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Anis, Master of Elegiac Poetry

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M. A. H. Khan

Mir Babr Ali, "Anis" (1801–1873) occupies the same towering position in the realm of Urdu literature as Firdausi in Persian, Milton in English and Dante in Italian. While other great poets refined and enriched the language by their lyrical works, Anis devoted himself exclusively to the composition of *marthias*, i.e. elegies in honour of Husain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, and his camp-followers who laid down their lives on the memorable 10th day of Moharram, fifty years after the death of the Prophet, so as to protect and preserve the religious ideals preached by him.

Marthia is an Arabic word, which means elegy, and such compositions were current in Arabia long before Islam, in remembrance of some loved one who had passed away. The outrageous massacre of the Prophet's kinsfolk, perpetrated by their enemies, fired the imagination of many a devout soul to sing of its disconsolation in the most touching tones, and consequently there accumulated a rich store of elegies in memory of Imam Husain.

The development of the *marthia* in Arabic has been traced at length by Dr. ፩. ፩. Ayoub in his learned article which appeared in *Al-Sirat* in Vol. VI, Nos. 3&4, November 1980. Persian elegies also followed the same lines and there accumulated a profusion of *marthias* in that language.

Classic examples of elegies in Persian are those written by Mulla Mohtasham-i-Kashi, Mulla Muqbil and

others, so that in the course of time the recitation of *marthias* became an important part of the observances of Moharram and Chehlum, and the elegy came to be associated more and more closely with the tragedy of Karbala.

In Urdu, although Mir Taqi Mir wrote an elegy of his daughter and Mirza Ghalib wrote about the death of his favourite nephew, 'Arif, yet the bulk of *marthias* were associated with the tragedy of Karbala. Under the Shiite monarchy of Avadh, (oudh), the commemoration of Muharram took place on a large scale.

It was characterized by mammoth gatherings called "*majalis*" (plural of *majlis* = a sitting or session) in which it was customary to recite "*marathi*" (plural of *marthia*) depicting the tragic scenes of the martyrdom of innocent souls from the Prophet's family. The success of such an assembly depended on the intensity of grief provoked by the reciter.

Anis' father, Mir Mustahsan Khaliq was a renowned composer of elegies in his own time, but Anis was a genius who surpassed all the other poets in this field. Just as Shakespeare is admired for his achievement of rescuing the dramatic art from the rigmarole of Old Morality Plays to place it on the high pedestal of artistic development so also may it be asserted of Anis that his genius illuminated the *marthia* with the undying flame of his passionate love of nature, imparting to Urdu poetry a universality and popularity which no other poet could have achieved.

At the time of his birth, it was generally remarked that an incompetent poet became a *marthia*-reciter.

بگڑا شاعر مرثیہ خوان

and an incompetent singer became a singer of elegies

بگڑا کوئیا سوز خوان

for, although Urdu poetry was highly developed in other directions by the time Anis came upon the scene, the field of elegy-writing was hopelessly neglected. Mir Taqi Mir and Mirza Ghalib by this ghazals (lyrics) had become the luminaries of Urdu poetry.

The 'seventy-two darts' of Mir penetrated deep into the hearts of his listeners, thrilling them with feelings of intense love, while Ghalib by his mastery of sublime philosophy, scaled the summits of divine thought, yet the rank and file of poets wasted their talents in treading the beaten path.

Little was their originality and great was their preoccupation with trivial and commonplace ideas, superficial and pedantic expressions. Anis bemoaned such tendencies and took pride in the fresh vigour which he imparted to the intellectual life of the people, saying: –

سبک ہو چلی تھی تراز دے شعر مگر ہم نے پلے گرائے کر دیا

The standard of poetry had started becoming light, but we put weight into its scales.

میری قدر کر اے زمین سخن مجھے بات میں آسمان کر دیا

O field of literature, acknowledge my worth, for by my word I have lifted you to the sky.

So, by turning his attention to the untrodden paths, Anis opened up new vistas of vision before the eyes of literary endeavour. He pursued the path of *marthia* writing as a noble and more honourable occupation than the pursuit of princely pleasure.

It must be borne in mind that unlike those of his Arab and Persian counterparts, Anis' elegies had to be presented to an audience which had a very hazy and imperfect acquaintance with the tragedy of Karbala. This circumstance called for a more detailed and vivid description of the events and character of its participants. But the ignorance of his listeners, instead of being a handicap to the poet, provided him with the required impetus for a more graphic description and a more complete narration of the entire episode.

It led to the development of narrative poetry, in respect of which the Urdu language was deficient. It called for a lucid, idiomatic and impressive treatment, a simple and dignified, intelligible and impassioned dramatization of the theme, which would at the same time remain consistent with the solemnity and decorum of a spiritual discourse.

The skilful use of Urdu idioms and spontaneity of apt remarks, the continuity of narrative and the smooth and serene flow of thoughts and words came naturally to Anis. Had not his worthy grandfather Mir Hasan written the classic narrative of "*Sehr ul Bayan*"? Had not his father excelled others in the chastity of language?

