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LONDON, JULY 1984

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Because of the size of this volume it has been decided not to publish the Autumn issues 1985 and 1986 of this journal.

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PREFACE

This special number of *Al-Serāt* contains papers which were either presented at, or, in some cases, subsequently submitted in longer written form to, the International Conference on the Imam Ḥusayn held in London from the 6th to the 9th of July, 1984. The event was jointly organized by the Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Muhammadi Islamic Centre, Toronto, Canada, to commemorate the 1400th *hijrī* anniversary of the birth of Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, the third Shʿī Imam and grandson of Muḥammad, the prophet of Islam, in 4 AH. Further details of the conference and speakers can be found in: Maryam Wdlings, 'Report on the International Seminar on Imam Ḥusayn. peace be upon him', *Al-Serāt* X/2 (Autumn, 1984), 3-12.

The papers have been arranged thematically under three headings, and within these headings the order is alphabetical, according to author. Given both the variety of ways in which the subjects were treated in the papers themselves, and the different backgrounds of the contributors, only an absolute minimum of uniformity has been imposed by the editors, and, while it is hoped that consistency has been maintained within each paper, such consistency should not be looked for between them. Dates, for example, usually appear in their *hijrī* form, but in some places they are given according to the Christian calendar, or in both forms; it should be clear from the context which system is being used. Qur'ānic quotations have been given throughout in the form of, e.g., 2:156. without further indication. The transliteration of Arabic names and terms follows the usual style of *Al-Serāt*, but in the case of other languages the editors have generally retained the transliterations given by each author.

The Muhanimadi Trust would like to thank the contributors and organizers for their cooperation and assistance, and for their kind patience in awaiting the delayed publication of these papers. In particular, they would like to thank Mahmoud Ayoub and Azim Nanji for their help and advice in the preparation of this volume, and Lynda Clarke for her translation of Professor al-Janhānī's contribution.

INTRODUCTION

This publication of the proceedings of the conference to commemorate the 1400th *hijra* anniversary of the birth the the Sayyid al-Shuhadā', the Imam Ḥusayn, peace be upon him, gives me the opportunity to say a few words of introduction about the Muhammadi Trust and the Muhammadi Islamic Centre for those whose do not already know about their operations and activities. The Muhammadi Trust was established in the United Kingdom in 1973, with its registered office in London, for the purpose, *inter alia*, of encouraging Islamic studies and disseminating knowledge of Islamic teachings: and its sister organization, the Muhammadi Islamic Centre of Canada, was set up in 1979, with the additional aim of awarding fellowships to students and scholars of Islam, and it has recently been registered under the name of the Muhammadi Islamic Foundation so as to allow it greater freedom and independence in its activities. Both organizations are anxious to strengthen unity among all Muslims, and, in particular, the youth. In pursuit of these objectives, the Trust has published a number of books and booklets in the English language. Some of these are translations of Arabic books on religious themes and topics, written by renowned scholars, and some are original works by scholars of international repute who have contributed to the study of Islam. The Trust also publish a journal, *Al-Serāt*, which prints articles on religious topics by eminent writers. Those who are familiar with this journal know that the utmost importance is given to the quality and standard of the articles, and, at the same time, full freedom to express views is allowed the writers so as to permit the publication of articles propounding diverse views with which the publishers may not necessarily agree. This effort of the Trust is directed towards the dissemination in English of knowledge concerning Islam in all its aspects.

Although a large body of literature on Islam exists in oriental languages such as Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, there is, in contrast, a dearth of such literature in English. Yet English is the only language with which our younger generation living in the Western world is familiar.

