why have you streaked your face with dust? Your son is devoted to you!
All of us will be safe with the King of the World (Husain); what is all of this fuss?
Don't utter the words, 'I've been robbed,' Mother
I'm alive, so calm yourself, Mother."

12.
"Who was it that delivered the news I was wounded?
It's a lie, for I never was struck by a dagger
Fate has brought your son back safely to you
I spied the Master's (Husain's) feet (approaching), and life welled up in me
Mourning before a death bodes ill, Mother!
What's on my clothes is Abbas's blood, Mother!"

13.
"Shall I tell you why I fainted, why I returned?
It was the third day that I'd had no water
Then there was the sun of the battlefield, with no shade overhead
This boy of yours fell down swooning from his horse
I was all but dead, yet God saved me
Father came running and lifted me into his lap"

---

[38] Dirt or dust smeared on the body and a rent collar (*ġharībān*) are conventionalized signs of extreme, almost demented, mourning found throughout Urdu and Persian poetry, including the ghazal.

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14.
"If only God would render what you say true," said Bano
"My precious, would that this mother of yours could take on your afflictions, could die in your place
Come, then, let me wash out those blood-drenched clothes
And why are your moon-white hands covering your breast, then?
I do know that you are departing from this world,
And you're hiding your wound because of my tears"

15.
"You're afraid lest Bano die of shock, my son
My heart knows all that is in your heart, my son
That hand on your chest is wet with blood, my son
What is that there if not a mortal heart's wound, my son?
Your body quivers and your life departs
And the smell of my milk wafts from that blood"

16.
"Raise that hand from your chest and show me all
Pull aside the covering of that tight cloak
You say to me 'Mother, don't fall down in grief'
Can you explain it away once you let me see that luminous chest?
I'll neither strike my head nor lose my life:
If you are well, I've hardly cause to weep"

17.
"I dream that the tree of my hopes will flourish
That you'll bring home a bride, that my household be filled
That I'll see your children with my own eyes
Then my spirit will be fully content when I depart from this world
I'll be called grandmother and my standing will increase
Your own son will be the image of the Prophet, too"

18.
Hearing this, Akbar gave a sigh full of sorrow and anguish
Pain swelled in his breast, his state worsened yet further
Realizing it in his heart, that virtuously endowed one wept
"I'm taking leave mother; forget the idea of marriage:
For a wedding gift I'll have a shroud, my face in the dust
No bride shall there be, nor children, nor nuptial festoons"

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19.
He heaved a chill sigh, thinking on how
The angel of death had willed to end his life
A shudder shook him, and that virtuous one began to writhe
Those blood-drenched hands slipped from his chest
Bano shrieked, but saw no responding breath in her son
What she saw through his wounded chest was a gaping hole in his heart

20.
She started to strike her head and breast with both hands
Falling on the ground, she cried, "Oh, my son, oh my son!"
"You said to me, 'Of course I'm not injured, mother!'
How could you hide so grievous a wound from your mother, my darling?
You didn't spare any dread for your own loss of precious life
But cared only for my sorrow; may I be sacrificed for you!"

21.
"I said, after all, that your mouth was dry, your coloring pallid
You did battle in the heat of the afternoon, your hair was caked with dirt
'Why is it,' I asked, 'that your limbs are growing cold?'
Now I writhe on the ground, but feel no pain
You beckoned Sakīnah to you, and showed her such affection,
And never expressed to your mother the pain of that wound"

22.
"I sacrifice myself for you, whom I nurtured for eighteen years!
Summon me to your side somehow
The spears of cruelty and oppression have smitten your chest
Oh boy of luxuriant tresses, your youthful whiskers have sprouted in blood
Why couldn't the horrors that befell this moon-like breast have stricken me?
I've no desire to live, my precious, no desire to live!"

23
"Oh, my lion, you never obtained the pleasures of youth
Oh, you second Joseph, you had no peace in this foreign land
Not a drop of liquid, save the shedding of tears, did you get
You were raised drinking milk to your heart's content, and then denied water
You died without even bringing me a bride, my son
All Bano had is ground to dust, my son"

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24.
Bano's lamenting loosed a doomsday tumult in the tent
The King of Karbala convulsed beside the corpse
Just then Fizzah came and said to the master,
"A rider on camelback stands with a letter at the threshold
Whenever he speaks, he breaks down with emotion
He's in search of you and of Ali Akbar"

25.
The heaven-dwelling King spoke weepingly to Fizzah:
"I'm a broken man, in no condition for correspondence and greetings
The one of whom he inquires has met his end
You go and bring me the envelope that bears my name
Who has any wish for missives and messages now?
Now all I yearn for is the stroke of the sword!"

26.
Fizzah fetched the letter whilst weeping bloody tears
Inscribed on the envelope was the writing of the ailing Sughra
The pious king wept over his daughter's name
After reading the heading, he touched the letter to his head time and again
He couldn't look, for grief, towards the helpless Bano
Gazing upon Akbar's body, he heaved a sigh

27.
Zainab asked, "Who sent the letter, my beloved brother?
Even without reading it, you shed blood unceasingly from your eyes"
Said the King, "The one who is ill in Medinah,
My dear Sughra, felled by the torment of separation
Fate yet again fails to cast a kind glance upon her
Now, when we've all but departed this world, her letter has come"

28.
When he opened the package, he discovered another letter
The oppressed King tried to hide it in his fist
A thick troop of tears massed on the line of his eyelash
"Who's the second letter for?" ventured Kulśūm, in tears
Zainab said, "She'll have written to her mother"
Bano said, "She must have written to Ali Akbar"

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29.
The king wept, and gave his sisters no reply
He read all of the opening titles of Fatimah Sughra's missive
After these titles was written, "Oh, lofty sir,
Your daughter lives on, but extremely anxiously
There's a limit, after all, to waiting
And you must see what a trial it is to endure such long separation"

30.
"Have mercy on me, for I am ill and afflicted
At times I haunt the hall, at times I remain at the doorway
Tell me how I can pretend to well-being with a heart riven hundredfold with wounds,
And to whose home could I flee, having left this one?–I'm at a loss
How can I survive in this lonely house, Father?
Indeed, if I die, no one may come to know of it, Father"

31.
"If I had received just one letter, it would have eased my heart
You haven't even sent me a spoken message
Now, save worrying, I've no activity at all
My eve turns to morn and again morn to eve
People inquire constantly after me but then take their leave
And no one ever says that Husain is on his way"

32.
"If someone asks, 'How are you Sughra?'
Well, I tried to recover from my ailment just as the heat of summer struck
'You weep all day and night, at least sleep a little bit'
What I reply is, 'But Father hasn't come as yet'
Oh, people, how can I not weep upon my fate?
Oh, people, if death comes, then will I sleep in peace!"

33.
When the King had finished reading the full content of Sughra's letter
He pounded his breast, released a cry that was a sigh
And said that beloved one of Ali, ever so painfully
"It's beyond me to read that second letter, my friends!
Someone else relate what Sughra has said of her condition
Someone bestir that one who lies asleep"

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34.
He spoke then, weeping, to the corpse, "Arise Ali Akbar!
Take your sister's letter and read it, arise my precious one!
How long will you sleep? The sun strikes your head, arise!
Arise, brother of Fatimah Sughra, arise!
Memory of your homeland weighed heavily on you my son
So go and inquire news of your sister through the messenger"

35.
Whereas the women already stood weeping about the corpse
The letter's arrival intensified the fervor of mourning
Bano cried, "Oh, people, quiet down this moment
Just listen what this sister has written her brother
How happy he'd have been to read that name, alas!
And the letter only came when he had died, alas!"

36.
When the imam opened the (second) missive and looked upon it,
A torrent of tears fell, the letters all were soaked
Once he had read it, he spoke thus to Bano, weeping,
"Sughra thinks of her brother perpetually
What she's written is a complaint to her beloved Akbar
Just listen to what fate's hand has written for our daughter"

37.
"At the head of the message, that invalid has written this:
'Brother dear, bright noon sun of kindness, gentility, and blessing
You are the ocean of sincerity's pearl, the garden of loyalty's rose
Oh, you of cypress stature, bud mouth, moon brow, and sun visage
May you breathe in this world for thirty and a hundred years!
But how long shall this sister of yours remain in her tormented state?"

38.
"May the Creator save you from the evil eye, brother!
And fate bring you safely back home, brother!
How long shall your sister's eyes shed tears, brother?
And how wonderful if you would come to take me away, brother!
If only I had someone capable as you to reassure me
If only, truly, I had someone as true to his word as you"

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39.
"Your sister suffers with longing to see you
With neither medication nor nourishment, and lacking anyone with whom to speak
Who could know the sorrow and difficulties I bear?
My heart knows and I know, and this heart of mine knows[39]
That sometimes I stand, still as a picture, at the door"
And sometimes I simply take to my bed in grief"

40.
"If you plan to come, Akbar, then come now, while I still live
Death encroaches all about, so save me, Akbar
Quickly release me from this prison of afflictions, Akbar
Now while I have life in my eyes, show yourself to me, Akbar
Otherwise when you come, it's my tomb you'll have to visit
Though the whole span of the world will remain, I shan't be here"

41.
"But why, after all, would you come to fetch me?
And it's pointless to complain to you, inappropriate to object
I'm lying far away wretched, I'm invalid—who cares for me?
And, well, whatever pleases you is surely right, brother dear
Mother loves you more than anyone else
It's just me, alas, who has no one with me"

42.
"I know that you hardly have the leisure to come,
Though all the rest of the world may well come to inquire of me
You're the darling of mother's heart, the very life of father's body
How could they wish you out of their sight?
The journey's stages are rough, and they'll not permit you to take the trouble
Even if you determined to come, father would forbid you"

43.
When they heard of her state, a clamor arose amidst the women
They all beat their heads, and the imam of both worlds wept
Placing the letter on Akbar's breast, that personage said,
"I have read it, now you write the reply, my son
She fills her days with weeping alone
Take heed quickly—your ailing sister dies!"

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[39] This line is in Persian.

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44.
Turning her face towards Medinah, Bano said,
"I sacrifice myself to your sorrow, my poor Sughra
The moon-visaged one to whom you wrote in your letter, 'Come, Brother!'
Lies dead, struck with an arrow in the chest
Akbar's spirit was here and, alas, has gone!
Now we'll only meet with Akbar come doomsday!"

45.
"The heavens have showered disaster on your mother, oh daughter
Akbar has betrayed me in the prime of his youth
My womb is desolate and my home a wasteland
He departed from this world before completing this last journey[40]
What am I to do, alas? I can't stand against fate
Though Akbar's corpse can't even attain a shroud and a grave"

46.
That broken-hearted one began to strike herself with this lament
Lifting the corpse, the chieftain took it from the tent
Then the messenger, kissing the feet of that king of men and jinn,
Asked humbly, "Please tell me where Akbar is
Now that I've met with you, I have to seek him out"
Said the king, "Take a look, this body is his"

47.
"This is the very image of the Prophet, reared in my lap
Today he's departed my house for the martyrs' catacomb
Miserable days such as cannot be eluded are upon us:
He's been taken untimely from the world, without blooming forth fully, without bearing fruit
He used to flit round me, as a moth does about the candle until dawn
Now, with the death of this precious gem, my household is destroyed"

48.
Striking his head, Sughra's messenger then said
"*This* is Ali Akbar! oh, horror, oh, disaster!
And such reproaches his sister ventured to him!
She'll not survive this, she'll not survive it, Sughra will not survive it!
Alas, as it is, she's retained neither beauty nor youth,
And some spoken messages of hers remain yet undelivered"

---

[40] i.e. to Kufah, whence Imam Husain was headed to meet with his supporters and marshal a challenge to the caliphate of Yazid when he was ambushed at Karbala.

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49.
"She said to me, wailing as I left,
'Remember my words: "I'm devoted to you, my brother"
And speak thus, that he should take pity
On my constant anxious writhing and weeping
And you come back, having promised Father to return straight here
And you come back, bringing my brother along with you' "

50.
"Now that he's bound for the grave whom should I take along?
When I go to explain to that invalid girl, how shall I explain?
Akbar has passed on to heaven, so to whom should I show her letter?
Alas, brother of Sughra, how may I ever find you?
I left there, bearing a scarred heart, and this is the reward I reap
We had expectation of a letter, but received only the news of death"

51.
"To whom, alas, shall I give that broken-hearted one's message?
To whom shall I relate her condition, to whom shall I complain?
If only I could die rather than shame myself before that invalid!
Lay the corpse on the ground that I may pay obeisance to it
She said to me, 'Lay down your life for my brother!
Rather than for me, lay down your life for Ali Akbar!' "

52.
The king said, weeping, "Relate these matters to her with care:
Say 'Banish now, dear, from your heart all thought of Ali Akbar'
And if she inquires of me, tell her the shock was thorough and devastating
Say, "Asadullah's darling died along with his son[41]
And the helpless 'Ābid departed his abode carrying two corpses
The breath of father and son departed their bodies together"

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[41]Asadullah, "the Lion of God," is an epithet for Ali. Thus Husain, even as he is "struck dead" by the death of his own son, stresses the imamite lineage by positioning himself, the third imam, as the darling of his father Ali (the first imam). In the very next line, Husain invokes imamite successorship and the sad responsibilities awaiting 'Abid, his surviving son and the fourth imam, after his own death.

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53.
Speaking thus, the King of the age took his son's body and left
Whilst the doleful messenger, striking himself, set off towards his homeland
No sooner had he left than the thirsting king was slain
Now is the time for tears, Munis, no power of speech remains
Here you have my image of the oppressed Akbar's murder
Here you have my description that will turn even a stone to water

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Chapter Five: *Vāqi'ahs*, *Vāqi'ah-nigārī*, and "Intertextuality" in *Lāsh Akbar kī*

Introduction

The vaqi'ah or episode is such a central feature of the classical marsiyah that the early critic Shiblī Nu'mānī developed a categorization scheme for marsiyahs based on themes of their major vaqi'ahs. Today's popular marsiyah anthologies also organize poems according to the events they narrate; a few among the dozens of sub-plots are Husain's party setting out from Medinah, Husain purchasing the land near Karbala to be used as a burial ground, and the Karbala survivors' journey to Syria. Even more often, these compilations arrange marsiyahs by the exploits and martyrdoms of individual heroes.

Skillful *vaqiah-nigari (*vāqi'ah-nigārī*), depiction of incidents, like the use of the "sections scheme," is a virtue that literary critics play up in their writings on marsiyah poets. The difference is that while classical marsiyahs rarely adhere very closely to the sections framework, they *are* largely defined by their episodes. A distinct episode extracted from a long and complex poem forms the core of brief performed versions of the marsiyah. Even when very abbreviated, such an episode unfolds gradually over five or six verses.

Vaqiah-nigari distinguishes the marsiyah from other majlis poems—including the marsiyah's close relative, the soz—about the same hero or event. The shorter genres might evoke a mood by pointing to episodes, but they summon up events though emblematic shorthand images rather than actually

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presenting them as narrative. In Munis's poem, vaqi'ah-nigari offers insight into ways that the marsiyah enlivens well-trodden thematic ground, and into the basis of the marsiyah's performative variety. It also epitomizes the sort of elaboration and creativity the successful marsiyah poet orchestrates within the circumscribed parameters of the Karbala incident.

Lāsh Akbar kī consists of two sections, two vaqi'ahs, that would almost seem to form two distinct poems. Poets so frequently inscribe multiple incidents within marsiyahs that well-versed majlis-goers characterize certain poems as "two-**maṭla'*" or "three-*maṭla'*" marsiyahs, that is, marsiyahs containing two or three distinct "opening verses." A maṭla' is generally the most common means of identifying a poem (in any Urdu genre), and indeed provides the poem's title, so it is scarcely surprising that sections of a marsiyah starting with distinctive maṭla's should virtually evolve into separate poems as far as the lay audience is concerned. This is especially the case because marsiyah recitations are shorter today than decades ago; given the time constraints and the dominance of the sermon in most women's majlises today, marsiyah recitations of more than about fifteen verses are rare.

Present-day recitations of *Lāsh Akbar kī* almost always cull verses only from the first vaqiah, the one in which Imam Husain brings Akbar's body to the tent, and he and the women of the family react with alternating disbelief and lament to the young man's untimely death. In our "full" version of the written text, the second vaqiah begins when a *qāṣid*, messenger, comes bearing Sughra's letters to

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the Imam and Ali Akbar. The delivery of this plaintive missive interrupts Husain's transferal of the body from the tent. An extended symmetry with the beginning of the marsiyah is provided when the imam finally carries Akbar out of the tent for the final time.

Kenneth E. Bryant's comparative discussion of contract, structure, and closure in the context of medieval Hindi poetry has implications for marsiyah's vaqiah-nigari as well:

> As Edward Said observes, 'a beginning immediately establishes relationships with works already existing, relationships of either continuity or antagonism or some mixture of both';[1] and while much of Said's study of 'beginnings' in Western literature necessarily focuses on relationships of antagonism, in the case of Vaiśnava poetry the emphasis must be on continuity. It must be remembered that while Sūr's poems are self-contained *formal* units, they are not self-contained *narrative* units. Rather, they are parts of a longer narrative, one already known to the audience, and fixed firmly in outline as a matter of religious dogma . . . Said asks: 'Is the beginning of a given work its real beginning or is there some other, secret point that more authentically starts the work off?'[2] For Sūr's verse, that 'point' is to be sought in the audience's detailed knowledge of the mythos.

The detailed knowledge shared by the majlis audience promotes a flourishing "intertextuality" within the Karbala tale's prose, poetic, and dramatic forms. Textual malleability and intertextuality both launch, as I see it, from the narrative core of the "incident." An inventively presented vaqiah ultimately interacts with dozens of other descriptions of similar events, or the same event, as well as grounding and structuring each marsiyah in a unique way. We will now review

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[1] Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York, 1975), p. 3.

[2] Said, p. 3.

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Munis's poem part by part to identify poetic figures and strategies that contribute to effective vaqiah-nigari, and then return to the poem's overall structure.

Part I: The Death of Akbar

Ravānī, Wordplay, and Imagery

> When Husain carried Akbar's body from the slaying-ground
> Husain carried that youth from the front lines of battle
> Husain drew out the moon from the evening clouds
> Husain lifted up that lion, his last breath on his lips, and brought him from the wilderness
> He cried out "Come take the corpse of your son, Bano!"
> "Akbar's heart has been pierced by the dagger, Bano!"
>
> *Lāsh Akbar kī jo maqtal se uṭhā la'e Husain*
> *Naujavāñ ko ṣaf-e awwal se uṭhā la'e Husain*
> *Chānd ko shām ke bādal se uṭhā la'e Husain*
> *Jāñ balab sher ko jangal se uṭhā la'e Husain*
> *Dī ṣadā lāsh-e pisar ān ke le jā Bāno*
> *Chhid gayā barchhī se Akbar kā kālejah Bāno*

Flowing sounds and basic, repeated images combine to produce much of the evocative appeal of this marsiyah. The following discussion highlights a few representative examples in sequence, often incorporating a line-by-line analysis. The reader will thus periodically need to refer back to the translation of the poem..

In the poem's first four lines, the very repetition of *uṭhā lā'e Husain* ("Husain picked up and carried"), establishes the haunting image of the doomed father lifting his beloved son's body over his shoulder, and distraught himself, carrying it to the boy's mother. The extended vowel sounds lend themselves to a wailing quality in delivery, complementing the image. The several re-namings of Akbar rapidly introduce the themes of this scene. Akbar's youth and comeliness

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are invoked with *naujavāñ*, youth, and *chānd*, the moon, a classic metaphor for facial attractiveness.

Within this single verse, Munis juxtaposes Akbar's beauty with his heroic death, employing the words *lāsh* (corpse) and the *maqtal* (the slaying-ground, i.e. the battlefield), in the first line and the *jañ balab* ("life on his lips") and *sher* (lion) in the fourth line. A small bit of wordplay occurs in the third line where the "*shām ke bādal*," the evil black clouds from which Husain removes his beautiful "moon," secondarily mean Syria, and so the Syrian army. The pivotal word here is *shām*, which means both "evening" or "night," and "Syria."

In the second verse, too, the language is very simple and filled with reiterated images as well as epithets.

> "Have your last look, our son is dying
> Before our eyes, this light of our lives is dying
> Now, at any moment, your son, the envy of the moon, shall die
> His tongue lolling out of his mouth, thirsting to the bone, he dies
> His breath halts in his breast, blood flows from his wound
> Oh, Bano, the pillaging of your household is underway"
>
> *Dekh le akhirī dīdār pisar martā hai*
> *Sāmne ānkhoñ ke yeh nūr-e naẓar martā hai*
> *Ab ko'ī dam meñ tirā rashk-e qamar martā hai*
> *Munh se bāhar hai zubāñ tashnā jigar martā hai*
> *Dam hai sīne meñ rukā zakhm se khūñ jārī hai*
> *Āre Bāno tire ghar luṭne kī taiyārī hai*

The epithets again invoke Akbar's shining, moon-like beauty (*rashk-e qamar,* "envy of the moon") and his preciousness ("light of our lives," lit. "of our sight," *nūr-e naẓar*). The allusions to "vision" in the first two lines are extremely dense: *dekh le* ("see!" "look!") *dīdār* (view, vision) *ānkhoñ* (eyes), and *naẓar* (vision,

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sight), while *dam* (moment, breath) continues to emphasize Akbar's ebbing life, first conjured in the phrase *jāñ balab* in the first verse.

As the first vaqiah winds down, in verses 20-24, we see that on occasion, puns or idioms with potential double meanings sustain Munis's images through a verse or several verses. In verse twenty-two, line four, Munis employs a bit of slightly gruesome wordplay:

> *Tire sadqe mire aṭṭhārah baras ke pāle*
> *Pās apne kisī ṣurat se mujhe bulvā le*
> *Tire chhātī pah lagī zulm o sitam ke bhāle*
> *Khūñ meñ bhīgīñ yeh miseñ a'e mire zulfoñ wāle*
> *Nah lagī mujhko balā chānd se is sīne kī*
> *Maiñ nahīñ jīne kī lāl nahīñ jīne kī*
>
> I sacrifice myself for you, whom I nurtured for eighteen years!
> Summon me to your side somehow
> The spears of cruelty and oppression have struck your chest
> Oh boy of luxuriant tresses, your youthful whiskers have sprouted in blood
> Why couldn't the horrors that befell this moon-like chest have befallen me?
> I've no desire to live, my precious, no desire to live!

The phrase *Khūñ meñ bhīgīñ yeh miseñ* might initially seem to signify simply "these whiskers are steeped/drenched in blood," but *miseñ bhīgnā* is an idiom for the first sprouting of the down on a young man's upper lip, an indication of supreme youthful beauty, and of a delicate balance between virility and vulnerability. Munis's other popular marsiyahs also employ a great deal of visceral imagery; in his poem about Muslim's two young sons, the children wallow at length in their blood, and the younger brother is forced to watch the decapitation of the elder before meeting his own death.[3]

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[3] See *Soz-e Karbalā* vol. 1, 83-84, verses 13-16.

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This verse fits, in content and placement, the classic description of women's lament, the *bain* category of the critics' sections rubric. Recall Hāshmī's assessment of this part of the marsiyah:

> . . . because it consists of the expression of grief and sorrow, sighing and crying, and lament and plaint, no sense of stirring fervor in its emotional mood is sustained. An atmosphere of loss and depression predominates, and it is not appropriate to the martial temperament and mode that the narrative should end in this way.[4]

What we see here, though, is that even rather conventional *bain* content, such as Bano's formulaic exclamations at the beginning of this stanza, can build up to conflicting emotions and layered images. Bano's lament would have limited impact but for the allusions to warfare and Akbar's own fighting.

Like so much of the Akbar narrative, the scene plumbs the experience of youth cut short by death, the intensity of loss aroused by truncated strength and potential. The luxuriant locks—together with the tender whiskers—of a dead, heroic son is a complex and tactile reference. It resonates, one might argue, with scenes in other world literatures: young men with lush heads of hair who are bloodied and dying; mothers running their hands through the beautiful, still-living hair and the warm sticky blood.[5] Here, then, in the segment of the marsiyah that critics have most eagerly sought to marginalize in their analyses is an image that might compare interestingly with "epics" from other cultures. As long as critics

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[4] See Chapter One, p. 13.

[5] The present-day knowledge that hair still lives and grows after clinical death curiously intensifies the picture painted by Munis.

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view the *bain* as a problem component that compromises the "epic," though, verses such as these will all be relegated to the rank of what Sadiq calls "colloquialisms, cheap endearments, and sob-stuff."[6]

The next verse, twenty-three, is one of the last verses included in popular performed versions of *Lāsh Akbar kī*. The verse's content facilitates its placement near the end of a recitation, and performers can heighten its concluding mood if they so desire. In a version from Ahmed House, Lahore, for example, reciters' voices swell louder here than in previous portions of the poem. They also repeat the whole last couplet, which they do not do in other verses of their relatively lengthy performance. This stanza is rendered in firm, loud unison, apparently because of its familiarity, in contrast to the uncertainty the reciters betray in other portions of the poem:

> Oh, my lion, you never obtained the pleasures of youth
> Oh, you second Joseph, you had no peace in this foreign land
> Not a drop of liquid, except for the shedding of tears, did you get
> You were raised drinking milk to your heart's content, and then denied water
> You died without even bringing me a bride, my son
> All Bano reaped is ground to dust, my son

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[6] 213.

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A'e mire sher tujhe luṭf-e javānī nah milā
Chain pardes meñ a'e yūsaf-e śānī nah milā
Qaṭrah-e āb bajuz ashk fashānī nah milā
Dūdh pī pī ke pale aur tumheñ pānī nah milā
Mar ga'e mujhko dūlhan bhī nah dikhā'ī beṭā[7]
Khāk meñ mil ga'ī Bāno kī kamā'ī beṭā

The rhyme scheme of the first four lines, *ānī nah milā*, holds the key to some of the appeal of this popular verse, and we might take note of several points highlighted here as examples of techniques that recur throughout the marsiyah. *Nah milā* translates to "did not obtain" or "did not get," while the qāfiyah, *ānī*, forms part of the words and phrases *javānī* (youth), *yūsaf-e śānī* (second Joseph) *ashk fashānī* (shedding of tears), and *pānī* (water or liquid).

The rhyme in line two, *yūsaf-e śānī*, calls to mind the marsiyah verse inserted into the prose version of Akbar's death in Chapter Four ("Jacob knows what the love of a son is . . ."). The comparison of Akbar with the beautiful beloved son Joseph now takes on something of the appearance of a stock technique in the marsiyah-writer's repertoire. Here the comparison turns on the handsome youths as exiles in foreign lands, and is executed more formulaically than in the other, denser verse, which conjures up the image of Joseph without even mentioning him by name.

The fourth line is also a key one. This is often the case in a marsiyah stanza

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[7] In this line, *dūlhan* has a long "ū," but must be pronounced with a short "u" to scan. The Naval Kishor printing of the poem contains many long vowels that would be short in terms of both modern pronunciation and scansion, as well as a number of archaic spellings. Even with the short vowel, this line is still metrically awkward, as the *lhan* in *dūlhan* would have to be considered one long syllable, as though it contained an aspirated *"lh."*

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because as the last line before the rhyme scheme (*aaaabb*) shifts, the fourth line lends itself to strong emphasis, a preliminary conclusion, or an unexpected twist.[8] Here the word *pānī* completes the conceit (that starts in the previous line) of substituting tears for water (to drink). This exchange pervades almost every marsiyah, often with mother's milk (also mentioned in the fourth line) and/or blood also acting as elements of a bodily and spiritual transaction. In *Lāsh Akbar kī*, such an exchange is implied in verse #2, with the hero pictured "tongue lolling out of his mouth, thirsting to the bone," while "blood flows from his wound." This image draws indirectly on a broader poetic association between a wound and a mouth, so that the parched, thirsty mouth and the "wound-mouth" from which liquid flows concretize the contrast between Akbar's loss of water and his copious blood.[9]

In verse #15, too, blood becomes a component of the transaction, as Bano exclaims over Akbar's gory wound, "Your body quivers and your life departs/And the smell of my milk wafts from that blood." Akbar offers his blood for his father Husain's cause, even as Bano has given Akbar her milk. This expenditure of milk, blood, and tears mark the relationship between mother and martyred son more generally in the marsiyah. At times, the exchange of vital liquids is condensed into

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[8] The penultimate fifth line is an alternative turning point. See Chapter Six for discussion of the fifth line as a point of musical emphasis.

[9] In one example from the ghazal, the great poet Ġhalib says to the cruel beloved, *Jab tak dahān-e zaḳham nah paidā kare ko'i/Mushkil kih tujh se rāh-e sukhan vā kare ko'i*: "Without creating a wound-mouth/It's difficult for anyone to open communications with you!" *Dīvān-e Ġhālib* (Aligarh, Educational Book House, 1996), 216.

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the cultural idea of the "debt" of mother's milk (*dūdh kā qarẓ*) that children owe.[10] Mirza Dabir, in one of his most famous marsiyahs, renders this concept of a "milk debt" even more clearly. In Dabir's poem, Akbar explains to his uncle 'Abbas:

> Mother said to me, "Akbar, I won't forgive your debt of mother's milk
> If an arrow should strike the King while you live"
> So I shall protect my father when it comes to battle, . . .
>
> *Ammāñ ne kah diyā hai kih bakhshūngī maiñ nah shīr*
> *Akbar tumhare hote lagā shāh par jo tīr*
> *Ḥāfiẓ rahūngā bāp kā maiñ vaqt-e dār o gīr* [11]

With its yearning for things not obtained (*nah milā*), its invocation of Akbar's mythic beauty, and its juxtaposition of bloody valor and tears, verse #23 reiterates all the promise Akbar's life held and all that he was denied. The future lost to him and to his family culminates in the last couplet, when Bano anguishes over the wedding that will never be, paralleling Akbar's own cry just before he dies (in verse #19): "For a wedding gift I'll have a shroud, my face in the dust/No bride

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[10] The "debt of milk" implies that, as Akbar Hyder puts it, "it is incumbent upon a person to ask her/his mother to forgive him/her for putting the mother through such hardships [of childbirth and breast-feeding]." The concept (*shīr/dūdh bakhshnā*) is still invoked today. Hyder adds that "it's very common for people in serious health conditions [i.e. who might be dying] to ask their mothers to *bakhsh* their *dūdh*." Personal communication, 4/24/02.

In *Lāsh Akbar kī* and other marsiyahs, the women of Karbala exhibit their devotion to Husain's cause by telling their sons that this debt will not be forgiven if they do not fight to the end. In some poems, it is Husain's sister Zainab who uses this leverage with her own sons. In a marsiyah that narrates Akbar's leave-taking much as we read it in Timirżī's prose account, Zainab tells the young man to ask Umm-e Laila (rather than Bano) to free him from the debt of her milk before he takes to the battlefield.

[11] *Mirzā Salāmat 'Alī Dabīr*, "Paidāshu'ā'-e mihar kī miqrāz jab hu'ī," in *Intikhāb-e marāsī* (Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Urdu Academy), verse 38, 201.

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shall there be, nor children, nor nuptial festoons"

Part II: Fatimah Sughra and Separation

Introduction to the "Sughra Incident"

In the long published version of *Lāsh Akbar kī*, the next verse, verse #24, initiates the second episode. Yet this stanza does not start with a typical marsiyah opening line along the lines of "When such-and-such happened" or "X (the hero) sets out for such-and-such" Indeed, the stanza's first line, *Bain se Bāno ke thā kheme meñ ik ḥashar bapā*, more resembles one from a verse near the end of a marsiyah than a "second maṭla'." What the verse does do is effect an interesting transition from the *bain,* which often closes a marsiyah, to the new incident:

> Bano's lamenting loosed a doomsday tumult in the tent
> The King of Karbala convulsed beside the corpse
> Just then Fizzah came and said to the master,
> "A rider on camelback stands with a letter at the threshold
> Whenever he speaks, he breaks down with emotion
> He's in search of you and of Ali Akbar"

The incident that begins here forms a meaningful unit all its own.

The details of Sughra drafting her letters and sending them to the imam do not rank among the most popular marsiyah selections in majlises today. This second half of the marsiyah does not appear in any of my recorded examples and is apparently generally unknown to the audiences so enamored of *Lāsh Akbar kī*. Significantly, though, marsiyahs such as Mirza Dilgīr's *Pidar kā apne jo thā intiẓār Sughrā ko* ("As Sughra Waited for Her Father," which appears in twenty-two-verses in the widely-used *Hilāl-e Muharram* collection) match the details of the

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episode as rendered by Munis in most respects.

Editors of marsiyah anthologies often place poems about Sughra's message alongside those about Ali Akbar. The marsiyah that follows Dilgīr's in *Hilāl-e Muharram* is the very well-known *Jab Naujavān Pisar Shah-e Dīn se judā hū'ā*, ("When the King of the Faith Lost his Young Son").[12] The special bond between Akbar and Sughra is a familiar enough trope that poems about Sughra languishing in Medinah and missing her family—Ali Akbar especially—are often recited alongside poems about Ali Akbar's death. The whole episode, then, took on a life of its own, while retaining a close link with the Akbar narrative, as the classical marsiyah proliferated.

Poetic embellishments: Wordplay, Mazmūns, and Diction

This second vaqiah from *Lāsh Akbar kī* contains several examples of adroit word-play and of the sorts of **mazmūns*, or metaphor-formulae, that are also well known in the ghazal.[13] This craftsmanship, and Munis's occasional ventures into Persian phrasing, are noticeable largely because the poem's diction is otherwise so simple and straightforward. The critics who dwell on the marsiyah's "defects" would likely label these embellishments "exaggeration" and "artificiality."

Verse #25 contains a small, running play on words, culminating in a pun of a type that is common in marsiyahs by Anis or Dabir, but relatively rare in this

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[12] *Hilāl-e Muharram*, vol. 1, 275-290,

[13] Pritchett explains how *mazmūns* are not simply poetic motifs or propositions, but established themes presented through "metaphorical equations." 1994, 93;197.

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poem. The word for a letter—as in the letter the messenger bears—is *ḳhaṭ*, and when Husain says that he is anxious for the "stroke" or "mark" of the sword, that is, that he is anxious to meet his own death, he also uses the word *ḳhaṭ*.

Ḥasrat-e nāmah o paiġām kise bāqi hai
Ab to humko ḳhat-e shamshīr kī mushtaqī hai

Who has any wish for missives and messages now?
Now all I yearn for is the stroke of the sword!"

We might, then, read this line as "the only message/summons I want is the message of (my) death." The last line of verse 50, near the end of the marsiyah also invokes this idea of a message of death. When Sughra's messenger learns Ali Akbar is dead, he cries

We had expectation of a letter, but received only the news of death"

Ḳhaṭ kī ummīd thī so maut kā paiġhām milā

Judicious symmetry, of which additional examples are offered below, structures the beginning and end of each vaqiah, and the opening and closing of the poem as a whole.

The words related to writing, messages, and letters are dense in the verse; in just a few lines, we come across *ḳhaṭ* twice (in verse #24, and at the end of #25), *paiġām* (message) twice, *salām* (greetings), *lifāfē* (letter packet, or envelope, here in the oblique form), *raqm* (inscribed), and *nāmah* (letter, missive):[14]

25.
The heaven-dwelling King spoke weepingly to Fizzah:

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[14] Note the preponderance of long *ā* sounds in several of these words, which contribute to a flowing quality of *ravānī* when the verse is recited.

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"I'm a broken man, in no condition for correspondence and greetings
The one of whom he inquires has met his end
You go and bring me the envelope that bears my name
Who has any wish for missives and messages now?
Now all I yearn for is the stroke of the sword!"

Ro ke kahne lage Fizzah se shah-e 'arsh muqām
Maiñ to mazlūm nahīñ lā'iq-e ***paigām o salām***
Pūchhtā hai jiñheñ unkā to hū'ā kām tamām
Jā ke le ā jo ***lifāfē*** *pah* ***raqam*** *ho mirā nām*
Ḥasrat-e ***nāmah o paigām*** *kise bāqi hai*
Ab to humko ***khat-e shamshīr*** *kī mushtāqī hai*

A mosaic of words related to death and beauty, ornamented with an instance of wordplay, filled the first few verses of Munis's marsiyah, and the same kind of lexical play introduces the theme of correspondence, a link joining separated kin, in the initial verses of this second incident. The appearance of Sughra's message ushers in a sense of expectation and further drama, but the new events ultimately serve to intensify the loss of Akbar, bringing home the sorrow of multiple separations. Leaving Sughra behind on her own was, after all, the foretaste of all partings to come for Husain's family.

This small bit of wordplay is the first in a series of puns, metaphors, similes, and sustained motifs that, although not especially complex, distinguish this second half of the poem from the first half. A few verses later, in stanza twenty-eight's third line, we come across the curious, and seemingly incongruous image of a cluster of tears lining up like soldiers in formation on Husain's eyelashes:

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When he opened the package, he discovered another letter
The oppressed King tried to hide it in his fist
A thick troop of tears massed on the line of his eyelash

Namah kholā to hū'ā aur ik ḳhaṭ ma'lūm
Usko muṭṭhī meñ chhupāne lage shāh-e maẓlūm
Ṣaf-e mizhgāh pah zyādah hū'ā ashkoñ kā hajūm

The word *ṣaf* frequently indicates a line or a rank of soldiers, especially in the marsiyah, and *hajūm*, while it can mean simply a crowd, in older usage tended to connote a teeming crowd bent on an attack, or an attack itself. The quasi-military motif might strike some as odd in the context of Husain's bereaved state, but this type of fanciful description is quite common in classical marsiyahs on the whole (although the marsiyahs of Mir Anis, for example, tend to generate multiple meanings and use rather complex puns throughout a verse or series of verses rather than inserting a single one here and there). Also, Husain has, after all, just come from the battleground. A single line manages to reinforce an image of Husain as a stock handsome hero worthy of detailed description—the eyelashes being a celebrated feature of heroes and beloveds—and also a warrior, and a vulnerable, weeping father.

In verse #47, near the end of the marsiyah, a more familiar *maẓmūn* expresses the love between father and son: the enduring image of the devoted moth circling its beloved candle, even risking death in its flame.

"He used to flit round me, as a moth does about the candle until dawn
Now, with the death of this precious gem, my household is destroyed"

Ṣubah tak gird mire phirte the parvāne se
Ghar mirā ulaṭ gayā is lāl ke mar jāne se.

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Some aspects of this conceit take on a special poignance in the marsiyah: the son sacrificing himself for his beloved father, or the "dawn," the time when the candle gutters out or fades in the sunlight, as the end of mortal life (and an awakening into the hereafter). Poetic tropes familiar from the ghazal, including the candle flame, the rose, or the beautiful tree in a garden, palpably enhance the listeners' appreciation of the sorrowful marsiyah. The "love" object at the center of the ghazal becomes, in the marsiyah, a beloved martyr-hero.

David Matthews points out that images like these are common currency throughout Urdu literature: "An extremely common comparison which occurs over and over again is that of Husain to a bridegroom about to be united with his mystical beloved in heaven. . . . Mystical comparisons of the lover being united with his beloved to the soul's union with God are very frequent in all Urdu poetry . . ."[15] Akbar Hyder takes the view that employing the language of ghazal and *qaṣīdah* (the praise poem) genres allowed the great marsiyah poets to make the most of their improvisational skills. Through the free play of "well-established similes, metaphors and other rhetorical devices," Anis and Dabir, he says "cast the tragedy of Karbala in a manner that makes it . . . aesthetically appealing . . . to an audience well attuned to such language."[16]

Whether or not nineteenth-century poets were strategically employing the language of the ghazal in particular, they certainly incorporated classical *maẓmūn*s

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[15] Matthews, 29.

[16] Hyder 2000, 152.

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abundantly into their marsiyahs. In an environment of congenial Shi'i patronage, they were able to take logical steps towards making the marsiyah an increasingly prominent literary form. In the Avadh of the Navabs, the expansion and sheer quantity of the poems required content, whether new "incidents," novel elaborations of old ones, or more elaborate, lengthy descriptions.

These changes, and the use of the six-line verse form perceived as especially suitable for narrative, were the ones that supposedly marked the marsiyah's "arrival" as a literary form and its disengagement to some extent from its ritual context. Yet the transformations in the marsiyah's format and length occurred over generations, rather than as the sudden "inventions" of one or two poets. Commentators had also constructed oppositions between marsiyah's artistry and devotional content back in the eighteenth century.[17] The oppositions continue to figure prominently in critical analyses of the marsiyah, although like *Lāsh Akbar kī*, most marsiyahs actually contain both religious sentiment and literary conceits.

In terms of general diction, Munis uses a simple, emotionally-charged, but formulaic vocabulary to convey the content of Sughra's message to her father, as he has in most of the first half of the marsiyah. This style, though not perhaps the "everyday, colloquial" naturalistic speech so idealized by Urdu literary critics, is some of the most easily comprehensible language one could encounter in Urdu verse. In stanza #37, Sughra's letter to Ali Akbar ushers in a sudden and radical change in diction. With the letter's elaborate formal titles and blessings, Munis

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[17] See Chapter One, p. 65.

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offers up a string of *fārsī tarākīb*, Persian constructions. These are mostly flowery verbal sequences joined by *izāfat*s, the "e"s connecting two nouns or a noun with an adjective, such as *Gauhar-e bahar-e ṣadāqat* ("pearl of the ocean of sincerity") *gul-e gulzār-e vafā* ("the rose of the garden of loyalty"):

> "At the head of the message, that invalid has written this:
> 'Brother dear, bright noon sun of kindness, gentility, and blessing,
> You are the ocean of sincerity's pearl, the garden of loyalty's rose
> Oh, you of cypress stature, bud mouth, moon brow, and sun visage
> May you breathe in this world for thirty and a hundred years!
> But how long shall this sister of yours remain in her tormented state?"

Sar-e nāmah to yeh bīmār ne mazmūñ hai likhā
Bhā'ījāñ ***mihr-e sapahar-e karm o lutf o du'ā***
Gauhar-e bahr-e ṣadāqat gul-e gulzār-e vafā
Sarv qad ghunchah dahan māh jabīñ mihr-liqā
Khalq meñ āpkā dam tā ṣad o sī sāl rahe
Ghar meñ kab tak yeh bahan muztarib al-hal rahe

Although the conventions used for virtue and beauty in this verse occur in much Indo-Persian poetry, the shift in vocabulary and diction could not be more abrupt or obvious. One epithet follows so hard upon the heels of another that the effect is rather overwhelming.. In line four alone, Akbar is described with a plethora of the classical features of the poetic beloved: cypress-statured, bud-mouthed, moon-browed *and* sun-visaged. This might show us how Akbar encapsulates all that is noble and beautiful, or even, through the sun and moon, the very cosmos. What is it, though, that all of these splendid greetings and invocations preface? The ornate first five lines, it emerges, lead up to Sughra's rather simple plaint about her situation.

The contrast established at this point between Akbar's glory and bravery

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and Sughra's own helplessness sets the tone for the remainder of the second vaqiah, and in that sense the verse is quite effective. One might find fault with a certain unevenness in Munis's marsiyah, but the poem's alternation between lofty phrasing and relatively unadorned, emotional language interestingly problematizes the dichotomy created by Urdu critics between the "natural" and "artificial" styles of individual poets. If Anis's work represents the perfect balance of heartfelt simplicity and artistry, if Dabir is too showy and the earlier marsiyah poets too pathetic, should Munis be characterized as excessively sentimental and unartistic or as overly grand? Munis's expression here offers a chance to test mainstream Urdu critics' ideas about judging the marsiyah, and their categories don't seem especially applicable.

Verse #37 may also be too ornate and too lacking in "action" to make it a good candidate for inclusion in a short marsiyah performance, but Munis's diction is profitably viewed in the light of vaqiah-nigari. Part of the dramatic appeal of a letter is its elegance and mystery. Models for actual Urdu letters remained until recently quite formal and circumscribed, especially with literacy the province of the very few. Urdu "letter-writing guides,"offering exhaustive examples of how to write to each and every class of relative and deploy long passages of Persianized or Arabicized blessings and greetings, are still available in India.[18] In the ghazal, *dāstan*, and popular literature, the entry of a messenger and/or a letter can be

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[18] See, for example Ḥāfiẓ Manẓūr al-Ḥasan, *Āsān Ḳhaṭūṭ Navīsī*(Delhi: Maktabah Gulistān-e Adab, 1979).

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depended upon for romance or suspense. Whether or not "realistic," then, Sughra's "lofty titles," might in some sense be typical of nineteenth-century conceptualizations of a proper letter. Perhaps a decline in the letter's mystique even accounts in part for the relative neglect of this vaqiah in the marsiyah recitation tradition.

Sughra's letter to Akbar (verses 37-42) is about twice as long as the one to Husain By providing the reader with fancy titles and a lengthy message in the one, while glossing over the titles and keeping the diction simple in the other, Munis retains his focus on the slain boy and his relationships, The first letter is merely a prelude to the second; it induces grief and guilt, and presages more of the same.

Except for verse #39, where Munis throws in a bit more Persian and Arabic vocabulary, the remainder of the message is a heart-wringing plea, not especially profound, but not without its own piquant charm. With verse #38, Sughra immediately reverts to the basic blessings, invocations, and exclamations that are often the hallmark of the speech of women (with the possible exception of the imam's sister Zainab) in the marsiyah. Despite the simplicity of the lexicon, Munis manages to imbue his "Sughra incident" with considerable personality and narrative interest, and the language he uses to do so flows smoothly and appealingly.

Munis, Anis, and Portrayals of Sughra

Sughra's tactics as she implores Akbar to come to Medinah and rescue her progress from praise and hopeful requests, to pleading, even threatening, and then

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to sarcasm. She is portrayed as devoted and respectful one moment, plaintive and helpless the next; in verse #41, she even adopts the long-suffering tone of a virtuous, self-dramatizing martyr:

> "I'm lying far away wretched, I'm invalid—who cares for me?
> And, well, whatever pleases you is surely right, brother dear"

Finally, by stanza #42, Sughra acknowledges the impossibility of Akbar abandoning the battleground, which concession is rendered all the more poignant for the audience by Akbar's death, and his sister's ignorance of it..

