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The importance of elegies on Imam Husayn as literary works, and an explanation of some of their major themes and imagery.

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I still remember the deep impression which the first Persian poem I ever read in connection with the tragic events of Karbala' left on me. It was Qaani's elegy which begins with the words:

What is raining? Blood.

Who? The eyes.

How? Day and night.

Why? From grief.

Grief for whom?

Grief for the king of Karbala'

This poem, in its marvellous style of question and answer, conveys much of the dramatic events and of the feelings a pious Muslim experiences when thinking of the martyrdom of the Prophet's beloved grandson at the hands of the Umayyad troops.

The theme of suffering and martyrdom occupies a central role in the history of religion from the earliest time. Already, in the myths of the ancient Near East, we hear of the hero who is slain but whose death, then, guarantees the revival of life: the names of Attis and Osiris from the Babylonian and Egyptian traditions respectively are the best examples for the insight of ancient people that without death there can be no continuation of life, and that the blood shed for a sacred cause is more precious than anything else.

Sacrifices are a means for reaching higher and loftier stages of life; to give away parts of one's fortune, or to sacrifice members of one's family enhances one's religious standing; the Biblical and Qur'anic story of Abraham who so deeply trusted in God that he, without questioning, was willing to sacrifice his only son, points to the importance of such sacrifice. Iqbal was certainly right when he combined, in a well-known poem in *Bal al-Jibril* (1936), the sacrifice of Ismail and the martyrdom of Husayn, both of which make up the beginning and the end of the story of the Ka'ba.

Taking into account the importance of sacrifice and suffering for the development of man, it is not surprising that Islamic history has given a central place to the death on the battlefield of the Prophet's beloved grandson Husayn, and has often combined with that event the death by poison of his elder brother Hasan. In popular literature we frequently find both Hasan and Husayn represented as participating in the battle of Karbala', which is historically wrong, but psychologically correct.

It is not the place here to discuss the development of the whole genre of *marthiya* and *taziya* poetry in the Persian and Indo-Persian world, or in the popular Turkish tradition. But it is interesting to cast a glance at some verses in the Eastern Islamic tradition which express predominantly the Sunni poets' concern with the fate of Husayn, and echo, at the same time, the tendency of the Sufis to see in him a model of the suffering which is so central for the growth of the soul.

The name of Husayn appears several times in the work of the first great Sufi poet of Iran, Sana'i (d. 1131). Here, the name of the martyred hero can be found now and then in connection with bravery and selflessness, and Sana'i sees him as the prototype of the *shahid*, higher and more important than all the

other *shahids* who are and have been in the world:

Your religion is your Husayn, greed and wish are your pigs and dogs

You kill the one, thirsty, and nourish the other two.[1]

This means that man has sunk to such a lowly state that he thinks only of his selfish purposes and wishes and does everything to fondle the material aspects of his life, while his religion, the spiritual side of his life, is left without nourishment, withering away, just like Husayn and the martyrs of Karbala' were killed after nobody had cared to give them water in the desert.

This powerful idea is echoed in other verses, both in the *Divan* and in the *Hadiqat al-Haqiqa*; but one has to be careful in one's assessment of the long praise of Husayn and the description of Karbala' as found in the *Hadiqa*, as they are apparently absent from the oldest manuscripts of the work, and may have been inserted at some later point. This, however, does not concern us here.

For the name of the hero, Husayn, is found in one of the central poems of Sana'i's *Divan*, in which the poet describes in grand images the development of man and the long periods of suffering which are required for the growth of everything that aspires to perfection. It is here that he sees in the 'street of religion' those martyrs who were dead and are alive, those killed by the sword like Husayn, those murdered by poison like Hasan.[2]

The tendency to see Husayn as the model of martyrdom and bravery continues, of course, in the poetry written after Sana'i by Persian and Turkish mystics, and of special interest is one line in the *Divan* of 'Attar[3] in which he calls the novice on the path to proceed and go towards the goal, addressing him:

Be either a Husayn or a Mansur.

That is, Husayn b. Mansur al-Hallaj, the arch-martyr of mystical Islam, who was cruelly executed in Baghdad in 922. He, like his namesake Husayn b. 'Ali, becomes a model for the Sufi; he is the suffering lover, and in quite a number of Sufi poems his name appears alongside that of Husayn: both were enamoured by God, both sacrificed themselves on the Path of divine love, both are therefore the ideal lovers of God whom the pious should strive to emulate. Ghalib skillfully alludes to this combination in his *tawhid qasida*:

God has kept the ecstatic lovers like Husayn and Mansur in the place of gallows and rope, and cast the fighters for the faith, like Husayn and 'Ali, in the place of swords and spears: in being martyrs they find eternal life and happiness and become witnesses to God's mysterious power.

This tradition is particularly strong in the Turkish world, where the names of both Husayns occur often in Sufi songs.

Turkish tradition, especially in the later Bektashi order, is deeply indebted to Shi'i Islam; but it seems that

already in some of the earliest popular Sufi songs in Turkey, those composed by Yunus Emre in the late 13th or early 14th century, the Prophet's grandsons played a special role. They are described, in a lovely song by Yunus, as the 'fountain head of the martyrs', the 'tears of the saints', and the 'lambs of mother Fatima'.