The diffusion and dissemination of knowledge is. according to the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, the religious duty of every Muslim, man or woman. The Prophet of Islam has enjoined us to acquire knowledge from the cradle to the grave. As Sa'dī said,

پئے علم چوں شمع باید گداخت کہ بے علم نتواں خدا را شناخت

'*to kindle the light of knowledge, one must necessarily melt like a candle; for how can one understand the divine Being without the glow of learning.*'

I will now say just a few words as my humble tribute to the great Imam whose memory we have honoured in this conference. As a gem of the purest rays, serenest sparkles and reflected light, the life of the Imam Ḥusayn mirrors the light of guidance through its every facet. It is no wonder that the Imam Ḥusayn is looked upon as an ideal by all who believe in righteous causes, who believe that no sacrifice is too great for the achievement of a noble aim, who believe that death for a righteous cause is the very acme of noble living and far preferable to a life of ignominy and degredation based on compromising principles. How rightly Kawar Mchandra Singh Bedi has said:

جی کے مرنا تو سب کو آتا ہے مر کے جینا سکھا دیا تو نے

'*Everybody knows that after life there is death;*
but it is you [O Ḥusayn] who has taught how to live by dying.'

As Thomas Carlyle, in his *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, has put it: 'The best lesson which we get from the tragedy of Karbala is that Husayn and his followers were rigid believers in God: they illustrated that numerical superiority does not count when it comes to truth and falsehood. The victory of Husayn, despite his minority, marvels me.'

On the plains of Karbalā', Ḥusayn showed what *jihād* stands for in Islamic terminology. He taught us, as no one else could have done,

that it does not mean aggrandisement or the flamboyant display of valour which cries out: 'One crowded hour of glorious life is worth an age without a name.' He showed, as none else could have done, that to remain firm and steadfast in the hour of trial and tribulation, to surrender to the will of Allah with complete resignation is the zenith of martyrdom and *jihād*. He showed us that even the death and destruction of his dearest ones cannot deter a person from the performance of the appointed task, from the fulfillment of the ordained purpose, without the least hesitation, without the least demur, without a word or murmur of complaint. Who else but Ḥusayn could have prayed to Allah for the salvation of Muslims without any rancour or bitterness under the dagger of the assassin. And all this with the utmost serenity and calm which comes from supreme resignation to the will of Allah and complete submission to His divine purpose. As Yagana says,

ڈوب کر پار اتر گیا اسلام آپ کیا جانیں کربلا کیا ہے

Only after drowning did Islam survive. How is it possible for anyone to comprehend the meaning, message, and significance of Karbalā'?

Secretary to the Muhammadi Trust.

THE SOCIAL AND SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF URDU *MARTHĪYA*

Karrar Husain
Pakistan

THE RITUAL

The Shīʿa of South Asia borrowed most of the Muḥarram rites and ceremonies from Iran. But they have been discriminating in their borrowings, and moulded whatever they borrowed according to their genius, developing forms of activity and expression peculiar to themselves. They rejected the Iranian *taʿzīya*, or Passion Play; nor did the graphic representation of the Prophet and His f amily find any favor with them.

Of the symbols in the Muḥarram ritual, they developed what they call *taʿzīya*, something very different from the *taʿzīya* of Iran. The South Asian *taʿzīya* is an imitation in an architectural form through whatever medium — it may be wood and paper or any metal or grass and flowers or tender shoots of wheat and barley — of the idea of the mausoleum of the Imam Ḥusayn. This root idea proliferated into myriad shapes, peculiar to each city, and even to each guild. *Taʿzīyas* are meant for just one day's parade along with the 'Āshūrā' processions, to be buried in the earth or thrown into water in the evening an example of the artist losing himself in the work of art fulfilling itself as an act of worship.

In the field of literature, the glorious achievement of the South Asian Shīʿa is the evolution of the Urdu *marthīya* out of the threnodies and dirges on the martyrs of Karbalā' and its final establishment as one of the most essentially characteristic forms of Urdu poetry.

It may be noted that unlike other centres in the Muslim world, Muḥarram celebrations in South Asia are not eclusively the concern of the Shīʿa. The initiative did come from the Shīʿa, but the Sunni and even

the Hindus lake part in Muḥarram celebrations. The *taʿzīyas* are almost all built by the Sunni, and the *marthīya majlis* is not only attended by many Sunni and Hindus, but many Sunni and non-Muslim poets have cultivated this form with high artistic skill and deep devotion.