Sālihah 'Abid Husain provides similar examples of Sughra's seemingly mercurial temperament, contradictory arguments, and even her sarcastic tone, from other marsiyahs. In a poem by Anis, Sughra comments self-pityingly that none of her family bothers about the fate of an invalid. Then, when they all set out on the dread journey, she reflects rather acidly that her lonely isolation must be meant to cure her:

> Loneliness will dissipate my fever
> And yes, my aching head will be cured now, too
> As I languish, these bone-breaking pains will all disappear
> Anguish, regret, and grief will reduce my temperature
> This is indeed the better protocol, this the fitting prescription
> Supping on sorrow will bring strength to my body[19]

Anis's marsiyah also has Sughra threatening Akbar that if he doesn't pay heed to her now, he'll shortly find her dead, just as she does in verse #40 of *Lāsh Akbar*

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[19] *Khāvatīn-e Karbala Kalām-e Anīs ke Ā'ine Meñ* (New Delhi: Maktabah Jāmi'ah Limited, 1973), 101. My translation.

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kī.[20] Sālihah 'Abid Husain argues that such forlorn speeches represent Anis's distinctive talent for characterization, but her description of them applies nearly as well to Munis's marsiyah:

> . . . her conversational style, her irritability, and her manner of complaining all prove that she is passing through that stage of life where childhood and adolescence meet. The complete innocence of childhood has departed, but the maturity of young adulthood is not yet attained. Amidst the deep love for family, emotional turmoil, extremes of sentiment, and youthful egotism can also clearly be seen, as well as the frailty and loss of control born of long illness. Her dissatisfaction with life and tendency towards self-pity emerge, and the poet hasn't neglected the delicacy of her lament, either. [21]

The basic similarity of the two portrayals, including the simple, unspecialized language, is remarkable. Anis, for example, shows Sughra moping in much the same way Munis does, although in Anis's marsiyah, she exhibits her sulkiness at being ignored by Akbar in person, before he sets out on his journey, rather than in a letter:

> May all blessings be yours, for you love your sister well, Akbar
> Not even inquiring whether she has died or still lives
> While I suffer within the house, he's busied himself outside since dawn
> What else should he do, when my own fate has turned against me?
> No one even thinks to ask, "Where is that invalid?"
> My brothers aren't mindful, and neither do my sisters give it any thought[22]

Though no one has suggested so, it is just possible that Munis based his sketch of the girl on a template established by Anis. Even if that were the case, Sālihah 'Abid Husain's analysis still reveals how little scrutiny is typically applied to the common

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[20] 100.

[21] 95. My translation.

[22] 101.

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assumption of Anis's uniqueness in every aspect of marsiyah-nigari.

Conventionality and Creativity in Vaqiah-Nigari

The brother-sister bond between Sughra and Ali Akbar forms a less prominent theme than the intimate tie between Husain's little daughter Sakīnah and her uncle Abbas, and comparatively little has been written about it. Sālihah 'Abid Husain does, however, make a few general observations in the context of Mir Anis's descriptions of Sughra:

> Sughra and Ali Akbar are a sister and brother right next to one another in age. The poet knows that such brothers and sisters share a very informal loving relationship, in which arguments, sparring, complaints, affection, sulking, and coaxing all occur continuously. His imagination envisions the manifestation of just this sort of love in these two siblings.[23]

While one might hesitate to concede that the relationship between Sughra and Akbar in the marsiyah faithfully reflects a whole sociological institution, one can see that anyone with a family of his own might well recognize in broad strokes the alternating affection and irritation the girl displays towards her kin. Husain, with her close reading of Anis, does successfully draw out his rather charming images of Sughra pouting and pleading, suggesting that it is because of her special fondness for Akbar that Sughra is wounded most deeply when she feels neglected by him: " . . . she is spurned by that person in whom she takes the most pride, of whom she considers it her right to make maximal demands, the one of all the family whom she believes loves her the best."[24]

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[23] S.A. Husain 1973, p. 101. Translation mine.

[24] S.A. Husain 1973, p. 101. Translation mine.

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Unfortunately, Husain follows the general critical tendency to root characterizations such as Sughra's in Anis's personal insistence on portraying persons of every age and gender, and family relationships molded by "Indian culture and customs," accurately and realistically.[25] The flaws in this approach begin to emerge when we scan other marsiyahs and find that Sughra's character, however affectionately, and even humorously, drawn, is more conventional than "original."

Most majlis-goers today concern themselves less with "original" poetic themes and poet's individual signature styles than Husain does. Sughra may not have dozens of rites and observances consecrated to her, as the hero Akbar does, but her story is known and loved, and appears in multiple parts, in prose and poetry, just as his does. However exemplary Anis's portraits and incidents, to see his as the only poetically interesting depiction of Sughra would be to overlook both the rich intertextuality of majlis poetry and the very conventional outlines taken on by even the Karbala "incidents" that lack any attested historical basis.[26] What might appear "original" if we view only one poet's marsiyah on a topic, looks more like a stock incident when we read more broadly. Poets' artistry emerges often in the details of vaqiah-nigari, and less frequently in the invention or

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[25] 95

[26] The notion of intertextuality figures prominently in Akbar Hyder's discussion of the Karbala paradigm. Hyder, however focuses more on motifs and *mazmūn*s that run the gamut from the majlis to qawwali poetry to modern poetry outside of the majlis than on interplay between majlis genres. Hyder 2000.

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introduction of a "new" incident or character.

Lāsh Akbar kī's penultimate verse, for example, compares interestingly with the final stanza of Mirza Dilgīr's, "As Sughra waited for Her Father." Dilgīr's poem, as a whole, incorporates more of Sughra's own perspective into the tale of the young girl and her messenger than does Munis's. At the vaqiah's conclusion, both poets picture Husain dispatching Sughra's messenger back to Medinah with a final message for her:

Example #1 (Munis, verse #52)

The king said, weeping, "Relate these matters to her with care:
Say 'Banish now, dear, from your heart all thought of Ali Akbar'
And if she inquires of me, tell her the shock was thorough and devastating
Say, "Asadullah's darling died along with his son
And the helpless 'Ābid departed his abode carrying two corpses
The breath of father and son departed their bodies together"

Example #2 (Dilgīr, verse #22)

"This is my answer to the letter; this is my message:
Tell my daughter, oh hapless one,
That her father the Imam has been martyred in prostration for prayer
And even at the last, he never had a draught of water
Be still now, and don't shed more tears; hold firm!
Hold firm, and distribute water, in the name of your father"[27]

In closing his poem, Munis reinforces leadership through the lineage of the imams and male descendants of the Prophet, while Dilgīr invokes a cherished Muharram tradition, the distribution of water or sherbets at *sabīl*s, watersheds, in the names of the Karbala martyrs. The poet seems to position Sughra as the founder of this tradition, much as Zainab is said to have founded the majlis itself.

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[27] *Hilāl-e Muharram* I vol. 1, 275-290.

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As he does so, he deploys yet another example of the motif of exchange or transformation of water described earlier; rather than the common invocation to shed tears to acknowledge the imam's thirst, though, Sughra is instructed to make a broader ritual gesture, one that still carries many personal associations for pious modern Shiahs.[28]

This is just one verse from two poets' depictions of the same event, but the differences and similarities seen here represent a trend. Many of the vaqiahs presented most deftly and animatedly by Anis, Dabir, and Munis are stock incidents found in dozens of marsiyahs by various poets. Excerpting substantial passages from different marsiyahs for comparison would consume considerable space, but in Appendix G the reader can find at least a brief example of two poets' versions of the same incident. The two renditions of Husain begging for water for Ali Asghar parallel each other strikingly closely, with speeches or actions positioned almost in the same place over a similar number of verses.

While strongly similar locutions in two or more marsiyahs are especially noticeable because of the verse structure and the space allotted to vaqiah-nigari,

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[28] In present-day Lucknow, for example, the erection of *sabīl* stalls dramatically changes the face of the old city, creating a characteristic seasonal atmosphere familiar to every resident. In1998, when I returned to Lucknow around the fourth of Muharram after attending majlises in Calcutta, the huge black-curtained stalls on Turia (Victoria) Street obscured the entrances to my neighborhood's winding lanes so thoroughly that I had difficulty finding my own house. The clusters of people around the water/*sharbat* stalls, the banners inscribed with Karbala slogans or poetry, and the makeshift shops that blared cassettes of majlis poetry lent the environs an air of austere solemnity, but also a sense of bustle and excitement.

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tropes expressed more simply appear throughout the various genres of majlis poetry. An allusion to a son's death as treachery in *Lāsh Akbar kī*, for example, mirrors Husain's plaint in the *nauhah* poem from Chapter Four.[29] The word for betrayal or treachery is *daġhā*. The first couplet of verse #45 reads:

> "The heavens have showered disaster on your mother, oh daughter
> Akbar has betrayed me in the prime of his youth
>
> *Māñ pah āfat kā falak ṭūṭ parā a'e dukhtar*
> *Naujavāñ ho keh* ***daġhā de ga'e*** *mujko Akbar*

In the nauhah verse, Husain says:

> "Is this treachery of yours in my old age my rightful harvest
> After your father raised you with care for eighteen years?"
>
> *Aṭhārah baras bap ne nazoñ se jo pālā*
> *Kyā uskā yahī phal thā kih pīrī meñ* ***daġhā do***

Although Bano does not use the same words in Zahidah Baji's poem from Chapter Two, she expresses a like sentiment to Akbar:

> "Didn't you think a bit of your mother's sufferings,
> That you didn't let her know when you took the dagger in the chest?
> And where have you gone, leaving her in this helpless state?"

The dramatic accusation directed at the deceased appears almost predictably in the midst of the bereaved parents' laments. This implication of blame functions largely to express wishes that the inexorable course of events could have been altered—"if only you hadn't insisted on fighting . . . attacked so many enemies at the same time . . . gone to battle in a weakened condition . . ."—and is clearly an established part

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[29] This poem was woven into the end of the prose version of Akbar's tragedy related in the handbook of women's majlis sermons.

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of the mourning pattern. Yet such sentiments intriguingly complexify the deathbed scene, especially since Akbar's parents' pride in his valiant death already vie with their regret and sorrow for expression.

Thematic Connections and Symmetry

The last several examples from Munis's marsiyah, which directed our attention to the life of a vaqiah beyond an individual poem or genre, were taken from the end of the poem. Let us now revisit the overall structure of *Lāsh Akbar kī*.. Earlier, we examined verse twenty-four as one that incorporates both mourning and new activity.[30] This transitional stanza is only one of the effective links between the vaqiahs. Throughout his marsiyah, Munis thematically exploits the devotion, loyalty, and love that unite the entire Prophet's family (and their followers, the Shiahs), by emphasizing special bonds between pairs of relatives—father and son, mother and son, brother and sister. In the case of Husain's relatives, these are of course not just any family bonds, but those of the revered *ahl-e bait*. We will explore the significance of kinship ties in more depth further on, but for the moment let us consider just one example of how they are invoked to unify the poem.

Husain's son Ali Akbar is so much the central martyr-hero of this poem that despite Akbar's death quite early in the marsiyah, in comparison with it, Husain's own death on the battlefield amounts to just one anticlimactic line in the final verse. The blow of Akbar's death, in Munis's rendering, as in much popular

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[30] See page 199 above.

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understanding of the Karbala cycle, is truly Husain's deathblow. Akbar's loss signals the demise of Husain's remaining attachment to mortal life, underlining the prevalent notion of Shimr's swordstroke as a ritual *zibbah* (sacrifice) to which Husain willingly submitted.

We have already seen that Ali Akbar looms large in the popular majlis tradition. In many marsiyah anthologies designed for majlis use, poems on Ali Akbar outnumber other topics, excepting perhaps the death of Husain himself; the collection *Hilāl-e Muḥarram* (volume 1), for example, contains sixteen marsiyahs about Akbar, as compared to five or six on most other topics or heroes. One might note that the slaying of Hazrat Ali Asghar, Husain's baby son, also receives extensive attention from marsiyah poets and in popular ritual. The pity evoked by the death of six-month old Asghar centers on innocent suffering, however, while Akbar's death, however heart-breaking it is, also arouses a sense of the importance of family status, succession, and heroism, along with paternal attachment. When Munis invoke Akbar's resemblance to the Prophet in verse #5, for example, he reinforces the lofty lineage that binds father, mother, and son. The two men's similar appearance deepens the horror of Akbar's slaying: how could anyone claiming to be Muslim, even an enemy, attack someone who resembled the holy Prophet so closely?

The poem as a whole is also orchestrated through structure and symmetry, especially Husain's movement from tent to battlefield and back again. As was just pointed out, in verse #5 at the beginning of the poem Husain exclaims, when

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entering the tent, "This is the very image of the Prophet, come drowned in blood!" At the poem's finale, when Sughra's messenger intercepts Husain leaving the tent, the imam identifies Akbar to him by declaring, "This is the very image of the Prophet, reared in my lap/Today he's departed my house for the martyrs' catacomb" (verse #47). The mirroring effect both reinforces the importance of lineage and succession in the Shi'i worldview and binds the poem together.

Mourning in the Marsiyah, Mourning Through the Marsiyah

The Women of the Prophet's House

One result of Husain's traversing the boundaries between the battlefield and the sheltered tent of the holy family—and more specifically, of the women—is a delineation of the sphere of women and the importance of women's mourning. Indeed, in the very first verse, Munis introduces succinctly not only the radiant qualities of Akbar the hero, but all three of the primary incident's main characters, suggesting in particular how prominently Bano's grief figures in Akbar's death narrative:

> He cried out "Come take the corpse of your son, Bano!
> Akbar's heart has been pierced by the dagger, Bano!"

Verses that depict the ladies of Husain's family rushing out of the tent, chorusing their laments each in turn, and executing formulaic gestures of grief periodically punctuate Munis's marsiyah, with some lines almost indistinguishable from one another (see verses 3, 11, 35, 43, and 46). Although many descriptions of *bain* are utterly conventional and repetitious, they often form launching points

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for the more detailed, nuanced and lengthy laments of one character, such as Bano or Sughra. The belief that Hazrat Zainab herself actually instituted mourning assemblies for Husain, and the expectation that female majlis mourners' will themselves participate in the text by weeping and moaning as they hear these verses, intensify the impact of this caricatured lament. Given the purposes and associations of women's *bain*, it is not hard to see why it is a standard segment of the marsiyah.

The Complex Drama of Death

A motif of reluctance, weakness, and indeed almost shame, on Husain's part as he presents his women with martyred sons appears repeatedly in Karbala narratives and popular piety: in Maulvī Mirzā Ġhulām 'abbās 'alī's prose account of Akbar's death, Husain calls Zainab to help him carry Akbar's body into the tent when he cannot find the strength.[31] A number of poems narrate how, when the six-month-old Asghar is slaughtered, Husain approaches and retreats from the tent time and again because he cannot bear to reveal Asghar's tiny, arrow-pierced body to the women. This despite glory of his sons' martyrdoms and the willingness with which he contracts with God to sacrifice them.[32]

While we can easily imagine that the literary critic Muhammad Sadiq would

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[31] 235.

[32]See Ali Asani, "Marthiya: Imam Husayn's Conversation with God," in John Renard, ed., *Windows on the House of Islam*, 95-98. Also recall the conclusion of Shabih-us-Zahra's *maṣā'ib* in Chapter Three, when God explicitly warns Husain of all that his family will suffer and asks him to accede willingly to it.

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find such behavior morally inconsistent and unbecoming to a warrior, Ayoub shows that such tensions in the Karbala narrative have meaning and purpose. In the Shi'i view, the imam's supernatural foreknowledge and extraordinary strength readily co-exist with his vulnerability: "Husayn approached his impending martyrdom with courage and deep sorrow, a fear of death and love for life, and a truly heroic readiness for death if necessary."[33] Some Shiahs say that on the day of 'ashura, they roll up their sleeves several times to represent Husain's anguished "turning back," his horror at acknowledging Asghar's death and his desire to hide it.

Many other parts of *Lash Akbar Ki* allude to emotional complexity, vulnerability, and inner meanings. Munis positions the sensitive, "the hidden," and secrecy—qualities with special Shi'i resonance, as Shabih's sermon in chapters Two and Three has already demonstrated—as necessary, even virtuous counterparts of bravery, exposure, and flamboyant sacrifice. The rather simple verse #17 acquires a little extra intensity from the mention of the *sehrā*, the strings of flowers that obscure the Indian bridegroom's face, in the last couplet:

> For a wedding gift I'll have a shroud, my face in the dust
> No bride shall there be, nor children, nor nuptial festoons"
>
> *Bar meñ ho'egā kafan khak pah chahrā hogā*
> *Nah dūlhan hogī nah aulād nah sehrā hogā*

Not only is the devotional motif of a "wedding with death" invoked, but the obscuring floral chains eerily echo both the dust that hides Akbar's face in line five,

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[33] 121.

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and his earlier hiding of his imminent death from his mother. In other instances, "hiding," in the Karbala narrative may be equated with weakness, cowardice, or moral blindness, as when the Kufans who summoned Husain to lead them hid their loyalties and failed to come to his aid at Karbala. Here, though, Akbar's short-lived subterfuge is indicative of values crucial in the majlis: undying devotion to family, and willingness to suffer.

Husain's tearful grief over Akbar, too, is multi-layered; it both exposes his own soft-heartedness and sorrow, and signals his final resolution to do battle and die. It is Husain who relays the news of Akbar's imminent death to his female relatives, allowing the women to initiate the requisite laments for the fallen hero. Yet even after he witnesses his son's death, he addresses Akbar—in fevered denial that sometimes differs little from that of the women—as though he is still alive.

Much of the drama of death in *Lāsh Akbar kī* relies pointedly on such heartfelt addresses to the departed. Mourners who alternate frenziedly between bemoaning the death of the loved one and cajoling or pleading with him also feature prominently in shorter poems, especially nauhahs or "lori-type" poems (lullabies for the infant Asghar) lamenting the martyrdoms of Husain's sons. In poems addressed to Ali Asghar, Bano is often found exhorting the infant to "Come, come to my lap, my Asghar:"

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Bano maqtal meñ kehtī yeh ā'ī	Bano came to the slaying-ground saying
A merī godī ā mere Asghar	Come sit in my lap, my Asghar
Terī surat ke sadqe yeh dā'ī	I'd sacrifice myself for the sight of your face
A merī godī ā mere Asghar	Come sit in my lap, my Asghar
. . .	
Jhūlā ḳhalī hai kis ko jhulā'o	The cradle's empty, whom shall I rock?
Lorī de ke maiñ kis ko sulā'o	Whom shall I send to sleep with lullabies?[34]

Compare this poem with a well-known early marsiyah of Mirza Dabir,:

> With arms outstretched, sometimes she says, "Come, my dear one
> My soul is restive, come, O 'Ali Asghar, come
> My heart writhes in agony, come to my embrace
> For the sake of Fatima, come! For the sake of Haidar, come!
> You lost your life for a drop of water
> Come embrace me, my son"[35]

Cries to the departed to awaken from their deep slumbers and so forth provide considerable scope for dramatic irony, as mourners almost convince themselves and their listeners that the dead still live. One might detect a further layer of dramatic irony peculiar to Shi'i metaphysical understandings here, in that, although the heroes *are* lost to their loved ones for the time being, as martyrs they

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[34] See Bard, "Form, Function and Feeling in 'Women's Songs' as Poetic Genres of the Shi'i Mourning Assembly," paper delivered at the annual meetings, Society for Ethnomusicology, Toronto, 2000

[35] See Akbar Ḥaidarī Kashmīrī, *Avadh meñ Urdu marsiye kā irtiqā*, (Lucknow : Nusrat Publishers, 1981), 546. I have used here Akbar Hyder's translation, 140.

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still do live on, if on another plane.[36] Indeed, it is the special not-quite-mortal status of martyrs that enables them to intercede on behalf of the faithful, one of the most fundamental motives for Shi'i mourning rites in all their textual, visual, and performative elaboration.

In the marsiyah under consideration here, Husain's intermittently exhorts Akbar, even as he laments the boy's death, to arise and draft a reply to Sughra's letter.[37] Munis also makes immense use of dramatic irony in Sughra's very plea to her brother, and in Akbar's obscuring his wounds to make elaborate pretense that he is just suffering from a bit of sunstroke, and not dying of a vicious dagger attack. Few reciters, I should note, incorporate more than one verse detailing this play-acting of Akbar's in their performances of the poem; perhaps his protestations of well-being, which Bano first dismisses for what they are, then believes, would prove too convoluted given the limited time commonly allotted to marsiyah recitations in today's majlises.

"Now is the time for tears . . ."

Turning now to these modern mourning assemblies themselves, we find that in current ritual, as in *Lāsh Akbar kī,* the intensity of lament exhibited is ideally in direct proportion to a mourner's devotion to and love for the fallen martyr. In the poem, Husain is so stricken by Akbar's loss that his grief is no less than a

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[36] For the special status of martyrs and the intercessory powers of martyrs, the imams, and the fourteen *mas'ūmīn*, see Pinault 1992, 13, 62, 84, 132, 157-180; Momen, 116, 192; Ayoub 205-5; Amir-Moezzi, 195; and Yann Richard,11-12.

[37]See verses 34 and 43

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deathblow:

> And if she inquires of me, tell her the shock was thorough and devastating
> Say, "Asadullah's darling died along with his son" (verse 52)

Husain resigned himself to this incomprehensible agony and more for the sake of Islam, and some of his followers today, in the name of his sacrifice, willingly undergo privations, scourging, or walking on coals.

Shiahs may attest their love, loyalty, respect, and sorrow through means either subtle or dramatic, which are often implicitly assessed, and even openly critiqued, by other members of the Shi'i community. My friend Gulzār Nigār told me of being upbraided by Hyderabad's charismatic Shi'i leader Laṭīf-un-nissā for exhibiting a less-than-seemly degree of grief during Muharram. Gulzār's error was to don a black sari with a narrow blue border for a majlis. The attire, deemed acceptable for a new bride in her family and home region, earned her an unexpected public scolding. Majlis garb that was anything except entirely black reportedly appalled Laṭīf-un-nissā, who demanded of Gulzār (and of several other women who told me remarkably similar stories), "How can you wear that? Don't you love the Imam?!"[38]

In South Asian Muharram ritual, Shiahs also express their sense of loss and bereavement through almost hysterical weeping or self-flagellation that draw blood, even if substantial disagreement exists within the community concerning the

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[38] Gulzār Nigār Khān, personal communication, June 12, 1998.

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most appropriate, religiously correct modes of matam.[39] In his autobiographical novel *Ādhā Gāṃv*, Rāhī Mas'ūm Razā has some light fun at the expense of a majlis in which men compete to exhibit the ultimate proof of their love for the Prophet's grandson.

> . . . then Sajjād-chā ascended to the pulpit and began an Anis marsiyah, "Exalted Karbala Draws Nigh To the Imam." People wept a great deal at this marsiyah, and then the matam started. Suddenly Maulvi Qurban Ali Sahab was afflicted with a sort of fit; he began to beat himself like a madman. Folks on all sides tried to restrain him, telling him that they had to start a nauhah, but he didn't respond. He moved faster and faster, and everyone began performing matam and crying wildly. My brother, already fading, began to hit himself with both hands, while I sat down in exhaustion. Then, one by one, all the boys got worn out. The voices of those crying swelled louder. Maulvi Qurban Ali's hands flew even more speedily:
>
> "Husain, Husain"
>
> "Maulā Husain"
>
> "Āqā Husain"
>
> "Husain, Husain,"
>
> And then Maulvi Sahab stumbled and fell. I said to myself, "Just wait and see, old man! Once you come to *our* majlis . . . "
> But Maulvi Qurban Ali was not just unconscious, he had actually died.
> I conceded defeat. Maulvi Qurban Ali had broken my nerve by dying like that. I wasn't prepared to die, since no one lives on after death.[40]

This is only one of many situations in which the ritual mindset of majlis-

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[39] The idea of negotiating standards for "ritual criticism" has already been introduced in Chapters One and Three, and will be developed further in Chapter Eight.

[40] Rahī Mās'ūm Razā, *Ādhā Gāṃv* (Delhi: Akshar Prakashan Private Ltd.: 1966), 64. My translation from the Hindi.

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goers and even the Karbala story, usually discussed so somberly by scholars of religion, lend themselves to irony, parody, and outright joking on the part of Shiahs themselves. Still, Razā's exaggeration and mockery (including mockery of the idea of a martyr's living beyond mortal death!) notwithstanding, an understood, intimate identification between mythic and present-day mourners strongly influences the architecture of most marsiyahs, including Munis's poem. Images of women's *bain* link the two halves of *Lāsh Akbar ki*, and also connect the idealized women of Karbala with their sisters through the ages who perpetuate Zainab's tradition of mourning. Earlier we saw how Abdul Halim Sharar, with his description of an elegant grieving female procession, presented himself as a witness to a melding of Karbala figures and modern participants in Muharram.[41]

Munis portrays Akbar's relatives weeping over him, only to become even more frantic when a relic or a special relationship dramatically conjures his memory, just as happens today during a majlis when a coffin replica (*tābūt*) or an especially poignant verbal icon appears:

> Whereas the holy family already stood weeping about the corpse
> The letter's arrival intensified the fervor of mourning (verse 35)

Although not performed as such, Munis's marsiyah functions convincingly as a whole partly because Sughra's letter forms a secondary focal point in a mourning gathering that parallels the very majlis within which Shiahs recite marsiyah and remember Ali Akbar's martyrdom. The poem, encapsulating as it

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[41] See Chapter One and Sharar, 255.

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does both martyrdom and ritual mourning of martyrdom, illustrates David Pinault's exegesis of Shii mourning as expressed evidence of love for the ahl-e bait:

> From the Shiite perspective, I think it is fair to say, neglecting the memory of Karbala in any way devalues the sacrifice made by Husain's family and the Prophet's household . . . Shiite self-definition, at least as I experienced it in Hyderabad, could perhaps be summarized as follows: Shiites are those Muslims who excel beyond all others in their love for the family of the Prophet.[42]

Pinault and Schubel have both concluded that majlis poetry tends to conjure a sacred or ritual time, in which seventh-century Karbala and today's South Asian majlises are conflated.[43] Shabih-e Zahra, the young preacher from Lahore, carefully invoked this sacred time, shifting tense and narrative style at a critical juncture during the masaib for a specific day of Muharram.

However profound the experience of "entering Karbala" through the majlis, my fieldwork indicated that this ritual mindset was more often an expected, unremarkable part of the proceedings for most majlis-goers, something they actively reflected on only rarely, than the dramatic, thoughtful journey one might imagine from reading the studies of Pinault and Schubel. This in no way detracts from the importance of the majlis as a shared, participatory, spiritual encounter; the marsiyah poet, in fact, solicits the active engagement of majlis-goers not only in the *bain* at the end of the marsiyah, but throughout the poem. For example, the images of tears that counterbalance, or even replace, drinking water, sweat in the

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[42] Pinault 1992, 120.

[43] Pinault 1992,178, 42, 81.

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heat of the desert, blood, or mothers' milk, as discussed above, incorporate the listener in very crucial ways. It is the listener who weeps over Husain, contributing her tears, mourning him as he was not mourned by the larger Muslim community immediately after his death.:

Munis brings this complex of images to the fore one final time in his closing verse:

> Now is the time for tears, Munis, no power of speech remains
> Here you have my image of the oppressed Akbar's murder
> Here you have my description that will turn even a stone to water

To slake Husain's thirst, Munis expends his own words and tears. The poet not only effects a transfer of precious water through weeping, but posits tears as a means of transformation: they convey him (and ideally his listeners) into a world of grief beyond words. Munis's description, enough to reduce a (heart of) stone to water, is itself, he boasts, a crucial aid to tearful transformation. And finally, Munis personally, explicitly participates, side by side with his listeners and the women of Karbala, in salvific weeping, a bond that unites all of Husain's mourners.

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Chapter Six Marsiyah as a Performance Event;
Text and Tune, Fixity and Fluidity in "*Lāsh Akbar kī*..."

Introduction

Emotive, euphonious, not terribly erudite, Munis's most famous marsiyah tends to meet the majlis's requirements for eliciting tears. Yet in contrast to what mainstream literary criticism might lead us to believe, *Lāsh Akbar kī* varies considerably in its textual forms, and interweaves dialogue, description, complex, contrasting sentiments, and action. The poem's pathos is only one aspect of its allure, and it is not simply the text as authored by Munis that achieves this effect. Performed versions of *Lāsh Akbar kī* incorporate far fewer scenes of "action"and dialogue than does the full poem as it appears in translation in Chapter Four, yet retain considerable range and nuance when portraying Akbar's beauty, valor, and vulnerability. A combination of text, tarz (*ṭarz*, tune), performer, and specific performance context continually modulates affect and proffers meaning. This chapter will discuss the interaction of these factors, incorporating examples from five recitations of *Lāsh Akbar kī* and from several other sources.

Performance Examples

Before discussing patterns of variation and the text-music relationship, I will present some basic reference points for performances of *Lāsh Akbar Kī* taped between 1996 and 1998. Taking a cue from Regula Qureshi, I stress the importance of a specific range of textual-musical examples to ground a contextual study with broad implications.[1] I allude to these examples throughout the rest of the chapter, but in the interests of

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[1] 1990, 465

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brevity, merely extrapolate from a detailed analysis which involves close readings of text, analyses of different tunes, and substantial background information about the performers. I provide for the reader something more of a micro-level comparison (emphatically, as far as the musical component goes, from a non-specialist's point of view) of the five performances in Appendix D.

The examples below set *Lāsh Akbar Kī*'s text to melodies, and progress from shorter to longer versions (verse numbers are based on the full version of the text in Chapter Four). Two Lahore performances bracket the set's geographical range, and two performances by men are followed by three women's recitations. All of the examples are recited by groups of three to six individuals, with, except in the case of the first example, one obvious leader or exceptionally loud, strong voice.

Version #1. Men's majlis, 9 Muharram, 1418 (May 17, 1997), Zafar Colony, Lahore
(Verses 1, 2)

This large majlis was held on the grounds surrounding Qasr-e Zainab, the same modest imambarah in which the women's majlis detailed in Chapters Two and Three had taken place earlier in the month of Muharram. The sound system arranged for the reciters and preacher alternately buzzed and squawked at extraordinary volume, making the outdoor setting loud as well as hot and crowded. Though all attendees knew Urdu, many, including the group of amateur male marsiyah reciters, spoke Panjabi as a mother tongue. At least a dozen individuals—including a ten-year-old boy reciting marsiyah in declamatory, **taḥt-ul-lafẓ*, style—and groups performed poetry prior to the majlis

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sermon.[2]

Version #2 Sibt-e Ja'far, private majlis, 25 Muharram, 1418 (June 2, 1997), Seaview, Karachi (Verses 1,2,3,4,6)

Although many women attended this majlis, held in a comfortable private flat, women were seated in a separate room, screened off from male reciters and listeners. The hosts and participants, at least sixty in number, were almost all affluent, Urdu-speaking *muhājir*s educated in English-medium schools.[3] In this performance, Sibt-e Jafar's melodic rendition of *Lāsh Akbar Kī* preceded a declamatory, *taḥt-ul-lafẓ* recitation of a "modern" marsiyah. Sibt-e Jafar, a singer and renowned sozkhvan, and his vocal accompanists recited much of this poem in unison, although they more commonly use a traditional Lucknow-style configuration in which the two **bāzū*s provide a vocal drone, chiming in with words only occasionally.[4]

Version #3 Sikandar Jahāñ, elicited performance, December 26, 1996, Ghazi Mandi, Lucknow (Verse 1,2,4,6)

Sikandar Jahāñ, an aged and penurious professional reciter from the old city of Lucknow, provided this version of *Lāsh Akbar kī* when I requested that she perform any

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[2] *Taḥt-ul-lafẓ* relies on "speech" rather than melodic presentation, but the speech is very "musical" with emphatic meter and intense rising and falling vocal modulation.

[3] *Muhājir* ("migrant, refugee, exile") in this context refers to those whose families left India for Pakistan around the time of Partition in 1947. *Muhājir*s, especially in Karachi, are largely an Urdu-speaking community.

[4] *Bāzū*s, who flank the main performer, provide a subtle vocal drone which requires considerable expertise. The configuration of a solo marsiyah-khvan or soz-khvan and *bazū*s tends to be associated with high-quality or artistic renditions of melodic marsiyah, especially in Urdu-speaking men's majlises. This performance style is uncommon in Pakistani Panjab, and I occasionally heard Panjabi Shiahs make fun of it, caricaturing it as an oddity favored by Karachi-dwellers or old-fashioned *muhājir*s from India.

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popular marsiyah of her choosing. Sikandar and her family speak standard Urdu interspersed with words and phrases in colloquial *Avadhī* dialect. Though she is a professional, Sikandar's status could not differ more from that of an educated reciter such as Sibt-e Ja'far, who has authored books and receives respectful invitations to perform in small, elite majlises. The local Shi'i patron families who still feel duty-bound to call traditional performers like Sikandar are very mindful of the low *mirāsīn* status of most of these reciters. Sikandar's presence is ubiquitous in the Chauk area's local majlises, for each of which she assembles a slightly different crew of female relatives as vocal accompanists.

Version #4 Zarīnah Sozkhvān, private women's majlis, Muharram 3, 1419 (May 6, 1998) Victoria St., Lucknow. (Verse 1,3,2,13,12,4)

This small, relatively restrained women's majlis featured both professional and amateur reciters. Zarina, a *burqa'*-clad professional reciter, performed marsiyah and salam, while amateur reciters initiated a few salams, the nauhahs following the sermon, and the *ziyārat*.[5] The observance was held in the courtyard of a private home in old Lucknow, and—whereas some area majlises cater specifically to poorer, or middle-class, or affluent women—included women of a range of social classes and educational backgrounds. All participants spoke Urdu and attended by invitation. Like Sikandar, Zarina is an older professional who performs in the wailing, old-fashioned Lucknow recitation style, though Zarina's quiet, dignified demeanor appears to endear her more to patron families than does Sikandar's rather loud, disheveled self-presentation.

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[5] The verbal "visitation" to the martyrs through formulaic invocations, benedictions, and praises. See Chapter Three.

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Version #5, Women's Majlis, Muharram 6, 1418 (14 May, 1997) Ahmed House Imambargah, Cavalry Ground, Lahore; (Verses 1,2,3,4,8,10,15,17,18,19,23, and a final verse not included in the long version of the text.)

This rendition of Munis's marsiyah, by a group of six amateur reciters in a large imambarah in one of Lahore's most fashionable localities, is certainly the rawest and most passionate of the performances. The majlis occurred during a period of extreme Sunni-Shi'i violence in Lahore, so security was intense; I underwent two interviews in advance to secure permission to attend the gathering.[6] This was a large, public assembly attended by both Urdu and Panjabi speakers, but the language used by all present was Urdu, and the majority of attendees were well-educated and of at least middle economic class.

Printed Sources for Majlis Recitation

Some of the reciters in these examples, and a majority of those in urban India and Pakistan, use inexpensively-printed marsiyah anthologies, including *Shamshīr-e Mātam* ("The Sword of Mourning," subtitled *Hilāl-e Muharram*, "The Crescent Moon of Muharram"), *Soz-e Karbalā* ("The Burning Pain of Karbala," in which *soz* also alludes to the poetic genre), and *Tanvīr-e Ġham* ("The Illumination of Grief"). *Kāmyāb Bastah*, a collection already mentioned in Chapter Four, is also quite readily available from small shops in Shī'ī neighborhoods. Anthologies, intended specifically for majlis recitation,

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[6] These interviews were unusual prerequisites for participating in a women's majlis, although several times I needed to obtain special clearances to join large assemblies addressed by famous male preachers. All Ahmad House congregants were also searched by female police before entering the imambarah, and, despite my previous clearances, I underwent an additional interview just before the majlis started because I was carrying a tape recorder into the observance. In light of the murders of twelve Shi'i women at an observance in Pakistani Panjab in late April of 2002, these precautions were hardly excessive.

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typically include a fairly predictable range of works by ten or twelve nineteenth-century and contemporary marsiyah poets. In addition to (or instead of) these anthologies, some families use published collections of a single favorite marsiyah poet or handwritten manuscripts handed down from generation to generation.

Families who strongly favor one of the great classical poets may simply use a collection devoted solely to his work. In the case of Anis, for example, *Bazm-e Anīs* , *Anīs ke marsïye*; and *Marāsī-e Anīs* are among the texts considered reliable.[7] *Majmū'ah-e Marsïyah-e Mīr Mūnis*, in three volumes, would serve the same purpose for Munis's marsiyahs, but it is rarely found in the hands of reciters today, probably because just a few of Munis's marsiyahs enjoy substantial fame. These books contain longer marsiyah versions than do the mixed anthologies, are usually older, and are compiled with relative editorial care. Because of the length of the texts, reciters now cull selectively from them, and may use them for either "spoken," taht-ul-lafz, recitations, or for melodic renderings. The popular anthologies, in contrast, serve the needs of shorter melodic renderings almost exclusively.

Choosy reciters avoid publications such as Ram Narain Lal Beni Mado's *Intikhāb: Mirāsī-e Dabīr*, riddled with gross scribal and editorial errors, words that are obviously simply incorrect, and metrical mistakes.[8] On the whole, though, even in somewhat

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[7] Naiyar Ma'sūd, ed. *Bazm-e Anis* (Lahore: Packager, Ltd., 1990); Sālihah 'Ābid Husain, ed., *Anīs ke marsïye* (Delhi: Taraqqī Urdū Bureau, 1990); Maulana Sayyid 'Alī Haidar Rażā Ṭabāṭabā'ī ed., *Marasi-e Anis* (Badāyūñ: Niẓāmī Press, 1930).

[8] Dabir, Mirza Salamat Ali, *Intikhāb: Mirāsī-e Dabīr, With Introduction and Notes* (Allahabad: Ram Narain Beni Lal Madho,1982).

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carelessly compiled anthologies, minor lexical variations tend to conform to Urdu's standard prosodic requirements.

Personal compilations of poems and handwritten marsiyah manuscripts are additional resources for majlis recitation. Both professional and amateur reciters assemble handwritten notebooks as supplements or alternatives to published books. Such favorite collections, called *bayāẓes* in old-fashioned parlance, are usually referred to as "diaries," or "copies" today and tend to be weighted towards the shorter poetic forms rather than the marsiyah. Chock full of poems collected from published works, cassettes, majlises, and other reciters, majlis diaries are often thriftily penned in old appointment books and updated constantly.[9] Professional reciters or literary families may also hoard battered manuscripts of favorite marsiyahs and other classic poems that withstand the vagaries of yearly fashion. Some of these, handed down from generation to generation, date to the nineteenth century.[10]

Printed Texts and Orality

I pointed out in Chapter One that a combination of oral and written transmission

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[9] See for example the "diary" pages that precede this chapter.

[10] I consulted one such family text (about forty or fifty years old) from Hyderabad when comparing versions of Munis's marsiyah. The text was shown to and copied for me by Riyaz Fatimah, the daughter of a female marsiyah-writer, author of a dissertation on Deccani marsiyah, and a dedicated majlis hostess herself. Her version, although obviously intended for use in majlis recitation, differs dramatically from the published shorter versions of *Lāsh Akbar kī*. Of its 32 verses, 26 verses are from the second half of the poem, with only the first few verses of the poem making an appearance before the tale of Sughra and her messenger is introduced. As I pointed out in Chapter Five (pp.17;39), this episode is virtually always excised completely today in majlis performance, but here we may have an indication that this was not necessarily the case two generations ago.

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complexifies the forms of both marsiyah texts and related commentarial traditions (especially anecdotes about poets and their works). While some reciters, such as Sikandar Jahāñ of Lucknow, never have a printed text of any sort before them in a majlis, increasing numbers of those with a middling education, like Zahidah Baji, invariably do.[11] Other reciters from the professional performing classes wield their hoary, crumbling manuscripts more as symbols of their traditional ritual and social roles than as guides to the words. Many of these impecunious professionals are barely literate. As literacy increases, though, and reciters have trouble interesting the younger generation in systematic recitation training, so too does reliance on texts, especially popular majlis anthologies, increase.

The question arises as to how much mass-printed texts reflect current oral versions of marsiyahs, and how much reciters base their performances on these anthologies. Do the printed texts condition the recitations, in other words, or the other way around? To some extent, the flow of information goes both ways, and reciters may prefer specifically those anthologies that include verse and text choices they already favor. The nature of the interplay between such texts and the oral tradition can become quite complicated, however. One example (albeit a rather involved one) will illustrate what an influential role these demotic texts play in performance today, and why studying the marsiyah as a text on the page will never reveal much about how people actually interact with the genre.

At the end of example #5, which is at twelve stanzas the longest version in my sample, the otherwise confident female performers seem to fall apart, garbling their words, and failing, ultimately, to fit the text to the tarz. By the end of the final stanza, some

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[11] See Chapter Two for a description of this reciter and her performance.

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reciters are chanting one thing, and others another; in the final couplet, they do not even preserve the rhyme scheme. I suggest that the reasons for this confusion have to do with increasingly heavy reliance on a printed marsiyah text, in a situation where the text has become problematic.

In their powerful penultimate verse, which begins, "Oh, my lion, you never obtained the pleasures of youth . . . ,"(verse #23 in Naval Kishor and verse #17 in several popular anthologies) the reciters add a sense of finality by repeating not only the fourth and sixth lines, but by adding a repetition of the whole last couplet:

> You died without even bringing me a bride, my son
> All Bano reaped is ground to dust, my son

This is exactly the technique both men's groups employ at the actual finales of their short recitations, so the listener would almost expect the marsiyah to conclude here, but a final, anticlimactic, and almost distracting verse follows. This last verse from example #5 is the only one in the entire sample range that is not included in the lengthy Naval Kishor version of *Lāsh Akbar kī*. The verse does, however, end the poem in two anthologies, *Kāmyāb Bastah* and *Soz-e Karbalā*, displaying the pronounced parallelism between popular recitations and shorter anthology versions of the text:

> Now whom shall I summon with the name Ali Akbar
> Oh, my ringleted Ali Akbar, Ali Akbar
> Oh, my lion, my captivating one, Ali Akbar
> For whom shall this mother live on now, Ali Akbar?
> I am spent, and the evil hour has befallen the Prophet's lineage
> The enemies ascend over Husain, son of Ali
>
> *Ab kisko pukārūngī maiñ kahkar 'Alī Akbar*
> *A'e gesūoñ wale 'Alī Akbar 'Alī Akbar*
> *A'e sher mire A'e mire dilbar 'Alī Akbar*

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Ab kisko jiye dekh ke mādar 'Alī Akbar
Vārīga'ī hai vaqt parā āl-e nabī par
Ā'dā kī charhā'ī hai Ḥusaiñ ibn-e 'alī par[12]

This verse is the single portion of the poem so riddled with scansion problems that it seems, even at first glance (or at first hearing), metrically misplaced, even if its somewhat formulaic content can be believably grafted on to the marsiyah.

As it turns out, the verse is actually in a different meter from the rest of the poem. The meter repeats pairs of long and short syllables, as does the meter of *Lāsh Akbar kī*, but starts in such a way that it would be an impossible feat to cram this stanza's text into the poem's actual meter. Yet this is just what the Ahmed House reciters, following a printed text, attempt to do. As a result, the text does not match the tune, the reciters cannot maintain unison, and some individual reciters instinctively insert words (such as an additional "Akbar" in some lines, or a non-rhyming word at the end of the final couplet) to try to fit the text to the tune.

As noted in Chapter Four, the meter of the marsiyah (which, with just a few exceptions, otherwise scans properly in all of the printed and recited versions I have reviewed) is:

= ⏑ = = / ⏑ ⏑ = = / ⏑ ⏑ = = / = =

whereas the meter of the anthologies' last verse is:

= = ⏑ / ⏑ = = ⏑ / ⏑ = = ⏑ / ⏑ = =. [13]

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[12] *Soz-e Karbalā*, vol. 2, 255; *Kāmyāb Bastah*, 113.

[13] See Frances W. Pritchett and Khaliq Ahmad Khaliq, *Urdu Meter: A Practical Handbook* (Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison Publication Series, 1987), 56; 57-58, for a convenient reference list of Urdu meters that includes these patterns.

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What we have here, almost certainly, is an interpolated *band* that in effect replaces the transitional verse that appears between the first and second halves of the marsiyah in its longest form. This particular verse ("Now whom shall I summon . . .") appears just at the point where the longer text's verse #26 shifts to the second episode featuring Fatima Sughra's summons to her brother:

> Fizzah fetched the letter whilst weeping bloody tears
> Inscribed on the envelope was the writing of the ailing Sughra
> The pious king wept over his daughter's name
> After reading the heading, he touched the letter to his head time and again
> He couldn't look, for grief, towards the helpless Bano
> Looking upon Akbar's body, he heaved a sigh

A short performance could not conveniently incorporate such a verse, since it initiates a whole new vaqiah. The use of four different closing verses in our range of five performances indicates that the first portion of the marsiyah contains a number of *band*s that could provide a sorrowful conclusion to *Lāsh Akbar kī*, but only the reciters in example #5 include verses, including their problematic final one, from the end of Akbar's death scene. Different versions of Munis's poem may well include other stanzas that are accretions, but, as no others are as obviously problematic, and as even early marsiyah manuscripts often display considerable variation, they would generally be more difficult to detect.

It would be hard to trace the origins of the discordant verse, but we know that while it appears consistently in today's oft-used majlis anthologies, it does not appear, for example, in a fifty-year-old handwritten manuscript from Hyderabad. (This Hyderabadi version is clearly intended for use in recitation, but privileges the Sughra vaqiah over the

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first half of the poem.)