The student of Anis' works must also remember that *marthias* were composed for recitation in one sitting (*majlis*). They had to be just long enough for a recitation lasting from half an hour to two or three hours at the utmost. It should not be too long, because the interest of the audience had to be kept alive, and also because its recital must not put too much strain either on the reciter's voice or on the listeners' ears.

Now, we all know that the historic facts of Imam Husain's martyrdom and of his seventy-two followers together with the events connected with it are so wide as to fill several volumes. So, it was necessary for the poet to make manageable selections. It was Anis' task to pick and choose just the right material from the shelves of libraries to adorn his masterpieces of rendition with the heroic accounts of the battle of Karbala.

In doing so it was necessary to take up the accounts of a few selected martyrs, representative of their

comrades, one at a time, to form the theme of one complete *marthia*. Thus Anis, who composed about 144 *marthias* altogether, dealt with the martyrdom of Imam Husain, his brother Abbas, his sons Ali Akbar and Ali Asghar, his nephews Qasim and Abdullah, his sister's sons 'Aun and Muhammad and from among the Imam's companions he dealt only with Hurr and Habib ibn e-Mazahir.

The insatiable demand for new *marthias* every time impelled him to compose fresh elegies for each occasion, dealing with the same martyr's life and death from a variety of angles, and relating the same incidents again and again with renewed vigour and force of expression, fresh dialogues and descriptions, digressions, figures of speech and picturesque details.

So, Anis produced scores of elegies on Imam Husain, his brother and standard-bearer Abbas, his son Ali Akbar and about Qasim and 'Aun and Muhammad and the repentant Hurr. This in itself is a distinct and outstanding achievement of the poet's extraordinary genius, for after having exercised his art of portrayal on a particular subject, he reverts to the same theme again, without repeating a single idea or a single line of what he had composed before.

It would be pertinent to ask the admirers of the world's great poets, for instance if Shakespeare had been called upon to re-write the whole story of King Lear or Hamlet all over again, whether he could have acquitted himself of the task so beautifully, or if Firdausi were required to relate the story of Sohrab and Rustam whether he could have produced a parallel poem. Yet Anis proudly proclaims:

گلستہ معنی کو نئے ٹھنگ سے باندھوں اک پھول کا مضمون ہو تو سو رنگ سے باندھوں

"I can tie the bouquet of ideas in a new form and given the theme of a single flower I can describe it in a hundred colours."

The persistent demand for novelty led Anis to write on other themes – all connected with the subject-matter of elegies. He wrote about the life and death of prophet Muhammad, and about Ali's heroism, magnanimity and piety, ending with his martyrdom.

He eulogized Fatima and described her patient sufferings, he wrote about Hasan's cruel death from the poisoned cup; about the birth, childhood and miracles of Husain; about Muslim ibn e 'Aqîl and his two sons who were mercilessly put to the sword; about Imam Husain's daughter Fatima Sughra; and about the captivity of the women and children along with the sole surviving son of Husain, the Imam Zain-ul-'Abedin.

These narratives, all connected with the sacrifice of the Prince of Martyrs Imam Husain, form the themes of Anis' elegies. But this is not all. Anis skilfully brings into his poems the glories of nature, the morning and evening scenes, description of the desert's scorching heat, feats of valour on the battlefield, and the hopes, aspirations, the misery and despair, the affection and respect and the adamantine will and determination of his heroes, together with the depravity, callousness and cruelty of their murderers.

The sacred theme of the *marthia* and the seriousness and solemnity of recitation from the pulpit leaves no room for romance or love-scenes. The nearest approximation to such ideas is found in the parting scenes of the newly-wedded bridegroom Qasim ibn Hasan with his bride. But the puritanical character of the Imam's family imparts a delicate and deeply pathetic character to those scenes under the shadow of certain death and impending doom.

As already mentioned, Anis composed his elegies for recitation from the pulpit. His style of recitation, aided by appropriate changes of tone and tenor of the voice, enhanced and underlined the beauty of his poems, bringing them to life. He did not accompany the recitations with gesticulations but only hinted at the movements with the expression of his eyes.

He often composed the shorter poems known as "salams" and "rubaiyat" extempore, which acted as preludes and introductions to the longer poems called *marthias*. Through all these productions of his teeming mind he bequeathed to his mother-tongue a legacy of which one may be justly proud. His works consequently enjoy such wide acceptance and popularity that his name has become a household word in every town, village and hamlet where Moharram is observed it is his collected works that ensure a satisfactory observance of mourning during Moharram.

Many of the poets who followed Anis derived their inspiration and modelled their works on his musaddas form. The musaddas is a stanza consisting of six lines, the first four lines following one rhyme while the fifth and sixth lines form the climax as the conclusion of the developed idea.

Such stanzas are the units of a long poem produced by stringing the stanzas together. Chakbast adopted this structure for his Urdu version of the *Ramayana*, Hali utilised the musaddas form for his poem on social reform and Iqbal employed it for his "Shikwa" (complaint) and *Jawab-e-Shikwa* (reply). Thus, the poems of Anis have left an immortal imprint on Urdu literature, but none of those who followed him has yet been able to equal him in breadth of vision or depth of feeling.