The Muḥarram celebrations started in the Deccan in the late seventeenth century comprising Roza Khawani (the sad narration of the events of Karbalā') and mourning processions accompanied by dirge chanting and breast beating. It was a popular pageant of sorrow participated in and patronized by the Shīʿī sultans, and one of them, Mohammad Qutub Shah, also composed *marthīyas*, which were simple lyrics of deep lamentation and devotion.

In 18th century Delhi, where Urdu poets like Mir and Sauda were exploring, in a fit of creative energy as it were, the power and virtue of the newly-developed medium of Urdu language, and getting free of the tutelage of the Persian tradition, they experimented with many modes of expression for the *marthīya*, but thematically went little beyond lamentation and devotion.

In the Shīʿī Kingdom of Oudh, it was all different. Lucknow, in the late 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries, was the last refuge of Muslim talent in the troubled world of North India, a spot of light and peace amoung the lengthening shadow's of anarchy, the sophisticated, self-conscious, and very prodigal inheritor of ten centuries of Indo-Muslim culture, not resplendent with the sunset colours of a declining civilization. Lucknow was, like ancient Athens, a closed but complete universe, and the *marthīya*, with its roots deep in popular devotion and its branches absorbing the sunshine of courtly patronage, grew like a hot-house plant into a form of poetry fit to take its place along with tragedy on one hand, and epic on the other.

THE MYTH

The inspirational source of the *marthīya* is, of course, Karbalā', and there is something so deeply pathetic, so tremendously sublime, and

bewildcringly enigmatic about one's perception of Karbalā'! That God's own man, beloved of the Prophet, holding all authority from God, and master of Time and Destiny, the aim and end of Creation, its support and mainstay, the symbol of all that is holy and sacred, the inheritor and custodian of the Prophetic charisma, should meet what looks like total destruction, overwhelmed by forces of darkness in a state of utter helplessness, is not a mere historical event, not even the fall of a house, but almost a cataclysm in the divine order of things. Such ambivalence between the physical and the metaphysical levels of existance cannot fail to strike the deepest chords in man's moral and spiritual constitution and raise questions about the quiddity of divine dispensation and the mystery of human destiny — what a covenant, what fulfillment, what reward.

The matter now passes from the rational to the existential realm, and through the pressure of emotional intensity, it becomes interiorized as experienced reality. And as this experience is shared universally, it becomes part of collective consciousness.

To the startled, kindled imagination, Karbalā' becomes the focal point of human history, all the past leading up to it and all the future — until the Day of Judgement — flowing out of it, a fiery moment in which the beginning of lime and the end of time coalesce.

Legends, symbolising the meaning and significance that cannot be expressed through ordinary modes of communication, and which have yet to he expressed (so irrepressible and imperative is the urge) cluster around the fact. This constellation of legends forms a sort of myth (*mythos*, as distinguished from *logos*), a timeless cosmic drama in which all the forces of creation and chaos take part in an epic battle between the congregated might of darkness and the flickering inextinguishable beacon light of Heaven and Earth, a fertility myth of the resurrection of faith and truth, an apocalypse of redemption and intercession, and the final justification of the ways of God to man.

Karbalā' has thus become a compendium containing signs and

intimations of Man's predicament, his journey through this vale of suffering and tears, his social and spiritual values, his destiny and final redemption. And just as the Greek poet hewed out of the granite mass of Greek mythology the shades of his tragedies and epics, so a gifted artist like Anis or Dabeer sees the integrated outline of his *marthīyas* etched out in the different episodes or parts, or combinations and relations of parts of the inexhaustable tale of Karbalā'. And as the tale is inexhaustable, so are the *marthīyas* that emerge out of it innumerable — limited only by the insight and imagination of the poet.