At least two scenarios that might explain the probably relatively recent interpolation of a metrically unmatched verse into texts and performances of *Lāsh Akbar kī.* One is that it was simply lifted from another marsiyah and "pasted" at the end of Munis's marsiyah. This sort of transplant occurs fairly frequently, especially in those segments of the marsiyah that most clearly fall into specific categories, such as "lament" or "praise of the sword." Some commentators have suggested that classical marsiyah poets filled whole notebooks with lengthy passages of these categories of verses and merely inserted them into individual marsiyahs when it came time to complete a particular section. This strategy might also promote "cutting and pasting" from one marsiyah to another, and even be responsible for the appearance of whole passages in more than one marsiyah. The latter phenomenon is not confined to classical poems; in a collection of modern marsiyahs, I found quite lengthy sections of verses that appeared in two different marsiyahs by the same author.[14]

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[14] Al-e Razā, *Mirāsī-e Razā* (Karachi: Khurasān Islamic Research Center, 1981), 42-43, verses 70-78; 327-328, verses 117-125. The verses appear in almost exactly the same form in the marsiyahs *Thā jahāñ phir wahīñ Qurān ko le ā'e Husain* and *Qāfilah al-e Muḥammad kā sū-e Shām chalā*, although in three or four cases there are minor changes that alter a line's wording. The copious list of corrections in the book's prefatory matter notes some typographical errors in a few of the stanzas, but does not make mention of the repetition.

On another note altogether, one more point of interest in this marsiyah collection is the curious resemblance between the rhyme and meter of the first verses of one of the Raza (*Razā*) poems, *Thā jahāñ phir wahīñ Qurān ko le ā'e Husain*, and of *Lāsh Akbar kī.* Since the first four lines of both poems have not only the meter, but part of a *radīf* ("refrain") in common, one might be tempted to think of Munis's ever-popular poem having influenced the form of a decidedly *jadīd* marsiyah. In Raza's poem, the *radīf* and rhyming element of, *ā'e Husain*, are rather short, however, when compared with Munis's *al se uṭhā lā'e Husain.* Given that *ā'e Husain* is also an extremely common phrase in majlis poems, the effect is probably coincidental.

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Ordinarily, in such a case, the meters are the same, but with basic knowledge of poetics on the wane (as I point out in Chapter Eight) it is quite possible that an editor would print a verse included in a manuscript without checking the meter.

Another explanation would be that the verse represents a performance innovation. Whether the verse was newly-composed or imported from a different marsiyah, an expert reciter might have the ability to manipulate or change a tune so as to accommodate its different meter, thereby bringing the marsiyah to a rather creative conclusion. Given the importance and regularity of meter in Urdu poetry, this might seem a highly unlikely practice, but because performers exercise a considerable degree of personal discretion in the verses they select, there are precedents for it. The comparatively simple process of combining verses of one marsiyah with verses from another, or even recombining couplets from different stanzas into one verse when they share a meter occurs all of the time in performance.[15] Yet recitations that use a range of different meters are also possible. Ra'nā Iqbal, the daughter of the poet Ahl-e Raza, combined verses from five different marsiyahs with several different meters in a single uninterrupted *taḥt-ul-lafẓ* recitation in a 1997 Karachi majlis.[16]

If a reciter initiated such a change—perhaps originally a more substantial one than we now observe—in Lash Akbar ki, and written texts absorbed it, ordinary reciters without

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[15] See the additional discussion of the transposition of couplets below.

[16] Ra'nā combined verses from *Kalmah-e ḥaq kī hai taḥrīr dil-e fiṭrat meñ, Thā jahāñ phir wahīñ Qurān ko le ā'e Husain, Ḳhūsha nasīb dayār-e Ḥusain dekh liyā, Anīs ahl-e adab hai vaqār minbar kā,* and *Qāfilah al-e Muḥammad kā sū-e Shām chalā* in a Karachi recitation on June 5, 1997. See Ahl-e Raza, 1-14; 31-48; 151-164; 261-278; 309-335.

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musical training or intuition would be stymied by the inclusion of the verse in their books, just as the Ahmed House reciters are. None of the professional reciters in my sample present very long versions of the marsiyah, and as I have never heard this stanza included in the orally transmitted marsiyah versions of illiterate reciters, I cannot speculate as to how widespread it is among such performers. Whether or not they would identify the problem as a metrical disjunction, traditional, professional reciters who constantly listen to and re-arrange majlis poems in a range of different tarzes, in a multitude of mourning assemblies, might well sense something out of place with this verse. They would likely make special musical accommodations for it or drop it. Evidently, the Ahmed House reciters, too, in their attempts at correction, perceive some sort of imbalance, but having planned to recite certain verses from a printed text, they plow doggedly through them.

This case is suggestive about reliance on the sort of popular printed majlis collections stocked in Shi'i bookstores all over Indian and Pakistan. The widespread use of a few well-loved anthologies, such as *Shamshīr-e Mātam*, taken together with a proliferation of cassette and video majlis recordings, not only encourages the standardization of poetry selections in terms of their wording, verse inclusion, and the actual poems popularized, but may have begun to override instinctive and orally transmitted knowledge about text and tune. Nonetheless, the repertoires of the traditional classes of reciters, however endangered, and the locally-written works favored by many reciters, continue to counteract these trends to some extent.

Variation in Printed Texts

Despite increasing standardization, in the four or five most popular published

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anthologies one still finds among versions of a single marsiyah a noticeable, if rarely dramatic, degree of variation in the number of verses, in the placement of verses, and in the ordering of words within individual lines. A more suggestive level of textual flexibility is evident when single couplets are shifted from one verse to another in different versions of a marsiyah; this can reconfigure the poem on both formal and thematic levels. On one hand, the fact that verses retain meaning when such transpositions are made indicates just how formulaic some of the marsiyah's content is. However, frequent textual manipulations on the level of the couplet also suggest that editors, or more probably, reciters, perceive the couplet as a meaningful (or musical unit), undermining the great explanatory power given to the six-line verse by literary critics.

Let us take the example of verse #9 in Chapter Four's long version of Lash Akbar ki. One of the anthologies, *Kāmyāb Bastah*, replaces the last two lines of verse #9 (verse #7 in that version) with the last two lines of verse #5.[17] Instead of a final couplet that reads, "Your mouth never even uttered the word 'water,' my precious!/Stabbed by the dagger's blade, you came back stoically silent, my precious!" therefore, the popular version concludes, " This is the glory my son has given me, oh people! The wretched, lamenting Bāno has been robbed, oh people!" The two versions in Urdu are:

Nām pānī kā zubān par bhī nah lā'e vārī
Khā ke phal barchhi kā chupke chale āye vārī (Naval Kishore [long] version)

Mujhko beṭe ne kyā shān dikhā'ī logo
Luṭ ga'ī Bāno-e nāshād o duhā'ī logo (Anthology version)

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[17] See Chapter Four for the long version and *Kāmyāb Bastah*, 110, for this shorter version.

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The shorter version, then, reads,

> "Even in your dying agony, you asked for me; your love earns my devotion!
> This blood-drenched face of yours earns your mother's devotion!
> You battled thousands alone; your bravery earns my devotion!
> I sacrifice myself over your suffering; your misery earns my devotion
> This is the glory my son has given me, oh people!
> The wretched, lamenting Bāno has been robbed, oh people!"

While both versions of the verse in some way continue to praise Akbar's heroism, the couplet in the longer printed version makes for tighter, more interesting poetry, since it maintains the list of Akbar's great deeds. There is also the bit of wordplay centered on food and water in the last two lines: despite the desperate heat of the desert, Akbar never thinks of water or nourishment for himself, and what he does eat, or take in, is the blade of the dagger. The idiom for being struck by the blade is "to eat the fruit" of the dagger.

Although different levels of textual variation, then, are evident in printed texts of *Lāsh Akbar kī*, the versions of the poem in two publications, *Kāmyāb Bastah* from India, and *Soz-e Karbalā* from Pakistan, are identical in terms of the eighteen verses included, and almost identical in their wording of each stanza. One of the performed examples, #2, matches these anthology texts almost exactly.

Performance and Variation

Level 1: Performance/Anthology Affinity

In performance, we can identify patterns of textual variation on at least four basic levels. My sample texts and taped performances yield dozens of examples of divergence and convergence, but one example of each kind should sufficiently illustrate the phenomena I have in mind. First, most reciters' phrasings tend to favor the short texts of current,

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popular majlis anthologies, rather than the older text of *Lāsh Akbar kī* translated in Chapter Four, in cases where the two written sources diverge. This affiliation of performances and popular anthologies is so strong that each verse from all of the sample performances are found in these widely-sold anthologies, even though the anthologies contain a maximum of only twenty verses from the "full" fifty-three verse text of *Lāsh Akbar kī*.

In the case of verses that appear in both the popular collections and the longer text, performances generally, though not always, match with the popular versions if there are textual differences. *Kāmyāb Bastah*'s version of verse #18, for instance, renders line five differently than we saw it in Chapters Four and Five (where it was discussed as an allusion to veiling or hiding). In the long, published version, the couplet in question reads:

> For a wedding gift I'll have a shroud, my face in the dust
> No bride shall there be, nor children, nor nuptial festoons"
>
> *Bar meñ ho'egā kafan ḳhak pah chahrā hogā*
> *Nah dūlhan hogī nah aulād nah sahrā hogā*

In *Kāmyāb Bastah,* it reads, "**I'll not have even** a shroud as a wedding gift, my corpse will lie (directly) in the dust" (*Bar meñ hogā* ***nah*** *kafan ḳhak pah* ***lāshah*** *hogā*), imparting a rather different emphasis than in the recension above. The version of this eighteenth verse that I heard performed (again example #5), matched *Kāmyāb Bastah*'s text.

On one hand, the first version displays a pleasing extended rhyming pattern of *pah chahrā hogā* and *nah sahrā hogā* that would contribute to the verses's fluidity, *ravānī.* The presence of the word *chahrā*, face, also complements the idea of the veiling *sehrā.* On the other hand, the shorter text's meaning is somewhat more striking in one way: the morbid gift of a shroud as a wedding blessing, rather than an anomaly to be remarked upon, is

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surprising only by its absence. And, instead of simply bemoaning the fact that he will be lying in the dust, dead, Akbar laments the lack of dignity and proper ritual to which his family is subjected, deprived as they are even of shrouds. This version may enjoy popular appeal because the type of plaint Akbar makes is a familiar one in majlis poetry and sermons—see for example verse #45 in *Lāsh Akbar kī*[18]—and an understood parallel exists between the shroudless, headless male martyrs and their unveiled female survivors.

Level 2: Transformation on the Couplet Level

We have already seen that single couplets may appear in different verses in different printed recensions of a marsiyah, a pattern replicated in and probably derived from performances. This shifting of couplets seems to reflect in part the preponderance and popularity of couplet-based forms in majlis genres (salam, nauhah) and in other Urdu poetry (ghazal), although Naiyar Masud says that in individual collections or *bastah*s, transpositions commonly occur even at the level of the *miṣra'* (hemistich).[19] None of the performed examples of *Lāsh Akbar kī* in my sample incorporate verses where couplets are obviously extracted from another *band*, but the example of "couplet shifting" in a printed version of stanza #9, discussed above,[20] suggests strongly that some recitations would show the same or similar transpositions.

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[18] See Chapter Four.

[19] Masud, who has seen hundreds of marsiyah *bastah*s and manuscripts (*nuskhā*s), says they frequently combine hemistitches from a single poet's various marsiyahs, or the marsiyahs of different poets, to form marsiyah verses. Even among manuscripts, only the rare one is "authentic," (*mustanad)* close to the poet's own drafts of marsiyahs. Personal communication, 3/19/98.

[20] pp. 241-242.

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Examples from recitations of other marsiyahs reinforce how common this couplet shifting is. In Ra'nā Iqbal's *taḥt-ul-lafẓ* recitation of over sixty verses, she frequently incorporated couplets from different six-line marsiyah stanzas into a single stanza; sometimes she extracted the "floating couplets" from (the printed version of) a single marsiyah, sometimes from two different marsiyahs that shared a meter.[21] A soz recitation by Aminah Jafar (Ja'far) used four lines from a well-known marsiyah verse, but eliminated the middle couplet that appears in most printed texts, and concluded the stanza with a couplet from another source. A standard printed version reads:

> When evening fell on those helpless ones in the land of Syria
> The night passed in flagellation and weeping
> When morning broke, the Syrian army stood armed and watchful
> There was much pomp and show when Yazid appeared
> Zainab, tormented by the heavens, embroiled in affliction,
> Zainab went unveiled to Yazid's gathering
>
> *Dayār-e shām meñ jab bekasoñ ko shām hū'ī*
> *Woh rāt pīne rone meñ sab tamām hū'ī*
> *Hū'ī jo ṣubḥ kamar bastah fauj-e shām hū'ī*
> *Hū'ā Yazīd barāmad yeh dhūm dhām hū'ī*
> *Falak satā'ī muṣībat kī mubtilā Zainab*
> *Chalī Yāzīd kī majlis meñ be ridā Zainab*[22]

Aminah's version is rendered as follows:

> When evening fell on the captives in the land of Syria
> The night passed in flagellation and weeping
> Zainab, tormented by the heavens, embroiled in affliction,
> Zainab went unveiled to Yazid's gathering
> . . . Zainab, unveiled
> She cried, "They've slain the King of East and West
> The Syrian army has slain my brother Husain"

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[21] Karachi majlis, June 5, 1997.

[22] *Soz-e Karbalā*, vol. 2, 101.

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Dayār-e shām meñ jab qaidīoñ ko shām hū'ī
Woh rāt pīne rone meñ tamām hū'ī
Falak satā'ī musībat kī mubtilā Zainab
Chalī Yāzīd kī majlis meñ be ridā
. . . ridā Zainab
Pukārtī thī shah-e mashriqain ko mārā
Sipāh-e sham ne bhā'ī Ḥusain ko mārā

The printed text of the marsiyah scans properly, but because the reciter leaves out or changes the occasional word in addition to substituting a whole couplet, lines two and four of her version do not scan. However, as I suggested above, a talented reciter can manipulate her tune so that the recitation still flows smoothly and beautifully. More significantly, Aminah's version changes the standard rhyme scheme of *aaaabb* into three rhyming couplets, *aabbcc*, so that the poem resembles a salam more than it does a typical marsiyah in format.

Transpositions and performance innovations that occur in other Urdu genres are somewhat comparable. Inserted verses called *girahs* ("knots") in *qawwalī* performances, like the imported marsiyah couplets, have thematic links to a "host" passage of text, although they tend to amplify or embellish a very short text rather than effecting a substitution.[23] Where presentation techniques are concerned, successful singers of Urdu ghazal poetry, like Aminah, often take major liberties with meter, even when the texts used scan quite properly.[24]

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[23] Regula Qureshi, *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan; Sound, Context and Meaning in Qawwali* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 22; 237.

[24] See Peter Manuel, in Muhammad Umar Memon, ed. *Studies in the Urdu Gazal and Prose Fiction* (Madison : University of Wisconsin, 1979).

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Level 3: Selection and Sequencing of Verses

All performers in my sample also differ at least a bit from the structure of even the popular texts as they select and order whole verses. The degree of variation in the number and sequence of verses in the five examples is, in itself, testament to the flexibility of content and order. Example #4, by Zarina, is most unconventional in these respects. The verses she chooses are numbered 1,3,2,13,12, and 4 in the lengthy version of the marsiyah and 1,3,2,10,9 , and 4 in *Kāmyāb Bastah*; listeners in the Victoria Street majlis, then, heard the following:

1.
When Husain lifted Akbar's body from the slaying-ground
Husain carried that youth from the front lines of battle
Husain drew the moon out from the evening clouds
Husain lifted up that lion, his last breath on his lips, and brought him from the wilderness
He cried out "Come take the corpse of your son, Bano!"
"Akbar's heart has been pierced by the dagger, Bano!"

3.
When that lord's pain-ridden voice reached the tent
The female progeny of the Prophet of both worlds were aghast
Sakinah shrieked, "Alas! Alas! My brother!"
Fizzāh ran for the threshold, casting the veil from her head
Zainab, striking herself, rushed outside in agitation
Bano, distraught, rushed out bareheaded

2.
"Have your last look, our son is dying
Before our eyes, this light of our lives is dying
Now, at any moment, your son, the envy of the moon, shall die
His tongue lolling out of his mouth, thirsting to the bone, he dies
He breath halts in his breast, blood flows from his wound
Sher Bano, the pillaging of your household is underway"

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13.
"Shall I tell you why I fainted, why I returned?
It was the third day that I hadn't had any water
Then there was the sun of the battlefield, with no shade overhead
This boy of yours swooned and fell in the dust
I was all but dead, yet God saved me, Mother!
Father came running and lifted me into his lap, Mother!"[25]

12.
"Who was it that delivered the news I was wounded?

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[25] Although verse #13 varies little in its printed recensions, Zarina Begam incorporates a number of simple changes to the text, for which I provide the Urdu here:

Standard text:

Ġhash ke āne ki kahūñ vajah kih kyoñkar āyā
Tīsrā din hai kih pānī nahīñ maiñ ne pāyā
Dhūp maidān kī thī sar pah nah thā kucch sāyā
*Gir parā **ghoṛe se** tīvrā ke tumhārā jāyā*
*Mar chukā thā pah muqaddar ne bachāyā **ham ko***
*Daur kar bāp ne godī meñ uṭhāyā **ham ko***

Example #4:

Ġhash ke āne ki kahūñ vajah kih kyoñkar āyā
Tīsrā din hai kih pānī nahīñ maiñ ne pāyā
Dhūp maidān kī thī sar pah nah thā kucch sāyā
*Gir parā **khāk pah** tīvrā ke tumhārā jāyā*
*Mar chukā thā pah muqaddar ne bachāyā **ammāñ***
*Daur kar **shāh** ne godī meñ uṭhāyā **ammāñ***

Instead of Akbar falling "from the horse" (*ghoṛe se*), he collapes "in the dust" (*khāk pah*), and refers to his father with the formulaic epithet "the king," Zarina also replaces *ham ko* at the end of the last two lines with *ammāñ*, the exclamation "Oh, Mother!," reinforcing the fact that Akbar is addressing Bāno; this would seem obvious, but when we consider how Zarina arranged the verse order in performance, the interpolation proves a helpful reminder to listeners.

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It's a lie, for I never was struck by a dagger
Fate has brought your son back safely to you
I spied the Master's (Husain's) feet (approaching), and life welled up in me
Mourning before a death bodes ill, Mother!
What's on my clothes is Abbas's blood, Mother!"

4.
When she (Bano) saw Ali Akbar motionless upon the King's shoulder
She extended her hands and screamed, "Alas, alas, my darling!
What tragedy has occurred, oh virtuous emperor?
My darling's eighteenth year didn't do well by him
Daggers have cut his entire body to pieces, ha'e ha'e!
Who was it that murdered my darling, ha'e ha'e!"

Most listeners are accustomed to hearing the popular early verses of this marsiyah in a sequence that reflects their ordering in printed versions, even if the odd verse is omitted. Zarina's arrangement of the verses, and as a result, of the characters in them, produces a narrative that might therefore seem a bit jarring spatially and temporally. Akbar, for example, tries to dissuade Bano from mourning before she has actually said anything, so in verse #13 it is in part his interjected, vocative "Mother!" (*ammāṉ*, not included in printed versions of the text) that clarifies that he is in fact addressing Bano.[26]

Zarina's progression from verse #12 to verse #4, her final stanza, similarly reconfigures characters' action and reactions. Bano's exclamation, "Alas, alas, my darling!" as she starts to lament Akbar's death seems to respond directly to, and counter, Akbar's claim, in verse #12, that the blood on his clothes is not his own, but that of Abbas. This version of *Lāsh Akbar kī* postpones any response from Bano until the last verse, where her words assume the ponderous weight of finality, rather than initiating a whole dialogue with

[26] Akbar's plea here might of course be taken as a pre-emptive utterance, since Husain has called for Bano to fetch Akbar's corpse.

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Akbar as they do in all of the printed versions. Zarina's choice to conclude the marsiyah in such a way as to emphasize Bano's reactions is an unusual one, as is her inclusion of Akbar's pretense that he is not mortally wounded. The very familiarity that makes this text so recognizable and the alterations so obvious, however, also seem to make it easy for majlis-goers to absorb and enjoy this narrative reconfiguration. None of the listeners with whom I spoke seemed to find it odd or awkward.

Level 4: Lexical Alterations Within Lines and Verses

Another major level of variation occurs in each sample where reciters make occasional, seemingly idiosyncratic, textual choices within verses; sometimes these reflect orally-circulated alternative versions, while at other times they are almost certainly simplifications or inadvertent substitutions. In one case, a simple variation shared by the sample's two professional female reciters from Lucknow—neither of whom use printed texts—suggests an orally circulated version of the verse in question. Both Sikandar and Zarina recite verse #2 so that it resembles *Kāmyāb Bastah*'s quite closely, but in one of the small yet noticeable divergences from other recitations and from printed texts, they render the last line as "Oh, Shahr Bano, the pillaging of your household is underway," using the fuller version of Husain's wife's name, rather than simply Bano.

In a more telling type of alteration, when we compare example #1 from Lahore with *Kāmyāb Bastah*'s text, the Lahore reciters tend to modify and repeat certain formulaic phrases, occasionally substituting one conventional epithet for another, which sometimes reduces the semantic and euphonic variability of the poetry. Let us again take verse #2 as an example:

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"Have your last look, our son is dying
Before our eyes, this light of our lives is dying
Now, at any moment, your son, the envy of the moon, shall die
His tongue lolling out of his mouth, thirsting to the bone, he dies
His breath halts in his breast, blood flows from his wounds
Oh, Bāno, the pillaging of your household is underway"

Dekh le akhirī dīdār pisar martā hai
Sāmne ānkhoñ ke yeh nūr-e naẓar martā hai
Ab ko'ī dam meñ tirā ***rashk-e qamar*** *martā hai*
Munh se bāhar hai zubāñ tishnā ***jigar*** *martā hai*
Dam hai sīne meñ rukā zakhmoñ se ḳhūñ jārī hai
Āre Bāno tire ghar luṭne kī taiyārī hai [27]

In line 3, the reciters substitute *tirā lakht-e jigar* ("this piece of your heart (*liver*)") for *rashk-e qamar* ("envy-of-the-moon"). Since these phrases are both extremely common epithets, and moreover, scan the same way, the alteration is understandable. Yet, as I have indicated in Chapter Five, much of the charm of this verse lies in its compact packaging of images of brightness, light, sight, heroism, and suffering through conventional phrases and epithets. Although many listeners would barely notice the change, it might well prove an irritant to the connoisseur, especially since importing the word *jigar*, which appears in the fourth line, into line three reduces the pleasurable variety in Munis's rhyme scheme, *ar martā hai*. The simple substitution that likely makes for easier memorization renders Munis's poetry a bit flabbier here than it is in other versions.

The Lahore reciters, relying on memory and oral circulation of the poem, also invert some lines, for example, lines two and three in the first verse. This happens fairly frequently among both professionals and non-professionals. In a more plot-driven selection,

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[27]"Āre" is replaced by the sorrowful exclamation "*hā'e*!" in most of today's popular versions of this poem, and in this recitation.

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listeners would perhaps find line inversions jarring, but in this recitation of just two verses, such alterations make little difference, as long as the rhyme scheme is preserved.

Shaping a Marsiyah by Choice and Chance

The sorts of variation detailed here—whether casual, even perhaps careless word substitutions, re-configurations of lines or phrases within a verse, or more substantial re-structurings of the poem through couplet and verse selection and ordering—demonstrate the multiple chains of marsiyah transmission that function amongst literate and illiterate majlis-goers. Yet individual artistic decisions also clearly and importantly structure a performance. A range of four different finales among just five versions of the text, for example, tells us that reciters use considerable individual discretion in bringing the poem to a close. The different endings tend to thrust forward various of the themes woven throughout Munis's poem, whether Akbar's death figures predominantly as the forewarning of more death and horror to come, a virtual deathblow to the Imam and a threat to his lineage, or the focus of a mother's anguished lament.

Sometimes reciters' lexical choices merely simplify the text, rather than effecting a sought-after emotional impact. Long traditions of oral as well as published, scribbled, formally and informally edited written transmission limit our ability to trace exactly how Munis originally proffered his poem, but this complex network certainly attests to the vitality of the marsiyah. Reciters who rely on written texts may pick and choose from several versions or remain faithful to a favorite one, while anthology editors' word choices seem to largely reflect well-known recitations of famous or respected reciters.

The prevalence of *Lāsh Akbar kī* in a wide spectrum of majlises and locales and the

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poem's familiarity (or at least the familiarity of the first few verses) to a range of audiences testify to its place in the canon. Its favored status is also reinforced by the relative length (twelve verses) of example #5 in an era when marsiyah performers are steadily abbreviating recitations. This marsiyah's featured characters are also important; I mentioned in Chapter Five that editors of marsiyah collections often juxtapose Akbar and Sughra poems, and performers often do the same. For example, just before reciting *Lāsh Akbar kī*, Zarina and her party (example #4) chose to perform a poem about Sughra that parallels closely the content of *Lāsh Akbar kī*'s second vaqiah, including a plea from Sughra to her brother Akbar.[28] This contiguity reinforces the importance of the special brother-sister link from which Munis launched his poem, and hints at the potentially rich interplay between individual "incidents," poems, and different genres of majlis poetry.

Styles of Marsiyah Recitation

The "Problem" of Music

What does "music" contribute to marsiyah poetry? Broadly speaking, "rendering a poem performable means making it intelligible to its listeners in accordance with the shared expectations of the performance occasion."[29] In the South Asian *majlis-e 'azā*, tensions between aesthetic embellishment of the marsiyah text through music and Islamic strictures against music can complexify these shared expectations. Words related to "music" are never appropriate when alluding to the recitation of majlis poetry (*paṛhnā*, "to read or

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[28] From the majlis on May 6, 1998. I was unable to record the title line or first verse of this poem.

[29] Qureshi1990, 466.

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recite," is the preferred term), yet musical settings for the marsiyah, albeit without instrumental accompaniment, have augmented the mood of mourning assemblies in South Asia for hundreds of years. The musical settings for all of the majlis genres, and indeed for many secular genres of Urdu poetry, share textually based structural features which, as Regula Qureshi puts it, reflect "a strong ethos of textual precedence and musical subordination."[30]

Nonetheless, and despite terminology that conveniently and firmly distinguishes majlis chanting or recitation from "singing" and instrumental "music," conservatives' doubts about the propriety of the tarz in the majlis context crop up periodically, and have recently given rise to significant debate in some South Asian Shi'i communities. Broader constraints on music are manifested in its prohibition for recreational purposes—meaning that TV and radio are largely shut off in pious households—during Muharram, and, in Pakistan, in complaints from both strict Sunnis and Shiahs over the general proliferation of musical entertainment. The August 31, 1997 edition of *The News*, for example, contained this snippet in a letter to the editor from one Gujar Khan, a disgruntled and disapproving viewer of Pakistan Television:

> There is a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him): "In the era close to the Day of Judgement, singers and dancers will gain the people's respect whereas knowledge will be insulted."

In one of many cases of majlis performers negotiating the questionable status of music, the Indian Hyderabadi reciter Karrār Qāzmī told me that a classically-trained sozkhvan would always know the *rāga* to which a majlis poem is set, but would never

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[30] 1990, 460

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dream of announcing it in a majlis, even if he or she did provide other information about the poem by way of introduction. Sibt-e Ja'far of Karachi adopted a more controversial stance in responding to challenges made within the Shi'i community as to the propriety of the tarz and its musical heritage; a defense of majlis poetry's classical *rāga* settings as permissible in Islam takes center stage in Ja'far's book about vocal arts in Islam.[31]

The famous Karachi singer and reciter Kajjan Begam explained quite freely that she actually owed her prominence as a performer of light music to childhood training in soz and marsiyah recitation.[32] Given that the links between musical entertainment and majlis performance are very obvious in the lives of the professional classes of reciters, and that, in the absence of context, the untrained western ear can discern little difference between melodic majlis recitation and singing, this might not seem a startling statement. Yet because of Islamic prohibitions against "music," and a cultural association between low status professional female performers and sexual licentiousness, the average indigent professional, who enjoys nothing like the cultural capital Kajjan Begam wields, may actually minimize her links with systematic musical training.[33] Some of Lucknow's best female soz and

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[31] See Sayyid Sibṭ-e Ja'far Zaidī, *Sautī 'ulūm o funūn-e islamī* (*Vocal Skills and the Islamic Arts*) (Karachi: Sayyid and Sayyid, 1995). One chapter sub-section is headed "Is All Type of 'Song' Really Completely Harām?" The author also acknowledges the Quranic verses typically presented as evidence of the problematic status of "song" and counters with other Quranic verses and other Islamic literature.

[32] *Kajjan Begum and Mahnaz*, Lok Virsa Productions video recording, Islamabad, 1985. Also personal communication 6/6/97.

[33] This particular brand of reticence may fade, in my experience, when the professional performer is addressed as a skilled artiste, but such treatment is hardly the typical due of impoverished *mirāsīn* class reciters. It is also true that some reciters take a certain pride in asserting that they have come by their talents "naturally," without formal

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marsiyah reciters have after all been courtesans and *mirāsïns*.[34]

"Tune," Text, and Genre Distinctions

Many genres of popular Urdu poetry, whether secular or sacred, share a binary couplet structure with complementary musical anticipation and closure, recitation strategies aimed at clearly delivering a meaningful text, and controlled adaptation of Hindustani "light music" as an appropriate setting for the text. As Regula Qureshi reminds us, though, any individual piece in a performance is linked textually with its scope and function as a member of a genre.[35] Despite important musical continuities with non-liturgical poetic forms, the aims of identification and devotion to the Karbala martyrs individuate majlis poetry as a class from these other forms. *Within* the range of majlis genres, the marsiyah's verse form and narrative character distinguish it, and musical settings show these features to advantage to different degrees.

When marsiyahs are rendered melodically, rather than in declamatory fashion, their tunes vary widely, from droning chants to adaptations of classical Hindustani *rāga*s. (Verse

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"education." As the reciter Sūfiyā put it to me, "We have had soz and marsiyah around us since we were born; does anyone need to teach a fish to swim?!" See also Bard, "He Made Me Light Up the Gathering": Pride and Piety in Shi'i Women's Majlis," paper delivered at the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) workshop on "The Aesthetics of Texts and Performance in Islamicate South Asia," April, 2001.

[34] *Mirāsïn*s (f) and *mirāsī*s (m) are hereditary communities of singers. While sometimes valued for their musical expertise, *mirāsïn*s tend to be maligned for their "loose ways," and historical association with courtesanship. The name of the community derives from the primary meaning of the word *mirāsī*: "inherited, hereditary," (Platts 1979, p. 1105), and is considered a derogatory term in many contexts.

[35] Her comments appear in an analysis of the ghazal form, Qureshi 1990, that addresses the majlis genres salam, nauhah, and matam, and pertains on some levels—though not on that of basic poetic format—to the marsiyah, too,

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#2 of *Lāsh Akbar kī*, musically annotated for all five recorded examples in Appendix D, demonstrates the range and variation of the tarzes.)

Some features of melodic marsiyahs suggest that reciters take the truly couplet-based majlis forms nauhah and salam as their models (at least for musically less elaborate renderings). As recited today, marsiyah melodies often recall the ghazal-like pattern, *aa*, *ba*, *ca*, etc., with an emphasis on couplet structure and a single melodic idea rendered in a particular range for lines 1,2, and 4 of each stanza. This is so even though the vast majority of Urdu marsiyahs written from the nineteenth century onward utilize a six-line (*musaddas*) verse with rhyme scheme *aaaabb*, and even though textual content frequently organizes the marsiyah verse as a quatrain (*aaaa*) followed by a couplet (*bb*), or even two three-line segments divided into narrative and dialogue. These divisions exist in a certain tension with recitation styles influenced strongly by the *ghazal* paradigm. There are no doubt many exceptions, but my collection of recordings indicates that professional performers tend to make relatively strong melodic distinctions between the first four lines and the final couplets of a *band*, while reciters with less musical training fall into an alternating pattern more obviously influenced by the ghazal.

Very often in the marsiyah, lines 1,2 4, and 6 of every stanza provide an adaptable baseline tune while lines 3 and 5 contrast, usually (but not necessarily) by exhibiting melodic activity in a higher range or ascending from a lower register. The "staying" (base) tune (similar to the *asthayī* in the ghazal) is generally self-contained, while the usually higher-pitched *antarā*, the tune for lines 3 and 5, requires melodic completion in the form

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of a return to the *asthayī* in the lines that follow. [36] The tunes for lines 1 through 4 in some way fit the pattern "same, same, different, same," though the rhyme scheme is *aaaa*. Performers frequently repeat two lines of the six-line marsiyah verse, creating an eight-line melodic structure (perhaps better conceptualized as two units of four lines).

At least one aspect of the marsiyah tarz, however, highlights the genre's special six-line form: line 5 frequently ascends even higher than line 3 (it is also recited loudest), and line 6, its response, starts emphatically high and brings the verse to a resounding conclusion. The penultimate verse line, then, can form a significant musical "set-up" for closure. At this point, the text, converging with tune, often contains an anticipatory pattern of its own, posing a question, shifting tense, or employing another transitional strategy. Even where the actual content of line 5 does not function so climactically, the change in rhyme scheme (*aaaabb*), invariably provides textual reinforcement for the rising melody. The line, then, forms a distinctive bridge between the first quatrain and the final line of the verse in terms of melody, pitch, volume, and rhyme.

The recurrence of a similar melodic idea in specific lines, a contrasting *asthayī-antarā* pattern, and the key role of the penultimate line characterize many marsiyah performances, but actual recitation style is more complex than any short list of features can suggest. Among my five examples of *Lāsh Akbar kī*, for example, version #1 adheres to the template above fairly closely, while other performances exhibit some of the features or only one of them. A number of factors can cause the delivery of the marsiyah to differ from what I have described; these include reciters' use of either unison or repetition by a

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[36] See Qureshi 1990, 470-473.

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chorus following one lead voice, intensified or reduced repetitions of lines, and incorporation of the first line of the entire poem as a refrain between verses or as the first melodic line of a new verse. As one might expect, professional reciters tend to employ more elaborate delivery strategies; in the *Lāsh Akbar kī* examples, the professionals all use the first line of the poem to lead into verse #2, whereas the amateurs do not. Neither do the amateurs contrast the voice of a soloist with a chorus, but generally strive to have all group members chant the same thing in a predictable recurring pattern (although textual confusion may intervene).

At least one basic tendency distinguishes the more ornate marsiyah tarzes from musical settings for majlis genres that use the "ghazal" form. While a number of different marsiyah poems may be set to a single one of the simplest, most chant-like tunes, marsiyah tunes most often are associated with a limited set of texts and are strongly bound by metrical conventions. By contrast, one tune used for couplet-based poems proved so ubiquitous that I heard it presented in salams and nauhahs variously commemorating Sakinah, Qasim, Ali Asghar, and Ali Akbar (and even, in one version, petitioning the Karbala martyrs for rain) in locations as diverse as Lahore, Aligarh, Udaipur, and Lucknow.[37] The song-like settings of newer nauhahs and salams and their relatively simple texts encourage majlis-goers to match different poems to the same tune, experiment with different settings for one poem, and make up their own words and tunes. Anjum Hasan Naqvī of Karachi and Zoyā Zaidī of Aligarh were among the many avid amateur reciters who constantly tinkered with new tunes and reworked salam and nauhah texts, but such

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[37] Bard, "Form, Function and Feeling," 5.

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experimentation with longer, trickier marsiyah poems was less common.

Qureshi, too, notes the prevalence of "favored musical arrangements of poetic meters in the form of tunes that have become portable between poems of the same metric structure and even between *ghazal* genres," in the majlis.[38] Today's stock tunes or *pattern dhuns*, as Qureshi calls them, are often so swingy and appealing that they tilt salam and nauhah recitation away from musical subordination and indeed militate against strict adherence to poetic meter. Trendy and readily absorbed from majlises, processions, or commercial cassettes, these tunes reinforce enthusiastic young majlis-goers predilections for the shorter majlis genres. In contrast, the complexities of marsiyah and soz recitation, often involving a leader and vocal accompanists with distinct responsibilities, and the narrative qualities of these genres, lend themselves far less to portable "pattern tunes." The tarz from example #2, by Sibt-e Jafar Zaidi, is a beautiful musical setting for Munis's text, but hardly an easily-recalled "tune" that a typical listener could pick up and replicate after hearing it once or twice.

Genre distinctions are generally obvious in terms of lexicon, too: while many marsiyah passages revel in a lofty, elegant Urdu, nauhahs and salams often capture listeners through simple diction and immediate associations with familiar household and ritual contexts. These shorter genres, especially where they take the form of "lullabies" and "wedding songs," contribute to the vibrance of modern Urdu by virtue of their very adaptability to popular tunes and linguistically mixed settings.[39]

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[38] 1990, 471

[39] Bard "Form, Function and Feeling," 8.

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Marsiyah vs. Soz: A Matter of Genre or Delivery Style?

Lāsh Akbar kī, and several other of Munis's marsiyahs, remain today extremely popular in *sozkhvānī* (melodic) renderings and are rarely heard in the dramatic *taḥt-ul-lafẓ* form. In *taḥt-ul-lafẓ*, reciters "speak" rather than chant or sing, but their speech features exaggerated poetic meter, voice projection, and cadences that swoop up and down, crescendo and fade. *Taḥt-ul-lafẓ* provides an exemplary illustration of "textual dominance and musical subordination." Rather than using melodic embellishment, reciters tend to illustrate the poet's words with expressions and hand gestures. Many critics imply that "*sozkhvānī* marsiyahs" represent a lament-oriented sub-set of the marsiyah genre rather than the fully-developed "epic" marsiyah that gains pride of place in declamatory recitations.

Given that soz, as a genre, very often consists of just one or two verses of a marsiyah text and is relatively simple textually, many majlis-goers might well define examples one and two, the versions of *Lāsh Akbar kī* by Pakistani men, as soz rather than marsiyah because of their brevity or the degree of "musical" expertise involved. In example #2, for instance, the professional Karachi *sozkhvān* and musical authority Sibt-e Ja'far recites at a slow, measured pace, clearly articulates the text with a distinctive accent and pronunciation, and establishes impressive vocal unison with his accompanying *bāzūs*. As the sozkhvan starts the poem, the first line establishes a musical theme and a refrain between verses to which he will consistently return throughout the recitation. A bi-partite melodic structure is subtly maintained, but all four lines in the first quatrain of each verse resemble each other very closely in contour, especially at their conclusions. The striking feature of

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this recitation emerges with the dramatic differentiation of the last couplet from the first four lines: it is rendered melodically distinct in a higher register, although line 6 returns satisfyingly to the pattern of the *asthāyī* in its second half.

Sibt-e Ja 'far's performance features raga-like elements not found the other examples of *Lāsh Akbar kī*. While the marsiyah's musical foundation may not be especially varied or complicated, it has a certain classical grandeur supported by Hindustani vocal techniques and extreme precision and control in presentation of the melody. Sibt-e Ja'far, introducing his performance, does not identify it as soz, but states clearly "I will now present five verses of a marsiyah." The poem's presentation of a vaqiah, although in very abbreviated form, supports the performer's classification, since a soz almost always evokes a mood but does not narrate an event per se.

Popular belief holds that the major classical poets produced marsiyahs with either the sozkhvani or the *taḥt-ul-lafẓ* style of recitation in mind. For example, Mirza Dabir is reputed to have specialized in shorter marsiyahs intended for sozkhvani, the implication being that shorter marsiyahs are of lesser literary quality. Sharar, like many commentators, implies in one section of *Guzïshtah Lakhna'ū* that the emergence of longer, declamatory marsiyahs represented developmental "progress," although he later propounds the view that soz and marsiyah recitation actually reflect "musical" versus "poetic" presentation of the same or similar texts. He suggests that under the patronage of the Nawabs of Avadh, these gradually developed into separate "art forms."[40]

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[40] For the "progress" made from short marsiyahs to the longer, more elaborate poems of Khaliq and Zamīr (the ustads of Anis and Dabir), see Sharar, 135. For soz and marsiyah as different styles of "elegy" presentation, see 251.

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We shall discuss implications of the soz/marsiyah distinction a bit further in the next chapter; at this point, though, I wish to argue that it is actually just as often individual reciters' treatments of a marsiyah text as the content of a full-length marsiyah that shapes the text into a poem suitable for melodic recitation. In majlises, long works by Anis, such as *Āj Shabbīr peh kyā 'ālim-e tanhā'ī hai*, which constitute the core of the "literary" marsiyah canon, are often recited in abbreviated form in sozkhvani. It is thus difficult to accept the argument that a firm divide in content exists between short, simple, undistinguished sozkhvani marsiyahs and long, heroic marsiyahs of great literary quality. In the case of Munis's marsiyah, however listeners or critics classify it, its popularity clearly spans men's and women's majlises, professional and non-professional performances, and a very wide range of South Asian communities.

Marsiyah as an "Event"

Examining Munis's poem as a complex "event" allows us to consider those elements of performance and popular piety that shape the marsiyah text every bit as much as authorial intent does. Reciters capitalize on South Asian majlis-goers' familiarity with nineteenth-century marsiyahs and their common religious knowledge. Earlier we saw that this shared knowledge facilitates thematic and lexical interplay among marsiyah texts and the many other variants of the Karbala tale. Many Shi'i acquaintances pointed out to me that their community strives very consciously to inculcate children with basic tenets of religious belief at a young age. The editor of the English book *Tragedy of Karbala* echoes many writers of instructional and informational guides when he declares,

> Strictly speaking, the book is exclusively meant for teaching and grooming 'Shia Youth.' It is entirely oriented on 'Shia' faith and at the same time it is based on

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> authentic historical record. However, it may serve anyone who may care to look for Truth.[41]

Some parents drill their children with lists of the twelve Imams and similar rote knowledge that distinguishes Shi'i priorities and precepts from those of the larger Muslim community. The Persian and Urdu scholar Dr. Naiyar Masud said (albeit somewhat jokingly) that he would be surprised indeed if most Shi'i children in Lucknow hadn't memorized this sort of information by the time they entered school.[42]

The majlis is generally the main site of early religious training, and the major setting for lively interplay between various recensions and dimensions of the Karbala story. As such, the mourning assembly resembles in important respects Bryant's conception of the performance context for Surdas's poems about the child-god Krishna:

> The fact of an omniscient audience who knows the whole course of our poet's story, and furthermore an audience of true believers who expect that story to stay on course, limits his major narrative choices to two. We may imagine the situation to be rather like having the whole story on tape, and the tape one that the audience has heard a hundred times before, The man controlling the tape, however, need not play it in its entirety. He still has two interpretive choices: when to turn it on, and when to turn it off. His choices will not affect the narrative; but they will most

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[41] Saiyid Sibt-e Ahmad Rizvi, introduction to Mohammad Zainul Abedin Rizvi, *Tragedy of Karbala*, no publication information, n.d., 1.

[42] Personal communication, 12/20/98. Some also retain *maulvī*s to tutor the young generation in Arabic and Quranic knowledge, and also to provide them with a thorough grounding in the history and belief that underlie Shi'i piety. This might involve studying the details of the Karbala incident in order to understand Imam Husain's importance. "When we were little," Syed Akbar Hyder recalls, "we often had questions about different characters from Karbala and their children and my *marḥūm* [late] *maulvī ṣāḥab* used to explain them to us . . ." (Personal communication, 8/25/01). The teacher might clarify, for example, confusion about how certain figures were related to one another, or render an opinion on the historical validity of certain incidents.

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certainly affect the audience's *reexperience* of the narrative.[43]

The (somewhat dated) tape player comparison only works in terms of the starting and ending points of a vaqiah, however. To extend such a technological analogy to the poet's use of poetic figures and diction, individual style and formulaic locutions, we might have to resort, and then only with partial success, to images of re-mixing or high-tech DJ creativity. These models of "sampling" and recombination might, despite their limitations, speak to both the phenomenon whereby marsiyahs or vaqiahs rendered by different poets play off of one another, and to the range of presentations of a single incident in a single marsiyah by different reciters.

If the previous chapter gave us some idea of how a nineteenth-century poet orchestrated conventionality and creativity once he chose where to "turn the tape on and off," creating a marsiyah that ultimately met with great popular enthusiasm, this chapter (and the related appendix) shows that reciters can enhance and individualize the text to craft personal styles and climactic moments. A bounded but malleable marsiyah is manipulated through lexical and topical choices, and through tune selection; it is also molded by performers' backgrounds, and through performer-listener interaction.

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[43] Kenneth E. Bryant, 45-46.

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Chapter Seven ". . . and the smell of my milk wafts from that blood;" Gender, Genre, Emotion, and Hierarchy in Marsiyah Performance

Introduction

In performance, *Lāsh Akbar kī* is a lingering elegy punctuated by the vain, poignant hope that Akbar, one of the best-loved martyr-heroes of the Karbala cycle, will live. Our range of five performances of this poem, supplemented by examples from other marsiyahs, permits some tentative conclusions about marsiyah assessment, evaluation and appeal in the majlis community. The highly charged environment of Shabih-e Zahra's majlis has already showcased the vitality of pious response, performer-audience interaction, and the marsiyah's intertextual allusions. These multi-leveled, ritualized communications make it quite clear that in the case of the marsiyah text "the concrete realm of performance" is "the locus of . . . communication between an 'utterer' and a 'receiver.'"[1] Regula Qureshi has used this terminology in her discussion of Urdu ghazal genres, within which she includes the nauhah and salam from the mourning assembly, and the observation certainly applies as well to the marsiyah recitations surveyed in the previous chapter.