To illustrate the above assertions a few examples of Anis' art may be given.

(1) Depicting a duel between two warriors on horseback he says: –

مہمیز یہ مہمیز تھی اور کوڑے پہ کوڑا ہر مرتبہ منہ مارتا تھا گھوڑے پہ گھوڑا گل پھر گئی جس باگ یہ جس
نے جسے موڑا زخمی ہونے پر کہیت کو دونوں نہ چھوڑا

اس زور سے تیروں کی بھی سریاں بعضی جلتیں چلتے ہیں کہ پریاں نہیں حقیقی یوں جہوم کے چلتے ہیں کہ

Then Spur on spur ensued and whip on whip

And each time each horse attacked the other with its mouth

As each rider twisted the reigns, his charger turned mechanically round;

and wounded though they were, neither of them left the field.

So swiftly the shafts of arrows do not speed

and swaying so nimbly even fairies do not dance.

(2) The aged father says to his young son who pleads to be allowed to go into the battlefield.

کیونکر جدا نگاہ سے، بیٹا کریں تمہیں آنکھیں یہ چاہتی ہیں کہ دیکھا کریں تمہیں

"How can I separate you, my son, from my sight

My very eyes like to go on gazing at you."

(3) When Imam Husain falls from his horse, the spirit of Fatima cries out to her daughter

انہی موی زخم تن چاک پر زینب نکل حسین تڑپتا ہے خاک پر

"Nineteen hundred are the wounds on his body torn to shreds, O Zainab! Come out! Husain is rolling in the dust."

(4) On the eve of the momentous battle, Zainab, daughter of Ali, the mother of 'Aun and Muhammad encourages her sons to perform acts of chivalry in support of the cause of Islam:-

بچے اسد اللہ کے مو جان پر کھیلو میدان میں جوانوں کی طرح سخیاں تھیلیو فوجوں میں دھنسو چھا ہوں
نیزوں کو ریلو کونے کو تہ نیغ کرو شام کو لے تو

"Cubs of the lion of God! play with your lives;

Brave the hardships like champions in the field;

Penetrate the ranks and push the spears with your breasts;

Put Kufa to the swords and capture Syria"

جعفر کی طرح جو ہر شمشیر دکھاؤ تن تن کے بیدالہ کی تصویر دکھاؤ مظلومیت حضرت شبیر دکھاؤ اعدا کو
مرے دودھ کی تاثیر دکھاؤ

"Like Jafa-e-Tayyar, show them your skilful swordsmanship

Like Ali; with bodies erect show them his posture

Show them the patience of Husain amidst oppression

Display the effect of being suckled by my milk."

(5) The instinctive loyalty of a horse to its master – 'Abbas' horse which was trained to be implicitly faithful unto death – was put to a severe test when the brave Abbas, single-handed, captured the Alqama canal of the Euphrates and released his reins to let his trusty horse quench its thirst. Here is Anis' description: –

دو دن سے بے زیاد پہ جو تھا آب و دانہ بند پانی کو ہنہنا کے لگا دیکھنے سمند ہر بار کا پتا تھا سمتھا تھا
جوڑ بند چپکارتے تھے حضرت عباس ارجمند

تاتا تھا جگر کو جوشور آب از کا گردن اٹھا کے دیکھتا تھا منہ سوار کا

بولے تھیک کے حضرت عباس نیکنام بس اتنا مضطرب نہ ہو اسے اسپ تیز گام

گر تو ہے تشنہ کام تو ہم ہی میں تند گام پیاسا ہے دو النجاح شست و خاصی عام

اٹھا ہے شور گریہ محمد کی آل سے آگاہ کیا نہیں ہے سکینہ کے حال ہے۔

عباس نے کہا جو یہ بچوں کا حال زار گردن ہلا کے رہ گیا اسپ وفا شعار جب نہر علقمہ میں در آیا وہ
نامدار پانی سے تھوٹھنی کو اٹھاتا تھا بار بار

جانبازی سمند یہ غازی نے رو دیا نمازی کے منہ کو دیکھ کے تازی نے رو دیا

The animal having passed two days without food or drink,

At the sight of water, the horse began to neigh

And its muscles twitched and released each time

While its chivalrous rider made consoling kissing sounds

But as the sound of flowing water made its thirst acute

It turned its head to watch its rider, wistfully

The doughty Abbas stroked its neck as if to say,

"Be not so impatient, my swift steed.

For I am just as thirsty as you are,

Remember, the Imam's horse is thirsty too

The cries of Muhammad's children rise time and again

Are you unaware of Sakina's plight? "

When Abbas related the children's agony

The loyal horse shook its head, and kept quiet

And presently Abbas plunged into the stream

But the horse did not let its lips touch the surface of the water

At the horse's self-denial Abbas was moved to tears

And seeing the hero's face, the horse also shed tears.

Examples of Anis' masterful picturisation of each incident are too abundant to be recounted in full. It is hoped that these few specimens, picked out at random, will serve to illustrate the poet's style and treatment of the subject, which imparts to his *marthias* the quality of everlasting beauty and enduring fame.

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