THE WORLD OF THE MARTHĪYA

The world of the *marthīya* opens with the constrained journey of the Imam Ḥusayn and his relatives from Madina to Mecca. It extends along the Imam Ḥusayn's journey from Mecca towards Kūfa, which is intercepted at Karbalā'. Karbalā' is the centre of this world, where the battle of truth is fought: the field of Destiny. From Karbalā' it follows the caravan of the surviving widows and orphans and the sole surviving son of the Imam Ḥusayn, the Imam Zayn al-ʿAbidīn, all chained and manacled, through the merry market crowds and festive courts of Kūfa and Damascus. The last phase is the return of this torn and tattered caravan from Damascus to Karbalā', now turned into a graveyard, and from there back to Medina. At this point the world of *marthīya* closes. It stretches like a track of light, a trail of suffering in the midst of deepening shadows of ghoulish darkness closing in upon it from all sides and trying to obliterate it. And yet this world, so narrow and confined in its temporal dimensions, is so immense in its relationships and significance. It reaches back to the days of the Holy Prophet and beyond it to the Divine Covenant on which the fate and future of Islam depends, and looks forward to the end of time and the Day of Judgement and Redemption. All nature and all history is deeply involved in the final outcome of these events and in what happens in this world. For the poet this world is inexhaustible, peopled with innumerable murtluyas waiting for his eye and pen to be quickened into life.

THE CONSTRUCTION

The *marthīya* is a well-organized whole of about 150 to 200 stanzas of six lines each, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The structure, particularly of *marthīyas* dealing with the death of a hero on the plains of Karbalā', follows a more or less standardized pattern which resembles the ebb and flow of a tide. In *marthīyas* dealing with other subjects the poet modifies this basic structure to suit his vision.

The first part is the opening, or 'face' (*chechra* as it is called). It may start with any subject, however remote, but it must artistically lead to the immediate occasion that gives rise to the action of the *marthīya.* In this parr the hero is introduced.

The second part is the rising action which comprises the leave-taking of the hero in the tent or base camp until his appearance before the hostile army.

The third part is the climax. The hero identifies himself to the hostile forces and reprimands them, challenging and threatening them with grevious chastisement at his hands and at the hands of God. Then the hero is shown engaged in single combats, which are depicted correctly in all details of warcraft. Routed in single combats, the enemy launches a mass attack. Here the poet uses all the resources of his art and invention to describe the lightening and wonderful exploits of the horse, and the deadly onslaught of the sword. The horse and the sword, being projections of the hero, acquire a personality of their own.

The fourth part is the falling action, or denouement. The hero, tough, invincible, has to be brought down. This change is a very delicate part of the poem, and must be handled very deftly and very reverentially.

The last part, the catastrophe, and in the spiritual sense the climax, closes on the death of the hero, and the hero departing in a crescendo of grief and sorrow.

Such is the skeleton, and the poet fills n out with flesh and blood and gives it a hundred shapes. He takes pride in playing a thousand changes on a single theme.

The basic unit of the medium is the *mussudas* stanza, four rhyming lines rounded off by a rhyming couplet. The stanza has an individuality of its own, a rising movement in the four rhyming lines clinched by the rhyming couplet. And yet it is just a stop in the progression, a marble slab suiting its place in a very complex edifice. The effect is architectural, very different from the monotonous flow of the mathnavi. The meter is neither short nor long, capable of being manipulated for every effect of dialogue and action.

The discovery of the medium proved to be as crucial for the development of the *marthīya* as the discovery of blank verse for the flourishing of Elizibethan drama.

The language is assiduously cultural and tastefully polished, fit to be spoken in a king's court. Yet far from displaying any signs of stiffness or artificiality, it has a flow and suppleness, and is alive with colour and movement and dramatic shifts and nuances. This is the natural language of a very formal and sophisticated civilization, and is capable of expressing every mood and portraying every situation.

For the last two hundred years, this language has carried the tradition of *marthīya* with case and grace without undergoing any apparent change or looking like going out of date.

THE KING'S COURT

The *marthīya*, like drama, is a composite art. It consists not only of composition, it is also performance. The poet's art of poetry, the reciter's art of presentation (the reciter may be the poet himself, or someone else, but reciting the *marthīya* is an art in its own right), attuned to the devotional spirit animating the congregation and the solemnity of the place and the occasion, cumulatively produce the desired effect and fulfill the *marthīya*.