Emotional impact, artfulness, demographics, and even literary criticism all contribute to the relationships among marsiyah texts, their reciters, and their listeners. Discussions of these criteria, however, are constantly, if often implicitly, structured by gender and gendered categories. Such categories frequently inform women's multi-faceted and enthusiastic engagement with the marsiyah; women seldom write marsiyahs, and sometimes even denigrate the quality of their own recitations and understandings of the

[1] Qureshi 1990, 464-465.

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genre.

Lament and "Backwardness"

We have already seen, starting in Chapter One, that a whole complex of factors links the "emotional" with the delicate, weak, or feminine in literary discourse about the marsiyah. Identifying individual emotional suffering as the key, or "real" stimulus for the uninhibited outpouring of grief in a majlis is one strategy used to claim that those who weep over the marsiyah are mainly ignorant and impoverished people wallowing in their own sorrows.[2] This view pervades everything that the Urdu scholar Muhammad Sadiq, for example, has to say about the marsiyah in any majlis situation.[3]

Other analysts retain the notion of a social and psychological catharsis, but frame the outpouring of emotions more positively as an outlet for the oppressed feelings of the downtrodden. Mary Hegland describes women's majlises in Peshawar as forums for women's otherwise repressed social and creative energies, while the journalist M. Laxmaiah says members of the rural scheduled castes in Andhra Pradesh connect Yazid's oppression of Husain with their own suffering and hopes for ultimate triumph.[4]

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[2] Wolf points out that Shi'i leaders of the nineteenth century similarly ascribed the most colorful and "superstitious" aspects of Muharram rites to "ignorant village people who were not fully conversant with Islam." "Return to Tears,"17.

[3] Also Qāsim Razā, personal communication, 6/97; Mashkur Husain "Yad," personal communication 3/97 ; Dr. Aġhā Muhammad Bāqir, personal communication, 12/20/96.

[4] Mary Elaine Hegland, "Popular Piety during Muharram: Shia Muslim Women and the Life Cycle in Peshawar, Pakistan," paper presented at the Twenty-third Annual Conference on South Asia, Madison, Wisconsin, 1994, 1; M. Laxmaiah, pers. comm., 11/98.

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Emotional "motivations," however, are more complex than these analyses suggest; one perspective within the female Shi'i community insists that one must firmly cast aside one's personal sorrows when lamenting the Prophet's family.[5] Other women take a certain comfort in relating the individual martyrs of majlis poetry to their own deceased relatives. I previously mentioned the elegant lady from Delhi who found that poems about Husain's son Ali Akbar attained a new and treasured significance for her after the death of her own beloved son.

It should be understood that among my consultants, the loss of a relative to untimely death is not an altogether rare occurrence; without straining to remember, I can count at least eight deaths of individuals under twenty years of age within a small group of my closest Lahore and Lucknow acquaintances. In Lahore, three men died in sectarian violence; in Lucknow, two young men, including a zakirah's adolescent son, died of "viral fevers," and another in an accident. Often, medical facilities that served my consultants' communities were not good or convenient, as was the case when the 10-year-old daughter of a prominent Shiah cleric in Lucknow passed away in 1998, or when my research assistant's father, still in his forties, suffered a painful, unexpected heart attack in Lahore in 1996.

Under such circumstances, many are the occasions on which a recent death within a family, partnered with poetic images of distraught Karbala survivors, renders mourners hysterical or physically ill with grief. In such a situation, my research assistant Sadaf Batūl said she negotiated what she felt were the dangers of either privileging or marginalizing

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[5] Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali documented this view in Lucknow in the 1820's:

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personal sorrow by asking herself during a majlis, "If I am in such pain over my father's death, what must Husain have felt, sacrificing his beloved family, one after the other?" Along the same lines, Akbar Hyder shows that in a marsiyah written in tribute to one of his patron's sons, Mir Anis "consoles the mother of Ahmad Navab by speaking through the spirit of her late son and reminding her that the women of Karbala had to endure a much more profound suffering":

> You [the mother of Ahmad Navab] are the pious devotee of the children of the Prophet!
> Each year you listen to commemorations of Ali's fine youths
> How proper your mindfulness of Shahr Bano's tribulation:
> The splendid Akbar died just as he attained his prime
>
> Just spare a thought for Qasim's mother
> May no mother in this world see such a wedding for her son
> Alas, that he was a groom in the evening
> And then died with the dawn, that moon-browed one
> Qasim's mother saw his body butchered with swords
> And saw his bride of one night beating herself over his corpse[6]

For some, ideal execution of the majlis demands distance from personal tragedy, while for many others, suffusing remembrance of the Karbala heroes with personal loss heightens the majlis experience in a perfectly appropriate way. In either case, and for men as well as women, Husain's tragedy is ideally taken to heart in a very personal way, rather than promoting a simple projection of one's own difficulties.

The Arms of the Prophet's Daughters and Bonds!: Women's Survival Narratives

The great sacrifice of Imam Husain defines Karbala commemorations, although a whole cast of characters struggled and died or survived there. If the majlis and marsiyah

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[6] Hyder 2000, 164-5. I have slightly modified Hyder's translation of the poem.

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extract every drop of lifeblood, exploit and embellish every possibility of narrative interest from the Karbala events, some modern declarations about the tragedy are more telegraphic and to the point; a popular bumper sticker available in neon pink or orange from Shi'i bookstores, for example, proclaims, "*Live like Ali; die like Husain!*" The motto echoes a sample of poetry we examined in Chapter One, which described Ali's mighty force and Husain's humble submission as summing up the essence of Islam.

Women's repeated invocations and tributes to Ali in the Qasr-e Zainab majlis suggest that they are fully appreciative of Ali's power as well as Husain's suffering, but how else might they relate to Karbala's involved narratives of struggle, triumph, and survival? Here it must be said that the facility for judgement or appreciation of marsiyah, however pervasive, is so internalized that it is often tacit, uncritical, and difficult for a researcher to access. As I discuss below, women tended to proffer general assessments of marsiyahs based on poetic content that is devotional, and thus always "good," or that is affiliated with a particular favorite Karbala martyr, or that is "realistic," or emotionally evocative, but many other factors also mediate their responses to the marsiyah.

Much literature on Muharram rites, and on marsiyah narratives, tends to slot the female experience at Karbala into the general categories labeled by Ayoub, "the nobility, beauty and suffering of the female captives."[7] The bulk of literary studies confine discussion of female characters to their weeping over fallen heroes. Even this stereotype is problematized by complex elements incorporated in heroes' deaths and laments over heroic martyrs, exemplified by Bano's boasting over Akbar even as his loss shatters her:

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[7] 159

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"Even in your dying agony, you asked for me; your love earns my devotion!
This blood-drenched face of yours earns your mother's devotion!
You battled thousands alone; your bravery earns my devotion!
I sacrifice myself over your suffering; your misery earns my devotion
Your mouth never even uttered the word 'water,' my precious!
Stabbed by the dagger's blade, you came back stoically silent, my precious!"[8]

Bano's utterances swing dramatically between proud expectation of Akbar's triumphant return and the reality of his bloodied, battered state. The tension between glory and heroic defeat, between pride and grief, dominates verse #5, paralleling poems about Husain's nephew Hazrat Qasim, slain in his wedding finery hours after becoming a bridegroom.

Women's *bain* is indeed a crucial, ritualized aspect of the marsiyah; it carries the weight of tradition believed to date back to Karbala itself, and elicits a sense of identification from listening mourners. Yet the great nineteenth-century *marsiyah-gos* also composed hundreds of poems that centered on the female captives' exhausting trek to Damascus; their further suffering, including the death of Sakinah in prison; Zainab's confrontations with Husain's tormenters, and the women's broken return to Medinah via Karbala upon their release from the jail. A survey of literary criticism on the marsiyah, however, would hardly lead us to think that whole vaqiahs, and even many entire marsiyahs, focus on female characters.

Nowhere perhaps, are strength and helplessness paired as dramatically as in portraits of the imam's sister, Hazrat Zainab. Zainab is known both for her defiance of evil forces and her unbearable suffering. Mir Anis, in one of dozens of classical marsiyahs that feature Zainab, depicts her rushing out from the women's quarters in response to the

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[8] See Chapter Four, verse 9.

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news of Husain's death:

> Casting aside the curtain, the daughter of Ali burst from the tent
> With quaking steps, doubled over, drowning in heart's blood
> She called out all about, whilst striking her head
> "Oh Karbala, reveal to me the whereabouts of your guest [Husain]!
> Mother, now this thirsting one's feet can't even move
> Take my arm and lead me to his corpse" [9]

Majlis lore is replete with incidents highlighting Zainab's protection of Zain-ul-abidin, the fourth Imam, her confrontations with Shimr and Yazid, eventual release from captivity, visits to the martyrs' graves, and initiation of majlis mourning. These narratives of survival ultimately relate moral victories, but they are hard-won, desolate victories indeed.

The figure of Zainab has garnered a fair amount of attention from scholars of South Asia as a remarkable example of gender role reversal. Carl Ernst and David Pinault, looking to Zainab's defiance of Yazid and her role as leader and custodian of the imamate when Husain's men have been vanquished, describe her as an assertive model for Shi'i women.[10] Zainab's behavior in majlis narratives, they seem to suggest, represents a gender inversion quite unprecedented in the Islamic world.

Certainly, Zainab's selfless actions and confident speeches as depicted by Anis, Dabir, and others, make her one of the most prominent characters in the marsiyah. In a verse from *Farzand-e payambar kā Medīnah se safar hai*, an Anis marsiyah from the literary canon that is also popular in performance, Zainab explains the reasons for her family's departure from Medīnah:

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[9] *Bazm-e Anīs*, 369.

[10] Pinault 2001, 73. 84-5; Ernst, personal communication, 10/16/99.

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The king's sister said to the noblewomen
"Fate now carries us off, away from Yathrib[11]
There's no living in this city, by any means
Letter arrives upon letter,[12] so that Shabbir is compelled to go
I myself am regretful beyond words
But I couldn't live if separated from my brother"

Said Zainab, "The just king calls us;
The howdahs and camel-litters are waiting at the gate
By evening we'll make halting-point for this day's march
Come, bid farewell to the local folk; what will weeping get you now?
The breeze blows chill now that it's dawn
But it'll be a searing journey, and we've some little ones with us"[13]

In a twenty-eight verse vaqiah from *Jab Qata' kī*, Anis's most famous marsiyah, Husain defers to Zainab in the matter of who will become his standard-bearer;

"Now I'll present the army's standard to whomever you recommend"
Responded she, "Whatever is the advice of the King of heavenly rank"
"From the day the gentle Zahrā passed on," he said
"I've considered that you fulfill the role of my mother."[14]

Just a few verses earlier, Zainab has tartly taken her own pre-pubescent sons to task for having the effrontery to want to the standard-bearer post:

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[11] Another name for Medīnah.

[12] i.e. letters urging Husain to come to Kūfah, where supporters awaited his leadership.

[13] Sālihah 'Ābid Husain, ed. *Anīs ke marsiye*, vol. 2, 104-105. Taped recitation, May 9, 1997, Lahore.

[14] *Bazm-e Anīs*, 340, verse 71.

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"You yearn after such a lofty station at such a young age!
If so, contrive some way of increasing your height
It's true this is evidence of your courage, and I am devoted to you
Indeed, no one your age can compare
But one must think, deliberate, weigh all considerations
Why yearn after something that cannot be?"[15]

In short order, though, she proudly dispatches the boys to battle, where they fight valiantly before being slain.

Zainab's competence and authority are quite unique, but it does not follow that the women at Karbala are otherwise always portrayed as noble, beautiful, and long-suffering, while bravery, defiance, and eloquence are qualities of the menfolk. If that were the case, we would have to proclaim portrayals of Husain, Abbas, and Akbar as vulnerable, tender-hearted, and tearful as "gender inversions," as remarkable as depictions of a fearless Zainab. Urdu literary critics would indeed have us believe these characterizations are peculiar, and Pinault holds "male helplessness at Karbala" responsible for "role reversals and unexpected inversions of traditional gender-linked behavior."[16] In the Urdu-speaking majlis community, however, women are more often centralized as thinkers and actors than most commentarial literature reveals.

Shabih-us Zahra not only punctuated her sermon with allusions to Fatimah's piety, but used hadiths, folk traditions, and anecdotes to point to a central theme of Fatimah as the source of the Imamate. Marsiyah episodes featuring the power Sakīnah exerts over her father, Zainab's protection of the invalid Zain-ul 'abidīn, and Bano's often eloquent

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[15] *Bazm-e Anīs*, 338, verse 338.

[16] 2001, 73.

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interaction with male characters are all well-ensconced elements of the tragic cycle. When it comes to the male heroes, Husain's intermittent weeping and Akbar's laments over the bride and offspring he will never have are as integral to their portrayals as their prowess on the battlefield or their devotion to prayer, duty, and God. The verse of Munis's that combines the martial image of a "troop massing" with Husain's weeping over his daughter Sughra may be heavy-handed, but it references the tender-heartedness that is the essence of Husain's character. It is Husain's sensitivity, after all, that is the measure of the toll his continual sacrifice exacts.

Zainab, often titled *shahzādī*, "Princess," in the marsiyah, appears in public, unveiled, to curse the monstrous Yazid to his face, seemingly heedless of the dignity and protection usually accorded the women of the holy family. This image is of course a startling one. But the simple facts that Yazid attempts (and fails) to humiliate the women by unveiling them, and that Zainab has the wit and passion to taunt the Caliph, do not amount to her assuming a "male" role. Casual perusal of any Shi'i bookstore usually yields at least several titles that focus exclusively on the many "brave women of Karbala," and other Islamic heroines.[17] These hardly substantiate the idea that Zainab epitomizes a unique, "male" style of leadership in the vacuum left by a "feminized," defeated Husain. Zainab may transgress some conventional feminine behaviors, but hers is hardly a conventional situation, and the impact of the scene hinges on her femininity, on her status

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[17] See Salihah 'Ābid Husain, *Khavātīn-e Karbalā Kalām-e Anīs Meñ*; Parvānah Rudaulvī, *Karbalā kī Bahādur Khāvatīn* (Lahore: no publisher, n.d.); 'Ā'ishah bint inshaṭī Miṣrī, *Karbalā kī Sherdil Khātūn* (Lahore: Maktabah Imamiyah Mission, 1996).

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as sister, daughter, and mother.[18]

From the majlis standpoint, Zainab's victories and accomplishments arise, of necessity from horrific, sorrowful events, and Husain's defeat is transcended through spiritual achievement that benefits the whole Muslim community. Members of the imam's family, heroes and heroines alike, bear an inherent nobility and purity that transforms the most intense of humiliations into triumph. As Akbar Hyder points out, what Zainab's public exposure ultimately brings home to listeners is the unmitigated evil of the imam's enemies, rather than any actual disgrace of the holy family.[19] A marsiyah by Anis has even Husain's heartless enemies crediting Zainab with so much loyalty to Husain that she *chooses* to relinquish her veil to pay respect to his dead body:

> The people of Kufah speak amongst themselves:
> "Now, after the battle they'll be bonds on Zainab's hands
> Her head will be unveiled, so she can provide her brother a shroud
> We'll burn the tents and abscond with the goods of the holy ones [20]
>
> *Kūfe ke log karte haiñ āpas meñ yeh sukhan*
> *Ab ba'd-e fatah bazū-e Zainab hai aur rasan*
> *Sar par ridā nah hogī kih bhā'ī ko de kafan*
> *Khemah jalā ke lūtenge asbāb-e panjatan*

Zainab's position as the daughter of Zahra (and Ali) and sister of Husain makes her role, defiant though it is, an accepted narrative of both femininity and of authority. Abbas and Akbar are seen constantly deferring to her, and Husain seeking her counsel, in dozens

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[18] See also Akbar Hyder on Zainab asserting herself through a "narrative of femininity." 98.

[19] 95.

[20] *Jab badbān-e kishtī-e shāh -e umam girā*; see Akbar Hyder, .

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of marsiyahs, so her respected status does not simply devolve by default after Husain's death. The character of the long-suffering Fatimah is depicted quite differently. She is reputed to have stood up for her rights when wronged by the Prophet's companions, but her most highly-touted virtues lie in veiling, piety, and obedience. There is no more reason to suppose, though, that a simplified, one-dimensional interpretation of Fatimah's character ("associated with passive mourning and eternal suffering"[21]) is a predominant model for Shi'i women, with Zainab posed as a subversive alternative, than to suppose that Ali represents a "better" masculine ideal than Husain.

The notion that Shi'i women consciously mold Zainab into a powerful, politically relevant behavioral model has quite possibly, without adequate field verification, been transported wholesale to scholarly literature on India and Pakistan from an Iranian model. Phenomena such as the armed "sisters of Zainab" (*khvāharān-e Zainab*) playing an active role in post-revolutionary Iranian society and of Iranian women taking ownership of the symbolic language of veiling are certainly important ones. David Pinault even suggests that the assertive Zainab-like roles that some women took on during the revolution have become a vexing one for the clerical patriarchy to control in its aftermath. Yet linking mythical models and behavior on the ground is always somewhat problematic, and where women do affix Zainab's name to new movements, the result is not always the clear-cut defiant or assertive role that Pinault's reference to "commandos of Zainab" might suggest.[22] The "sisters of Zainab" organization, for example has been described as "the women's

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[21] Pinault 2001, 83.

[22] 84-85.

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state/vigilante group in charge of checking women's public behavior in Iran today."[23] Neither does Pinault establish that Zainab is a singular, dominant "women's role model" among South Asian Shiahs.

It is true that some South Asian Shiahs have absorbed reformist views similar to those popular in Iran concerning limiting bloodletting during matam, "masculinizing" Husain's character, aligning majlis poetry with attested history, and sobering up sometimes carnivalesque observances in the name of Muharram.[24] However, as Pinault himself takes pains to point out, such efforts vie constantly with localized expressions of popular piety that show no signs of dying out any time soon. My own hundreds of structured and unstructured interviews with Shi'i women all over India and Pakistan revealed deep reverence for Zainab, Fatimah, Kulsum, Rabab, Shahr Bano, Sakinah and other Karbala women, but failed to suggest that Zainab's image spurred ordinary women to adopt special assertive, outspoken, or transgressive behaviors.

The idea of identification with the women of Karbala is a powerful tool when wielded by the preacher on the minbar, and many women who address majlises comport themselves with confidence and eloquence that implicitly recall Zainab as the first convener of majlises. Such identification may have very limited or discernable conscious impact on the majority of female majlis-goers in their day-to-day lives, but the similarities and

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[23] Afsaneh Najmabadi, personal communication, 5/02.

[24] Korom 2002; Wolf, "Embodiment and Ambivalence"; Hamid Dabashi and Peter Chelkowski, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

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differences between Husain and Zainab are exquisitely implied. The manner in which Zainab's sex distinguishes her suffering is a keen reminder of the differences between men's and women's worlds.

In a majlis poem recited by Āminah Ja'far of Hyderabad, the performer's delivery of the whole text is moving, but there is something especially touching, in the context of the women's majlis, in Zainab grimly facing her responsibilities in the world of women, while Abbas ventures forth to fight. Like Zainab herself, female majlis performers' identities and survival are both largely shaped by the work of keeping the flame kindled:

> Remembrance of Husain's sorrow still ornaments our gathering
> The lamp has been extinguished, but the light remains
> The chain of tears of sorrow for Husain is never severed
> Fatimah's handkerchief stays damp forever
> The tents were uprooted from the Euphrates, but
> The brow of Abbas remains raised in a scowl
> When Abbas sought permission to enter the battlefield
> Zainab was simply left regarding her own arms [25]

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[25] For the vaqiah of the tents uprooted from the banks of the river, see Mirza Dabir's marsiyah in Chapter Two. The next line refers to Abbas, the standard-bearer who was Husain's half-brother. Abbas is known for his passionate loyalty and anger (thus the furrowed brow), and for his determination to fetch water for the dying children of Husain's camp. As Abbas tried to convey his filled waterskin back from the Euphrates, Yazid's forces severed his arms (thus the reference to Zainab's *bāzū*, "arm," or "companion/supporter" in the next line) and eventually killed him.

In the majlis context, the word *bāzū* also specifically refers to the vocal accompanists who hum a drone and join in with the main marsiyah or soz reciter on the last lines of verses. As Zainab is credited with initiating morning assemblies for Husain, *bazu* has at least two possible meanings here: Zainab looks to those who will accompany her in mourning rituals, or (in the obvious interpretation) gazes at her own arms, soon to be chafed by the enemies' bonds. The identification between the arms of Zainab and Abbas recalls juxtapositions of the headless Husain and the unveiled Zainab, the shroudless Akbar and his exposed mother, and other poetic parallels often drawn between the male martyrs and female survivors.

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"The lamp has been extinguished, but the light remains:" Gender and Performance

Āminah's poem speaks to all ritual remembrance of Karbala, but has a special relevance to the duty of the majlis reciter to keep Husain's "light" kindled in memory. A wide range of female majlis "performers," including the preacher, present Husain's family tragedy, whether with passion and rhetorical flair, or with unadorned, dutiful execution. We have seen that a rich emotional texture and varied levels of artistic expression characterizes even our necessarily limited sampling of women's mourning assemblies. Nonetheless, a number of educated Shi'i women, such as the Karachi marsiyah-writer Tasvīr Fāṭimah, subscribe to the view that typical women's majlises, steeped in hyperbole and bathos, offer no opportunity for the appreciation of serious poetry: "There's a whole crowd present," Tasvir says, "but one completely unacquainted with poetic taste."[26]

Marsiyah critics and connoisseurs, too, frequently imply that men's majlises provide a forum for poetic competition and artistry somewhat similar to that of a secular poetic **mushā'irah*, while women's majlises privilege extremes of sentiment, especially a "disproportionate" emphasis on *bain*, or lament. Such gendered classifications of emotion are hardly confined, of course, to Muslim contexts or to South Asia. As William M. Reddy points out, anthropologists have critiqued "a gender-biased, Western view of the self that privileges alleged male rationality over the supposedly natural emotionalism of women," and "a number of philosophers, historians, and literary critics concerned with gender have

[26] 1998, 68-69.

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recognized the political implications of the West's gendered conception of emotions."[27]

Diane Bell finds that many religious scholars are predisposed to "misread" ritual because of assumptions about gender. Her own research in Australian aboriginal communities seeks to redress such misconceptions as the following:

> Women's ritual activity, their work, has been seen of concern to women only, while that of the men is seen as of concern to the whole society. Men celebrate themes of a broad cohesive nature; women have narrow, personal, and particularistic themes and influences. [28]

Invoking very a similar dichotomy, Mashkūr Husain Yād, a Shi'i poet from Lahore, complained of the "limitations," localization, and "narrow vision" in "sentimental" women's majlises, as opposed to what Yād felt *should* be emphasized: the universally relevant "tragic" dimensions of Husain's decision to die for a principle.[29] Yād, stating explicitly what many critics merely insinuate, associated blinkered views, tears, and mediocre performances of half-comprehended poetry with women. How does our recitation sample accord with these claims?

In every region, there are marsiyah reciters, both male and female who, even if amateur, are highly trained or talented. Among the least artful of amateur performers, though, the pace of marsiyah recitation seems to be generally slower and more melismatic among men than among women. The amateur male performers in my sample recordings

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[27] William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling : A Framework for the History of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 41-42; 112.

[28] "Women's Business is Hard Work: Central Australian Aboriginal Women's Love Rituals," in Grimes, ed. *Readings in Ritual Studies*, 38.

[29] Personal communication 2/9/97.

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also pay more attention to articulating the text clearly and in unison than do most groups of female marsiyah reciters. It is also true that, in this sample, careful articulation, pronunciation, and vocal unison are generally maintained much more consistently in the men's performances. Sibt-e Jafar's rendition (example #2) of *Lāsh Akbar kī*, with its slow speed, melodic complexity, and clearly audible text, is certainly the most aesthetically controlled of the five.

In women's majlises, one of the most significant, though not absolute, demarcations between professional and amateur reciters is the degree of actual participation in weeping and lament on the part of performers as the poem is rendered. A number of majlis organizers, in Hyderabad most notably, even said they avoided retaining professionals because their skilled recitations potentially created a distancing effect in two ways: listeners might become more an "audience" than participants, and the emphasis on aesthetic beauty might outweigh "believable" expression of pain and sorrow.

The male performers, whether amateur (example #1) or professional (example #2) showed little inclination to break down or weep as they recite. Of the women's performances, example #5, the only one by amateurs, is the most "uncontrolled" and impassioned; an older woman with a hoarse, tuneless voice leads the group, often delivering lines in a raw shout, intermittently sobbing, and liberally inserting exhortations and exclamations of "aré!" The younger women who recite with her generally follow her lead, remaining more in unison with one another than with her. Their recitation tends towards the syllabic, rather than the melismatic, except at the end of lines, where final vowels are often drawn out over several notes.

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This group performs fairly early on in a long series of reciters, in a line-up designed to feature the most expert or professional reciters after the less experienced. The women keep their voices low-pitched and loud, whereas often nowadays younger female reciters, especially perhaps the more gifted among amateurs, strive for a *bārīk*, "delicate," voice profile.

The audiences in examples #2 and #5 respond to the marsiyah in ways that accord with the performers' delivery styles. Sibt-e Jafar displays musical and textual control, and his select, educated audience sobs audibly, but softly. Jafar's actions at times virtually "illustrate" the text; in verse two, for example, when reciting the couplet, "Have your last look, our son is dying/Before our eyes, this light of our lives is dying," he motions delicately towards his eyes. In verse four, as he chants precisely, "When she (Bāno) saw Ali Akbar motionless upon the King's shoulder/She extended her hands and screamed, 'Alas, alas, my precious one!'" he spreads both hands to replicate Bano's stunned disbelief. At these points, and during verses three and four, as the reactions of the women to Husain's arrival with Akbar are described, the men sitting closest to Sibt-e Jafar begin to weep in earnest. One man seated directly in front of the performer mops his tears constantly with a handkerchief, issuing sobs that wrack his entire body. When the reciter brings his short version of *Lāsh Akbar kī* to a powerful conclusion, his listeners sigh and exclaim "*subḥanallah!*" The large audience at Ahmed House, meanwhile, wailed and cried, echoing the raw emotions expressed by the oldest, loudest reciter. The intensity of weeping and moaning intensified on the emphatic final couplets of each verse and also built throughout the recitation.

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Despite the range of recitation styles, responses, and actual poetic renditions produced, the five recorded performances contains closely related versions of a single text—especially in the first three short examples—that blend a tribute to heroism with desperate bereavement, but certainly privilege "lament" over heroic description in terms of verse selection.

In our sample range, "bain" dominates men's performances every bit as much as it does women's. It is only, in fact, with the longer recited versions of *Lāsh Akbar kī* that enough detail and context emerge to draw out the nuanced emotional contour, the complexity of anger, betrayal, parental love, and heroic sentiment, that balances the pure lament in Akbar's death scene. As it happens, two women's renditions of *Lāsh Akbar kī* (examples #4 and #5) offer longer recitations, more innovations in verse order and interpolation, and, arguably, more impassioned, spontaneous energy than the other performances.

Defining the "Good Marsiyah" in Literary and Majlis Discourse

The fact is that many pious majlis-goers of either sex focus intensely on the Karbala martyrs, expressing devotion, pleading for intercession, and forging personal identifications with them. Chapter One introduced the dilemma that literary critics of the marsiyah have imposed upon themselves by problematizing the "sentimental:" should critics castigate or rationalize the genre's "excess" of "unmanly" sentiment? This anxiety would until recently probably have mystified most majlis-goers, and, like the anxiety over violent, bloody matam performed by men in more public rituals, is still largely confined to the sphere of educated reformers, though that pattern is unquestionably changing.

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One concern of modernist reformers within the Shi'i community is the impression that seemingly "backward" or "savage" Shiahs might make on outsiders with impassioned mourning and flagellation.[30] The impetus for this kind of concern has a substantial history conditioned in part by sectarian sentiment. Wolf notes, for example, that the Sunni theologian Shāh Abdul 'Azīz, prominent in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, "branded Shiahs 'childish' for their mimetic performances and for their belief in the martyr's spiritual presence." 'Azīz also "criticized the mournful affective dimension of Shi'i piety, . . . of 'weeping, making images and playing instruments in acts of worship."[31] Muhammad Sadiq's aversion to majlis "bathos" is a latter-day, literary approach allied with this view, and Sadiq's legacy of judgements against the marsiyah that continues to makes itself felt today.[32]

Many literary commentators would assert that Munis's doleful text, lacking as it is in martial drama, is far better suited to melodic recitation than to declamatory, spoken delivery. I pointed out in the previous chapter that framing the different delivery styles as

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[30] Pinault 2001, 32-33.

[31] "Return to Tears." See also Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *Shah Abd Al-Aziz: Puritanism, Sectarian Polemics, and Jihad* (Canberra: Marifat Publishing House, 1982), 337-38.

[32] It must be said that at least few of today's active and prolific commentators on the marsiyah, such as Sayyida Jafar of Hyderabad, dismiss the Sadiqian bias against vulnerability and lament as outdated, and of little relevance to those who truly know the genre. Personal communication, 11/98. Still, Sadiq's work still has a substantial readership among educated people who enjoy dabbling in Urdu literature. I heard his *History of Urdu Literature* praised often among members of the Lucknow elite who wanted to familiarize themselves with the literary heritage with which they had lost touch in the course of their English-medium educations.

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indicative of two marsiyah "sub-genres" is problematic, in part because a number of marsiyahs are recited in both taht-ul-lafz (*taḥt-ul-lafẓ*) or sozkhvani, and appear both in the shortened anthology versions intended for the majlis recitations and in "literary" recensions. Differences in delivery style are real, but they do not reflect different genres or exclusively male or female realms of performance.

That said, each delivery style does tend to favor certain types of diction and content from within a lengthy marsiyah text. Taht-ul-lafz recitations have traditionally dwelt on lavish set-pieces that describe the morning of the battle or Husain's army assembling for their last group prayer, or one of the heroes (usually Abbas, Akbar, or Husain himself) on the battlefield. In the Karachi majlis from which example #2 is drawn, Sibt-e Jafar's *Lāsh Akbar kī* was followed by a *jadīd* (modern) marsiyah rendered in taht-ul-lafz, an example of a relatively recent poetic trend that stresses straightforward exploration of character, principles, and imamite teachings.

This newly-minted poem, written and recited by the professor Dr. Hilāl Naqvī, probes the moral compulsion that led Ḥurr, the general who halted Husain's progress towards Kūfah, to ultimately turn against his leader Ibn Ziyad and join the Imam's doomed forces. While poems about Ḥurr form one of the standard classical marsiyah themes, Naqvi's marsiyah dwells less on the actual telling of Ḥurr's tale than its philosophical and ethical implications.

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Hur is synonymous with life, and with perception
Hur is the epitome of active excellence in warfare and in social grace
Hur represents the best of the ideology
For an age whose revolution should be interwoven with blazing passion
He is engaged every moment with setting things right
Hur represents man's innermost virtues [33]

Compared with elaborated martial or ethical themes, in some ways Munis's poem does indeed fit the stereotypical model of the short, pathos-ridden marsiyah, the model that attracts so much scorn from the genre's harshest critics. This is not a poem replete with the battle scenes or praises of the warriors' horses and swords that Sadiq, and even such a usually sensitive critic as Mas'ūd Hasan Rizvi 'Adīb, are inclined to valorize as the best of the marsiyah.[34] Nonetheless, the architecture of Munis's dual vaqiahs, and the details of character portrayal—whether Akbar's brave front in the face of death alternating with all-too-human vulnerability, or Sughra's immense sisterly devotion and almost sullen self-pity—hardly mesh with Muhammad Sadiq's blanket notions of a genre marred by a "limited scope for subtlety in characterization," by "verbal fireworks," and by generally "pathetic" depictions of Husain and his family.[35]

We have seen ample evidence that the invariable presence in "martial" marsiyahs of passages that resemble the most sorrowful in *Lāsh Akbar kī* similarly trouble the critics and

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[33] See "Hurr," in Dr. Hilāl Naqvi, *Azān-e maqtal* (Karachi: Muhammadī Trust, 1994), 150, verse 4.

[34] *Razm-nāmah-e Anīs* (Lucknow: Kitāb Nagar, 1951). In this book, Adīb combines the martial segments of numerous poems into one "ideal" marsiyah. For a classic example of the "praise of the sword," in a marsiyah, see the excerpt from a Dabir poem. in Appendix F.

[35] Muhammad Sadiq 1984: 209; 211.

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their classification schemes. As the Urdu professor Aġhā Muhammad Bāqir complained, the enemy in the marsiyah is so terrifying and the imam so vulnerable that they challenge the "idea of a hero." A poet should preserve the hero's stature, displaying *hifẓ-e marātib*, "protection of status."[36]

Maintaining a distance from the complexities of marsiyah's ritual performance context allows Sadiq and his ilk to avoid addressing the co-existence of their most and least favorite aspects of the genre. Ironically, though, these literary scholars' dismay at perpetual weeping and showy phraseology seem to have begun trickling down into the discourse of those who attend majlises. In discussions about what constitutes a "good" marsiyah, Shi'i women frequently proffered some variation on this theme: "All marsiyahs are inherently good, because the subject matter is good." "Good" here stood as a gloss for religious, moral, or devotional. But a fervent, reformist-influenced assertion also cropped up sporadically: the remark that aesthetic beauty merits no consideration in majlis genres. I was told, for example, that the marsiyah, as a narration of the Karbala incident, "is truth, not poetry" (*yeh shā'irī nahīn hai, haqīqat hai!*).[37]

Both of these comments tend to foreclose detailed discussion of the criteria for judging a marsiyah, although majlis attendees invariably assess the quality of marsiyahs in one way or another as they respond to and participate in marsiyah performances. Both statements also curiously refract some of the sentiments expressed so frequently in literary

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[36] Personal communication, 12/20/96.

[37] This comment was made in March 1997 by an outspoken middle-aged woman participating in a ritual at the Bāb-al-Hawa'ij shrine, in Lahore.

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criticism: the concern for moral, high-minded content, and the tension between artistic "poetry" and "truth" or "realism." The declaration about "truth" versus poetry surely reflects an increasingly-expressed concern that hyperbolic description in the marsiyah and the inclusion of well-loved vaqiahs such as Hazrat Qasim's battlefield wedding, and Sughra's detailed message to Akbar, might confuse or compromise the historical authenticity of the Karbala tragedy.

David Pinault points out a parallel phenomenon in the case of flagellation and "bloody" matam. On one hand, even relatively uneducated majlis-goers have imbibed to some extent the reformist clerics' anxiety that expressions of devotion and grief such as blood-letting, which Carl Ernst has described as "in-your-face" actions, may stigmatize the Shi'i community and distract mourners from the "historical facts" of Karbala.[38] On the other, criticisms of ritual bloodshed, or of "exaggerated," unrealistic poetic accounts of Karbala, still fail to divert the majority of Shiahs from the demonstrations of love, lament, and belief in the *mas'umīn*'s powers of intervention that they feel identify their community most fundamentally as the partisans of the Prophet's household.[39]

On several levels of written and spoken discourse, a fissure appears to differentiate reform-minded, educated (often, but not exclusively, male) Shiahs who espouse "rational thinking," and muscular, martial marsiyah poetry, and shun flagellation and hysterical majlis weeping, from less affluent devotees who value all the performative embellishments of Muharram as critical manifestations of piety and opportunities to highlight the tragedy of

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[38] Carl Ernst, personal communication, 10/99

[39] Pinault 1992, 120; 2001, 96-7.

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Karbala. Pinault has argued that developments in Iran drive some of the recent clerical moves towards making South Asian Muharram more austere (i.e. less bloody, less weepy). Some of my anecdotal evidence supports this, as well: several highly- educated Shiahs in Lucknow approvingly described Iranian rites they had witnessed that were markedly free of physical matam, and a number of young Iranian women of my acquaintance strongly disapproved of the "backwardness" and "weakness" implicated in excessive tearfulness during Muharram. Those who expressed these opinions were all elites, yet the trickle-down effect—and sometimes the direct and insistent hectoring—of those determined to create Islamic "authenticity" anew results in a divide that is in fact more complex than a purely class- or a gender-based explanation would suggest.

A believer could adopt one of many stances that lie somewhere between "superstitious" beliefs that, say, the Karbala martyrs can be prevailed upon to provide good husbands, and the desire to purge from the majlis any reference that cannot be supported by the Quran or early Shi'i-approved hadith. Anxieties about practicing "real," unadulterated Islam, and imbibing "true" Islamic history—including a verifiable Karbala narrative—now breach the class divide, and are apparent in some of the most economically humble of Shi'i neighborhoods. Pious lower-middle class Shiahs, then, and especially women whose ritual and social lives center around majlises, may find themselves criticizing flowery or sentimental marsiyahs one minute and lovingly reciting and weeping over them the next.

When the question becomes one of how "good" a specific reciter's performance is, factors such as familiarity, the raw intensity of devotion, or the level of perceived expertise wielded may all weigh in, and professional performers may leverage certain aspects of

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"expertise" to bolster their standing. I have indicated that some women's criteria for judging marsiyahs pit skill against authentic feeling, yet what many perceive as expertise in performances of *Lāsh Akbar kī* seems to have a great deal to do with how "artful" and how "poet-like" the presenters are.

Not only literary critics, but listeners, and even more so, reciters, tacitly relate literary glory to taht-ul-lafz and to performances in which poets themselves recite, as opposed to melodic marsiyah recitations.[40] In taht-ul-lafz performances, as in mushairahs, the recitation of works by poets themselves whenever possible is a long-standing and valued tradition. As we saw in Chapter One, the famous nineteenth-century marsiyah poets received accolades for the style of their recitations as well for the quality of their poetry itself. Interestingly Sibt-e Jafar of Karachi, an expert in melodic renderings of soz and marsiyah, garners appreciation only in part through his sheer vocal talent and reference to art music; he also adopts aspects of a delivery style that listeners intuitively or habitually associate with a poet's individual, cultivated "stage personality."[41]

If Sibt-e Jafar's recitation stands at one end of a spectrum of most to least "expert" performances in my sample, example #5, by the large group of female performers, would figure as the least expert. As we saw in the previous chapter, these reciters had difficulty maintaining unison and remembering the wording of the text, particularly in the last verse. Sibt-e Jafar's rendering, meanwhile, exemplifies certain precepts cited by Qureshi for the

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[40] This respect figures in historical accounts of the great marsiyah poets, as well as contemporary majlis settings. See Naiyar Masud, *Marsiyah-khvani ka fan*, Murtazā Husain Fāzal Lakhnavī, *Javāhar-e Dabīr*.

[41] See Qureshi 1990 and Appendix D.

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appropriate rendering of Urdu poetry in an artistically demanding mushairah setting; these manifest in example #5 hardly at all. Specifically, melodic renderings (*tarannum*) of ghazal poetry often capitalize on "the personal vocal profile, including mimetic and gestural support, which poets cultivate as part of their creative personality."[42] This description certainly recalls Sibt-e Jafar's carefully modulated voice, unified vocal accompaniment, and paralinguistic elaborations.

The reciters in example #5 privilege none of these characteristics, but rather deliver the marsiyah with intensity, high volume, and a vocal approximation of weeping. They also execute their performance at a relatively rapid pace, completing their twelve-verse rendition in just under eleven minutes. This amounts to a minute or even less devoted to each verse, although the version includes significantly more line repetitions than does Sibt-e Jafar's. In most ghazal performances, and certainly in Sibt-e Jafar's sozkhvani, recitation is considerably slower. His five-stanza version of *Lāsh Akbar kī* (example #2) takes over eight minutes with at least a minute-and-a-half devoted to each verse. The slower speed of example #2 complements a "consistent enunciation and weighting of consonants" and "the differential tonal representation of long and short vowels, of voiced consonants, and of the *e muet*" also emphasized in the ghazal's art music settings and in sozkhvani, but not in the Ahmed House performance.[43]

How do listeners respond to perceived skill and expertise on the part of performers? Norms of conduct in men's majlises that feature taht-ul-lafz marsiyah recitation call for the

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[42] 1990, 474-5.

[43] See Qureshi 1990, 471.

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audience to provide *dād*, verbal approbation of the text and of recitation skills.[44] Where expert melodic renderings take pride of place, or in the rare instance where women perform taht-ul-lafz marsiyah, something of same protocol may prevail in women's assemblies (especially in Lahore and in Uttar Pradesh); the Qasr-e Zainab women's majlis featured in our early chapters also exemplified a high level of enthusiastic, spontaneous commentary, as well as call and response.

Overt verbal appreciation is completely alien, however, to some women's majlises that are smaller or are addressed only by amateur reciters. With a few exceptions, women's amateur, group-based marsiyah recitations stress communal expression more than individual solo performance, limiting the attempt at "poet-like" delivery. A tension between personal "pride" and "piety" can make any majlis-goer ambivalent about reciters or poets "flaunting" their skill, but the quandary over whether to appear devout rather than boastful emerges more noticeably in certain communities; for example, knowledgeable amateur reciters in the old city of Hyderabad's insular majlis circles, as well as women in general, often openly described others' artistic "pride" as excessive. The "others" might be Lucknow folk, professional performers, or even classical marsiyah poets.

Many majlis-goers told me, for instance, that paying attention to the authorship of marsiyahs was simply not important, or even proper, in the devotional context of the majlis. Although in fact many Urdu-speaking Shiahs of almost all levels of class and education casually absorb and transmit detailed information about poetic attributions and lineages

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[44] *Dād* in majlises, of which we saw some examples (such as the cries of "*Subḥānallah!*") in Chapters Two and Three, typically draws significantly on precedents in mushairahs or musical performances.

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within their families, these consultants asserted that most listeners and performers simply do not care about such issues. The marsiyah, they stressed, should be considered the community property of majlis devotees, rather than the individual creative work of one person. Perhaps in keeping with this precept, most majlis recitations differ from performances of other Urdu genres, including musical renderings of the ghazal, in that they do not conclude with a final written verse, a *maqtah*, which includes the poet's takhallus or pen name. In fact, no melodic performance in the hundreds of majlises I attended incorporated a last verse with the poet's signature, a rather notable exception to not only Urdu and Hindi devotional traditions, but to performance practice in the genres of many other South Asian languages.

In cases where women recite marsiyahs by poets in their families in taht-ul-lafz, or write marsiyahs themselves, the already complex systems for exhibiting pride and piety, and for ritual and aesthetic criticism, can vie noticeably with one another. Even if skilled taht-ul-lafz recitation elicits tears and groans, it also nearly always calls for cries of praise at clever turns of phrase or elegant diction. Generally, then, appreciation of taht-ul-lafz requires alert listening more than, or at least alongside, spontaneous sorrowful response or ready participation. It seems likely that what frustrated the young marsiyah writer Tasvīr Fāṭimah so when she ventured into Karachi women's majlises to present her taht-ul-lafz marsiyahs was not women's ignorant sentimentality, but their expectation to participate more than an enthusiastic but reserved mushairah "audience" would.

It is the case, then, that audiences composed of men and women, the educated and uneducated, Urdu-speakers and speakers of other regional languages, can differ

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demonstrably in modes of appreciation for the marsiyah. Today, a certain class of male majlis-goer may prefer martial, declamatory marsiyahs to the exclusion of all other dimensions of the Karbala tragedy. Still, as listeners' openly-expressed grief during Sibt-e Jafar's performance indicates, little stigma attaches to male weeping in the majlis.

Aesthetic enjoyment and perceptible grief are constants in the majlis, but their proportions can be weighted in one direction or another. These experiences can also be modulated by preference for taht-ul-lafz as opposed to "sozkhvani" marsiyahs, different degrees and modes of active participation, and inattention or detailed attention to expertise in a recitation. The creative and interesting variety manifested in five versions of just one sample marsiyah by Munis also indicates just how much the marsiyah canon can adapt to various majlis environments. We must not lose sight of the reality, however, that what is shared by a remarkably broad spectrum of Urdu-speaking majlis- goers is a very similar body of texts, and often the very same core marsiyahs.

Let us suspend for a moment what we know of the complex demographics of majlis communities and the manipulability of the marsiyah itself, and imagine a generic version of one of the core marsiyahs and an "average" majlis-goer, with something like a middle or high school level of education, who attends at the very least twenty mourning assemblies during Muharram. Extrapolating from dozens of interviews with South Asian Shiahs who fit this profile, I would hazard that this individual's sense of a marsiyah's textual and melodic variety, and of the quality of delivery, might be compared to the appreciation the avid, but not especially discerning, modern admirer of Christmas carols expresses for those seasonal religious songs.

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This analogy has its limitations, but both genres do include narratives about a religious event and about commemorations of that event. Poems about divine praise for Husain's martyrdom form counterparts to songs about the glory of Jesus's birth, while verses that describe Shiahs baring their heads and wearing black compare with references to Christmas finery and celebratory customs.[45] Perhaps more to the point, hymnals compiled by different Christian denominations—and sometimes a single hymnal—contain various tunes, some better known than others, for well-known carols. Hymnals, Christmas songbooks, and sheet music also omit or include various song verses, just as majlis anthologies do. Audiences for each genre may well cherish the piece that relatives tentatively warble at home as much or more than the expertly prepared performance at church or in the majlis. Moved by nostalgia, religious sentiment, or tradition, they may know very well what they like in a performance, but, understandably, devote little conscious attention to matters of history, systems of transmission, or musical/textual structure in the genre' repertoire.

Although an audience at an art music concert of Christmas pieces is likely to applaud actively, in such a setting the religious mood might well be diluted. Expectations for affective and performative participation in a homey family setting or in casual caroling groups, meanwhile, are rather inexplicit and varied. Most majlises, in contrast, even modest ones, support expressive, formalized, and continuous audience response to and

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[45] Nauhahs are perhaps especially notable for their allusions to how Muharram is observed. As one poem translated in Chapter Three observes, "Now the season of mourning for our King has arrived!" Many other nauhahs refer to donning black garb, or attending majlises.

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participation in marsiyah performance. Listeners in mourning assemblies chime in on poetic lines, interject religious slogans or blessings, weep on cue, and verbalize their approbation for a piece of clever word-play, an unexpected expression, or an especially euphonious line embedded in a tricky rhyme scheme.

Conventional literary critics and reformists have basically implied that certain constituencies among Shiahs—namely the women and "uneducated masses" who resemble my "average" majlis-goer— are capable of enjoying only an inferior class of marsiyah, a degraded, sentimental shadow of poetry at its best. It is these masses, Sadiq might argue, that Anis pandered on those occasions when he strayed from the bounds of tastefulness into "exaggeration" and "hyperbole." My fieldwork data suggest, though, that performative differences, and accordingly the spectrum of audience response, reflect textual selection and style choices more than they do a vastly different "type" of marsiyah text in each environment.

Furthermore, the increasingly mixed nature of majlis audiences challenges any attempt to make categorical statements about the "quality" of marsiyah performance and appreciation. True, majlises organized by "marsiyah societies" intent on modernizing and reinvigorating taht-ul-lafz khvani espouse a distinctive literary agenda; they almost seem a realization of Muhammad Sadiq's cherished dream of "rehabilitating" the genre.[46] Their controlled atmospheres and their measured audience responses contrast dramatically with the impassioned shouting and chatter in a lower-middle-class, Panjabi-influenced Lahore

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[46] Literary circles within the Shi'i communities of Karachi and Hyderabad Deccan are notable for their determined sponsorship of marsiyah series that seek to save the "dying art" of taht-ul lafz khvani.

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majlis. Yet reformist concerns about "realistic" depictions of Karbala heroes and heroines at least tinge both sorts of majlises. Female majlis-goers, too, are far from a monolithic group. Women who recite taht-ul-lafz marsiyahs, for example, almost invariably hail from elite and/or literary backgrounds.[47]

Gender and Hierarchies of Evaluation

Even within this complex and composite picture of interpretive communities, though, certain hierarchies of evaluation remain viable. Sibt-e Jafar in some ways reaps the best of all worlds. An educated performer, he contributes to the type of majlis that privileges the dramatic, "masculine," philosophical ideals of modernized taht-ul-lafz marsiyah. He commands respect by exploiting solemnity, gestural embellishments and poet-like delivery. At the same time, his melodic marsiyah's musical beauty and brevity achieve an effect more poignant, and perhaps more immediate, than that exerted by a marsiyah in a taht-ul-lafz tradition relatively bound to narrative and sequence.

Women who desire a certain stature or a cerebral atmosphere in their majlises may also aspire to "poet-like" qualities, especially when they choose taht-ul-lafz recitation. Although Taṣvīr Fāṭimah was frustrated in her attempts to do just this, other female marsiyah poets reciting in selective, literarily-inclined women's majlises have been more successful. At least once, listeners overhearing Begam Fāṭimah Zaidī (b. 1900) of Panipat and Aligarh recite one of her own marsiyahs mistook it for the work of Anis. This misapprehension, like the occasional attribution of *Lāsh Akbar kī* to Anis, is an important clue that the qualitative distinctions routinely drawn by "experts" between Anis's work and

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[47] Bard, "Value and Vitality."

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that of other poets are not clearly evident to those appreciating marsiyah in the everyday majlis context. In Begam Zaidī's case, while not venturing to compare her work to that of Anis in sophistication, her daughters noted that since he was the single marsiyah poet she viewed as a worthy model, there is something of his stamp on her work.[48]

There is little doubt that establishing an environment conducive to literary appreciation (*qadrdānī*) is in general more challenging for women than for men, in part because some remaining stigma against "performing" restricts even elite, non-professional female reciters. In only a few women's majlis communities does conscious, rigorous evaluation of poetic diction, style, and recitation technique rank alongside the criteria of "good," familiar, evocative poetic content, and these communities tend to be remnants of small, insular, almost feudal elites, often dominated by a coterie of older women who were the first or second generation in their families to be formally educated, at the behest of Islamic reformers.

In the Shi'i qasbah of Mustafabad, Uttar Pradesh, for example, Begam Atiyā Naqvī came of age in a majlis culture where women recited declamatory marsiyah, and female audiences showered exclamatory *dād* on reciters for verses or couplets that excelled in their creative figures of speech, ravani, exquisite use of meter and rhyme scheme, or masterful recitation. Neither did they hesitate to make felt their disappointment over an uninspired reciter or a lackluster marsiyah. As I observed in 1998, something of this atmosphere still persists in the women's majlises of this rural Shi'i stronghold.

The same Mustafabad clan also provides an example of the brand of educated

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[48] Bard, "Value and Vitality," 326.

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majlis-goer who bemoans the extensive liberties taken by marsiyah poets with the historically known facts of the Karbala incident. Begam Naqvi introduced one of her male relatives to me in as person extremely knowledgeable in matters of Islamic history and Shi'i doctrine. This opinionated middle-aged man launched into a breathless tirade against Mir Anis for fabricating incidents in his marsiyahs, and insisted that the genre should be purged of all such "historically false" elements. Atiya Begam, an elegant, educated woman who knows hundreds of marsiyah verses by heart, but had summoned her relative because he had so much more "expertise" than she did, began to bridle as the assault continued. She finally muttered bitterly, "Poetry is poetry; if we take all of those things out, what's the point?"

Akbar Hyder recounts an anecdote that makes a similar point with a bit of levity :

> My uncle, an observant Shi'a and an anecdotist of considerable merit, often narrates an incident wherein a religious authority (*'ālim*), during a particular commemorative gathering of Muharram, was made to swear that he would only narrate "factual" events pertaining to the Karbala incident. The authority climbed to the pulpit (miñbar) and uttered but one sentence: "On the tenth of Muharram, 61 hijrī, Husayn b. Ali was martyred at Karbala."[49]

Most critics of majlis poetry rather resemble the sticklers for factual events who issued instructions to this *'ālim*. They have typically undervalued and misunderstood the range of performative activity contained within the category "marsiyah," the appeal of the marsiyah to ordinary majlis goers, and the whole spectrum of response and judgement that operates in the mourning assembly. These blind spots are part and parcel of critics' concerted efforts to link the term "lament" definitively with melodic renderings of a

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[49] 3.

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marsiyah, with the undiscriminating masses, or with female performers and audiences. If female narrators in Dakanī poetry and the "effeminacy" of Lucknow literature "were purged and ostracized [from literary criticism] in order to render Indo-Muslim culture sufficiently 'manly' to stand and fight for a place in Hindu-majority, British-occupied India," the marsiyah's tears were meant to meet the same fate. [50] Yet these efforts are destined to flounder, for critics both misapply the "lament" label, and fail to realize that it need not necessarily carry the derogatory connotations which they ascribe to it.

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[50] Carla Petievich, "Making 'Manly' Poetry: The Construction of Urdu's 'Golden Age,'" in Richard Barnett, ed. *Rethinking Early Modern India* (Delhi: Manohar, 2002), 57.

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Chapter Eight Classical Marsiyah: Thriving, or in Need of "Reviving"

Introduction

From the outset, this work has stressed the majlis as marsiyah's major setting, but acknowledged that the genre is multi-faceted, and has different resonances for different audiences. In this chapter I wish to discuss the marsiyah's prospects in the twenty-first century. Of key interest here are broad articulations of group difference that surround the marsiyah's performance context. To explore these I venture at times beyond the bounds of the Shii community, for in a South Asia where the shrines and burial grounds designated as local Karbalas often become the sites of modern-day "martyrdoms," one key to the marsiyah's fate lies in the sense of difference that is termed "sectarianism."

Kinship and Community Solidarity, Life and Death

The marsiyah alludes often to the crucial significance of kinship, community, and solidarity, on one hand, and foreignness, isolation, and difference, on the other. Indeed, a majority of vaqiahs in classical marsiyahs—and listener responses to them—turn at least in part on all-important kinship bonds, bonds that are manifested at their most precious in instances of separation and loss.

Poetic homage to the Karbala martyrs and the surviving female captives reinforce the majlis-goer's affiliations with Husain and his party in both general and specific ways. Indeed, as we have already seen, the significance of kinship bonds can underlie the intricate relationship between individual majlis-goers' experiences of loss and the Karbala narrative as a deeply felt personal tragedy. Recall the standardized portrayals of Husain and his younger son Asghar, Husain and his older son, Akbar, and Akbar and his sister

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Sughra. And there are more: the idealized relationships between the imam and his sons, the imam and his daughters, brother and sister (Husain and Zainab; Sakinah and Ali Asghar), uncle and niece (Abbas and Sakinah), and aunt and nephew (Zainab and Akbar; Zainab and Qasim), form strong bases for identification among devout Shiahs. Many, many Shi'i families have members named after these characters in the Karbala tale, and at times they are even related to one another in the same way as their namesakes are related. The family with whom I lived in Lucknow, for example, had a mother and daughter called Rabāb and Sakīnah.

In *Lāsh Akbar kī* and in his other well-known marsiyahs, Munis repeatedly likens community and kinship to life, and isolation and exile to death. An exemplary instance is the isolated bereavement experienced by Fatimah Sughra, the "abandoned" member of the family. Widespread and deliberate placements of Sughra and Akbar themes together in majlis performances show that the connection which structures the full version of Munis's poem remains a touching and suggestive one for the audience, even if it is now most often expressed in two separate poems.[1] Sughra's tale emerges in its full poignancy when juxtaposed with the communal nature of the mourning described in the first half of Munis's poem and in other poems about Akbar on his deathbed.

This communal mourning, is also, of course, enacted throughout majlis ritual. The multi-level tension and complementarity between unity and division that are evident in

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[1] A number of gatherings I attended featured poems first about Sughra and then about Akbar. I mentioned earlier Chapter Five's performance example #4, and the same pattern characterized Zahidah Bājī's Lahore recitations in Chapter Two and a number of majlises in which Sikandar Jahāñ of Lucknow performed.

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Shabih's majlis sermon are echoed in Sughra's and Akbar's experiences of death and bereavement. The effectiveness of the siblings' intertwined story rests in part on the shocking nature of Sughra's loneliness, given the value of articulating grief, no matter how shattering it is, as a family, a group, or a community. Sughra's life is a " prison of afflictions," a living death. Munis's petulant, affectionate heroine pines alone while the rest of her family together mourns her brother and Akbar himself, in heroic death, gains everlasting life and the power to mediate with the divine on behalf of the pious.

Martyrdom implies a blessed "witnessing," a sacrifice, a union with God, while bereavement and estrangement from home and family in life are misfortunes even more dreadful than death.[2] The sense of estrangement that pervades many marsiyah vaqiahs can at times extend in a general way into the realm of social life in today's multi-religious South Asian communities. Although Shiahs of my acquaintance rarely explicitly discussed a link between ancient historical oppression and their current social or economic status, I would agree with Hjortshoj that, at least among those who most actively seek to assert their Shi'i identity in the wider community, "The social reality and historical background of sectarian divisions in Lucknow are . . . viewed as effects of a more fundamental division between two different traditions of religious authority in Islam—traditions which place bonds of affectivity and kinship in opposite relation to formal and legal bonds."[3]

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[2] The root form of the word *shahīd* signifies "giving testimony." Words derived from the root can refer to "witnessing" in the everyday sense of the word, or being "slain in battle against unbelievers." See e.g., Platts 738.

[3] 17.

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Sectarianism and "Difference"

In Lucknow, where Shiahs were once rulers and are now by and large a poor minority within a Muslim minority population, sectarian conflict has taken on both insidious and frighteningly antagonistic forms. On one level, Lucknow Shi'ahs might complain jokingly of Sunnis who surreptitiously spit in tea before serving it to Shiahs, but once Shi'i-Sunni conflict escalates, it can result in restrictions such as the ban on major Muharram processions instituted in 1977.[4] Twenty-one years later, in 1998, the prohibition was finally lifted just after I began fieldwork in Lucknow. While some elements within each community strove for rapprochement at this time, others remained embittered, and some leaned first one way and then another in the matter of sectarian reconciliation.

Sūfiyā Āpā, the Shi'i preacher with whom I lived in Lucknow, for example, disparaged celebrations in which her co-religionists burned a huge effigy (*putlah*) of the Caliph Umar. This custom, observed on the ninth of Rabī'-ul-awwal, ushers in a new mood following a majlis on the eighth of the same month, which concludes the lengthy Muharram mourning season. The main city celebration featured dancing girls, onlookers in festive red clothing, and chants which insult Caliph Umar, set to the tunes of majlis poetry. These all dismayed Sūfiyā; a college teacher, she found the putlah-burning a provocative "low-class" public observance designed to bait Sunnis. Yet while she took a stance against public confrontations, she tolerated the makeshift miniature putlahs burned gleefully by neighborhood children in her own enclave. Sūfiyā also sometimes favored Shi'i students; when pressed by her relatives, she sheepishly conceded that a girl with a

[4] Pinault 2001, 20; Hjortshoj, 224-227..

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Shi'i surname like "Ja'far" was likelier to attain a high grade than a comparable student who was Sunni or Hindu.

Processions may have resumed in Lucknow, but in Lahore in 1997 and 1998, circumstances caused the government to step up its vigilance on Muharram violence. Stories of anti-Shiah extremists who sprayed bullets as they rode past majlises aboard motorcycles, and of Shii reprisals, appeared almost daily in the English and Urdu press: "Three More Fall Prey to Sectarianism . . . Imambargah's Caretaker Shot Dead in Phoolnagar," announced a typical headline. The associated story began,

> LAHORE: The Sectarian killing spree continued for the second day running as three more people—two Shias and a Sunni—were gunned down Tuesday. Police say the violence ahead of Moharrum shows a sinister pattern . . .[5]

By the first of Muharram, dozens were dead, and a writer for the Urdu newspaper *Jang* posed the question, "Where will this series of senseless murders end?" Like other journalists reporting throughout the spring and summer of 1997, he called for the Panjab and federal governments (headed by Shahbāz Sharīf and Navāz Sharīf respectively) to make controlling sectarian bloodshed its top priority:

> The government that has won the biggest mandate in this country's parliamentary history now faces a challenge of daily murderousness in the nation from a terrorism that is organized, trained, and clothed in the bloody garb of sectarianism, such a challenge that at this point extreme steps are being considered at the highest levels in order to halt the deluge of human slaughter.[6]

The "extreme steps" included bans on sectarian political organizations, curfews, and an increased police presence in potentially volatile areas, but the violence persisted. Urdu

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[5] *Dawn*, April 30, 1997.

[6] *Jang*, May 9, 1997.

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newspapers, and sometimes English ones, tried eliminating the terms Shiah and Sunni when alluding to "sectarianism" and "religious organizations" and to murder victims, for fear that details would fan the flames of aggression and retaliation. Most victims on either side who were slain at religious sites of any sort were said to have been "martyred:"

> "Four Individuals Shoot at the Office of a Religious Organization in Shādahrah; An Eighteen-Year-Old Youth is Slain; Local People Shout Slogans at the Police and at a Religious Organization"
>
> "Shooting Inside a Chauburjī Mosque; The Imam and Three Worshippers Are Martyred"[7]
>
> LAHORE. In Chauburjī Park, armed terrorists entered the al-hilāl mosque and firing randomly, killed ["martyred"] three worshippers who were performing the evening prayer along with the mosque's imam. The attackers rode motorcycles, while two armed individuals in the back of a Suzuki wagon a short distance away provided them with cover. When the incident occurred at 7:25 PM, the Lahore police, invoking an "SOS" to block off roads, sealed the entire city, but the terrorists proved successful in escaping, despite the terrorist act being broadcast over the wireless just a few minutes after it took place.[8]

Most newspaper readers, though, could guess easily which organizations were implicated, especially when obviously Shi'i names indicated victims' affiliations:

> LAHORE In a shooting in Imāmiyah Colony, four individuals killed an 18-year-old, Ja'far Husain Naqvī, who was said to have been sitting alone yesterday in the office of a religious organization. According to eyewitnesses four men appeared riding motorcycles; two of them leaped a wall and burst into the office while two remained outside. The two who entered the office fired on Ja'far Naqvī, as a result of which he died on the spot. The attackers fled the scene.[9]

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[7] *Jang*, June 30, 1997. Here the imam signifies the mosque's prayer leader, and obviously not a "divine guide" from the prophetic lineage revered by Shiahs.

[8] *Jang*, June 30, 1997.

[9] *Jang*, June 30, 1997. "Naqvī" derives from a title (*an-Naqī*, the distinguished) of the tenth imam, Abu'l Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Muḥammad (b.212 AH/837 CE) and is common among Shiahs. Note that the victim's other names, Ja'far and Husain, also have Shi'i

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If dozens of clippings like these became the background noise of sectarian tension, in daily conversation, members of each community quite often maligned one another. A middle-aged Sunni teacher fondly remembered sharing in Shi'i rituals and the meals that accompanied them when she was a child in small-town Panjab, but commented acerbically that Shiahs of the present day were mostly enamored of heretical thinking and insulting the Caliphs revered by Sunnis.[10] Lahore Sunnis and Shi'ahs alike inventoried for me the slurs commonly applied to the other community, and a Shi'i friend insisted I accompany her, at the height of tensions, to a crowded imambargah for the exhibition of a string of prayer-beads that dripped blood at the hour of Husain's death, so that I could witness for myself the transformative powers of Karbala that Sunni Muslims "denied." When my consultants and I visited such sites, it was not unheard of for uniformed female security guards or police to search us for weapons or explosives.

Even closer to home, an acquaintance of mine, a father of six, was slain in Lahore in January 1998. My research assistant's cousin was one of the dozen or so men and women killed when machine gun-bearing attackers sprayed bullets through a graveyard in Mominpura ("settlement of the believers/the faithful") where a large majlis was being conducted. The man died while shielding two young sons with his body; when I attended the women's condolence gathering after his death, I was introduced to one of the boys, a child of about five. A teenaged member of the family startled me by asking the boy to

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resonance as they are the names of the sixth and the third imams, respectively. Readers would also recognize "Imāmiyah Colony" as a likely Shi'i neighborhood, even if unaware of the sectarian demographic of Lahore.

[10] For similar comments by Sunnis, see Schubel, 37.

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relate the tragedy in detail, "Tell aunty what happened at the majlis. Tell her what Papa did, and what happened when the bullets struck. Then what happened? . . . Then what happened?" This mode of remembrance, which might strike outsiders as traumatic for the child, not only seemed expected, encouraged and appreciated, but it clearly followed the pattern of majlis narratives, whether consciously or unconsciously. I earlier expressed reservations about the evidence for some assertions that majlis-goers model daily behavior on a sort of "key scenario" of Karbala. Here, though, is a case in which the symbology of martyrdom and mourning, doubly-layered in a majlis massacre, do seem to operate to formulate culturally appropriate goals and "suggest effective action for achieving them."[11]

Although at large observances such as the one in question women may be caught in the slaughter, most victims of Shi'i-Sunni violence have tended to be men. This trend may be changing, though. When ten to twelve Shi'i women were killed by a bomb at a women's observance in small-town Panjab in April 2002, the event even caught the attention of the American media.[12] Lest we think that these bloody outbreaks merely reflect recent political developments and maneuvering, Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali reminds us of similar events in the 1830's:

> It is always expected that the bad feelings between the two sects, amongst the lower orders of the people, may produce a real battle on the imitative ground of Kraabaallah; and I have heard of many such terminations of the Mahurrum at Lucknow, where the enthusiastic Sheahs and Soonies—having reserved their long hatred for a favourable opportunity of giving it vent—have found an early grave on

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[11] Sherry B. Ortner, "On Key Symbols," in William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, eds. *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 95.

[12] Reported by National Public Radio, 4/26/02

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the very ground to which their Tazia has been consigned.[13]

The periodic eruptions of Shi'i-Sunni conflict that have bedeviled Pakistan in recent decades have reaped relatively little attention in the U.S. press, but may come in for broader scrutiny in the aftermath of President Bush's "war on terrorism." Indeed, increased news coverage of internal sectarian conflict in 2002 has already reflected intense American concern with Pakistan's stability. President Parvez Musharraf's speech at a Washington, D.C. dinner in February bespeak the commitment the U.S. desires from Pakistan to clamp down on "anti-Western Islamic extremists," but they also apply to the Shi'i-Sunni divisiveness that threatens Pakistan internally. "When we talk of the writ of government," stated Musharraf, "it is to curb religious extremism, fanaticism and sectarian violence. . . . I'm interacting with religious leaders to ask them not to continue divisions in Pakistan. We are all religious and progressive and we must integrate our society, not divide it into groups."[14]

Yet it is difficult to feel confident that top-down interventions will curb the entrenched positions and tit-for-tat retaliation that may at some level reflect political power plays, but now characterize feelings even on the grassroots levels. The bumper sticker proclaiming "Live like Ali, Die Like Husain!" is for many devout Shiahs a credo meant to encourage personal, internal struggle for moral living and integrity, but in a society rife with violence, it might easily be taken as a challenge. In some major South

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[13] 52-53.

[14] The comments were made at a dinner given for Pakistani-Americans by Pakistani ambassador Maleeha Lodhi on 2/13/02.

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Asian cities, this is the larger context of the marsiyah as well. Recall the women at Qasr-e Zainab declaring, "Right, if they attack us, they attack us. If you have to go, you might as well go while you're engaged in something meritorious, attending a majlis," or " No one can be expected to sit idly around the house half the day during Muharram! Go ahead and read the marsiyah; this is a majlis. Besides, in these circumstances, who knows what tomorrow will bring? You may not get the chance!"

Celebrations of Death and Mixed Emotional Contour

Having considered a broad confrontational environment that surrounds the marsiyah in such cities as Lahore and Lucknow, let us revisit some of the messages presented in marsiyahs themselves. The poems, I have observed, repeatedly position life and death in the framework of kinship and community ruptured by tragic separation. Think for example, of the opening line of one of Munis's popular marsiyahs: *Insān ke liye maut hai gham bevaṭanīka* ("The Sorrow of Exile is Death to Humanity"). The marsiyah recited in Qasr-e Zainab's majlis, too, explicitly aligns social isolation with corporeal death, while presenting righteous martyrdom as a separation that leads ultimately to a more important, spiritual union:

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The King had the illustrious tent pitched in the sands
But remained anxious night and day until the eve of 'ashūr
When the morn of his murder dawned our Lord became joyful
He said, "Now I'll be removed from everyone"
In the tent of his companions a celebration was underway as well
A celebration with the trappings of death, the passion for battle,
and the remembrance of God[15]

The separation incurred by one's own death, it seems, is less cause for grief than the separation one experiences as the bereaved party. By now we are familiar with the image of the bereaved parent in the Karbala tale; Husain, Bano, and Zainab suffer separations so cruel that they express their sorrow as a death, and so "die" along with their martyred offspring. The image is hardly unique to Munis or Anis; one of Mirza Dabir's most famous marsiyahs is among the many that describe Husain's mother Fatimah being "killed" by his death:

The Lord smiled and looked to the sky
When the sound of a sigh arose over on the right
They all said, "It's a petitioner's plea for justice"
But Husain said weepingly, "Let whatever is God's wish occur,
But his dagger is slaughtering the most excellent of women
My mother is weeping, having seen my murderer"[16]

Only lament, and the belief in the glorious martyr's ability to mediate between humanity and divinity, makes such separation and loss at all bearable.

It is in part the celebratory dimension of righteous martyrdom, apparent even in the midst of death's tragedy and unbearable loss, that give the majlis its intense emotional charge. This same mixed emotional contour likewise shapes the marsiyah, and has

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[15] See Chapter Two.

[16] Mirzā Dabīr, "Paidā Shu'ā'-e mihar kī miqrāż jab hū'ī," in Rashīd Ḥasan Khān, ed., *Intikhāb-e mirāsī (Anīs o Dabīr)* (New Delhi: Maktanah Jamiah, Ltd, 1970), 256.

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commonalities with Bryant's notion, cited in Chapter One, of a poetic "epiphany" brought about by interweaving elements of parental love, awe, respect, fear , and devotion. In the marsiyah, sorrow is a crucial ingredient, yet mixed emotional contour is a major marsiyah component that critics underestimate when they laud heroism, or decry "lament."

Critics who explain away ritualized grief as merely a stylized, dutiful sentiment have also ignored the complexity of the mourning assembly. Even if mourners are comporting themselves in accordance with ritualized, emotional ideals—what William M. Reddy might call a culturally or politically constructed "emotional regime"— the intensity of emotion is often experienced very deeply and personally, with the constant communal negotiation (or, as Reddy would say, "navigation") of pride, grief, love, and loss bringing that intensity to the fore. Some of the points Reddy makes, drawing on Hindu rasa theory and Kapferer's work related to it, may also be applicable to the majlis setting:

> The individual must work in order to get out of his or her particular feelings, and into the generalized mood of the play; success is by no means certain. The high erudition required to perform and appreciate such plays points towards an implicit element of competition, as well. Sectarian ritual, too, is just one step in the prescribed path by which the faithful search for spiritual fulfillment; long meditation on myths and feelings that go with them is essential. Speaking of Sinhalese healing rites, Kapferer (1979) concluded that participants in rituals '*often actually feel* what they express' (p. 153; emphasis added). 'Rather than view the structured and regulated display of emotion in ritual as representative of normative and customary I regard it as problematic, problematic for participants as well as for the anthropologist . . . . Performance both expresses and creates what it represents'.[17]

The possibility of (affective and/or ritual) performance that expresses and creates challenges charges of insincere or unfeeling ritual in the majlis that we surveyed in Chapter

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[17] Reddy, 57-60.

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Three; examples from Attia Hosain's novel and David Pinault's research illustrated such charges of inauthenticity. Other critics, implying that majlis emotion *is* in some sense "authentic," take the alternative tack of focusing on weeping alone, the view exemplified by Sadiq: ". . . the sufferings painted are real and there is too much of them."[18] We have seen time and again how this faction ignores the nuanced nature of sentiment or emotion in the majlis, and often disparages the women's mourning assembly in particular.

Reddy's theory of emotions posits a class of statements called "emotives," which he defines as "A type of speech act different from both performative and constative utterances, which both describes (like constative utterances) and changes (like performatives) the world, because emotional expression has an exploratory and a self-altering effect on the activated thought material of emotion."[19] Emotives include statements such as "I love you," or, in the majlis, "We are mourners!"[20] One might even extend Reddy's concept by configuring physical acts of matam as the sort of "emotional claims" that emotives represent. The concept of descriptive, exploratory, and transforming emotives can address several challenging aspects of the marsiyah and majlis. I will just briefly consider how Reddy's theory might apply to 1) the complex, participatory majlis narratives that some reformists attempt to divide into positively-valued rational argument and negatively valued, ignorant "sentiment" 2) the assembly's mixed emotional contour; and 3) the idea of assessment by participants, or "ritual criticism."

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[18] 212.

[19] 128.

[20] For examples of emotives see Reddy 102-103,107.

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Reddy synthesizes and critiques anthropological and psychological theory on affect, striving to develop a framework that will acknowledge historical change, a model of emotions that is malleable, allows for cultural specificity, but can also be applied across space and time.[21] His basic definition of emotions as "goal-relevant activations of thought material that exceed the translating capacity of attention within a short time horizon" reflects the conclusion, supported by cognitive psychology, that cognition and emotion are not firmly divisible. He marshals a whole body of research on the physical and cognitive components of emotions, and thereby calls into question not only the mind-body divide, but a certain romanticization of emotions as the opposite of "rational thinking.[22] In the West, of course, the feeling/thinking dichotomy has often been framed as gendered, much as has happened in the discourse of marsiyah critics and reformers who would like to purge the majlis of irrational sentimentalism. Traditional Islamic discourse, too, has also established polar oppositions between sentiment that emerges from "ignorance" and "reason." One publishing house in Karachi that prints books of marsiyahs also promotes titles such as *The Book of Reason and Ignorance*; *The Book of Excellence of Knowledge*; *The Book of Unity*.[23]

Although it is not within the scope of this work to develop an affective case study at length, there are many ways in which the majlis seems to provide an excellent example

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[21] 3-111.

[22] 3-33.

[23] These are sections of the *English Translation of al-kafi*, Sayyid Muhammad Hasan Rizavi, trans. (Karachi: Khorasan Islamic Research Center, 1981). For the ignorance-reason dichotomy, see also Amir-Moezzi, 7.

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of thoroughly intertwined "thinking" argumentation and impassioned "emotional" engagement, of emotional claims that are verbal and visceral (striking the body, weeping, screaming). Let us also recall the preacher Shabih-us-Zahra invoking lessons, precedents, and arguments to impress upon her audience the revered status of the ahl-e bait, and then employing the language of suffering, grief, sorrow, and sacrifice to describe the affronts that wound these figures, and in so doing wound all present in the assembly. Often her discourse privileged feeling: "'First achieve equanimity in your *heart*,' then *knowledge* will come to you of the stature of Muhammad's family." [24]

It is true that the sermon consists, in majlis-goers' terms, of fazail (virtues) and masaib (sorrows, afflictions) sections, with the former containing more "lessons" and the latter facilitating more active affective participation. Nonetheless, the fazail evokes "feelings" of pride and celebration and the full experience of the masaib relies on learned understandings of certain moral values.

In the marsiyah as well, we have seen a considerable range of "feelings" depicted and evoked, and then augmented by argument or precedent. Consider the variety of tactics and exclamations Munis's Sughra employs, for example ("Who cares for me?" "How can I pretend to well-bring?" Your sister suffers with longing . . ." "Whatever pleases you is surely right, brother dear"); and this poem does not even contain the wide range of elements that some other marsiyahs do. The difficulty of rigidly distinguishing thinking from feeling—especially through the filter of language— becomes evident, problematizing critical insistence on a conflict between proper, rational thinking and indecent, "backward"

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[24] See Chapter Two.

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emotional displays.

We might furthermore suggest that some poetic utterances in the majlis act as emotives, describing and even creating emotional response. This is not to say that every stylized cry of "I suffer" or "my heart is shredded!" or "my hidden grief outdoes Majnūñ's" in Urdu love poetry, for example, is an emotive for every reader or listener (although one could argue that ideally it is), but that in the special context of the majlis, rhetorical or poeticized emotives and physical exhibitions of mourning aid in the identification between the sufferers at Karbala and majlis participants:

> Today is the third of Muharram. . . . Oh, mourners for Husain. Army upon army [of the enemies] is coming. The earth of Karb-o-balā is trembling. Zainab is agitated . . .

Just as Bano might cry, "The dagger of sorrow has slain me," when Akbar dies, the emotional claims articulated in ritual, ofttimes in the voices of the Karbala characters, facilitate majlis-goers' participation in the tragedy.

Reddy's emotives, designed to limit cultural judgements of the kind Lila Abu-Lughod attributes to Western scholars, can still be classed as effective or ineffective.

> Just as Austin noted that performatives are not true or false but either efficacious or ineffective ("happy" or "unhappy" in his terminology), so emotives are neither true nor false; as descriptions they always fail, because of the complexity of the personal states they describe in the first instance, and because of the effects they have on these states as they are formulated and uttered. But they may also be efficacious or ineffective, depending on whether their effects confirm or disconfirm their claims.

Does expressing sorrow for Husain, in other words, make you sad? This basic idea of effectiveness allows for the possibility of criticism in majlis participants' own terms, echoing the commonalities between ritual and theater that Reddy invokes in his discussion

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of Kapferer's work.

While Urdu literary critics strove to fit the marsiyah to their (often extra-literary) definitions of decorum and beauty, majlis-goers' assessments of the marsiyah reflect their own notions of decorum and beauty in the context of ritual. David Pinault has probed to some extent the aesthetic aspect of Ronald Grimes' concept of "ritual criticism," with reference to the majlis, but I stress here the convergence of basic categories of "felicitous/effective" or "infelicitous/ineffective" performances in Reddy's "emotional performance" and Grimes's "ritual criticism." Indeed, I have provided in Chapter Three a number of examples of majlis organizers' firm linguistically and regionally determined notions of what makes Muharram's emotional claims effective. One broadly relevant declaration of ritual effectiveness is quite explicitly made in Zahidah's upbeat praise poem:

> Once you acknowledge that Ali is the Solver of Difficulties
> Then just see what Ali accomplishes
> All of our problems move aside
> When we call "Yā Ali!" with sincerity![25]

I also noted, however, that women often defined norms for marsiyah and majlis "effectiveness" against "the possibility of ritual failure."[26] Majlis-goers almost universally found it easy to convey an instrumental assessment of marsiyah, such that when a marsiyah is unsuccessful, one can't cry no matter how much one wants to.

To take a step further, tears are not only a response indicating the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of a majlis or marsiyah, but, as Gary Ebersole has suggested, they are

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[25] Chapter Two, 8.

[26] See chapter three, 79-81.

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themselves subject to evaluation:

> There is an art to this, an aesthetics of weeping effectively-and this is what I am calling the poetics of weeping. Ritual weepers are themselves subject to criticism from members of the audience on aesthetic and performative grounds. The poetics and the politics of ritual weeping are, then, inseparable.[27]

In the case of the mourning assembly the assessing "audience members" are themselves the weepers, some of whom beat themselves wildly, mimicking the wailing hysteria and disheveled hair of the Karbala women, others making the gestures of sobbing delicately and tapping their chests that they deem more seemly and respectful. In either case, we begin to see how the notion of effectiveness allows not simply for evaluation, but for the development of hierarchies, whether those that prize humble piety and in which decorum implies unadorned chanting (as in the case of the majlis reciters at Qasr-e Zainab), those in which musical and poetic display of individual talent are paramount (as in Sibt-e Jafar's recitation), or those that value selected themes of valor and steadfastness above all.

One of the genre's inherent, across-the-board complexities is that it brings about tears, which in turn bring about a sense of satisfaction and ritual effectiveness. Reddy's discussion of emotion suggests that such satisfaction serves "the dense network of goals that give coherence to the self;" at the same time "the unity of a community—such as it may be—depends in part on its ability to provide a coherent set of prescriptions about emotions." His model allows for careful contextualization of complex emotional expression, accommodating personal and communal priorities of religious merit (*ṣavāb*)

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[27] "The Poetics and Politics of Ritualized Weeping in Early and Medieval Japan," paper presented at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meetings, 2001.

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and close identification with the ahl-e bait.

> . . . negative emotions may be rendered positive by their goal relevance; under proper circumstances, nostalgia, melancholy, sorrow, anger, even grief can become sources of satisfaction or fulfillment, and occasions which produce them may be sought out. [28]

It is a more difficult matter to express what makes for an exceptionally good marsiyah than a simply effective or ineffective one, but it seems that for every audience except the one typified by Muhammad Sadiq, a marsiyah of quality brings emotions to a high and even confusing pitch by juxtaposing and alternating between the sad and the happy, love and hatred, a grand, historical scale and somewhat familiar and homey scenes. By this point, we can also say with some confidence that, however worthy a text is, a good marsiyah has to coalesce as an "event" in terms of appropriate topic, length, poet, reciter, delivery style, artistic language, emotive content, and majlis environment.

What allows the classical marsiyah to endure and thrive, then, is not some simple, weepy cathartic function, but its complexity. Even where its poetic diction is not strikingly original or brilliantly multivalent, its art, emotive language (however stylized), sorrow, celebration and narrative interest combine to make it irresistible, especially for those who have been able to imbibe early on the values that ground the tradition, and the implicit systems of ritual criticism that derive from those values. Some of the complexity that surrounds the marsiyah at present is especially conflicted, reflective of social change and even potentially indicative of what Reddy calls an "incoherent" emotional regime. These

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[28] 23. Here Reddy cites Stearns 1994: 16-57. With regard to the nature of suffering, Reddy's model is at times a problematic one to apply to the majlis; the idea of emotional suffering as "goal conflict" ("induced" by outside forces or otherwise) on the personal level is not, for example, necessarily applicable..

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trends can be seen in the demonstrably varied viewpoints about emotions within the Shi'i community, a variation produced by historical changes in attitudes towards emotion, as well as complex sub-groups. There is little evidence for the blatant, negatively-charged "gendering" of tears, for example, before the nineteenth-century when discourses of Islamic reform and British Victorianism converged. As Naim and Petievich put it,

> Moral authority has played a significant part in literary criticism, informed equally, it might be argued, by reformist Islamic principles and those of Victorian England. . . . Both shared an emphasis on chasteness, austerity and authority.[29]

Just as the classical marsiyah came into its own, both modernist and sectarian, forces that would threaten and "flatten" the majlis's emotive expression were also swelling. Wolf has analyzed how, starting in the early nineteenth century, Shi'i reformists increasingly sought to purge Muharram of celebratory aspects, especially music, in favor of unambiguous sorrow, so as to emphasize their differences from Sunnis.[30] Ironically, the agenda of later reformists and "rationalists" has been to manipulate Muharram's emotional regime so that the suffering it articulates is austere and stoic. Those who have absorbed this viewpoint over the last several generations, and who may consider themselves "progressive" and "modernist," for so doing may now find themselves sitting side by side in assemblies with "old-fashioned," less inhibited, wailing, weeping, mourners. Even more likely, they may find themselves conflicted, caught between modes of response that are deemed meritorious from the "manly" or the religious point of view, the difference between the two being that the emotional regime of the majlis has long allowed for

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[29] 1997, 178.

[30] "Return to Tears."

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complex and conflicting feelings whereas the literary tradition for the last one hundred years has operated within narrow emotional boundaries.

"... the Whole World Echoes with the Sound of 'Ya Husain.'"[31]

Sometimes it seems that men and women all over South Asia cherish the classical marsiyah more today, when some of its key values are under fire, than ever before. Challenges to the continued existence of the genre advance on many fronts. Today any element of Shi'i commemorations is almost invariably assessed in the context of continual sectarian strife, especially in urban areas. Some Sunnis in Lahore castigate the use of the word *ibādat*,or worship, and similar terms when applied to Husain in the marsiyah, deeming them perfect examples of Shi'i heresy.[32] Such points of conflict can mushroom into a more general distaste for the marsiyah that one might encounter when purchasing books in generalist Urdu bookmarkets outside of Shi'i areas. On several occasions Lahore shopkeepers practically shooed me away when I inquired whether they stocked marsiyahs. Increasing sectarian sentiment, it seems, has given rise in some quarters to the idea that the marsiyah is "only for Shiahs." This state of affairs may force us to look more charitably on Sadiq and his ilk, for whatever disservice they may have rendered the marsiyah, they at

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[31] Maulvi Mirza Ghulam Abbas Ali, 298.

[32] In "*Dast-e ḳhudā ka quvvat-e bāzū Ḥusain hai,*" Mirza Dabir declares,

> Love of Husain is the testament of faith
> Devotion to Husain is a duty like that of prayer
> One may have seventy opportunities for the Haj, but one pilgrimage to Husain's shrine
> Homage to Husain is incumbent on all creation

Intiḳhāb-e marasī(Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Urdu Academy, 1983), 216.

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least thought it merited the attention of a large forum of Urdu speakers.

Today, basic ignorance is a very real threat to the genre on the publishing and marketing front. At the same time that sectarian sensitivities and the perception of Urdu literature as a pointless (profitless) field of study are on the rise, older booksellers and publishers who knew Urdu literature intimately are dying off to be replaced by their sons' generation. In India, Urdu-medium education is on the decline, too. Under these circumstances, perhaps it shouldn't come as any surprise that the knowledge base of those booksellers who have some familiarity with the marsiyah can be very limited. The first time a store employee responded to my request for marsiyah books with the query, "Which ones do you want, the ones by Anis and *Dabīs*?" I thought the error was a slip of the tongue or a case of one poorly-informed clerk. When it happened time and again, and other friends had the same experience, I realized that for many non-Shiahs, even publishers, not only are Anis and Dabir the only two names associated with the marsiyah, but that association is hazy in the extreme.

Many Shiahs, too, are increasingly distanced from the knowledge base that makes marsiyah appreciation possible in terms of either line-by-line craftsmanship or wide-ranging allusions. At a majlis in Karachi addressed by Dr. Hilal Naqvi, a female member of the highly educated audience approached him after his taht-ul-lafz marsiyah recitation and congratulated him ". . . on a very wonderful performance. I hardly understood a word, but it was very wonderful!" The textual accessibility and undeniable musical appeal of short majlis genres, as well the pressures of an increasingly fast-paced world, challenge the continued prominence of a genre that requires time and attention to display some of its

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best traits, especially the narrative ones. One of the frustrations of attending majlises with the preacher with whom I resided in Lucknow was that she considered the pre-sermon poetry dispensable, and could never fully understand why I wanted to arrive promptly to hear it. When I accompanied her, we seldom did arrive in time; increasing numbers of majlis participants seem to adopt her attitude that marsiyah is a sort of optional preliminary to the real "core," of the majlis.

A number of experts, mainly men, bemoan the decay in recitation skill that seems to go hand-in-hand with declining audience connoisseurship. Naiyar Masud of Lucknow mentions a handful of individuals, including A.M. Naqvī (a descendant of Anis), Kāzim 'Alī Khān (a descendant of Dabir), the still-active Navāb Haidar Ja'far, and members of the royal family of Mahmudabad, who, in the last few decades, have offered some approximation of the great classical reciters' techniques.[33] He has reservations about all of them, however; none were quite "the real thing." The present Rajah of Mahmudabad likewise says that he believes the art of taht-ul-lafz khvani to be largely dead, and the sozkhvan Jyoti Pandey, much in demand Shii communities in India and the U.S., states the same of sozkhvani.

In women's circles, too, there is intermittent talk of marsiyah recitation as a dying art. Sikandar Jahan complains that she has not been able to properly train her daughters or daughters-in-law in the subtleties of recitation or the accompanying theory and terminology. Since current audiences largely fail to appreciate the old-fashioned skills and style of families like Sikandar's, these reciters face poor prospects for survival, and the

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[33] Personal communication, 6/28/98.

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younger generation takes a less than passionate interest in training. Consequently, their skill level sometimes does actually decline. The increasing reliance on printed texts, and the use of texts printed in Hindi or even romanized script in more affluent communities, are a double-edged sword: they keep the marsiyah in circulation among all levels of majlis-goers, but tend to shorten, simplify and generecize the pool of poems upon which reciters draw.

We might do well to realize, though, that in the U.S., too, some lament the decline of specific kinds of poetry as dramatic performance events accessible to many; when Camille Paglia does so, the context of which she speaks could hardly be farther removed from a taht-ul-lafz marsiyah in a majlis, yet there are certain commonalities in the art of recitation:

> Reading poetry aloud, Kessler made great use of dynamics, another of the losses rock music has suffered since the Sixties. Like the blues shouters, Kessler could roar, then drop off to a rasp or whisper. Poetry was music-drama.[34]

Fiery, subtly crafted, and multi-textured recitations of poetry in languages around the world share more than might at first seem to be the case. As Marion Molteno points out, "Poetry which is intended to be listened to, and so is a close relative of song, can be enjoyed even by people who do not understand the words," and almost all Urdu poetry, of course, is "composed primarily not for presentation in writing but for recitation before a live audience."[35] Urdu poetry is thus still well suited to public consumption and sharing,

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[34] *Sex, Art, and American Culture,* 127

[35] "Approaching Urdu Poetry," in Ralph Russell, *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature: A Select History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992) 11. See also Russell's "Understanding the Urdu Ghazal," in the same publication, 46.

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and not exclusively to the kind of individual, interior reflection which many in the West value as the salient experience of poetry. Those who recall the fading glory of bygone marsiyah performances are understandably troubled when they see evidence that the crucial element of recitation itself is under threat of extinction.

Closer examination, though, shows us that for every sign of the marsiyah's decline, there is a counter-trend. For every case in which sectarian sentiments render the marsiyah suspect, non-Shi'i and even non-Muslim writers display their fascination for the subject. Not only is there a small stream of books and articles about "non-Muslim" marsiyah poets, but virtually every city has at least one well-known Sunni reciter. The Hindu reciter mentioned earlier, the civil servant Jyoti Pandey, has also made quite a name for himself in majlis circles. Given the historical participation of Hindus in Muharram observances, it is not a matter of enormous surprise that interest in majlis poetry is evidenced across the religious spectrum, or that Hindu themes find their ways into folksy Muharram genres. Knowledge and skill about marsiyah, a erudite tradition of Urdu literature, on the part of non-Muslims is more remarkable; the majority of Hindu involvement in Muharram has centered around taziyah processions and the most localized, vernacular poetic expressions. Furthermore, non-Shi'i participants in the marsiyah tradition are drawn to its Karbala lore and narrative techniques, but rarely define themselves as full-fledged members of the associated religious community..

Active marsiyah "revival" projects such as the "marsiyah societies" in Hyderabad and Karachi or marsiyah recitation schools like the one at Lucknow's Talkatora Karbala are endeavors administered by men, but the perpetuation of marsiyah recitation among

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Urdu-speaking women is perhaps even more indicative of the form's hardiness. Nineteenth-century marsiyahs in Urdu women's majlises represent a classical poetic tradition with which women identify proudly. They are not entirely "of" the tradition, in that they are not prominent writers of marsiyah poems, but in the realms of the organization of majlises, recitation, ritual criticism, and increasingly, in scholarship and literary criticism, women are active. Female reciters both preserve the marsiyah and reconfigure it in terms of delivery style and plot emphases. Many men and women offhandedly describe classical marsiyah in women's majlises as having a narrow thematic scope and a presentation style that is only rarely artistic, yet my recordings reveal performances on dozens of Karbala themes rendered in taht-ul-lafz, and in melodic presentation crafted entirely by an individual performer, as well as in rather monotonous chanting. Performers and performances can be heard from Calcutta to Lahore and Karachi, from Delhi to Madras, and in many places in between and beyond those cities.