The Imam Bargah is the King's Court, the court of Shah-i Karbalā'. All the pervading influence and the presiding presence is the Lady of Light, Fāṭima Zahra, the mother of the Imam Ḥusayn. The Prophet and the Family and the angels of God are here — all sharing and watching. The majlis is the Darbar-i ʻĀmm, the King's audience of the populace. And for every gesture and every movement, the proper etiqueite is described, to which it must conform.

The poet is the court poet, the bard. The reciter is the court herald. His performance is neither sing-song recitation, nor histrionic representation of the stage, nor rhapsodical abandon. Such things would be too vulgar. And yet the reciter has to present the whole variety of situations, from the holiest and the purest to the most execrable, and lead his audience through the whole gamut of human moods from highest exaultation to deepest pain, and through the whole range of emotions, love and devotion, joy and pride, hatred and anger. He has to give full weight and value to every word of the poet — and he does that just with a restrained movement of his hand, eyebrows, the expression of his face, a change of lone or accent, with an undertone of reverance throughout, controlled by a sense of solemnity. Until he brings the congregation to the appointed tryst, the sacred conclave of grief where full vent is given to the pent-up pathos, and tears are turned into screams. No trace of despair or depression is left. There has been a washing of the heart and the soul. The sinner feels so light. A sort of communion has been established between him and those who sacrificed their all for men, and whom God has invested with authority, and out of this communion springs eternally the hope and certainty of redemption and felicity, a catharsis of a deeply mystical quality.

RELIGION WITH A HUMAN FACE

Marthīya is not religious poetry in the sense that the poet is expressing his religious experiences, though the attitude of the poet towards his subject is one of deep reverance, and the *majlis* is a religious rite. Nor is it religious poetry in the sense of a hymn, or a eulogy, or an elegy. It unfolds a panorama of life. The features of this life are drawn from an

idealized image of contemporary Oudh society. This panorama of life is shown at its most climactic moment — the conflict between good and evil, between the insolence and agrcssivcncss of evil and the suffering and sacrifice of truth. Religion pervades here, as the spirit of human culture, and religious values walk the world in different shapes of human excellence. Just as Thomas Aquinas provides Dante with the key and criterion to judge all humanity, so in the same way does the faith of Anis in Karbalā' give him an insight into the mystery of human life, its beauty and its justification.

The characters on the side of the Imam Ḥusayn are different shapes of human excellence, full of compassion and grace and the milk of human kindness, the very soul of loyaly and fidelity, steadfast and eager to destroy the forces of evil and meet the hero's death, each one occupying a definite and well-defined position in that society, and each one knowing the obligation and etiquette of that position — which is *adab*, the essence of religious conduct. Yet each character is subtley individualized; Abbās, the soul of chivalry, the hope and support of all, the protector of women's honour and children's smiles, power pledged to tuth, like his father ʿAlī; ʿAlī Akbar the very image of the Prophet, a beautiful soul residing in a beautiful body, shedding grace and light like the prophet Joseph wherever he moves; Qāsim, mild and retiring and loveable; the two sons of Zaynab restless with the adolescent dreams and ambitions to rise to the stature of their forfathers ʿAlī and Jaʿfar; ʿAlī Asghar representing humanity in its most tender and innocent condition; Ḥurr, the honest, brave soldier, conscience-stricken, atoning for the past by being the first on the list of martyrs. Surpassing all these is Zaynab, in womanhood; its infinite power of suffering, healing, protecting, preserving and hating all that is mean and impure and tyrannical; and Ḥusayn. the man, in whom all the qualities of power and beauty, of firmness and gentleness mixed in balanced perfection.

The enemies arc all painted black with little differentiation, except that Yazīd is a drunken tyrant; Ibn Ziyād, his relentless tool; ʿUmar Saʿd has sold his soul for mere pittance; and Shimr is a malignant and degenerate brute. The soldiers are mercenaries, full of sound and fury, putting up a brave show, but cowards at heart.

Against this background of darkness, the characters of light are shown in action. The poetry of the *marthīya* may justly be called the poetry of the beauty and sanctity of human relationships.