Marsiyahs, are, despite all indications to the contrary, women's narratives in several senses. Marsiyah stories of women's suffering and endurance transpire alongside those of men; for every valiant, beheaded hero there is a noble, bareheaded heroine. Many women, explicitly or implicitly, avow their relationship to the marsiyah and the great poets. Perhaps two or three dozen poems by the Lucknow poets Anis, Dabir, Munis, and the ustads and shagirds of these men form a central core of marsiyah texts enjoyed in almost all Urdu-speaking Shi'i communities. A few female poets informally affiliate themselves with these great poets' networks or lineages, while others are entirely excluded

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from sources of conventional literary authority.[36] An invocatory *band* from one of young Tasvīr Fāṭimah's marsiyah collections illustrates the enduring influence of the classical tradition, and how the rare female poet can profitably position herself in relation to that authority:

> Why shouldn't Tasvir be suited to this eloquent form of expression?
> After all, I'm proud to say, my grandfather is Mazhari
> It's due to this lineage that I've acquired the taste for marsiyah
> His marsiyahs provided guidance at every step
> And it is my particular prayer to the Almighty
> That continuity not be broken with the school of Anis and Dabir[37]

Even those who lack the advantage of formal ustad-shagird relationships or a literary upbringing can re-work or contribute to a huge treasury of marsiyahs that are already known and loved, including some by local poets in cities outside of Lucknow, and a whole panoply of other majlis genres. The classical canon is only one portion of this enormous, ever-changing collection.

One aspect of the unquestioned connection so many make between women and the most sentimental aspects of the marsiyah emphasizes that the women's majlis is an exhibition of ignorance; the "positive" counterpart of the association presents mournful women as beautiful, moving, and redolent of pious simplicity. Sharar's descriptions of *sharīf* women who excelled at marsiyah recitation are excellent examples.[38] A very few majlises, mostly among the princely families of the Lucknow area, do in fact seem to strive

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[36] Bard, "Value and Vitality."

[37] Tasvīr Fāṭimah, *Ridā-e Ṣabr: Pānch Marāsī* (Karachi: Ḥalqah-e Fikr-o-naẓr, 1996), 35.

[38] Sharar, 254-255. See also Chapter One.

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to conform to this aesthetic. The majlises in question make great use of elaborate old royal imambarahs, cloistered settings, and professional marsiyah reciters. In these social circles, women shop carefully for austere but elegant black majlis attire, and the younger ones enter the majlis with their gleaming locks loose, a look that would be branded "daring" on the streets of Lucknow.

In a number of novels, the professional singer/courtesan figure is invoked as the female soz or marsiyah reciter par excellence. In *Umrā'o Jān Adā* or the film *Sardārī Begam*, a potent mixture of sensuality, religious sentiment, and artistic mastery imbues the *ṭawā'if*'s presentation of marsiyah. A similar romantic image has now been deployed even in Indian literature in English directed largely at a Western audience:

> Saeeda Bai did not lose a syllable of her marsiya as she saw Firoz enter, though her eyes flashed. Already the listeners were in a high state of excitement. Men and women alike were weeping; some of the women were beating their breasts and lamenting for Hussain. Saeeda Bai's own soul seemed to have entered the marsiya...
>
> Firoz glanced at Tasneem; her eyes were still cast down, but her lips moved to the famous words that her sister was reciting.
>
> "Anis, thou canst not write of Zainab's lamentations more!
> The body of Hussain lay there, unburied, in the sun;
> Alas, the Prophet found no peace in his last resting place!
> His holy progeny imprisoned and his house burnt down!
> How many homes Hussain's death left all ruined, desolate!
> The Prophet's progeny thus never prospered after him."[39]
>
> . . . Saeeda Bai now began singing a short marsiya particularly suited for soz. This contained...almost nothing but the most moving parts of the story: the scenes of leave-taking from his loved ones, his death, the lamentations of the women and children. At the lamentations Saeeda Bai's voice rose into the air in a strange sobbing wail, intensely musical, intensely beautiful.

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[39] The (unattributed) translation used is from S.G. Abbas, *The Immortal Poetry of Mir Anis* (Karachi: Majlis-e Milli), 1983.

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> Firoz had heard soz before, but it was nothing compared to this. He turned to the spot where Tasneem had been sitting, and noticed the frivolous Bibbo there instead. Her hair was undone, and she was crying her eyes out, beating her breast and leaning forward as if she were about to faint with sorrow. So were many of the women around her. Bilgrami Sahib was sobbing into his handkerchief, which his hands clutched in the gesture of prayer. Saeeda Bai's eyes were closed; even for this supremely controlled artist, her art had passed beyond her own restraint. Her body, like her voice, was shaking with grief and pain. And Firoz, though he did not realize it, was himself weeping uncontrollably.[40]

Anyone who might be sufficiently enticed by this description to venture into a majlis in the faded splendor of Lucknow's Shāh-e Najaf Imambarah, expecting a Saeeda Bai, would instead encounter the older, shabbily clad, impoverished reciters of the mirasin class, the Zarinas and Sikandars who account for the majority of professional reciters in Lucknow today, as they have for decades. Sufiya, one such reciter who is quite frequently called to Shah-e Najaf, claims a kinship tie with the famous Kajjan Begam's family. Kajjan's clan now reside in Pakistan and enjoy a rare level of status and patronage, mostly as the last representatives in Pakistan of a North Indian tradition of classical singing.[41]

In Hyderabad, reciters such as Āminah Ja'far and Munīr Fāṭimah, if not wealthy or famous, are respected and skilled professionals. In other cities throughout India and Pakistan, reciters like Zahidah Baji of Lahore, who are not hereditary performers but receive honoraria from the patron class and have evident musical talent, often serve the needs of women's majlis communities.

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[40] Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 1137-1139.

[41] Sufiya and Kajjan do indeed have striking commonalities in their tunes and wailing, melismatic styles. The Lucknow reciter had apparently tried to correspond with Kajjan Begam in recent years, but it is hard to say with certainty whether or not they are related, because even if they were, it would be awkward for the respectable Kajjan to acknowledge this socially marginal branch of the family.

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With few exceptions, the professional marsiyah reciters with whom I worked lived an economic and social notch or two below the rest of my consultants, who were for the most part lower-middle-class, non-English speaking, pious Shi'i women. Lest I leave the reader with the impression that the marsiyah and its ritual context appeal exclusively or mostly to this constituency, I wish to close by stressing the broad base of the marsiyah's popularity; Shi'i women's engagement extends to conservative elites and very modernized cosmopolites as well. Among them are majlis hostesses affluent enough to patronize professional reciters, and highly educated women who seem to find solace in the marsiyah's commemoration of loved ones.

I realized early in my research that women of all economic classes maintained relationships—intuitive, cultivated, or both—with majlis poetry. I knew that ladies from many wealthy, elite Shi' families attended majlises as dutifully as the pious poor, and not only on Muharram. They organize mourning assemblies to fulfill vows, to honor deceased kin, and even to respectfully acknowledge Husain before an auspicious occasion. One friend even organized for me before my wedding a sort of "mini-majlis" complete with marsiyah recitation as part of the **menhdī* party, as is the custom in her family. Still, my constant interaction with women who were extremely conservative on social issues left me unprepared for the approaches some elite women took to their devotions.

In Delhi, for example, I had to re-think assumptions about piety, propriety, and the appeal of the marsiyah when I met prominent ladies who might be arranging special majlises or fondly recalling favorite marsiyahs one minute and then sipping gins as soon in the evening as a cocktail hour could decently be acknowledged. Educated in English,

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these women sometimes also belonged to families with impressive Urdu literary heritages; they often took central roles in promoting Shi'i charities or women's majlises with empowering messages in poorer communities. Often, their appreciation of the marsiyah was substantially literary and perhaps nostalgic, yet their emotional engagement with poetic themes was still the key element of their experience of the marsiyah. One woman confessed to me that she found her tearful responses a mystery, and thought that as a researcher, I could accomplish a worthy task by analyzing the reasons for them and explaining them to her and others like her.

Sājidah Zaidī, a friend and distant relative of the same lady, is another Delhi resident of literary leanings, one of the last women whom I interviewed before leaving India. We had tea in her well-appointed flat, part of a complex of buildings where virtually all of the residents are Shiahs. After discussing marsiyahs and literature at length, we finally did a taping session in which Sājidah recited some of her favorite marsiyahs by Anis, the consummate classical marsiyah poet. In that the recitation was devoid of its ritual trappings and conducted by a literarily astute individual in taht-ul-lafz style, the scene was one that might have endeared itself to the most austere of literary critics. Yet it also defied most of the critics' casual pronouncements about how individuals tend to relate to the marsiyah, based on their social class, level of education, or sex

Clad in a shimmering silken sari in the already sweltering March temperatures, Sājidah chose her poem. Her selection, like *Lāsh Akbar kī* and a number of other marsiyahs mentioned in this work, dwells on Husain's regret and shame as he confronts

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the sorrow of his womenfolk over the deaths of Ali Akbar and Ali Asghar.[42] Sājidah commenced to recite authoritatively and rhythmically in taht-ul-lafz, eventually reaching a section where Husain speaks to the women as he prepares to take Ali Asghar to the battlefield, where he will plead for water from the enemy.

As the recitation progressed, Sājidah's face softened with the sheen of perspiration. Her voice began to betray subtle tremors after ten or so verses, though her words remained crystal-clear, perfectly enunciated;

> They slew Ali Akbar with a spear right in front of me
> He departed this world, still thirsting for water
> These ingenious torturers are the enemies of all Ali's offspring
> If they kill Asghar too, what strength will I have left?
> You'll grieve that I carelessly cast away my heart's darling
> You might say in your heart, "a father cast away his son!"

The pauses between verses grew longer as Sājidah's sniffles intensified;

> Fate has turned on me, and these times are my opponent
> To return to this tent once I leave is a fearful prospect
> You speak the truth when you say it's not right for him [Asghar] to go
> But if you love me, then don't shed any tears
> You must bear even widowhood's sorrows and pains, Bano
> What you have to say, say it to Allah, Bano[43]

Finally, as she delivered part of Bano's reply to Husain, Sājidah's weeping got the better of her;

> Only the one whose heart is under the knife knows what it feels like
> Only the one whose heart is acquainted with this hurt knows what it feels like
> Only the one whose son suffers such sorrow and pain knows what it feels like
> Only the mother with a son in her lap knows what it feels like

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[42] See the marsiyahs in Chapter One and Chapter Four, and also Chapter Five's discussion of Husain's weary journeys from battlefield to tent and back again.

[43] *Anīs ke marsïye*, vol 2., 146.

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How is it that night passes, why does the day wane?
Does anyone ask a mother why she rears her babe?[44]

Forced to stop speaking at this point, Sājidah snatched a tissue out of the box on the coffee table. She gulped hastily, "I think I'll recite something else now."

After about a half an hour, the reciter closed her book, dabbed her eyes, and heaved a loud sigh. Leaning back against the sofa in exhaustion, she caught sight of her sari *pallū*, which had slipped down considerably in the course of her exertions, and flipped it back over her shoulder. With tiny tears still bejeweling her eyelashes, Sājidah smilingly lit a cigarette and puffed contentedly.

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[44] *Anīs ke marsīye,* vol 2., 147. Although she read from *Anīs ke marsīye* Sājidah slightly modified line 3. In the text, it reads "Only the one who subsists in sorrow and pain knows what it feels like" (*Dukh dard meñ yūñ jis kī basar ho vahī jane*, rather than *Dukh dard meñ yūñ jis kā pisar ho vahī jane*).

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APPENDIX A

The Karbala Characters, Timeline of Events, and Daily Muharram Observances

The material presented in this appendix is intended as a reference for the main characters and events in the Karbala narrative as depicted in popular piety, and the ways in which they are commemorated. Observances vary from region to region, and versions of Karbala's central incidents and "sub-plots" differ with each telling. My outline synthesizes interpretations and customs broadly shared in many areas of India and Pakistan, but always assumes that variations occur. In some instances, I point out significant differences among versions of the tragedy, but my notations simply provide examples, rather than comprehensive documentation. I have drawn on interviews and fieldwork for this information, and also on accounts of Karbala by Moojan Momen, David Matthews, S.A.A. Rizvi, Abdul Ra'uf Uruj, Salihah Abid Husain, Parvanah Rudaulvi, David Pinault, Frederick Denny, Sayyid Murād 'Alī Ja'farī, and Zainul Abedin Rizvi.

I have emphasized in *Desolate Victory* that the most zealous majlis-goers among my consultants could recount Husain's tragedy backwards and forwards, in all of its intricacies. However, this ability is rarer in the younger generation, and books like Zainul Abedin Rizvi's have the stated objective of educating Shi'i youth about both the details and the background of Karbala. Rizvi, like some reformist critics, even asserts that majlis preachers recount the horrors of Husain's tragedy, "but unfortunately the causes that led to its culmination, the reasons for which it could not be avoided and the benefits that were aimed at and achieved are seldom explained by them."[1] Despite Rizvi's critique of ill-educated *zākir*s, his own version of the Karbala incident often replicates popular beliefs rather than presenting a thoroughly researched "historical" account.

PART I: CHARACTERS

This portion of Appendix A includes the most prominent Karbala personages (listed by the best-known of their names or titles) and all of those mentioned in the marsiyahs and sub-plots discussed in *Desolate Victory*, but is not exhaustive enough to include every single figure, just as the timeline does not cover peripheral vaq'iahs or details irrelevant to the discussions in my text.

Husain's forces at Karbala are traditionally said to have numbered just 72 men (although some reports suggest a maximum of 132 fighters), a figure sanctified in much majlis poetry and rhetoric. Mohammad Zainul Abedin Rizvi claims that at least 600,000 enemies "were needed to face these few heroes," and most accounts concur that Yazid's men attacked with reinforcements in the thousands. Zainul Abedin Rizvi goes so far as to provide an intriguing breakdown of commanders and troops on Yazid's side, as well of a list of those who presented specific numbers of martyrs' heads to Ibn-e Ziyad.[2] Other popular accounts, too, list the soldiers responsible for guarding the rivers, the infantry and cavalry leaders, and so forth, which individual names are not

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[1] *Tragedy of Karbala*, 3.

[2] 115.

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significant enough for our purposes to be included here.

"Husain's Side"

'Abbās Husain's half-brother, known as *'Abbās 'alamdār*, the standard-bearer. Little Sakinah's thirst drove Abbas to venture to the Euphrates with his water sac (*mashk*), the first time successfully, and thereafter meeting his death in the attempt. On the day of the battle, Abbas eluded the massive force at the Euphrates and filled the waterskin, only to be attacked on his way back to the camp. After killing dozens of enemies, Abbas lost his arms to sword blows, but clenching the *mashk* in his teeth, he continued crawling towards the camp. Ultimately, an arrow pierced his waterskin, and a blow from a club wounded him mortally.[3] Depictions of the damaged *mashk* spilling out precious water and of Abbas's severed arms adorn many imambarahs. Although Abbas is supposed to have had three children himself, it is the special relationship between *chachā* (father's younger brother) Abbas and his *bhatījī* (niece) Sakinah that figures as one of the key bonds in the Karbala narrative. Abbas also has a special tie with his sister Zainab.[4]

Abdullah ibn-e Ḥasan A younger son of Imam Hasan, Abdullah seems to play a peripheral role in South Asian Shi'i piety, although some traditions relate that in the final stages of Husain's combat, the child met his death when he rushed onto the battlefield and blocked a sword blow directed at the imam. Abdullah is perhaps better known in Iranian popular tellings of the Karbala cycle.

'Alī (*Ḥaidar*, "the lion"; *Amīr-ul mominīn*, "commander of the faithful) Cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, husband of Fāṭimah, father of Hasan, Husain, Abbas, and Zainab, and first Shi'i imam. It is "partisan" loyalty to Ali as blood kin of the Prophet, rightful successor to him, and divinely-guided leader that gives Shiahs ("followers"or "partisans") their name and is in a sense the foundation of Shi'ism. Invocatory praise poems (*qaṣīdah*s or *manqabat*s) at the start of Muharram majlises often hail Ali, as does the slogan-shouting throughout the mourning assembly. Marsiyahs about him are recited on his death anniversary (21 Ramzān). The heroes of Karbala, especially Husain, are known by epithets that relate them to Ali, such as *Ḥaidar kā lāl* (Haidar's "jewel" or "precious one"). Zainab, too, invokes her status as the *dukhtar-e 'Alī* (the daughter of Ali) as the source of her bravery. Even the power of the miraculous sword Zulfiqar that Husain wields in battle derives from its status as Ali's sword.

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[3] See the allusions to these last bitter moments of Abbas's struggle in the nauhah recited at the end of the Qasr-e Zainab majlis, Chapter Three, 114.

[4] When Abbas sets off to face certain death, Zainab tells him that a prophecy of Ali, their father, is about to come true. When Zainab was a child, Ali had kissed her tiny wrists, weeping because bonds of captivity would one day chafe her arms. Both Zainab and Abbas embrace their respective fates as Abbas takes his leave. (See the poem recited by Aminah Ja'far, Chapter Six, 246-7.)

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'Alī Akbar (*naujavān pisar*, "youthful son" [of Husain]) Husain's eighteen-year-old son, one of the last to die at Karbala. Akbar's physical resemblance to the Prophet figures prominently in the various versions of his tragedy, including Munis's marsiyah, intensifying the horror of his murder by Husain's enemies. (See the details of Akbar's martyrdom and relationships as depicted in prose and poetry in Chapters Two and Four.)

'Alī Asghar Husain's six-month-old son, murdered by an enemy archer. After killing hundreds or thousands in battle, Husain returned to camp to bid a final farewell to his family and found them huddled around baby Asghar, who was on the verge of death from hunger and dehydration. He brought the child before the enemy army to beg for a few drops of water for him. Even some of Ibn-e Sa'd's cruel soldiers were moved to tears by the child's plight, but the general instructed Hurmila bin Kahil to shoot Asghar with an arrow. The willful slaying of an innocent child epitomizes the unsurpassed evil Yazid's followers and the righteousness and sacrificial mindset of the ahl-e bait. In majlis rituals and processions, replicas of cradles and poignant *lorī* (lullaby) poems evoke the infant Asghar, one of the last to die before Husain himself was killed. Most poetry depicts Bano as the mother who mourns Asghar, but another wife of Husain, Rabab, is his mother according to older written accounts. (See also the poetic texts in Chapter One, 10-12 and Chapter Five, 223-224).

'Aūn Zainab's pre-adolescent son, who with his brother Muhammad aspired to be standard-bearer for Husain's army. The two boys fought bravely and died in battle according to their mother's wishes. Mir Anis is credited with bringing this story, an apparently late accretion in the Karbala cycle, into the mainstream of the Urdu marsiyah's narrative episodes.

Bāno/Shahar Bāno Said to be a daughter of the last Sassanid Persian king, Yazdigard III, Bano was the mother of the fourth imam, Zain ul abidin, and of Sughra, who was left behind in Medinah. The Bano of popular piety is an ideal wife, and indeed Husain's only prominent spouse. Majlis poetry often configures her as the mother of the prominent martyrs Ali Akbar and Ali Asghar, although many accounts say that Umm-e Laila was Akbar's mother, and Rabab Asghar's. In poetry, the relationships may also hinge in part on which woman's name fits most easily into a poem's metric pattern.

Fāṭimah Kubrā A daughter of Husain, Kubra was reportedly married to her cousin Qasim (Hasan's son) just before he met his death on the battlefield. Kubra is known for her laments over Qasim's death and over her own inauspicious status as a bride widowed the day after her wedding. Her story allows marsiyah poets to incorporate distinctly Indian customs related to marriage and widowhood into a narrative which takes place in the Middle East. Descriptions of Kubra's wedding by Anis and other poets detail Indian jewelry (nose-rings, head ornaments), flower veils for the groom, *mehndī* (henna) designs on the hands, and *pān* (betel leaf and nut) preparation. Salihah Abid Husain comments that in the classical marsiyah, when it comes to the story of Kubra, "the exaggeration, rather than acting as a bit of salt in the dough for narrative

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flavor, is usually excessive."[5] (See also *Qāsim*.)

Fāṭimah Sughrā The daughter of Husain and Shahr Bano, Sughra was too ill to accompany her family on the tragic journey to Karbala. Poetry about Sughra first appears in Chapter Two, and her story is elaborated and analyzed in Chapters 4-7. Her special relationships are with her father and especially with Ali Akbar.

Fāṭimah Zahrā ("The radiant one"; "the most excellent of women" [*khair un-nissā*]; and the "mistress of the women of the worlds" [*sayyidat-un-nissā al 'ālamīn*].) The Prophet's daughter, Ali's wife, and the "source of all imams," including Husain. Many versions of Husain's tragedy place Fatimah on the scene in Karbala, guiding her son, then lamenting over him, from the world beyond. During her own lifetime, Fatimah had supernatural foreknowledge of the fate that awaited Husain and thus she is his eternal, pre-eminent mourner. She is spiritually present at every lamentation gathering for Husain and rewards those who mourn him.[6] (See Shabih-us Zahra's sermon in Chapters Two and Three.)

Fizzah A loyal maidservant of Husain's family, Fizzah served Fatimah Zahra herself from a young age. By the time of the events at Karbala Fizzah was aged, but still often figures in majlis narratives as a trusted messenger, running back and forth between family members, and between men's and women's quarters. Husain's family often address her warmly, almost as a relative.

Habīb ibn-e Mazāhir A Kufan friend to the Prophet's family who remained loyal to Husain when the courage of other supporters failed. Zainul Abedin Rizvi recounts that a note sent from Husain at Karbala to Habib was "handed over to him in the market while he was buying dye for his grey hair. Learning from the letter that the holy Imam was surrounded by his enemies at Karbala, he threw the away the dye declaring that his beard shall be died with blood instead."[7] The reference offers a suggestive comparison between the red henna-dyed beard of the *ḥājī*— one who has completed the piligrimage to Mecca—and the blood-steeped beard of one who would virtuously defend Husain. Habib's wife also demonstrated zealous devotion to the imam, excitedly scolding Habib when he hesitated for a moment in his decision over whether to join Husain. (See Chapter Three, 139).

Hasan (*al mujtabā*, "the chosen") Son of Ali, brother of Husain, and the second Shi'i imam. The supporters of Ali felt Hasan should have ascended to the caliphate after his father's death in 661 C.E., but Mu'aviyah usurped the post. Most descriptions of Hasan paint him as a retiring individual who did not press aggressively to lead the Muslim community. Many Shiahs believe

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[5] 1983, 89 (translation mine).

[6] Fatimah's importance is discussed in detail in Chapters Two and Three in relation to Shabih's sermon, while the (somewhat problematic) notion of Fatimah as a modest, devoted, passive counterpart to the assertive Zainab is considered in Chapter Seven.

[7] 131.

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that Hasan (d. 669 C.E.) was nonetheless poisoned (perhaps even by one of his own wives, a granddaughter of Caliph Abu Bakr), at the behest of Mu'aviyah. Hasan's mellifluous voice was famous, and some marsiyahs cite Ali Akbar's resemblance to Hasan when he issues the call to prayer (*azān*).[8] Hasan was martyred on the 28th of Safar (the month after Muharram), years before the Karbala events, but South Asian Muharram rites often commemorate Hasan's death along with Husain's, especially through color-coded banners, taziyahs, or other emblems which are green for Hasan and red for Husain. The feverishly repeated Muharram chant "*Yā Ḥasan, yā Ḥusain!*," supposedly misheard by British listeners as "Hobson, Jobson," provided the title for a whole collection of quaint Anglo-Indian terminology.[9] The chant is only one of many heard in processions today, and is hardly the most prominent.

Ḥurr The valiant, principled commander of Yazid's army under Ibn-e Ziyad who crossed the lines to fight and die at Husain's side. Hurr did not initially realize that Ibn-e Ziyad intended to have Husain killed if he did not swear fealty to Yazid. Confronting Husain after the imam's caravan reached its sixth halting point from Mecca, Hurr compromised with the imam, directing him to travel a path that led away from Kufah while negotiations were carried on with Yazid. Hurr is said to even have encouraged Husain to take refuge with supporters in their fortified villages so as to amass more forces and take on Yazid with some hope of victory. On the tenth of Muharram, Husain delivered a powerful speech to his enemies, denouncing their flagrant disregard for both the Islam revealed by the Prophet and the guiding role of Muhammad's progeny. Only Hurr was moved; realizing that Husain would die rather submit to Yazid, he joined Husain and begged to advance against Ibn-e Sa'ad right away. Hurr was among the first to die, and some say that a young son of his was also martyred at Karbala.

Ḥusain ibn-e Ali (*Sayyid-us-Shuhahdā*, "Prince of the martyrs") The central tragic and valiant figure at Karbala, Husain, son of Ali, was predestined to face torture and martyrdom at Karbala to draw attention to the atrocities perpetrated by Yazid and his followers in the name of Islam. Husain, it is said, died to preserve true Islam and in so doing proved the divinely-guided, selfless leadership capabilities of the Prophet's descendants. Majlis poetry intricately depicts Husain's special relationships with each member of his family, from his grandfather the Prophet (who used to play uninhibitedly with Husain when he was a boy, pretending to be his camel) to his little daughter Sakinah. Sakinah's passionate devotion to her father moved him so much that after his death his decapitated head appeared in her jail cell to comfort her.

Ja'far-e Ṭaiyār - A famous warrior and cousin of Prophet Muhammad, and the brother of Ali. Ja'far's son, Abdullah, was Zainab's husband. Ja'far sometimes appears in the marsiyah as a sort of mythic ancestral figure on the battlefield, and has a special relationship with his grandchildren (Zainab's sons) Aun and Muhammad. As the standard-bearer of the Prophet's army, he also prefigures Abbas's powerful role. Ja'far invariably has a reputation as a warrior of the highest order; he earned the appellation *ṭaiyār* ("wing"/"winged") when jeweled wings miraculously

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[8] See for example Anis's "Jab qaṭa' kī," *Bazm-e Anīs*, 328, verse 22.

[9] William Crooke, ed. *Hobson Jobson* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 1994 [1886]), 419-420.

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replaced his arms, which were severed in battle. The injury provides another parallel with the story of Husain's standard-bearer Abbas. Ja'far died in battle in 629 C.E.

Qāsim Imam Husain's nephew, son of Hasan. Husain had promised his brother that he would marry Qasim, aged about 16, to Husain's daughter (Fatimah Kubra), so the two were married just before the battle. Qasim's tale is one of the most popular in majlis poetry, more so in nauhahs and shorter genres than in the marsiyah. The blended imagery of marriage and death readily captures the imagination, juxtaposing sorrow and celebration. A special genre of poems called *mehndīs* (usually a subset of nauhahs or salams) is even identified with Qasim. Some writing on Muharram perpetuates a misapprehension that enactments of Qasim's pre-wedding festivities are a South Asian innovation. The wedding customs that South Asian marsiyah poets describe and that majlis participants replicate are indeed Indian in almost every respect, but Qasim and Kubra also appear in early Persian poetry about Karbala, and Iranian taziyeh performances dramatize their story as well. The popularity of this poignant episode notwithstanding, many Shiahs acknowledge that is not historically attested. Qasim's death was especially gory; his red blood bespattered his wedding finery, and enemy cavalry trampled his body to pieces.[10] Husain had reluctantly granted Qasim permission to fight Yazid's forces when the boy revealed to him that an amulet prepared by Hasan charged him to do battle and die at Karbala. Some traditions hold that Qasim killed as many as 70 foes before succumbing to his wounds.

Muhammad Muhammad, the last Prophet, appears in marsiyahs as a guide to and mourner of his grandson Husain, but another Muhammad, Zainab's son, also figures in the Karbala narrative. Muhammad and his brother Aun wanted to bear Husain's battle standard, although they were only about eight and ten years old. Their mother Zainab encouraged them to die for Husain's cause, but upbraided them for being presumptuous enough to ask for the standard-bearer's post, which went of course to Abbas. The most famous depiction of Muhammad is probably in Anis's marsiyah *Jab qata' kī musāfat-e shab āftāb ne.*

Mūsā al-Kāẓim - seventh Imam,

Muslim ibn-e 'Aqīl A cousin of Husain's on his father's side, Muslim was the imam's first emissary to Kufah. Muslim initially met with an enthusiastic response from the Kufans who had summoned Husain to lead them against the CaliphYazid, but whenYazid intensified pressure on this group, most withdrew their support for Husain. When Ibn-e Ziyad issued orders for the arrest of Muslim, Hānī ibn 'Urwā gave him refuge, and was killed for the act. Muslim himself was ambushed, "overpowered and showered with stones and arrows." Finally, "he was beheaded by the tyrant [Ibn-e Ziyad] and his body was thrown down the roof, to the ground and dragged on the streets of Kufa."[11] Marsiyahs also recount the martyrdoms of Muslim's two small children in

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[10] See Shabih us-Zahra's mention of this incident in the sermon, Chapter Three, 133.

[11] As reported by Mohammad Zainul Abedin Rizvi, 10. Two similar sub-narratives seem to have become melded in this writer's account of Karbala. S.A.A. Rizvi, in a version that follows historical sources more closely, explains that after Muslim's murder, two other emissaries of

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gripping and gruesome detail, but the historical accounts of Muslim's mission do not say much about his sons. Munis's marsiyahs about Muslim and his children are particularly well known (See Chapter Four, 159-60).

Rabāb/Rubāb Husain's wife and the mother of Sakinah and Ali Asghar. In poetry, narrative, and literary criticism Rabab is almost always mentioned in the context of her son Ali Asghar's martyrdom on the battlefield and her daughter Sakinah's death in the Syrian prison. Some nauhahs depict a stunned and bereaved Rabab mechanically rocking Asghar's empty cradle, but the majority of majlis poetry seems to pass her over in favor of giving a more prominent role to Bano. One curious and unique facet of Rabab's experience appears in a few popular accounts of the Karbala tragedy: it is said that after the captives were freed and headed back to Medinah, Rabab refused to accompany them all the way, but stayed back at Karbala, where the party had halted to commemorate and bury the dead. Supposedly, she remained there, residing in pious simplicity in a tent aside Husain's grave for at least a year. She finally returned to Medinah and lived most of the rest of her life in mourning.

Sakīnah This young daughter of Husain (aged somewhere between three and five years) narrates hundreds of Karbala poems, plaintively asking her father when he will return, calling out to the slain Qasim to participate in pre-nuptial henna ceremonies, begging the dying Asghar to speak to her, and pleading for Abbas to give her water. After Husain's death, the innocent child repeatedly asks the definition of the word *yatīm* (orphan), and poets often utilize her character to dwell on the horrors of orphanhood. Many majlis-goers find Asghar's story the most heart-wrenching of Karbala episodes, but Sakinah's has even more pathos in some ways: she survives horror upon horror after the death of her father, only to die in prison in Syria. After Husain was killed, Yazid's soldiers supposedly slapped Sakinah and tore the earrings from her ears. Sakinah is depicted as begging to join her beloved father, and she dies happily after his decapitated head appears in her prison cell to comfort her. Majlis-goers explain that since her actual death date is uncertain, it is observed on different dates in different communities.[12] Some non-Shiahs assert that Sakinah survived the prison ordeal, and V.S. Naipaul describes a ferocious Shi'i- Sunni conflict in Karachi over a newspapers's allegation that a daughter of Husain, seemingly Sakinah, grew up to become a "many times married . . . beguiling, luxury-loving patroness of the arts" in Medinah.[13]

Shīrīn A beautiful Iranian slave who entered the retinue of Husain's family when he married the Persian princess Shahar Bano. Shirin's tale includes a sub-plot in which Bano gifts the servant-girl to Husain because she mistakenly assumes that he desires Shirin for himself. The better- known versions of the Shirin story have her freed before the Karbala tragedy and then married to a

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Husain (Qais Mashar us-Saidāwī and 'Abdullah bin Baqtar) were killed and thrown from the top of the governor's palace. S.A.A. Rizvi, vol. 2, 44-45.

[12] Often, three days of majlises are held in her honor; some families in Hyderabad commemorate her death from the 19th to the 21st of Muharram.

[13] V.S. Naipaul, *Among the Believers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 393-95.

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wealthy Jew (on the condition that he convert to Islam and profess love for the ahl-e bait). Husain had predicted upon releasing Shirin that she would host him and his family at some future time, so when she heard that the imam's caravan was passing close to her residence in Syria, she dispatched her husband to offer hospitality. The husband returned with a tearful description of the Karbala survivors on their way to Damascus, preceded by Husain's head on a lance. The distraught Shirin went to see for herself, then offered the women cloaks and paid ibn-e Sa'd so that she could bring them, along with the martyrs' heads, to her home. There she fed them and organized a mourning assembly before their captors led them on to Damascus. Poems about Shirin form a category of their own in majlis anthologies. The trope of humble women's generosity to the bereaved or disguised women of Husain's family appears often in Shi'i story literature, and marsiyah poets similarly play up the role reversal whereby Shirin, an erstwhile servant, acts as comforter to the noble progeny of the Prophet. Much is also made of the juxtaposition between Shirin's expectations of a joyful meeting with Husain's whole family and her actual encounter with piteous captives whom she can barely recognize.

Umm-e Farvah Hasan's wife, and the mother of Qasim. Umm-e Farvah willingly sacrificed her son for Husain's cause. Umm-e Farvah herself was widowed while still young, a pattern eerily replicated when Qasim's martyrdom made a widow her daughter-in-law, Fatimah Kubra.

Umm-e Kulsum Younger sister of Husain, Abbas and Zainab. Some accounts of Husain's tragedy suggest that Umm-e Kulsum, like Zainab, defied Husain's enemies. Pinault finds her speeches and acts of resistance quite prominent in early Shi'i devotional literature.[14] An oft-mentioned incident has Umm-e Kulsum snatching away the dates and nuts the guilty Kufans offer the starving children of Husain's party, denouncing attempts at charity for the family of the Prophet (especially from those who betrayed them). She also verbally attacks a courtier of Yazid's who wishes to purchase Kubra (or in some accounts, Sakinah) as a slave. The man is struck dead by her curses. Kulsum does not seem, however, to have a pronounced or very individuated role in South Asian Muharram rites today. In most marsiyahs, as in *Lāsh Akbar kī*, she appears as simply one of the haram, interjecting an occasional comment or question, and weeping during the *bain*.

Umm-e Lailā Husain's wife and the mother of Ali Akbar, according to older accounts of the tragedy. Umm-e Laila was closely related to the Ummayad rivals of the Prophet's clan: Abū Sufiyān was her grandfather, Mu'aviyah her uncle, and Yazid himself her cousin. Although these kinship ties might have enabled her to obtain special treatment from her captors, popular versions of the Karbala tragedy stress that she never attempted to obtain any such concession. She is allotted a high status as the mother who willingly sacrificed the noble Ali Akbar for Husain's cause.

Umm-e Salmah A wife of the Prophet, who stayed with Sughra and Umm ul Banin in Medinah

Umm ul Banīn - A wife of Ali, Umm ul Banin earns high regard as the mother of the strong-willed

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[14] Pinault 2001, 72-3.

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and valiant Abbas; she reportedly stayed in Medinah with Husain's daughter Sughra when Husain left for Karbala. Although Umm ul Banin was the stepmother of Husain and Zainab, marsiyah poets emphasize the unusual closeness and camaraderie among all of Husain's wives and children.

Zainab (*Shahzādī*, "the princess;" *bint-e 'Alī*, the daughter of Ali) Founder of mourning assemblies, sister of Husain, daughter of Ali and Fatimah. Almost universally depicted as brave and assertive, Zainab advised and instructed the men from her family, both juniors and contemporaries. Ali Akbar, Qasim, and all of Husain's children were as dear to her as her own sons, and she urged each young man on to martyrdom, mourning them copiously afterwards. Zainab's relationships with these "sons," and with Husain, Abbas, Sakinah, and Abid are elaborated in great detail in majlis sermons and poems, as are her confrontations with Shimr, Ibn-e Ziyad, and Yazid. Hundreds of poems feature Zainab as a main character, from full-length Urdu marsiyahs to the much-loved Panjabi dirge *navve dīrāt* ("The night of the Ninth [of Muharram]"), in which Zainab proclaims herself the "sister of eighteen brothers," and dares Husain's enemies to snatch her veil. Special functions are held on Zainab's birth and death dates, and sometimes on the twelfth of Muharram, when she led mourning for Husain. Many cities have shrines or worship halls called "Zainabiyyah" devoted to her.

Zain ul 'abidīn ("the ornament of the worshipers"; also known as *'Ābid*, "the devout one,"/ "the worshiper," *Sajjād*, "the prostrator," and *'Alī*). A son of Husain and Bano, Zain ul 'abidin was aged about 22 at the time of Husain's death and thus older than Ali Akbar, but fell ill and could not fight at Karbala. Protected by Zainab, his aunt, in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, this sole male survivor of the massacre became the fourth imam. Abid is invoked as the "ailing one" or "invalid" of Karbala, a male counterpart to the isolated Fatimah Sughra. A beleaguered figure chained in shackles and a metal yoke, but nonetheless invested with the responsibility of leadership, he is often considered a symbol for politically oppressed rightful or would-be leaders of modern times. Zain ul 'abidin is said to have kept himself sequestered in religious meditation and lament over the events at Karbala for most of his life. He wept for decades after the tragedy; popular piety even attributes celebrations at the end of the mourning season in part to his first smile upon hearing that the murderer of his father had died. In addition to his relationship with Zainab, Abid shared a close bond with his sister Sakinah, and had to carry out the heart-rending task of digging her grave when she died in the Syrian prison.

Żulfiqār (Arabic, *Żu 'l faqār*, "the cleaver of vertebrae") the sword of Ali, used by Husain in battle. In classical marsiyahs, the sword's prowess became so prominent that it merited a whole section of the poem to itself (see Appendix F). Zulfiqar is personified in these long passages and described in the feminine gender.

Żuljinah (Arabic *Żu 'l janāḥ* "the winged one;" Also known as *Dul-dul* in South Asia) Husain's winged horse, who returned to the camp riderless and so conveyed the calamity of Husain's death. As with the sword Zulfiqar, the classical marsiyah poets developed elaborate conventions and descriptions to memorialize Zuljinah's miraculous powers, speed, and prowess in battle. Special white horses are selected to play the role of Dul-Dul in processions, the dates of which are

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probably the most varied of all rites, differing from city to city and neighborhood to neighborhood. Many communities arrange processions during the first ten days of Muharram, and then multiple times during the remainder of the lengthy mourning season. In Lucknow and Mahmudabad, UP, procession organizers take pains to stain Zuljinah's saddle cloth with mock blood so realistic that it coagulates in a pattern that resembles that of real dried blood. In Hyderabad, Sindh (Pakistan), there are children's processions featuring toy-sized Zuljinahs pulled along by strings, accompanied by drumming on tin-cans.

"The Opposing Side"

Hāris A Kufan supporter of Yazid responsible for the murderer of Muslim ibn-e Aqil's two children, an event recounted in marsiyahs and Persian *ta'ziyeh* dramas, but for which there is little historical evidence. Munis and several other nineteenth century poets describe Haris's evil deeds in gory detail. Haris's wife had attempted to shelter Muslim's sons after their father, Husain's messenger, was slain, but upon learning of their presence in his house Haris immediately arranged for a slave to kill them. The slave would not do so, and jumped into the Euphrates to escape Haris's wrath. When Haris's son also refused to slay the Prophet's kin, Haris killed his own son, then beheaded the boys and threw their bodies into the Euphrates. Zainul Abedin Rizvi states that "their solitary graves stand under a green canopy on the sandy plains" near a place called Musaiyab.[15]

Hind/Hindah The wife of Yazid who visited Husain's women in prison, expressing condolences and shame for the torments they underwent. Hind even castigated her husband for her cruelty to the ahl-e bait and lobbied on their behalf. Like Shirin, Hind is said to have been strikingly beautiful and to have been at one time in the service of Husain's family. Salihah Abid Husain dismisses a belief that Hind was at least briefly married to Husain with the comment that "Marsiyah poets take up these sorts of 'traditions' to create a kind of 'romantic' atmosphere."[16] Certainly, even the suggestion that a single beauty was the wife of both Husain and Yazid lends an intense charge to the story of Hind, whose influence over Yazid was reportedly responsible for any mercy shown the captives and their eventual release. A whole category of marsiyahs details Hind's meeting with Zainab, Bano, and the others; the poems sometimes compare the finery of Hind and her daughters with the sorry state of the "daughters of the Prophet," especially little Sakinah. Dabir's marsiyah, *Qaid khane meñ talaṭum hai kih Hind āṭī hai* on this subject is one of the most famous of all classical marsiyahs.

Hurmilah bin Kāhil The archer who killed baby Ali Asghar.

(*'Umar*) *Ibn-e Sa'd* The general (under Ibn-e Ziyad) directly tasked with eliciting from Husain a vow (*bai'at*) of loyalty to Yazid, and with leading the battle against Husain once he refused to comply. While historical reports suggest that Ibn-e Sa'd was pressured into attacking Husain's

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[15] 108.

[16] 1973, 214.

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party, marsiyahs portray him as a villain so depraved that he took a keen pleasure in tormenting even the women and children of the imam's family. Uruj, in his introduction to Urdu marsiyahs and the characters in them, calls him "cruel, merciless, and greedy."[17]

(*'Ubaidullah*) *Ibn-e Ziyād* Governor of Kufah and Basrah under Yazid. Yazid replaced a less authoritarian Kufan governor with the harsh Ibn-e Ziyad as tensions with Husain came to a head. Some say that Yazid never intended for his army to carry out such extensive atrocities as they did at Karbala, and blame Ibn-e Ziyad for the excesses, especially the decapitation of Husain and the display of his head on a pike. A few accounts suggest that Yazid went so far as to denounce Ibn-e Ziyad's flagrant disrespect for the Prophet's family.

Mu'āviyah A member of the Ummayad clan, sometime rivals of the "Hashimite" clan of the Prophet within the Quraish tribe. Mu'aviyah, as governor of Syria, consolidated power and wrested the caliphate from Ali and his son Hasan. Shi'i tradition depicts Mu'aviyah as a usurper and tyrant, but some sources, both Islamic and western, consider him a shrewd politician and effective ruler. Denny, for example, compares Mu'aviyah with Teddy Roosevelt (!), introducing him as "one of the greatest leaders of Islamic history, with a personality and leadership style that were deeply informed and molded by *ḥilm* (forbearance)," and as a victor "who treated his defeated foes with magnanimity and respect." Yet Denny, too, acknowledges that "Mu'aviyah initiated a dynastic line that was much later criticized for its worldliness and ruthlessness."[18] Mu'aviyah had supposedly promised to acknowledge the claims of the Prophet's family to the caliphate after his death, but instead appointed his sonYazid to succeed him.

Shimr Żu'ljaushan (*Shimr-e la'īn*, Shimr "the accursed") A leader inYazid's army; most sources report that he was sent to issue an ultimatum to Ibn Sa'd to either do away with Husain or hand command over to Shimr. Popular piety configures Shimr as the murderer of Husain and an enemy so craven that he severed the imam's head as Husain prostrated in prayer. Shimr is reviled to the extent that in Iran, spectators have been known to attack—and in at least one instance, even kill—the actor playing Shimr in the *ta'ziyeh* passion play about Karbala.

Sinān (*ibn-e Uns Nakh'ī*) The earliest accounts of the Karbala tragedy hold Sinan, not Shimr, responsible for the deathblow to Husain. Many popular versions of Husain's story in South Asia acknowledge Sinan's presence on the scene, but list him as the leader of an infantry regiment or in some similar capacity. (See Chapter Four, 167, fn. 21; 169, fn. 26.)

(Caliph) *'Umar* The second Muslim Caliph, ruled 634-644. He is particularly despised by some Shiahs for taking on the Caliphate after Abū Bakr, because Ali "was passed over" as a candidate and "not even consulted" in the decision.[19] Umar furthermore supposedly turned Islam away from

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[17] 24.

[18] 137.

[19] Momen, 20.

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the strict path endorsed by the Prophet, and explicitly prohibited Ali from succeeding him, resentful of his cheerful temprament, ambition, and rigid adherence to truth. In some South Asian Shi'i communities, the burning of a huge *putlah*, a garishly-colored clownish effigy, on the ninth of the month of rabi-ul awwal, mocks Umar. (Umar's death is celebrated on this date, though he more likely died on the 1st of Muharram or at the end of the month of Zilhaj). Some aspects of the custom resemble quite closely the burning of the demons Rāvana, Meghanād, or Kumbhakarana in Hindu festivities. *Putlahs* of these enemies of Rāma are, like Umar's, stuffed with firecrackers so that they burst loudly into flames to the cheers of onlookers after hours of anticipation. The 9 Rabi-ul-awwal festivities include songs and poems that taunt Umar "the dog." Needless to say, smoldering Shii-Sunni tension can erupt over such practices, especially given that the Sunnis perform an observance called *Madḥ-e Ṣāḥabā*, ("praise of the companions," i.e. the first three caliphs, including Umar).

Walīd The governor of Medinah and the first of Yazid's henchmen to try to secure Husain's loyalty to Yazid.

Yazīd The Ummayad Caliph who came to power after his father Mu'aviyah, and maintained his father's enmity with the descendants of the Prophet and Ali. Yazid, bent upon Husain accepting him as the Caliph and swearing fealty, set the tragedy of Karbala in motion through his underlings Ibn-e Ziyad and 'Umar ibn Sa'd. Some Shi'i accounts say Yazid was remorseful over the evil ultimately done to Husain and his family, and even allowed the survivors to build a hall for mourning assemblies in Damascus itself. Other profiles emphasize his gloating over Husain's severed head. Many sources, and not only the most partisan Shi'i accounts, revile Yazid for his reversion to "pre-Islamic customs of vendetta, drink, and dissipation,"[20] but a few— including Frederick Denny— maintain that he was a shrewd and "capable leader."[21]

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[20] S.A.A. Rizvi, vol. 1, 44.

[21] Denny, 138.