DEFINITION ATTEMPTED

The *marthīya* resembles a dramatic tragedy in many respects. It resembles the tragedy in construction. At the heart of it is a dramatic conflict that defies resolution on the social plane. The tragic flaw of the hero is that he is flawless — too good for the world. The action is portrayed in graphic details with changes and surprises. The dialogue has the modulations of dramatic dialogue, typical at once of the situation, of the character, of the interlocutors, and of the poet's art.

But it is very different from a tragedy in the technical sense. It is not meant for stage representation. The hero is not beset by tragic loneliness — he belongs to a universe more real than any other. Though it raises the issue of human destiny, the idea of fate is excluded by too lively a conscience in the presence of God throughout. The catharsis of a tragedy leaves one, in some sense, a sadder and wiser person, but it is lacking in some positive elements, like the sense of communion and the sense of satisfaction, which are essential ingredients of the overall impression left by the *marthīya*.

Nor is the *marthīya* obviously an epic. It does not narrate — it presents. But the battle which it presents is epic in significance and to some extent in magnitude as well. The hero has epic stature, although the poet emphasizes his very human aspects. And like the epic it unfolds a whole civilization, its mores and manners, its values and morals, its philosophy and world view.

Though not a very wise thing to do. a working definition of the *marthīya* may be attempted somewhat in this way.

Constructed out of a repertoire of Karbalā' stories, the *marthīya* is a complete and integrated presentation, in the suitable poetic form, and

through the cultured language, of an action or episode portraying confrontation and the conflict of good and evil, and the tragic death of the hero, in such a way that feelings of exaultation and adoration are aroused for the hero or heros, and feelings of hatred and execration for the villians, and a bond of communion and partnership are all established through congregational mourning, thus providing a cathartic pleasure proper to the *marthīya*.

THE *MARTHĪYA* THEN AND NOW

Let us imagine the condition of late 18th and early 19th century Oudh. The Deccan sultanates situated on the border of the great Indo-Muslim civilization had long disappeared. Delhi, the centre of that civilization, is decaying. The civilization is breaking up. All around is anarchy, and an alien power is advancing from all sides. The indigenous civilization does not know this power, does not understand it, nor the meaning and purpose of it. With the decay of civilization, small pockets of culture are forming, closed but complete worlds. Oudh is one of them. These small worlds are doomed to be overrun and overwhelmed by the forces of barbarism in the near future. What can be the choice before this beleagured culture? Live fully, brightly, and gracefully while there is still time to do so, and when the hour strikes, give the barbarians a run for their money, and go down fighting like heroes, leaving the rest to God. And to the barbarians.

And this is just what the people of Oudh did in the War of Independence of 1857.

The Karbalā' of the classical *marthīya* is not the fall of a house, but the crash of a civilization, and also a noble, civilized way to face such a crash.

Even today the tradition continues, and the *marthīya* is flourishing. But times have changed. Gone are the days of that cultural twilight when poetry seemed to be the main business of life. Today the business of life is making poetry itself redundant. The *marthīya* does not now belong

to the mainstream of life. Even its place in the King's Court has been taken up by pulpit oratory. It now exists as an important branch of poetry. We do not live in a closed and complete world. Winds of change are blowing and our culture has lost its shape. We feel culturally disinherited and are in search of our identity. Life is not so much an experience as a set of problems. Along with the change in times, the vision and approach of the *marthīya* have also changed.

In our *marthīya* we are very much concerned with the causes and consequences of Karbalā'. From myth we have come down to history. What lessons useful to us can be learned from Karbalā'? What lay sermons can be proclaimed on the theme? From presentation we have moved to the propogation of messages. Our *marthīyas* now open with the discussion of some abstract idea that gives the *marthīya* its label or heading. The idea has taken the place of the image. Between us and Karbalā', there stands our interpretation of Karbalā'. The classical poet wrote Karbalā' — we can at best write about Karbalā'. The climax of the *marthīya*, the sacrament of weeping and wailing, does not grow out of modern *marthīya*. It hangs loose, like an appendage. We do not need sacrament as much as we need revolution. The temper of our *marthīya* is rational and revolutionary, and perhaps this is as it should be. Every age inherits a great tradition by reliving it, and this it can do only in its own peculiar way, according to its spiritual needs and its ethos.