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APPENDIX A: PART II

The Karbala Chronology and Related Muharram Practices

This chronology outlines the events leading up to Karbala, the tragedy itself, its aftermath, and the sequence of related rituals (especially poetry recitations) observed in South Asia today. The events commemorated and the dates designated for allied majlis customs show a direct correspondence only sometimes. For example, the main Karbala heroes were all martyred on 10 Muharram, but they are remembered individually on separate days up to and including the tenth. Assemblies that occur between Muharram and Rabi ul awwal (*Rabī' ul awwal*) also mark events that occurred in different calendar years, which complicates the alignment between the chronology of the tragedy itself and that of its remembrance. Zainab, Zain ul abidin, and their female kin, for instance, are said to have been held in captivity for just over a year after Husain's death, with the result that in popular anthologies poems to be recited on the fortieth day (*chehlum*) after Husain's martyrdom appear after the categories "The Release of the Women from the Syrian prison" and "The Women Return to Karbala and Bury the Martyrs' Corpses." The outline gives precedence to popular versions of Husain's story and to the order of the majlis rituals under discussion in this study, rather than attempting to reconstruct Husain's tragedy in a historically verifiable sequence.

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Date	What Happened to Husain and his followers on this Date	Observances and Poetry Recitations on this Date
Month of Rajab, 60 A.H. (March, 680 C.E.). Rajab is the seventh month of the twelve-month Islamic calendar, and Muharram the first.)	Mu'aviyah dies and Yazid succeeds him.	
28 Rajab	Nearly half a year before Imam Husain's death at Karbala, Walīd, the governor of Medinah, so intensely pressures Husain to swear allegiance to Yazid that Husain leaves Medinah for Mecca. Sughra, the imam's ailing daughter, is left behind. Before departing, he pays his respects at the graves of his parents, the Prophet and Fatimah, and receives a visitation from the Prophet. Muhammad lauds Husain's determination to save Islam and his inevitable martyrdom.	(Marsiyahs about the departure from Medinah such as Anis's *Farzand-e pai'ambar kā Medine se safar hai* are often recited during the first day or two of Muharram.)
Some months before Muharram	Husain receives letters from supporters in Kufah, asking him to lead a movement against Yazid. The imam deputes his cousin Muslim to meet with the Kufans. Initially received enthusiastically by up to 18,000 supporters of the imam, Muslim is later betrayed. A man who gives him refuge from Ibn Ziyad's forces is killed.	

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8 Zilhaj (*zï 'lḥajah*, the last month in the Islamic calendar); the eighth is the day before the haj "season" begins.	Husain leaves Mecca and heads for Kufah. He does so to avoid conflict between his supporters and Yazid's in the holy city during the haj period.	
9 Zilhaj	Through the machinations of Ibn Ziyad, Muslim is tortured and killed.	Some imambarahs organize majlises on this date. (More attention is given to Muslim's martyrdom during the first two or three days of Muharram, when poetry about him is often recited.)
22 Zilhaj	Muslim's two sons, still children, are beheaded by Haris by the side of the Euphrates river.	(Poetry about Muslim's children and Haris is often recited sometime during the first three days of Muharram.)
Later in the month of Zilhaj	At Salibiyah, their third halting place after Mecca, the party learns of Muslim's fate, and sends another emissary to Kufah	
Later in the month of Zilhaj	At Zebalā, the sixth halting place, Husain hears that his messengers have been murdered. The imam realizes that the Kufans who summoned him have weakened in their resolve, and little support will be had. He warns his companions that to stay with him means certain death, and offers them the option to leave. Some desert him, but the faithful stay with Husain	(Few observances commemorate the imam's travels during Zilhaj, perhaps in part because many joyous events (the wedding of Fatimah and Ali, *ïd-ul aẓhā*, *ïd ġhadïr*, and *ïd mubāhilah*) occur in this month. As Shi'i weddings cannot take place during the mourning cycle, Zilhaj can also be a busy "marriage season" in the community.)

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Later in the month of Zilhaj	The general Hurr intercepts the Imam at Zū Husam at Ibn-e Ziyad's orders. Husain distributes water to Hurr's parched troops and their mounts. Instead of arresting Husain or allowing him to proceed to Kufah, Hurr arranges for him to travel in a different direction.	
Later in the month of Zilhaj	A short distance from Karbala, some loyal supporters urge Husain to take refuge in their mountain villages and gather reinforcements. Hurr is willing to allow this equalization of forces, but Husain says he will not abandon his mission, and insists on continuing towards Kufah and confronting Yazid's army if need be.	
Later in the month of Zilhaj	At Zi-khum, the ninth halting place, Husain again offers his troops the opportunity to leave, but none are willing to abandon the grandson of the Prophet.	
Eve of the 1st of Muharram		In some cities, including Lahore, special nauhah poems for the *chānd rāt*, "night of the moon," are recited. The first, usually highly choreographed, *mātam* of the season is performed with flails or knives by men's mourning societies.

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1 Muharram		Nauhahs and marsiyahs describing the Muharram moon and the initiation of the mourning season are often recited on the first day or two of the month. Marsiyahs about Husain setting out from Medinah, or about Muslim and his children are also favorites. Women's majlis sermons may feature *kahānīs*, stories with folk motifs about miraculous events associated with the ahl-e bait or with Shi'i mourning.
2 or 3 Muharram, 61. A.H. (October, 680 C.E.).	Less than a month after leaving Mecca, Husain reaches "Nainevah." His horse stops suddenly and cannot be forced to proceed further. When he learns that the spot is also known as Karbala, Husain alights from the horse and has camp set up in what will be his final resting place. Ibn Sa'd's troops force the party to relocate at a distance from the Euphrates River.	Marsiyahs such as Dabir's *Jab Zaibdah-e manzil-e awwal hū'e Shabbīr* are often recited between the first and third of Muharram to commemorate Husain's arrival in Karbala. (See Chapter Two, 88-89, and the final portion of Shabih-us Zahra's sermon, Chapter Three, 135-137 for allusions to this event in majlises and for coordination between poems and sermons.)

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3 Muharram	Husain calls together the land owners of Karbala so as to purchases a large plot from them. He then returns the land to their custody under the condition that they will tend the martyrs' graves there after the battle.	This event is recounted in certain sermons and marsiyahs, including Dabir's *Dast-e khudā ka quvvat-e bāzū Husain hai* (see Chapter Three, 137-138). Marsiyahs about Hurr may also be recited sometime during the first half of the ten main days of Muharram. The classic poem on Hurr is Anis's *Bah khudā fāris-e maidān-e tahawwur thā Hur*, but Hurr is a popular subject for "modern" marsiyahs as well.
4 or 5 Muharram	Ibn-e Sa'd reports to Ibn-e Ziyad that Husain is willing to return to Medinah or leave the country if the Kufans no longer desire his leadership, but Ibn-e Ziyad insists that Husain must swear fealty to Yazid. Husain refuses.	In some communities, especially in Pakistan, men's majlises incorporate a final matam portion only after the first four days of Muharram (see Schubel, 107.) In all of the communities I studied, matam began in women's assemblies from the first of Muharram.
4-6 Muharram		Marsiyahs about Zainab's sons Aun and Muhammad and various of the Karbala martyrs may be recited sometime during this period, or even earlier during Muharram.
6 Muharram		Sacred to the memory of Ali Asghar (Lahore) or Ali Akbar (some neighborhoods in Karachi and Lucknow). In Lahore's old city, processions of *jhūla*s, cradles, take place late at night, and newly-composed nauhahs are performed for the first time. Many people conduct a *shab-bidārī*, all-night vigil.

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6 Muharram (continued)		Poems about Akbar and Asghar form some of the most popular majlis material, and are performed throughout the long mourning season, and not only during the first ten days or on the day designated for each martyr. Marsiyahs about Akbar outnumber those about any hero except Imam Husain himself.
6 or 7 Muharram	Ibn-e Sa'd's troops blockade the Euphrates river, cutting off Husain's only access to drinking water.	The seventh is sacred to the memory of Qasim. Events on this day include processions featuring *mehndī* and wedding paraphernalia (henna paste, fruit, and sweets); *tabūt*s (replicas of coffins); and/or the horse of Karbala, Zuljinah. The mehndi items may be distributed at the end of mourning assemblies. Young girls string *sahrāh* flower chains (like those that covered Qasim's face as a bridegroom) and request special boons (often for suitable spouses) when offering the flower chains.

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7 Muharram		In many areas, the devout also walk on coals or fire on the night of the 7th of Muharram, demonstrating their faith in the ahl-e bait by "passing through hell" without suffering pain or scarring. This custom has no direct connection with the Qasim narrative, but it is interesting that a rite that lends itself so much to spectacle is associated with the same date as the dramatic and colorful "wedding" commemorations. Fire-walking may recall the suffering of Husain's women, forced to rush and save their children from burning tents, but the temporal placement of the observance does not correspond with the calendar dates on which the looting and burning of Husain's camp occurred.
8 Muharram	Abbas makes a successful attempt to bring water from the Euphrates for the children, but after this the force guarding the riverbanks is reinforced.	Sacred to the memory of Abbas or Ali Akbar. In many cities, including Lucknow, processions of the battle standard take place, special food (*ḥāẓirī*) is prepared and placed below the standard, and special prayers for Abbas's intervention and favor are offered. Zuljineh processions are held in some neighbourhoods of Lahore.

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8 Muharram	Husain's party suffers desperately for lack of water. The children in particular become painfully weak and dehydrated.	A number of nauhahs feature interactions between Abbas and Sakinah. *Jab qatl kiyā nahar pah saqā-e ḥaram ko* is a popular Abbas marsiyah, and the poem *Jab hū'e bāzū-e 'Abbās qalam dariyā par* (by Anis or Munis) is performed both as a soz and as a marsiyah.
9 Muharram, known as the *shab-e 'ashūr*, "ashurah eve."	Ibn-e Sa'd prepares to attack; Husain requests, and is granted, a final night of prayer before the battle. The imam pays his last farewells to his family members. Zainab exhorts her two small sons to fight to the death for Husain, and they swear to do so. Husain offers his supporters the option to depart one last time, but all refuse. Yazid's forces spend the night carousing and drinking.	Popular marsiyah anthologies reserve an especially large category of marsiyahs to be recited on this day. Many communities commemorate the martyrdoms of either Ali Akbar or Ali Asghar on the ninth. Observances vary considerably from city to city and locality to locality, but generally speaking, the sixth usually honors Asghar and the ninth Akbar. Many observe a night vigil, staying awake the entire night and next day.
10 Muharram, (a), morning	Husain's forces assemble for their final devotions; Ali Akbar issues a mellifluous call to prayer.	The 10th is an official day off in India and Pakistan; the 8th and 9th may also be official holidays. Majlises of the 9th and 10th, and especially the *shām-e ġharībān* majlis (see below), are usually broadcast on radio and television in both countries.
10 Muharram (b)	Husain addresses his enemies, accusing them of straying from Islam by attacking the descendants of the holy Prophet. Hurr, won over by this speech, joins the imam's forces, and is slain early on in the battle.	Huge processions carry taziyahs to local Karbalas. In Lucknow, many walk barefoot for miles, even in the searing heat, to the major Karbala, Talkatorā.

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10 Muharram (c)	Qasim, Abbas, and Ali Akbar all die heroic deaths (for details, see the Part I of this appendix).	As other dates during Muharram are devoted to these heroes, marsiyahs and sermons on ashurah focus on Husain's own personal losses, valor in battle, communication with the almighty, and martyrdom.
10 Muharram (d)	Husain is left alone and makes a number of sorties against the enemies. He then pleads for water on behalf of Ali Asghar, but baby is shot in the throat by Hurmila's arrow and dies a painful death.	Many Shiahs observe a fast (*fāqah*, "hunger"/ "thirst") abstaining from food and drink until after the afternoon prayers which signal the time of Husain's death. Others roll up their sleeves to represent the imam's steps forward and backwards as he tried to carry Asghar's tiny corpse back to the tents (some say he made seven attempts).
10 Muharram (e)	Husain is attacked and wounded grievously, but nonetheless kills hundreds. In most traditions, a celestial voice reminds him of his mission of martyrdom, and that his purpose is not revenge, but to awaken Muslims to the evil being perpetrated in the name of Islam	In many cities, including Lahore, believers report that rosaries made from the earth of Karbala turn from brown to red at the hour of Husain's death—at the time of 'asr, late afternoon, prayers—and drip blood. Dozens of marsiyahs may be performed at 'ashurah majlises during the day, but among the most beloved is Anis's *Āj Shabbīr pah kyā 'ālim-e tanhā'ī hai.*

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10 Muharram (f)	Husain slips from his horse and performs a final prayer, during which Shimr or Sinan strikes his head off. The cosmos responds to this tragedy with an eclipse of the sun, earthquakes, and other "doomsday-like" signs.	Throughout the day, paper taziyahs arriving at Karbalas are buried in the earth with ceremonial prayers. "Permanent" taziyahs—often venerable ones maintained by major families or imambarahs—and other relics may be "cooled" several days before they are stored away.
10 Muharram (g)	Husain's horse Zuljinah returns to the tent riderless, signaling the imam's death to his loved ones, who begin their impassioned mourning.	Zuljinah processions occur on ashurah and throughout the mourning period for Husain. The "riderless horse" motif may have originated in pre-Islamic Iran. In Ladakh and some other regions, Husain's horse has become one of the most prominent elements of Muharram (see Pinault 2001, 109-132). In Varanasi, Zuljinah's spirit possesses a select mourner, who becomes the focus of a frenzied procession at the culmination of each Muharram.

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10 Muharram, (h), night.	Yazid's army burns the tents in Husain's camp, scattering and terrifying the survivors. Ibn-e Sa'd orders horsemen to trample the martyrs' bodies and snatch the veils from Husain's womenfolk.	*Shām-e ġharībān* ("night of the exiles/the wretched") majlis.The majlis is held in the dark, and commemorates the mourning of the survivors of the Karbala massacre, namely the women of Husain's party and Zain ul abidin. One popular marsiyah for *shām-e ġharībān* assemblies is *Karbalā meñ shah-e vālā ke ḥaram luṭte haiñ.* The intense mourning and matam on ashurah completes the annual mourning cycle for many Shiahs, but others, and women in particular, continue to attend majlises day and night for the better part of two additional months.
10-11 Muharram	The women of Husain's camp (*ahl-e ḥaram*) are taken captive and suffer many torments: their goods are plundered and they witness the martyrs' heads being raised on pikes. They leave Karbala as prisoners and are taken first to Kufah. En route, Zainab eloquently implores the heavens to bear witness to their captors' cruelty, and denounces Yazid and his henchmen. She also protects Zain ul abidin.	Marsiyah anthologies often contain a category of poems about this stage of the ahl-e haram's travails; one example is the popular *Jab luṭ ke Karbalā se asīr-e sitam chale*. However, majlis-goers do not generally recite these poems on the 11th itself, since this is the one day when majlises are suspended.

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12 Muharram or *Sivum* (Pers., *sīvum*; often pronounced *soyum* in this context), the "third day" (including the 10th) after Husain's death.	The women arrive in Kufah. Umm-e Kulsum accuses the Kufans who originally summoned Husain of cowardice, and refuses to let the children among the survivors eat the food offered by them.	*Sivum* majlises acknowledge the third day of death rites; "permanent" taziyahs and other relics may be put away after "cooling" on this day. On the 12th and 13th. Zuljinah appears in some processions In processions throughout the mourning season, women and children can be seen bound in shackles (to show devotion or fulfill the conditions of petitionary prayers that have been answered), emulating the ahl-e haram as prisoners. In mourning assemblies, women's loose hair and uncovered heads also mimic the distraught condition of the Karbala women. In some poetic anthologies, the Kufah episodes make up a small separate category of majlis poems.
Muharram	The women are kept prisoners in Kufah for about eight days, after which Ibn-e Ziyad sends them off to Damascus	Majlis traditions that relate the women's travels and imprisonment tell of the miraculous state of preservation of the martyrs' heads, and especially of Husain's head coming to life to comfort his relatives and denounce the enemy.

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25 Muharram (?)	Death of Zain ul abidin, 94 or 95 A.H. (In Iran, his death date is observed on 11 Muharram.)	Special majlises acknowledge the imam's death many years after Karbala. It is probably in part because several of the masumin's death anniversaries happen to fall during the months of Muharram, Safar, and Rabi ul awwal that the Muharram mourning season was gradually elaborated and prolonged under the Avadh navabs.
Muharram-Safar	En route to Damascus, the prisoners encounter Shirin, their erstwhile slave, who barely recognizes them in their piteous condition.	Many anthologies include an entire category of marsiyahs under the heading "*mulāqāt-e Shīrīn*," or "the encounter with Shirin."
Safar	After arduous travel of 19-36 days (according to various accounts), the party of survivors reaches Damascus. They are paraded through the Syrian bazaars and gaped at by onlookers.	Most anthologies also include a category of marsiyahs under the heading "*bāzār-e shām*," or "the Syrian bazaar."
Safar	The ahl-e haram are taken before Yazid, where Zainab denounces him so forcefully that non-Muslims present at court are won over to Husain's cause.	The *darbār-e shām* (Syrian court) forms a category of its own, with numerous sub-plots for marsiyahs and majlis sermons. Zainab figures prominently in these narratives.

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Safar	The Karbala survivors are imprisoned. After several days, Yazid's wife Hind is shocked to learn that the mournful and prayerful voices she has been hearing from the palace are those of the Prophet's kin. Hind commiserates with the prisoners and castigates her husband.	The *zindān-e shām*, Syrian prison, forms an entire additional topic for majlises. Majlises held during Safar, however, also revisit the martyrdoms of the Karbala heroes and impart lessons of all of the imams.
19 Muharram or 9 Safar?	Sakinah dies in the Syrian prison, and Zain ul abidin digs her grave there.	In some communities, Sakinah's death ushers in a three-day majlis series of it's own, including special rites for the third day.
Safar, 62 A.H.	The ahl-e haram are set free from prison. Some reports say that Yazid realized at this point that, rather than consolidating power, he had alienated the Muslim community by killing Husain. He consequently tried to offer blood money for the Karbala murders and respectfully sent the women off in camel-mounted canopies.	The release of the women (*rihā'ī-e ahl-e ḥaram*) usually merits its own section in popular marsiyah anthologies. Marsiyahs and sermons up until the end of the entire mourning period continue to feature the leadership and sufferings of Zainab. Imam Zain ul abidin also receives considerable attention.

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20 Safar	The fortieth day (chehlum, *'arabain*) after any death involves special commemorations and prayers. 20 Safar, 61 A.H. (680 C.E.), was the chehlum for Husain and his companions, although it was impossible for rituals to be held on that date. Some say the ahl-e haram arrived back at Karbala on 20 Safar, 62 A.H. and stayed for a few days to conduct proper death rituals for the martyrs, who had been buried by the locals the previous year.	Chehlum/*'arabain* is an occasion for substantial observances in South Asian Shi'i areas. City-dwellers may return to their villages or hometowns for the chehlum, just as many do for the first 10 days of Muharram. In many senses, chehlum is the conclusion of the mourning cycle. The very pious continue to hold majlises through the 8th of Rabi-ul-awwal, but there are fewer after the chehlum. Hyderabad marks the *'arabain* with especially large, alam-led processions and majlises.
28 Safar	Death of Prophet Muhammad 11 A.H. (632 C.E.) Death of Imam Hasan 50 A.H.	The Prophet's death happens to fall within the two-month, eight-day mourning period for Husain, and special majlises and marsiyahs are dedicated to this event. As has been noted, allusions to Hasan's death are often incorporated into general Muharram observances
1 or 8 Rabi-ul awwal (?), 62 A.H.	The women arrive back in Medinah, are reunited with Sughra, share the news of the Karbala tragedy, and institute formal mourning assemblies for Husain.	These events are commemorated through poetry recitations during the months of Safar and Rabi ul awwal. Marsiyahs such as *Musāfirān-e muṣībat vaṭan meñ āte haiñ*, dwell on the arrival at Medinah and the communal mourning that ensues.
8 Rabi-ul awwal	Death of the eleventh imam, Hasan al 'askarī, 873 or 874 C.E. (260 A.H.)	The last majlis of the mourning season is held.

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9 Rabi ul awwal	Years after the Karbala tragedy, Imam Zain ul 'abidin smiles for the first time on this day, which some popular traditions attribute to Shimr's death. The date is more commonly held to be that of the death of Caliph 'Umar, 644 C.E., "a joyful occasion for Shi'is." (See Momen, 239.)	Some communities mark the end of the mourning season with *jashans* (celebrations) that incorporate dancing girls, red and pink garb, and the burning of effigies of Caliph Umar (see Part I of this appendix) or an effigy that is a composite of Umar and Shimr. The overall atmosphere is reminiscent of a huge wedding. Some Shiahs find such celebrations distasteful, and some Shi'i calendars do not mark the date as any sort of sanctioned celebration. Others indicate that the date is a feast day, *Īd-e Zahrā*. Like Zilhaj, Rabi ul awwal contains a number of auspicious occasions, most notably the birthday of the Prophet (commemorated with joyous poetry recitations) on the 17th.
11 Jamādī us-śānī or 15 Rajab, 62 A.H. (?)	Death of Hazrat Zainab	

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APPENDIX B

Genres of Urdu Majlis Poetry

(Poetic forms are listed in typical order of performance in women's majlises)

qasīdah — A praise poem that appears in variety of rhyme schemes (including quatrains, and couplets in *aa, bb, cc*, or other formats) and initiates the majlis in some Lahore neighborhoods. In both majlises and auspicious Shi'i functions, qasidahs declare the virtues of the masumin, especially Ali. (Classical Urdu qasidahs usually honored a patron or ruler.) Most majlises in Lucknow and Karachi do not include qasidahs, as they are said to be inappropriately joyous.

soz — Usually a poem one or two verses in length, the soz captures a well-known moment of lament from the Karbala story. The format of sozes varies and may employ a couplet, four-, five-, or six-line structure, although many "classical" sozes are verses from a marsiyah with an *aaaabb* rhyme scheme, sometimes set to classical Indian ragas.

salām — Couplet form (with refrain), usually *aa, ba, ca* rhyme scheme, but sometimes *aa, bb,cc* etc. The salam may contain praise or eulogistic/elegiac themes, and its delivery style has "some resemblance to the syllabic recitative style of *qawwālī* singing."[1] Lullaby poems for Ali Asghar or *mehndī* poems for Qasim can be subsets of the salam genre, though they are just as often recited as nauhahs. The salam text is usually more complex than that of the *nauhah*.

marśiyah — Most Urdu marsiyahs have a six-line verse form with an *aaaabb* rhyme scheme, although marsiyahs in couplets and quatrains were popular before the nineteenth century, and some classical and "modern" marsiyahs employ a five-line form. The poems may consist of anywhere just three or four to over a hundred verses in performance. The majlis genre with the highest literary stature, the marsiyah narrates detailed episodes of the Karbala battle, its prelude, and its aftermath, and also contains segments of invocation and praise, long, stylized description, and dialogue. It is the only form of majlis poetry (except for the *rubā'ī*, quatrain, which is relatively rare in women's assemblies) that is presented in spoken, declamatory form as well as chanted melodically.

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[1] Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, "Islamic Music in an Indian Environment: The Shi'a Majlis," *Ethnomusicology* 25 (1) 1981, 57.

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nauhah — A simple dirge in couplet form, with refrain, recited after the majlis sermon. Nauhahs are usually recited by all majlis participants, accompanied by rhythmic breast-beating. *Lorī* (lullaby) poems and those with wedding themes (*mehndīs*) often occur as sub-genres of the nauhah. Nauhahs are also the most popular majlis form heard in Muharram processions, and on commercially available cassettes and videos.

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APPENDIX C:

Transliterated Text of *Lāsh Akbar Kī*

Note the limited use of the *radīf* (the "refrain" monorhyme that follows the rhyming *qāfiyah* syllable) in the poem, especially after the initial verses. The dropping of the *radīf* gives the poet more potential word choices, and may be one reason that the six-line *musaddas* verse form is considered so suitable for narrative. Adriot use of the *radīf* can, however, enhance the musicality, the flow, and the sense of anticipation in a verse. The *radīf* is of course optional in popular forms derived from the ghazal as well as in *musaddas*, but in practice it almost always appears in the ghazal. This marsiyah's beginning effects a general transition from verses with long *radīf*s to verses with short *radīf*s or none at all. Both verses 1 and 2 have substantial rhyming sequences: ***al*** *se uṭhā la'e Husain*, ***le*** *jā Bāno*, and ***ar*** *martā hai* (the syllable in bold is the *qāfiyah*, and the following sequence the *radīf*). Verse 2 ends in a shorter pattern, ***ārī*** *hai*, while verse 3 simply ends in *qāfiyah* words with a final ā, although its last couplet returns to a fairly long *radīf* in the sequence ***ar*** *nikal ā'ī bāhar*.

As discussed in the note on transliteration, I have matched the romal transliteration with the Urdu manuscript, despite inconsistent indications of aspiration in commonly used words such as *tujh* and *mujh*, and spelling with long vowels words that would ordinarily be spelled, pronounced, and scanned with short ones (as in *dūlhā* for *dulhā* and *ūs* for *us*).

1.
Lāsh Akbar kī jo maqtal se uṭhā la'e Husain
Naujavāñ ko ṣaf-e awwal se uṭhā la'e Husain
Chānd ko shām ke bādal se uṭhā la'e Husain
Jāñ balab sher ko jangal se uṭhā la'e Husain
Dī ṣadā lāsh-e pisar ān ke le jā Bāno
Chhid gayā barchhī se Akbar kā kālejah Bano

2.
Dekh le akhirī dīdār pisar martā hai
Sāmne ānkhoñ ke yeh nūr-e naẓar martā hai
Ab ko'ī dam meñ tirā rashk-e qamar martā hai
Muñh se bāhar hai zubāñ tashnā jigar martā hai
Dam hai sīne meñ rukā zakhm se khūñ jārī hai
Āre Bāno tire ghar luṭne kī taiyārī hai

3.
Pahuñchī kheme meñ jo Ḥazrat kī yeh purdard ṣadā
Muẓṭarib ho ga'ī nāmūs-e rasūl-e do sirā
Kahā chillā ke Sakīnah ne kih he he bhaiyā

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Fizzāh daurī sū-e dar phaink ke sar par se ridā
Pīttī Zainab-e muẓṭar nikal ā'ī bāhar
Bāno ghabrā ke khule sar nikal ā'ī bāhar

4.
Shah ke kāndhe pah dekhā 'Alī Akbar ko nidhāl
Hāth phailā ke yeh chillā'ī kih he he mire lāl
Kyā ġhaẓab ho gayā a'e bādshah-e nek khiṣāl
Rās āyā mire bachhe ko nah aṭhārvāñ sāl
Tukre teġhoñ se badan ho gayā sārā he he
Kaun thā jis ne mire sher ko mārā he he

5.
Maiñ to samjhī thī kih khair se phir kar ā'e
Sāth le kar mire farzand ko sarvar ā'e
Yeh nah ma'lūm thā is ḥal meñ Akbar ā'e
Khūñ meñ dūbe hu'e hamshakl-e paimbar ā'e
Mujhko bete ne kyā shān dikhā'ī hai logo
Luṭ ga'ī Bāno-e nāshād o duhā'ī logo

6.
Ro ke Bāno se yeh farmāne lage sarvar-e dīn
Sar nah pīṭo abhī Bāno zindah hai mirā māh jabīn
Sāñs ātī hai pah har dam hai dam-e bāz pasīn
Kūch unkā bhī hai aur ham bhī haiñ marne kī qarīn
Sab chhute ab nah rahā ko'ī hamārā Bāno
Is javāñ bete ke ġham ne hameñ mārā Bāno

7.
Pās unke jo maiñ sar pīttā maqtal meñ gayā
Kyā moḥabbat hai kih us dam bhī tumhīñ ko pūchha
Jor kar khūñ bhare hathoñ ko yahī ro ke kahā
Jān balab hai hameñ ammāñ ko dikhā do
Ojhlī masnad ko'ī jaldī se bicchā'o sāhab
Ab jagā kar unheñ shakl apnī dikhā'o sāhab

8.
Kah ke yeh lāsh-e pisar kheme meñ lā'e sarvar
Hāth Akbar ke sanbhāle the ko'ī aur ko'ī sar
Shah ne farzand ko āhistah liṭāyā jā kar
Gir ke pehlū meñ tarapne lagī māñ khastah jigar
Kahtī thī dil pah sināñ żulm kī khā'ī beṭā
Ānkheñ kholo nahīñ martī hai yeh dā'ī beṭā

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9.
Naz' meñ bhī mujhe pūcchā tirī ulfat ke niśār
Ammāñ is khūn meñ dūbī hū'ī sūrat ke niśār
Jang kī lākhoñ se tanhā tirī jura't kī niśār
Tirī mazlūmī ke sadqe tirī ġhurbat ke niśār
Nām pānī kā zubāñ par bhī nah lā'e vārī
Khā ke phal barchhī kā chupke chale āye vārī

10.
Sunke mādar kī sadā khol diye dīdah-e ġham
Hāth uthā kar kahā ro'o nah mire sar kī qasam[1]
Pās ā kar hameñ chhātī se lagā lo is dam
Ran se ā'e haiñ tumhārī hī mulāqāt ko ham
Phir yeh ghar āp ke iqbāl se dekhā ham ne
Par tumheñ ā ke 'ajab hāl meñ dekhā ham ne

11.
Bāl kyoñ bikhre haiñ kyoñ phaink dī sar par se ridā
Mail kyoñ sīne pah hai kyoñ hai ġharībāñ phatā
Khāk kyoñ muñh pah milī hai yeh pisar tum pah fidā
Shāh-e dunyā meñ salāmat raheñ yeh kyā kiyā
Lut ga'ī yeh nah sukhan muñh se nikālo ammāñ
Maiñ to jītā hūñ kaleje ko sañbhālo ammāñ

12.
Zakhmī hone kī mire kis ne khabar pahunchā'ī
Jhut hai meñ ne to barchhī nahīñ hargiz khā'ī
Āp tak bete ko taqdīr salāmat lā'ī
Dekhe hażrat ke qadam tan meñ mire jān ā'ī
Marg se pahle ho mātam yeh zabūñ hai ammāñ
Mere kaproñ pah to 'abbas kā khūñ hai ammāñ

---

[1] This line scans properly if *hāth* (hand) is considered one long syllable. Some convention apparently exists, or existed, for this "bending" of the metrical rules, since this word must be scanned the same way in several instances where it occurs in the poem. Certain words, notably "kyā," and "kyoñ" can be counted as one syllable at the poet's pleasure, but this flexibility is not common with random short words.

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13.
Ġhash ke āne kī kahūñ vajah kih kyoñkar āyā
Tīsrā din hai kih pānī nahīñ meñ ne pāyā
Dhūp maidān kī thī sar pah nah thā kucch sāyā
Gir parā ghoṛe se tīvrā ke tumhārā jāyā
Mar chukā thā pah muqaddar ne bachāyā ham ko
Daur kar bāp ne godī meñ uthāyā ham ko

14.
Bolī Bāno kih jo kehte khudā yūñ hī kare
A'e mire lāl yeh māñ tere balā leke mare
Lā'o dho dālūñ maiñ jo khūn meñ kapre haiñ bhare
Chānd se hāth haiñ phir kis liye chhātī pah dhare
Mujhko ma'lūm hū'a khalq se jāte ho tum
Mere rone ke sabab zakhm chhupāte ho tum

15.
Bāno sadme se nah mar jā'e yeh dar hai betā
Sab tire dil kī mire dil ko khabar hai betā
Hāth sīne pah tirā khūn meñ tar hai betā
Phir yeh kyā hai jo nahīñ zakhm-e jigar hai betā
Sansanātā hai badan jān chalī jātī hai
Is lahū se to mire dūdh kī bū ātī hai

16.
Hāth sīne se uthā kar to mujhe dikhlā'ō
Pardah us tang qabā kā to żarā sarkā do
Mujh se kehte ho kih ammāñ nah pacchareñ khā'o
Dekh lūñ chānd sī chhātī ko to phir samjhā'ō
Sar nahīñ pītne kī jān nah kho'ūngī meñ
Tum salāmat ho to phir kāhe ko ro'ūngī meñ

17.
Ārzū hai phale phūle mirā nakhl-e murād
Tum dūlhan byāh ke lā'o mirā ghar ho ābād
Dekh lūñ ānkoñ se apnī maiñ tumhārī aulād
Phir maiñ dunyā se jo gużrūñ to rahe rūh bhī shād
Dādī kehlā'ūngī rutbah mirā bartar hogā
Terā farzand bhī hamshakl-e payambar hogā

18.
Āh kī sunke yeh Akbar ne basad ranj o malāl
Dard chhatī meñ uthā ġhair hū'ā aur bhī hāl

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Dil meñ yeh soch ke rone lage woh nek khisāl
Ham safar karte haiñ ammāñ kohe shādī kā khyāl
Bar meñ ho'egā kafan khak pah chahrā hogā
Nah dūlhan hogī nah aulād nah saharā hogā

19.
Sard ik āh bharī sīne se yeh soch ke bāt
Malak al maut ne chāhā kih kare qaṭa'-e hayāt
Hichkī ik ā'ī tarapne lagā voh nek sifāt/
Hat ga'e sīne se voh khūñ meñ dūbe hū'e hāth
Bāno chillā'ī magar dam nah pisar meñ dekhā
Zakhm se chhātī ke sūrākh jigar meñ dekhā

20.
Donoñ hāthoñ se lagī pītne voh sīnah o sar
Khāk pah gir ke kahā hā'e pisar hā'e pisar
Mujhse kahte the kih zakhmī nahīñ maiñ to mādar
Zakhm is ṭarah kā aur māñ se chhupāyā dilbar
Lāl sī jān ke jāne kā nah waswās kiyā
Mire ġham khāne kā qurbān ga'ī pās kiyā

21.
Maiñ to kahtī thī zubāñ khushk hai aur rang hai zard
Dopahar pyāse lare ho ga'īñ zulfeñ pur gard
Hāth aur pā'oñ sabab kyā hai hū'e jāte haiñ sard
Ab taraptī hūñ zamīñ par maiñ nahiñ kucch mirā dard
Pās bulvā ke Sakīnah ko bahut pyār kiyā
Zakhm ke dard ko ammāñ se nah iẓhār kiyā

22.
Tere sadqe mire athārah baras ke pāle
Pās apne kisī sūrat se mujhe bulvā le
Tire chhātī pah lagī ẓulm o sitam ke bhāle
Khūñ meñ bhīgīñ yeh miseñ a'e mire zulfoñ wāle
Nah lagī mujhko balā chānd se is sīne kī
Maiñ nahīñ jīne kī lāl nahīñ jīne kī

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23.
A'e mire sher tujhe luṭf-e javānī nah milā
Chain pardes meñ a'e yūsaf-e ṡānī nah milā
Qaṭrah-e āb bajuz ashk fashānī nah milā
Dūdh pī pī ke pale aur tumheñ pānī nah milā
Mar ga'e mujhko dūlhan bhī nah dikhā'ī betā
Khāk meñ mil ga'ī Bāno kī kamā'ī betā

24.
Bain se Bāno ke thā kheme meñ ik hashar bapā
Lāsh ke pās tarpte the shah-e karb-o-balā
Itne meñ ān ke Fizzā ne yeh hazrat se kahā
Khaṭ liye ik shutrā savār hai devrhī pah kharā[2]
Tukre dil hotā hai kucch bāt voh jab kartā hai
Āpko aur 'Ali Akbar ko ṭalab kartā hai

25.
Ro ke kahne lage Fizzā se shah-e'arsh muqām
Maiñ to maẓlūm nahīñ lā'iq-e paiġām o salām
Pūchhtā hai jinheñ unkā to hū'ā kām tamām
Jā ke le ā jo lifāfē pah raqam ho mirā nām
Hasrat-e nāmah o paiġām kise bāqi hai
Ab to humko khat-e shamshīr kī mushtaqī hai

26.
Fizzā le ā'ī voh khaṭ jā ke bachasm-e khūñbār
Thā lifāfe pah raqam 'arzī-e Suġhrā-e bīmār
Nām se betī ke rone lage shāh-e abrār
Parh ke sarnāmah khaṭ ānkhoñ se lagāyā ka'ī bār
Ġham se dekhā nah kiyā Bāno-e be par kī ṭaraf
Āh kī dekh ke lāsh-e Akbar kī ṭaraf

27.
Pūcchā Zainab ne yeh khaṭ kiskā hai bhaiyya vārī
Bin parhe muttasil ānkoñ se lahū hai jārī

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[2] With a bit of awkward word-combining, what Pritchett calls "word-grafting," this line comes close to scanning. (See Pritchett, 1987, 29). It would be divided as follows Khaṭ li ye ik /shu t(a) rās vā/ r hai deo rhī /pah kha rā. The first syllable of *deo rhī* still contravenes metrical conventions because it consists of three letters, but these letters are pronounced almost as a dipthong. The vast majority of the lines in this poem scan, but there are certainly a number of exceptions, whether because of scribal errors, or loose adherence to metrical rules, or both.

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Shah ne farmāyā Madine meñ jo hai azārī
Kushtah-e sadmah-e furqat mirī Suġhrā pyārī
Phir nah taqdīr ne dīdār dikhāyā usko
Jabkih dunyā se chale ham to ḳhat āyā uskā

28.
Namah kholā to hū'ā aur bhī ik ḳhaṭ ma'lūm
Usko mutthī meñ chhupāne lage shāh-e maẓlūm
Saf-e mizhgāh pah zyādah hū'ā ashkoñ kā hajūm
Dūsrā kiskā hai ḳhaṭ bolī yeh ro kar Kulṡūm
Kahā Zainab ne kih mādar ko likhā ho'egā
Bāno boli 'Ali Akbar ko likha ho'egā

29.
Shāh royā kiye bahanoñ ko diyā kucch nah javāb
'Arzī-e Fāṭimah Sughrā kā parhā sab alqāb
Ba'd alqāb ke likhā thā kih a'e 'arsh janāb
Beṭī jītī to hai ab tak pah bahut hī betāb
Intiẓārī kī bhī ākhir kabhī had hotī hai
Muddat-e hijr basar dekhiye kad hotī hai

30.
Rahm farmā'o kih bīmār hūñ muzṭar hūñ maiñ
Kabhī dālān meñ hūñ aur kabhī dar par hūñ maiñ
Dil pah sau dāġh haiñ acchī kaho kyoñkar hūñ maiñ
Kiske ghar jā'oñ yeh ghar chor ke sheshdar hūñ maiñ
Sūne ghar meñ mirī kis tarah basar ho bābā
Mar bhī jā'oñ to kisī ko nah ḳhabar ho bābā

31.
Khaṭ ko'ī ātā to hotā mire dil ko ārām
Kabhī mujhko to zubānī bhī nah bhejā paiġhām
Beqarārī ke sivā aur nahīñ ab ko'ī kām
Shām se subh mujhe hotī hai subh se shām
Log ā ā ke 'ayādat ko chale jāte haiñ
Ko'ī itnā nahīñ kahtā kih Ḥusain āte haiñ

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32.
Jab ko'ī pūcchtā hai hāl hai kyā Suġhrā
Vaise hī tap kī hai shiddat kih afāqah bhī hū'ā
Rāt din rotī ho soyā bhī karo ek żarā
Maiñ to kahtī hūñ kih ab tak nahīñ āyā bābā
Apnī taqdīr pah kis ṭarah nah ro'ūñ logo
Gar ajal ā'e to phir chain se so'ūñ logo

33.
Parh chuke shah khaṭ-e Suġhrā kā mazmūñ sārā
Kūt kar chhātī ko ik āh kā na'rā mārā
Aur basad dard yeh bolā voh 'Alī kā pyārā
Dūsre khaṭ ke nahīn parhne ka mujko[3] yārā
Hāl Suġhrā ne jo likhā hai sunā'e ko'ī
Yeh jo sote haiñ pare unko jagā'e ko'ī

34.
Bolā phir lāsh se ro kar 'Alī Akbar ūtho
Khat parho leke bahan kā mire dilbar ūtho
Kab talak so'oge dhūp ā'ī hai sar par ūtho
Ūtho a'e Fāṭimah Suġhrā ke barādar ūtho
Wizr rahtī thī tumheñ yād vaṭan kī betā
Jā ke qāsid se khabar pūchho bahan kī betā

35.
Lāsh ke gird khare rote the jabse to haram
Khaṭ ke āne se zyādah hū'ā josh-e mātam
Bano chillā'ī kih chupke raho logo is dam
Sun to lo bhā'ī ko bhenā ne kiyā kyā raqam
Kaisā khūsh hote yeh is nām ko parh ke he he
Khaṭ bhī tab āyā kih jab mar ga'e Akbar he he

36.
Khol kar khaṭ ko lage dekhne jis vaqt imām
Bārish-e ashk hū'ī bhīg ga'e harf tamām
Parh chuke jab to kiyā Bāno se ro kar yeh kalām
Bhā'ī kī yād rahā kartī hai Suġhrā ko mudām
Hai gilah Akbar-e dilgīr kā likhā sāhab
Lo suno beṭī kī taqdīr kā likhā sāhab

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[3] The aspirated oblique forms of pronouns that precede the post position *ko* (as in *mujhko, tujhko*) as often appear without aspiration in this text as they do with aspiration.

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37.
Sar-e nāmah to yeh bīmār ne mazmūñ hai likhā
Bhā'ī jāñ mihr-e sapahar-e karm o luṭf o du'ā
Gauhar-e bahar-e sadāqat gul-e gulzār-e vafā
Sarv qad ġhunchah dahan māh jabīn mihr-liqā
Khalq meñ āpkā dam tā ṣad o sī sāl rahe
Ghar meñ kab tak yeh bahan muzṭarib al-hal rahe

38.
Tumko khāliq naẓar-e bad se bachā'e bhā'ī
Ghar meñ phir ḳhair se qismat lā'e bhā'ī
Kab tak ānkoñ se bahan ashk bahā'e bhā'ī
Vah kyā khūb mire lene ko ā'ē bhā'ī
Mujko bahlā ga'e hoshyār ko'ī tum sā ho
Such yeh hai ṣādiq ulā qarār ko'ī tum sā ho

39.
Āp se milne kī ḥasrat meñ taraptī hūñ bahan
Nah davā hai nah ġhiżā hai nah kisī se sukhan
Kaun vāqif hai gużartā hai jo kucch ranj o mihan
Dil-e man dānad o man dānam o dānad dil-e man
Miśl-e tasvīr kabhī dar pah kharī rahtī hūñ
Mūñh lapetī kabhī bistar pah parī rahtī hūñ

40.
Abhī jītī hūñ maiñ ānā ho to ā'o Akbar
Maut gherī hū'ī hai mujko bachā'o Akbar
Jald is qaid-e musībat se chhurā'o Akbar
Ab dam ānkoñ meñ hai dīdār dikhā'o Akbar
Phir jo ā'oge to turbat hī pah ānā hogā

41.
Mere le jāne ko tum kāhe ko ā'oge bhalā
Tum se shikvah bhī 'abaś aur gilah hai bejā
Dūr uftadah hūñ bīmār hūñ parvā mirī kyā
Khair jismeñ ho ḳhūshī āpkī bhaiyya acchā
Tum se ammāñ ko zyādah nahīñ pyārā ko'ī
Ek ham haiñ kih nahīñ āv hamārā ko'ī

42.
Mujko ma'lūm hai furṣat tumheñ āne kī kahāñ
Ātā ho'egā zyārat ke liye ek jahāñ
Māñ ke ho lakht-e jigar bāp ke ho jism kī jāñ

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Kab woh chahenge kih ho jā'o tum ānkoñ se nihāñ
Manzileñ sakht haiñ īżā nah ūthāne deñge
Ā'oge bhī to nah bābā tumheñ āne deñge

43.
Hāl yeh sunke hū'ā rāndoñ meñ ik hashr bapā
Sab ne sar pīt liye ro'e imām-e do sarā
Rakh ke khaṭ sinah-e Akbar pah yeh hazrat ne kahā
Parh diyā ham ne javāb us kā likho tum betā
Intiẓārī meñ faqaṭ zīst ke din bhartī hai
Lo khabar jald kih bīmar bahan martī hai
44.
Mūñh Madīne kī taraf kar ke yeh Bāno ne kahā
Terī māyūsī ke sadqe mire bekas Suġhrā
Tum ne likhā hai jise khaṭ meñ kih ā'o bhaiyya
Barcchī sīne pah lagī mar gayā woh mah liqā
Jān yāñ ān ke haihāt ga'ī Akbar kī
Ab qayāmat pah mulāqāt ga'ī Akbar kī

45.
Māñ pah āfat kā falak ṭūṭ parā a'e dukhtar
Naujavāñ ho ke daġhā de ga'e mujko Akbar
Kokh ūjrī mirī vīrāñ hū'ā bībī mirā ghar
Safar-e ākhir na hū'ā kar ga'e duniyā se safar
Kyā karūñ ha'e muqaddar se mirā zor nahīñ
Lāsh-e Akbar ko muyassar kafan o gor nahīñ

46.
Kar ke yeh bain lagī pīṭne woh khastah jigar
Le ga'e lāsh ko kheme se ūthā kar sarvar
Namah bar ho ke qadam bos-e shah-e jin o bashar
'Arz karne lagā farmā'iye Akbar haiñ kidhar
Mil chukā āpse ab mujko talāsh ūnkī hai
Shāh kahne lage le dekh yeh lāsh ūnkī hai

47.
Yahī ham shakl-e nabī haiñ mirī godī ke pale
Āj ghar se yeh mire ganj-e shahīdañ ko chale
Aise din sakht kucch ā'e kih nah un par se ṭale
Nāmurād ūth ga'e dunyā se nah phūle nah phale
Subah tak gird mire phirte the parvāne se
Ghar mirā luṭ gayā is lāl ke mar jāne se

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48.
Apnā sar pīt ke tab qāsid-e Suġhrā ne kahā
'Ali Akbar haiñ yahī hā'e ġhazab vāvelā
Unkī khwāhar ne gile unse kiye the kyā kyā
Nah jiyegī nah jiyegī nah jiyegī Suġhrā
Āh surat nah rahī voh nah javānī bāqī
Haiñ abhī to ka'ī paiġhām-e zabānī baqī

49.
Mujse chalte hū'e kahtī thī woh chillā chillā
Yād rakhnā mirī bāteñ tire sadqe bhaiyyā
Har gharī kā yeh tarapnā yeh bilaknā merā
Is tarah kahiyo kih mujpar ūnheñ raham a'e zarā
Qasameñ bābā ko idhar āne kī de kar ānā
Apne hamrāh mire bhā'ī ko le kar ānā

50.
Qabr meñ yeh to chale sāth kise le jā'ūñ
Jā ke bīmār ko samjhā'ūñ to maiñ kyā samjhā'ūñ
Chal base khuld ko Akbar kise khaṭ dikhlā'ūñ
Hā'e Suġhrā ke barādar tujhe kyoñkar pā'ūñ
Dāġh-e dil le ke chalā mujko yeh in'ām milā
Khaṭ

51.
Kisko he he maiñ paiyām ūs jigar afgār kā dūñ
Kis se hāl ūskā kahūñ aur gilah kis se karūñ
Kāsh mar jā'ūñ to bīmar se sharmindah nah hūñ
Khāk par lāsh liṭā dīje kih maiñ gird phirūñ
Kah diyā thā kih barādar ke tasadduq honā
Badle mere 'Alī Akbar ke tasadduq honā

52.
Ro ke shah ne kahā kah dījo mufassil yeh hāl
Bībī ab dil se ūṭhā do 'Alī Akbar kā khyāl
Aur mujhe pūcche to yeh kahiyo kih sadmah thā kamāl
Mar gayā sāth pisar ke Asadullah kā lāl
Ghar se do lasheñ liye 'Abid-e be par niklā
Bāp aur bete kādam tan se barābar niklā

53.
Kah ke yeh lāsh-e pisar le ke chale shāh-e zaman
Pīṭṭā qāsid-e ġhamnāk gayā sū-e vaṭan

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Ūske jate hī hū'e qatl shah-e tishnah dahan
Mūnis ab rone kā hai vaqt nahīñ tāb-e sukhan
Maqtal-e Akbar-e maẓlūm kī tasvīr yeh hai
Sang pānī ho jise sunke woh taqrīr yeh hai

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APPENDIX D:

Musical Notation for *Lāsh Akbar kī* Performances

(Musical examples transcribed by Richard K. Wolf)

This appendix highlights the performative variety in the five versions of Mir Munis's marsiyah discussed in Chapters Six through Eight. The second verse of the poem, included in all recitations, is notated for each example, with some comments on performance style and textual variation appended. In perusing this basic documentation of marsiyah performances, the reader should note the following:

- Because of inconsistencies in musical meter, time signatures are generally not provided.
- For ease of reading, musical measures indicated by dotted bar lines have been inserted, based for the most part on the occurrence of strong beats.
- The key signatures are provided for convenience, but are not meant to imply Western tonality. Melodies have been transcribed in their original pitches.
- Transliteration of the text in these examples reflects actual pronuciation by each group of performers, and so sometimes does not reflect strict metrical conventions or standard Urdu pronunciation.
- In some of the examples, the first line of the marsiyah precedes the first line of text in verse #2. When I mention the "first line," here or in Chapter Six, it is to the first line of verse #2 (*Dekh le ākhirī dīdār* . . .) that I refer.

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Lāsh Akbar kī, Example #1
Version #1, Men's Majlis, Zafar Colony, Lahore



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* = In repetition of this line, this [c] quarter note is omitted

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Notes on Version #1

The Lahore performers in example #1 are not professional and no single outstanding voice is apparent, although substantial attention is paid to clear articulation of the text. A great deal of poetry of all genres, performed mostly by non-professionals, figured in the majlis that contained this sample. The group performing Munis's marsiyah recited in unison, their Urdu inflected with Panjabi pronunciation. Their recitation, deep, resonant, and slightly nasal, mimicked a powerful delivery heard in various parts of Panjab, including Multan and Shergarh. Many Panjabis and other Pakistani Shiahs associate these vocal qualities with a "Panjabi style." Marsiyah tarzes in the Panjab are generally melismatic, but neither draw heavily on classical Hindustani vocal techniques nor recall the wailing laments of Lucknow. Marsiyah recitation in this and other men's majlises in Lahore tends to be slower and more melismatic than in women's majlises.

In verse #2, the Lahore reciters repeat each of lines 1, 2, and 4,with a single *asthāyī* melody. The rising *antarā* melody of lines 3 and 5 counters this *asthāyī*. As expected, line 6 replicates the *asthāyī* theme firmly at its finish. Because of the multiple repetitions of lines, this theme is heard repeatedly despite the recitation of only two verses. The rising, unrepeated line 3 (and, in the first verse, line 5) stand out in contrast.

At the end of this brief recitation, the repetition of the couplet,

His breath halts in his breast, blood flows from his wounds
Oh, Bāno, the pillaging of your household is underway

Dam hai sīne meñ rukā zakh se ḳhūñ jārī hai
Hā'e Bāno tire ghar luṭne kī taiyārī hai

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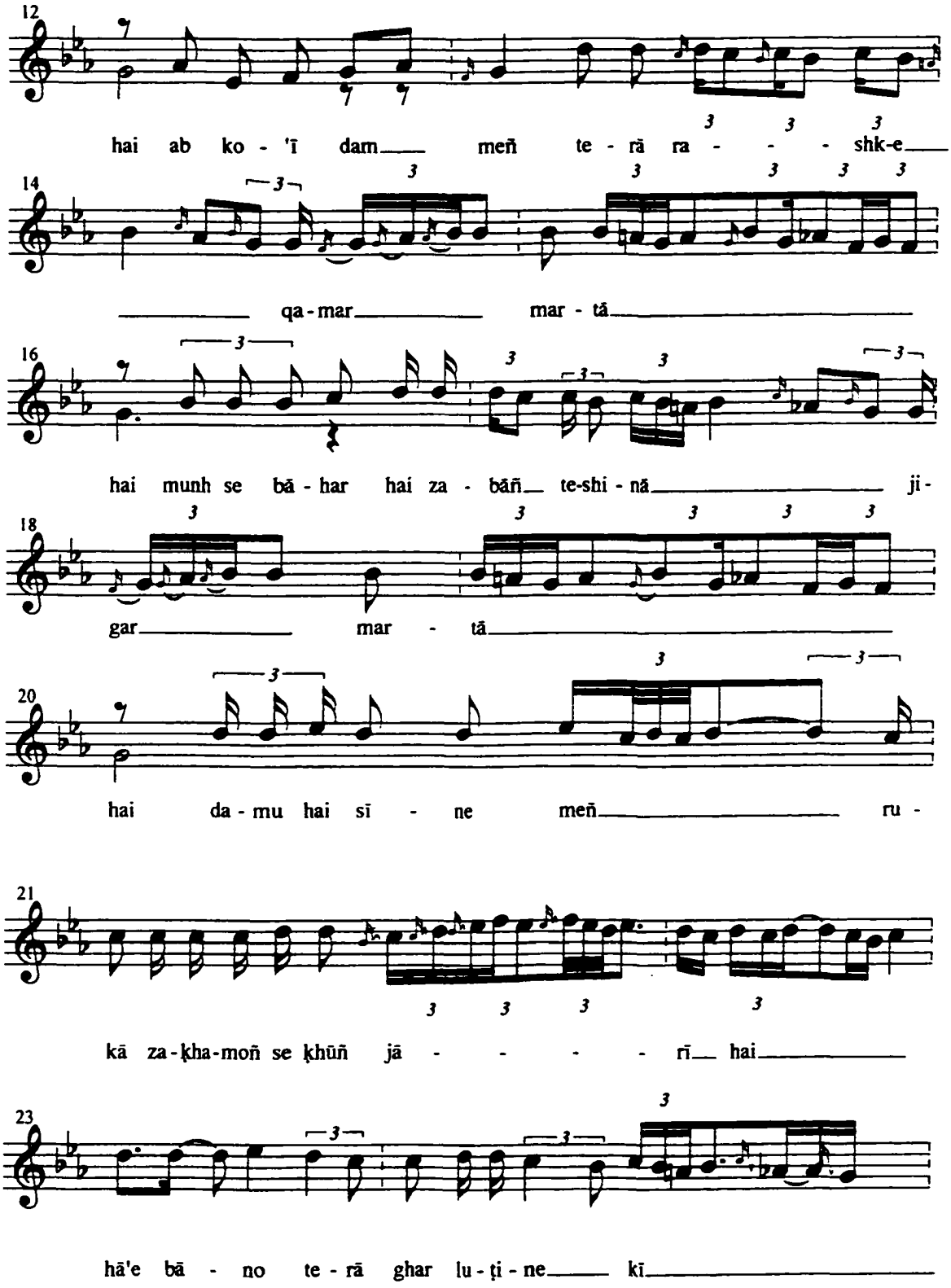
produces a conclusion that hinges on foreshadowing: as terrible as it is, Akbar's martyrdom is only the beginning of the sorrow to be faced by the Karbala survivors and those devoted to the Prophet's family. Listeners can hardly help but take to heart an emphatic warning to Bano to prepare herself for further tragedy, especially when this poem is being recited on the evening before ashurah, after which date the thrust of Karbala remembrances will shift to the sufferings of the massacre's female survivors.

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Lāsh Akbar kī, Example #2
Version #2, Sibt-e Jafar, Karachi



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tai - - - yā - rī hai

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Notes on Version #2

This version of *Lāsh Akbar kī* matches the widely circulating anthology texts almost exactly. Sibt-e Ja'far devotes remarkable attention to blending text and tarz evocatively, displaying vocal elaboration, and executing the recitation in harmonious coordination with his bazus. He maintains strict control over recitation speed and vocal quality. Sibt-e Ja'far's explicit concern with coordination between performers and with clarity of text results in a unified, easily comprehensible delivery of Munis's poem.

This group, functioning as something like an "opening act" for the featured declamatory marsiyah recitation by Dr. Hilal Naqvi, performed the bulk of the melodic poetry recited at the Karachi majlis. Sibt-e Ja'far's voice dominates noticeably, initiating many lines alone, while the bazus join in afterwards. In their melody, lines 1, 2, and 4 display some melodic differences, but begin and end almost identically. Line 3 rises from a lower register, but also concludes the same way. As a result a "same, same, different, same" pattern lends something of a ghazal feel to the recitation, yet an identical melody attached to the *qāfiyah* and *radīf* (rhyme and monorhyme at the end of lines) strongly binds all of the first four lines. The melody then ascends dramatically on line 5 of each verse, remaining high at the beginning of line 6, but then returning satisfyingly to the baseline melody that completes the first four lines.

The sozkhvan steals only occasional glances at his written text, in favor of making eye contact with the audience and ornamenting the recitation with simple but attention-drawing hand gestures. As the performance progresses, he also uses his hands to make

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deliberate signals to his bazus (who keep their eyes pinned either to him or to the text) to modulate their voices carefully at points when the tune rises.

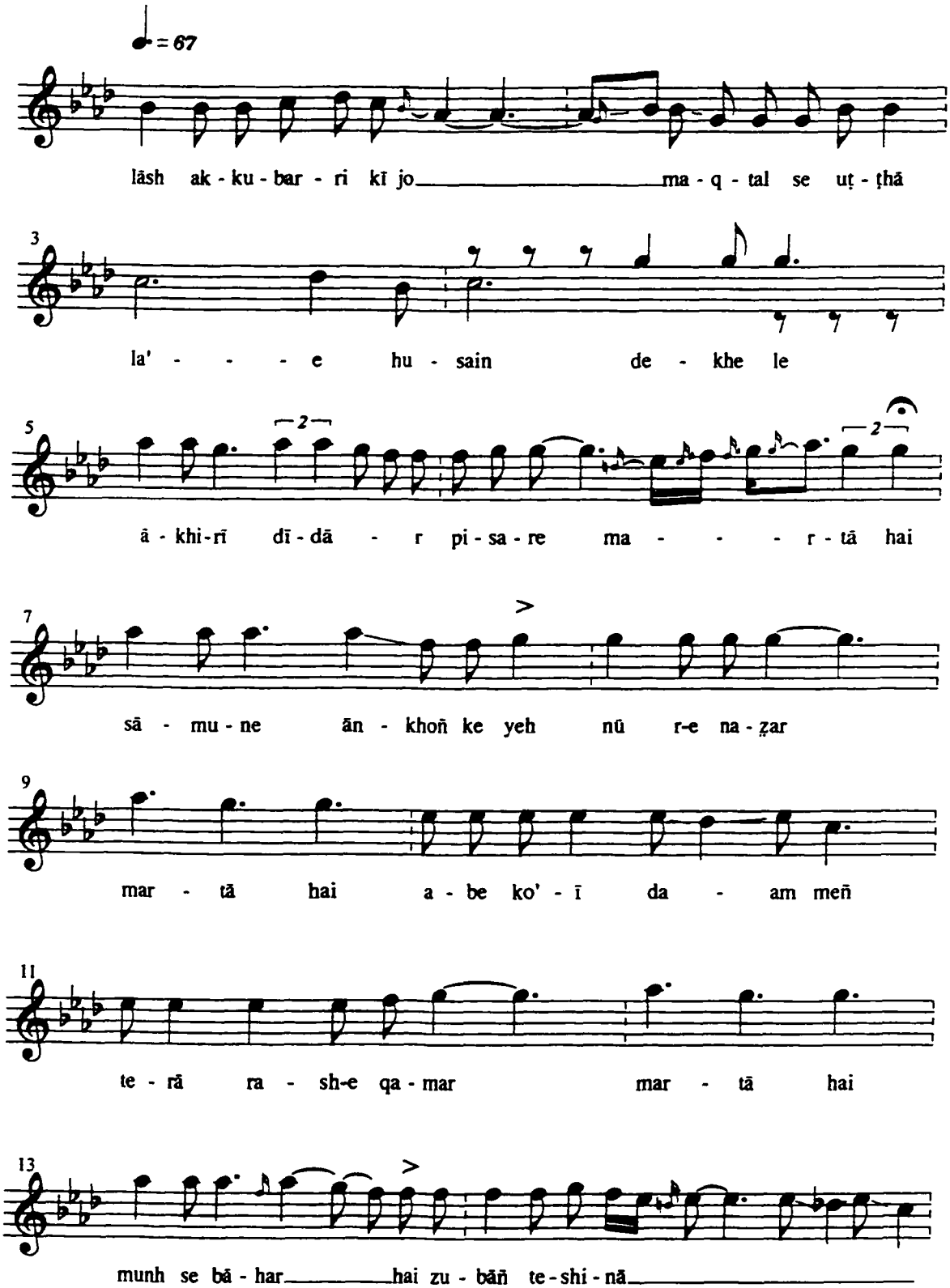
Making sparing use of repetition, the reciters double only line 4 in verses #4 (the penultimate verse) and #6, and the last couplet in verse #6. Thus, like the group in example #1, they repeat the final couplet of the last verse they recite (not notated here) as a concluding device. This threesome gradually slow their recitation in stanza six, with the very last couplet and the refrain, *Lāsh Akbar kījo . . .* , drawn out plaintively:

> I've lost all, now I have no one left, Bāno
> My grief for this young son has slain me, Bāno"
>
> *Sab chhuṭe ab nah rahā ko'ī hamārā Bāno*
> *Is javāñ beṭe ke ġham ne hameñ mārā Bāno*

The theme highlighted here of Akbar's death killing Husain is woven through Munis's entire poem, and indeed it emerges poignantly at the very end of Naval Kishor's version of the marsiyah (see Chapter Five, p. 187, verse 52). With a careful selection of verses and a judicious use of repetition, Sibt-e Ja'far brings even this short sozkhvani rendering of *Lāsh Akbar kī* to a powerful conclusion.

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Lāsh Akbar kī, Example #3
Version #3, Sikandar Jahan & Party, Lucknow



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Notes on Version #3

Sikandar, a resident of the rather insular Shi'i enclave of Ghazi Mandi, recites this marsiyah quite frequently in majlises throughout the long mourning period observed in Lucknow for the Karbala martyrs. Older residents of Lucknow appreciatively remember Sikandar's performances of decades gone by, although nowadays she seems little known outside of her immediate locality.

In their recitation of *Lāsh Akbar kī*, Sikandar and her party consistently repeat line four, and half of line six, in each stanza. Repetition of these two lines is probably the most common recitative patterns in women's majlises. This example illustrates how reciters can use a refrain as a musical "set-up" for verses after the first verse. The first verse establishes the refrain theme with the poem's initial line. In verse #2, notated above, this first line of the entire poem provides something of a baseline tune, while the melody of lines 1 through 3 of the verse operate in a higher register. Lines 1-3 all differ from one another melodically, but share a common ending that converges with the *qāfiyah* and *radīf*, *ar martā hai.*

At its outset, line 4 has some commonalities with lines 1 and 2, but its conclusion provides contrast. When the reciters repeat line 4, though, they basically use the melody of the refrain, *Lāsh Akbar kī jo maqtal se uṭhā lā'e Ḥusain.* Line 5 ascends in a new tune, while the final portion of line 6 mirrors the distinctive (first iteration of) line 4. The refrain (not notated a second time in the transcription) between verses will provide melodic closure for line 6, so that the last verse line and the *Lāsh Akbar kī* line mirror the two versions of line 4.

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In each verse, Sikandar's solo voice (or that of her daughter-in-law) initiates many of the lines, while the remaining vocalists join in later to form a chorus.[1] This is a fairly common pattern in groups with one main trained reciter, and resembles the style adopted by Sibt-e Ja'far (example #2) for the same marsiyah. Indeed, although the impact of examples #2 and #3 is strikingly different, the two performances as wholes also share some textual features: the selection of verses differs only in the elimination of one verse by Sikandar's group, and, in both cases, the same stanza brings the poem to its conclusion.

Although the group maintains considerable unity in their recitation, their evident need for verbal cues to be sure which verse they will recite next and their somewhat garbled pronunciation slightly compromises the clear delivery of the text, especially when compared with the distinct articulation of Sibt-e Ja'far and his bazus.

[1] Due to Sikandar's feebleness, the other reciters frequently must carry or fill in a line, or several lines, entirely, while she struggles, sometimes coughing and choking, for breath.

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Lāsh Akbar Kī, Example #4
Version #4, Zarina Sozkhwan & Party, Lucknow



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Notes on Version #4

Zarina's performance differs from many others in small household majlises in that her group's articulation of the text is quite clear and unified. Pronunciation, too, in this sample is distinct and somewhat old-fashioned, with the "ai" diphthong (as in *maiñ*, "I") more exaggerated than in the contemporary standard Urdu of Delhi, for example.

Zarina at times perceptibly simplifies the popular text. In verse four, for example, varied endearments for Akbar are uniformly converted to *lāl* ("my precious"; literally, "my jewel/ ruby"). The standard text reads,

> When she (Bāno) saw Ali Akbar motionless upon the King's shoulder
> She extended her hands and screamed, "Alas, alas, my precious one!
> What tragedy has occurred, oh virtuous emperor?
> My boy's eighteenth year didn't do well by him
> Daggers have cut his entire body to pieces, ha'e, ha'e!
> Who was it that murdered my lion, ha'e ha'e!"

Shah ke kāndhe pah jo dekhā 'Alī Akbar ko nidhāl
Hāth phailā ke yeh chillā'ī keh ha'e ha'e mire ***lāl***
Kyā ġhaẓab ho gayā a'e bādshah-e nek ḳhiṣāl
Rās āyā mire ***bachhe*** *ko nah aṭhārvāñ sāl*
Ṭukṛe teġhoñ se badan ho gayā sārā ha'e ha'e
Kaun thā jis ne mire ***sher*** *ko mārā ha'e ha'e*

while her version is:

Shah ke kāndhe pah jo dekhā 'Alī Akbar ko nidhāl
Hāth phailā ke yeh chillā'ī keh ha'e ha'e mire ***lāl***
Kyā ġhaẓab ho gayā a'e bādshah-e nek ḳhiṣāl
Rās āyā nah mire ***lāl*** *ko aṭhārvāñ sāl*
Rās āyā nah mire ***lāl*** *ko aṭhārvāñ sāl*
Ṭukṛe teġhoñ se badan ho gayā sārā ha'e ha'e
Kaun thā jis ne mire ***lāl*** *ko . . .*
Kaun thā jis ne mire ***lāl*** *ko mārā ha'e ha'e*

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In repeating this familiar endearment, Zarina picks up on a word already present in the verse's rhyme scheme, as in recorded example #1 (see Chapter Six, p. 251), effecting an insistent repetition that in some senses reduces textual nuance. Line four's stress on Akbar's youth and early death through the word *bacchah* for boy, or son, is diluted somewhat with the substitution of *lāl*. Similarly, in line 6, the heartfelt mother's lament "Who is it that murdered my darling?" (or "my precious") loses the disbelief and contrastive force inherent in the line when Akbar, the fearless, seemingly invulnerable *lion* is slain. Still, the appearance of *lāl* five times (considering all line repetitions) in what is here the final verse conveys a certain simple plaintiveness that perhaps appeals to performers and audience in a small majlis where poetic effect has more to do with devotional intensity than with lexical richness.

Like Sibt-e Jafar's rendition, Zarina's tarz for *Lāsh Akbar kī* builds towards an emphasis on the last couplet of the verse. In verse #1, lines 1 and 2 are both repeated; line 1 begins with a rising melody, 2 with a descending one, but end identically. In that verse, Zarina creates an eight-line structure such as most reciters use, although the more common pattern entails repeating lines 4 and 6. In the second verse, however, she uses no repetition. The melodic relationship between the first four lines (which she recites after a repetition of the poem's first line) relies on alternation to some degree (lines 2 and 4, for example, resemble each other fairly closely), but the tune that coincides with the rhyme at the end of each of the first four lines is also very compelling. The last couplet ascends noticeably, but returns with the final words, *kī tiyārī hai*, to the tune that ends the first four lines.

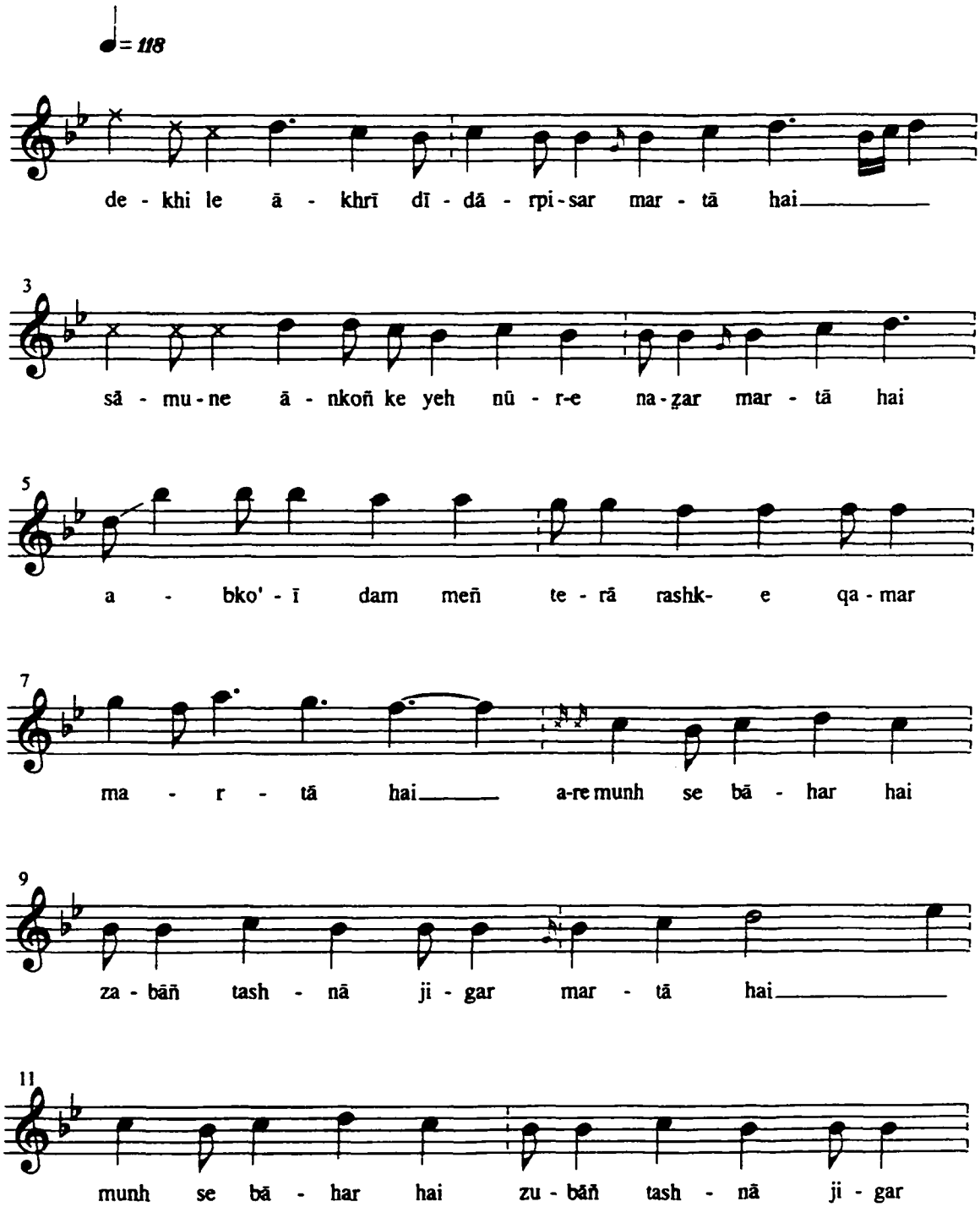
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In verse #4, Zarina's final stanza, she repeats line 4. This verse's last line, too, is repeated slowly, and in full, followed by a final, full refrain of "*Lāsh Akbar kījo maqtal se uṭhā la'e Husain.*" In other reciters' versions, the first line, when used as a refrain and a closure, is generally heard only in part.

Longer than the versions of *Lāsh Akbar kī* that we have surveyed so far, Zarina's recitation demonstrates more concretely how much individual reciters can manipulate a source text: she recites several stanzas neglected in other versions, and diverges significantly from the order of the standard printed text. By finishing her recitation with verse four, she effects a conclusion that highlights the lament of Akbar's "mother," Bano, rather than that of Imam Husain. This variation contrasts interestingly with Sibt-e Ja'far's and Sikandar's interpretations, which culminate in Husain's declaration that his grief for Akbar has killed him.

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Lāsh Akbar kī, Example #5
Version #5, Women's Majlis, Ahmad House, Lahore



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Notes on Version #5

The unadorned performance of These Lahore reciters is quite representative of the simplest type of group marsiyah recitation in women's majlises. While many performances rely on a self-contained or refrain tune for lines 1, 2, and 4, however, version #5's tune for these lines concludes with an antecedent phrase that requires a consequent phrase for melodic completion. Lines 4 and 6 are repeated, producing an eight-line structure with the melodic pattern *aab aac bb* and the melodic contrast between line 3 and the remainder of the first 4 lines is substantial. Line 3 does not return to a refrain tune but does provide musical completion. The last couplet strains for unprecedented high notes; line 6 returns to line 3's closing melody, but adds a small bit of ornamentation to this generally syllabic recitation.

Rendered by the largest group in the sample, example #5 is also, at twelve verses, the longest recited version, despite a request on the part of majlis organizers at Ahmad House that all performers strictly limit the duration of their presentations. These performers chanted quickly and intensely; in this respect, their performance differed from those of other female majlis reciters, especially in Karachi or Lucknow. To Shi'i listeners who equate slow speed with dolefulness, the recitation might well sound strident rather than "sorrowful." (Likewise, performers in Lucknow, where recitations are generally slower, sometimes criticize the marsiyah recitation style of Hyderabad, India—where renderings are often speedy and sometimes have a "shouted" quality—as sounding "angry" rather than "sad.")

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Chapter Six (pp.234-240) discusses the inclusion of a metrically confusing, interpolated verse near the end of this version of the marsiyah. In the average women's majlis, a simple loss of artistic control by reciters in such a situation may or may not considered a defect, but the presence or absence of "emotional control" can prove revealing. Where reciters of all social and economic classes and linguistic backgrounds recite side by side, steadfast control stands as perhaps one of the most reliable identifiers of professional as opposed to non-professional reciters. In the Qasr-e Zainab majlis described in the early chapters of this work, recitations by amateurs often stimulated intense reactions, including frenzied weeping, with the reciters themselves frequently breaking down into tears. Harsh shouting, cracking voices, and even a lack of synchronization reflected these reciters' passionate, "uncontrolled" devotion and piety, whereas when Zahidah Baji "took the stage," she remained composed and never wept herself, although she strove to inject pathos into her voice.

With a few exceptions, professional reciters in virtually every majlis I attended deployed their mastery of text and tune to induce mourners to weep, while amateurs reacted dramatically to poems along with their listeners, exhibiting far less concern with textual or musical nuance and group coordination. The Ahmad House version of *Lāsh Akbar kī* exemplifies this sort of impassioned recitation as mourning, and yet presents a relatively lengthy passage of Munis's text. This conjunction of characteristics contrasts with what one would expect from literary critics' insinuations that a direct relationship exists between highly "artistic" presentation and length of a text.

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Glossary

* *Ahl-e bait* "The people of the household," the Prophet's family and their immediate descendants.

* *'Arabain* The "fortieth day," (20 Safar in the Islamic calendar) important for its series of final death rites, processions, and majlises for the Karbala martyrs. Most majlis-goers use the Persian term *chihlūm* for this date, but the (Arabic) term *'arabain* is quite common in Hyderabad, India.

* *'Ashūrah/'ashūr/'ashurah* The tenth day of Muharram, the day on which Husain and his companions were slain. *'Ashūrah* means ten or the tenth in Persian, and sometimes indicates the first ten days (*'ashūrah-e awwal*) of Muharram, with a second *'ashūrah* leading up to the *chihlūm*, the fortieth-day rites for Husain.

* *'Ashur-khānah* A worship hall dedicated to the purpose of majlises and remembrance of Husain. The term is used in the Hyderabad (India) area, where these buildings have existed since the sixteenth century. See *imāmbārah*.

* *Āzād naẓm* "Free verse," unrestricted by the formal parameters of verse structure, meter, qāfiyah, and radīf. In practice, modern *āzād naẓm* often retains elements of classical prosody, but does not adhere consistently to conventions.

* *Bāṭinī* Inner, esoteric, hidden, covert. Since the time of the earliest mystics, there has been a strong strain in Islam of searching for inner and hidden meanings (in the Quran and sayings of the Prophet). The idea of an inner/outer dichotomy can also be reflected, in the extreme, in tensions between exoteric observances (e.g. pilgrimage) which may be executed without inner sincerity or proper intention (*niyyat*), and an inner search for the divine that carries little concern for injunctions at their most literal. Shi'ism and Sufism are known for the development of *bāṭinī* knowledge meant only for the adept or initiated.

* *Bāzū* A reciter (there are usually two) who sits at the side of a *sozkhvān* or *marsïyahkhvān* and provide a vocal drone (*ās*), like that which a *tanbūrā* or similar instrument would provide, were such accompaniment permitted. This effect is rather hard to produce, and good *bāzūs* may require considerable training. *Bāzūs* also chime in on some lines of the marsiyah or soz verse, usually the fourth and fifth, or fourth and sixth.

* *Bohrā* The South Asian *Dāu'dī Bohrās* are one of numerous factions classed as *Ismā'ilīs* because they broke off from the "twelvers" after the imamate of the sixth imam (d. 146 H.E./765 C.E.) to follow his son Ismā'il rather than another son Mūsā al-Kāẓim. The *Bohrā* community emerged as result of further splintering (in 487/1094 and 526/1132) among *Ismā'ilī*. These divisions are interesting responses to the imams' practice of *naṣṣ* (see below), the decision whereby an imam selected his successor.

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Bohrās revere a lineage of spirtual leaders that continues to this day, whereas for "twelvers," the twelfth imam, al-Mahdī, was the last imam, and continues to guide the community from the hidden realm of "occultation." An important Bohra leader, the *Syednā*, resides in Udaipur, Rajsthan, India.

* *Chihlum/chihlūm* The "fortieth day," (20 Safar, in the Islamic calendar) when a series of final death rites, processions, and majlises for the Muharram martyrs are held. *See "'Arabain."*

* *Darūd* In the majlis context, the *darūd* is the responsorial chant "*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!("Blessings on Muhammad and on the family of Muhammad"). More generally the term means, "benediction," "praise," or "blessing," though it is usually associated with Muhammad. In the majlis, the cry "*darūd bhejiye*," ("send out the *darūd*") uttered after the names of the Prophet's family members prompts all present to reciter the *darūd*. In Lahore, the cry *Ṣalavāt* is more frequently used. *See "ṣalavāt."*

* *Ġhazal* This extremely popular genre of Urdu poetry has counterparts in Persian, Uigyur, Turkish, Uzbek, and Arabic, to name just a few languages. Often described as a "love lyric," the ghazal makes use of elaborate metaphors and an established universe of stock images to muse on the tribulations of earthly and divine love, especially the tragic struggle of the besotted lover to attain union with an aloof, disdainful beloved. The format of the ghazal requires couplets that rhyme *aa ba ca da* and share a prescribed meter, but thematic unity in the genre is minimal.

* *Hadiṡ* (Arabic hadith). The traditions and sayings of the Prophet. *Hadiṡ* sometimes refers to the spoken majlis lecture, or to a majlis form that alternates prose and poetry. This term, scarce now, was more common in women's assemblies than in men's, and is rarely used to denote a full-blown sermon such as Shabih-us-Zahra delivers in Chapters Two and Three.

* *Hadiṡ-ḳhvān* Another name for the lay preacher or *ẕākirah* who delivers the majlis sermon in the women's assembly. In Lucknow, this term is almost always used, while in Hyderabad *ẕākirah* is more popular. The *hadiṡ-ḳhvān* relays "traditions" not only of the Prophet, but of the imams.

* *Imām* This word has different connotations in different contexts (an *imām* can be a prayer leader in a mosque, for example), but for Shiahs, the *imām* is a divinely appointed guide for the Muslim community. *Imāms* are descended from Muhammad the last Prophet, but also designated by the previous *imām* who exercises his prerogative of *naṣṣ*. The largest group of Shiahs traces a lineage of twelve imams: 'Alī, Ḥasan, Ḥusain, Zain-ul-'ābidīn, Muḥammad Bāqir, Ja'far us Ṣādiq, Musā al-Kāẓim, 'Alī ar-Raẓā, Muḥammad Taqī, 'Alī Naqī (or al-Hādī), Ḥasan 'Askarī, and al-Mahdī.

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* *Imāmbārah* - A hall dedicated to the remembrance of the Karbala martyrs and the imams through majlises, *jashn*s (birthday celebrations), and other events related to the lives of the imams and the *ma'sūmīn*. S.A.A. Rizvi points out that in Bengal, a site of such buildings since at least the seventeenth century, "the mansion for the Imām's mourning ceremonies was naturally known as the '*Imām-Bārhī*,'" because "*bārhī*" means "mansion" in Bengali. "In other towns," Rizvi adds, "'*bārhī*' changed to '*bārhā*'" and "in their zeal for Persianization, the Pākistānīs have changed *bārhī* into '*bārgāh*' (a king's court or palace." See Rizvi 1986, vol. 2, 351-2. *Imāmbārgah* is indeed the preferred pronunciation among Pakistani Urdu speakers. Other names for *imāmbārah*s include *Ḥusainiyah*, *'azā-khānah*, *'ashūr-ḵhanah*, and *ta'ziyah-ḵhānah*.

* *Iṡnā 'Asharī* Relating to the twelve imams. The term designates the main body of Shiahs who follow the teachings of twelve leaders/divine guides descended from Muhammad. See *imām* above.

* *Karbalā* The site of Imam Husain's martyrdom (and his tomb/shrine) has also been known as Nainevah. Muharram poetry often breaks down the word's syllables into *karb o balā*, "pain and torment." Karbala is located about fifty kilometers southeast of Baghdad.

* *Mājarā* An event, matter, or topic. *See vāqi'ah.*

* *Majlis/majlis-e 'azā* Majlis simply means "gathering," and can apply in Urdu to gatherings that range from political meetings to get-togethers for the purpose of entertainment. In the Shi'i context, the term is almost always shorthand for the *majlis-e 'azā*, the "assembly of mourning." Hazrat Zainab, Imam Husain's sister, is supposed to have established the first majlises to commemorate her brother's martyrdom. South Asian Shiahs also hold majlises through to mark the deaths of both the fourteen *ma'sūmīn* and their own family members.

* *Maqṭa'* The closing verse of a poem; to technically qualify as a *maqṭa'*, the closing verse must contain the poet's pen-name. Classical marsiyahs almost always have an actual *maqṭa'*, but today's performed marsiyahs, like modern ghazals, often omit it.

* *Marsïyah* The word marsiyah is derived from the Arabic root, *raṡā*, "to weep over, bewail." Marsiyah poems exist in languages from Arabic and Persian to Bengali. Though their formats and modes of expression can vary considerably, marsiyahs in some way lament the passing of heroes, kings, or family members. Marsiyahs have existed in Urdu since the time of the 15th and 16th -century Deccani kingdoms, and are commonly considered to have reached their height in the 19th century, when the great poets Anis and Dabir were writing.

* *Marsïyah-ḵhvān* A marsiyah reciter.

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* *Marsïyah-ḳhvānī* Literally marsiyah-reading, *marsïyah-ḳhvānī* refers to the recitation of marsiyahs, including artful schools or styles of presentation, including taht-ul-lafẓ and *soz-khvānī.*

* *Marsïyah-nigārī* The art of marsiyah-writing.

* *Ma'sūmīn* In Shi'ism, the fourteen "impeccable" or infallible personages divinely instilled with the capability to lead believers and intercede with Allah on their behalf. *Ma'sum* (*ma'sūmīn* is an Arabic plural) ordinarily means "innocent" or "innocent one" in Urdu, but for Shiahs the term signifies a pure status above sinful behavior. The *ma'sūmīn* are the Prophet, his daughter Fatimah, and the twelve imams (including Ali, Hasan, Husain, and Zain ul abidin).

* *Mātam* Literally "mourning," in the majlis *mātam* signifies overt expressions of grief over Husain's sufferings, especially rhythmic breast-beating. Qureshi has documented a majlis genre also called *mātam,* but this term seems little used today.

* *Maṭla'* "Opening verse." The first verse in a poem. In the ghazal, the *maṭla'* differs from the couplets that follow in that the poem's consistent rhyming elements are present in both lines, and not just the second one. In the marsiyah, no such clear-cut distinction exists, but the opening verse is still alluded to as a *maṭla'*.

* *Mazmūn* A poetic theme or proposition, a metaphor-formula. Ghazal poetry relies heavily on an established collection of *mazmūn*s, and the marsiyah makes use of many of them as well.

* *Menhdī* Literally, "henna." The term also refers to a joyous pre-wedding rite in which the bride and her cohort have henna designs painted on their hands, gifts and sweets are distributed, and joking songs are sung. Majlis-goers actually incorporate many aspects of this rite into mourning assemblies on the 7th of Muharram, in which the bridegroom Qasim is remembered and Muharram's blend of celebration and sorrow is exquisitely heightened.

* *Minbar* A staired pulpit used by a speaker, whether a majlis *ẕakir/ẕākirah*, or a preacher giving an address at a mosque. In a majlis, the marsiyah-khvan or the preacher sits on the step before the top one, to show humility. In large imambarahs, the *minbar* is an actually a metal or wooden pulpit, whereas in small or household majlises (as at Qasr-e Zainab), a chair suffices.

* *Muḥarram* The name of the first month in the Islamic calendar, although the term is more commonly taken to mean the observances that commemorate Imam Husain's death.

* *Mushā'irah* A gathering for poetic recitation.

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* *Naṣṣ*, "An elevation" or "explicit and decisive dictum" (e.g. Platts 1142) through which the imams designated their successors from among their heirs, balancing the importance of merit and descent in determining spiritual leadership.

* *Nauḥah* A short couplet-based dirge recited at the end of the mourning assembly and in Muharram processions. *See Appendix B.*

* *Nazrānah* An offering, or charitable gift. Honorariums in cash or kind given to poetry reciters and preachers in the majlis.

* *Qāfiyah* "Rhyme." The rhyming syllable that begins the rhyming element in a line of the ghazal, marsiyah and many other genres of Urdu poetry.

* *Radīf* "Refrain." The repeated word(s) at the end of the rhyming element in a line of poetry.

* *Salām* One of the introductory genres of majlis poetry. *See Appendix B.*

* *Ṣalavāt*. In the majlis context, the word *ṣalavāt* ("prayers," "blessings," "benedictions") means the *darūd* ,the responsorial chant "*Allahumma ṣaleh 'ala Muḥammadin va āl-e Muḥammad*!("Blessings on Muhammad and on the family of Muhammad"). Literally . *See darūd.*

* *Shī 'ah* A "partisan" of Ali, who asserts that he, rather than any of the first three caliphs, was Muhammad's rightful successor as leader of the Muslim community.

* *Shī'ī* I have used this term as an adjectival form that applies to Shiahs.

* *Soz* Literally, "melting, burning," this word indicates intense pain or sorrow. As a majlis genre, soz is the poetic form usually recited earliest in the mourning assembly. The phrase *soz o gudāz* ("burning and melting") is often listed as a characteristic of any emotionally affecting poetry or music. *See Appendix B.*

* *Sozkhvān* An expert reciter of soz poetry or of marsiyah poetry when rendered melodically. Note that while there are both marsiyah-khvans (marsiyah reciters) and marsiyah-nigars (marsiyah writers), no one uses the term *soz-nigār*, probably because most sozes are extracted from extant, longerf poems.

* *Sunnī* The term by which the majority community of Muslims, those who do not revere the lineage of imams decended from the Prophet as the major, rightful temporal and spiritual leaders of the Muslim community.

* *Tabbaruk* A blessing in the form of a "portion" or "share" of what is offered to Husain

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and then distributed in his name at every majlis.

* *Taḥt-ul-lafẓ* (*khvānī*) Declamatory, dramatic recitation (of marsiyah or other forms of Urdu poetry). Those who recite in *taḥt-ul-lafẓ* employ "speech" rather than melodic presentation, but the speech is very "musical" with emphatic meter and intense rising and falling vocal modulation. Although no full-fledged Muharram "drama" [see *ta'ziyeh* below] ever emerged in the South Asian Shi'i context, the best *taḥt-ul-lafẓ* marsiyah reciters embellish their performances with gestures, voice modulations, and even "acting" to represent the various characters.

* *Takhallus* The poet's pen-name, used in the final verse of classical written marsiyahs.

* *Tarannum* A chanting style used by poets when presenting their poems, especially, in a poetic gathering. Occasionally, a marsiyah is presented in a style similar to this, but melodic marsiyah renderings are generally more song-like (or have more classical musical elements) than *tarannum* and *taḥt-ul-lafẓ* recitations closer to speech. At times, my consultants used *tarannum* to describe melodic marsiyahs, not because the poems were actually chanted, but because this was a way to indicate musical qualities without employing inappropriate musical terms.

* *Ṭarz* Literally, "way," "manner," or "style," in the context of majlis poetry, *ṭarz* refers to the tune to which a text is set.

* *Ṭawā'if* A "dancing girl," usually connected to Muslim courts or noblemen. Many *ṭawā'if*s were and are Shi'ahs, and became renowned for their skill at sozkhvani. In a number of cities, including Lahore and Lucknow, *ṭawā'if*s and other classes of singers, dancers, or courtesans famously take part in Muharram processions, sometimes reciting poetry.

* *Ta'ziyah* Derived from an Arabic root (also the base of the Urdu *'azā*/*'azādārī*, "lament/state of mourning" and *'azādār*, "mourner") meaning "to be patient" or "to condole," this word has come to mean a tomb replica (for Husain) in Urdu. Most household or neighborhood taziyahs are constructed of paper and tinsel, and are buried on ashurah. These colorful objects can be elaborate multi-storied affairs that brush power lines when carried in procession. Major imambarahs and prominent households house "permanent" taziyahs of wood and cloth, metal, or glass, some of them hundreds of years old. Permanent taziyahs may be disassembled and stored at the end of the mourning season or displayed in imambarahs, where the devout view and pray over them.

* *Ta'ziyeh* The word which means tomb replica in Urdu (the pronunciation differs slightly) connotes a passion play about Karbala in Iran. Dozens of passion plays depicting Karbala incidents or subplots remain in existence today, although *ta'ziyeh* was banned for some time under the last Shah of Iran.

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* *Vāqi'ah* "Incidents" or episodes. In marsiyah poems, *vāqi'ahs* are episodes or sub-plots that structure individual poems. Brief anecdotes—often punctuated with a moral, a lesson, or a punchline— about the personages that figure in majlis narratives or about famous poets are also *vāqi'ah*s.

* *Vāqi'ah-nigārī* "Incident/episode-writing." The narrative art of relating an episode or plot. Traditional majlis audiences know almost every detail of the major marsiyah episodes by heart, so a gifted poet distinguishes himself mainly by style or diction, and occasionally by incorporating a lesser-known event into the familiar array of episodes.

* *Ẓāhirī* Outer, obvious, exoteric. Usually mentioned in the Shi'i context with reference to the literal meaning of the Quran or the sayings of the Prophet, the meaning that everyone has access to, as opposed to the inner meaning accessible to the imams and their faithful followers.

* *żākir* (m.)/ *żākirah* (f.) A respectful term, derived from the word for "remembrance" or "mention," for the majlis preacher

* *żākirī* In the South Asian Shi'i context, poetic or verbal remembrance of Imam Husain and Karbala. In an interview about her singing and majlis recitation, for example, soz-khvān Kajjan Begam said, "This is my family's seventh generation of performing *żākirī*

* *Zanānah* (From *zan*, "woman," in Persian.) The women's quarters, or sphere. The women's majlis is called the *zanānī* majlis.

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