Both of them, as the 'kings of the eight paradises', are seen as the helpers who stand at Kawthar and distribute water to the thirsting people, a beautiful inversion of Husayn suffering in the waterless desert of Karbala'.4

The well-known legend according to which the Prophet saw Gabriel bring a red and a green garment for his two grandsons, and was informed that these garments pointed to their future deaths through the sword and poison respectively, is mentioned in early Turkish songs, as it also forms a central piece of the popular Sindhi *manaqiba* which are still sung in the Indus Valley.

And similar in both traditions are the stories of how the boys climbed on their grandfather Prophet's back, and how he fondled them. Thus, Hasan and Husayn appear, in early Turkish songs, in various, and generally well-known images, but to emphasize their very special role, Yunus Emre calls them 'the two earrings of the divine Throne'.5

The imagery becomes even more colourful in the following centuries when the Shi'i character of the Bektashi order increased and made itself felt in ritual and poetical expression. Husayn b. 'Ali is 'the secret of God', the 'light of the eyes of Mustafa' (thus Seher Abdal, 16th cent.), and his contemporary, Hayreti, calls him, in a beautiful marthiya, 'the sacrifice of the festival of the greater jihad'. Has not his neck, which the Prophet used to kiss, become the place where the dagger fell?

The inhabitants of heaven and earth shed black tears today.

And have become confused like your hair, O Husayn.

Dawn sheds its blood out of sadness for Husayn, and the red tulips wallow in blood and carry the brandmarks of his grief on their hearts ... 6

The Turkish tradition and that in the regional languages of the Indian subcontinent are very similar. Let us have a look at the development of the *marthiya*, not in the major literary languages, but rather in the more remote parts of the subcontinent, for the development of the Urdu *marthiya* from its beginnings in the late 16th century to its culmination in the works of Sauda and particularly Anis and Dabir is well known.

In the province of Sind, which had a considerable percentage of Shi'i inhabitants, Persian *marthiyas* were composed, as far as we can see, from around 1700 onwards. A certain'Allama (1682–1782), and Muhammad Mu'in T'haro are among the first *marthiya-gus* mentioned by the historians, but it is particularly Muhammad Muhsin, who lived in the old, glorious capital of lower Sind, Thatta, with whose

name the Persian marthiya in Sind is connected. During his short life (1709–1750), he composed a great number of *tarji'band* and particularly salam, in which beautiful, strong imagery can be perceived:

The boat of Mustafa's family has been drowned in blood;

The black cloud of infidelity has waylaid the sun;

The candle of the Prophet was extinguished by the breeze of the Kufans.

But much more interesting than the Persian tradition is the development of the *marthiya* in Sindhi and Siraiki proper. As Christopher Shackle has devoted a long and very informative article on the Multani *marthiya*, I will speak here only on some aspects of the *marthiya* in Sindhi. As in many other fields of Sindhi poetry, Shah 'Abdu'l–Latif of Bhit (1689–1752) is the first to express ideas which were later taken up by other poets.

He devoted *Sur Kedaro* in his Hindi *Risalo* to the martyrdom of the grandson of the Prophet, and saw the event of Karbala' as embedded in the whole mystical tradition of Islam. As is his custom, he begins in *media res*, bringing his listeners to the moment when no news was heard from the heroes:

The moon of Muharram was seen, anxiety about the princes occurred.

What has happened?

Muharram has come back, but the Imams have not come.

O princes of Medina, may the Lord bring us together

He meditates about the reason for their silence and senses the tragedy:

The Mirs have gone out from Medina, they have not come back.

But then he realizes that there is basically no reason for sadness or mourning, for:

The hardship of martyrdom, listen, is the day of joy.

Yazid has not got an atom of this love.

Death is rain for the children of 'Ali.

For rain is seen by the Oriental poets in general, and by Shah 'Abdul Latif in particular, as the sign of divine mercy, of *rahmat*, and in a country that is so much dependant on rain, this imagery acquires its full meaning.

The hardship of martyrdom is all joyful rainy season.

Yazid has not got the traces of this love.

The decision to be killed was with the Imams from the very beginning.

This means that, already in pre-eternity, Hasan and Husayn had decided to sacrifice their lives for their ideals: when answering the divine address ***Am I not you Lord?*** **(7:171),** they answered '*Bala*' (=Yes)', and took upon themselves all the affliction (*bala*) which was to come upon them. Their intention to become a model for those who gain eternal life by suffering and sacrifice was made, as Shah'Abdu'l-Latif reminds his listeners, at the very day of the primordial covenant. Then, in the following chapter, our Sindhi poet goes into more concrete details.

The perfect ones, the lion-like sayyids, have come to Karbala';

Having cut with Egyptian swords, they made heaps of carcasses;

Heroes became confused, seeing Mir Husayn's attack.

But he soon turns to the eternal meaning of this battle and continues in good Sufi spirit:

The hardship of martyrdom is all coquetry (*naz*).

The intoxicated understand the secret of the case of Karbala'.

In having his beloved suffer, the divine Beloved seems to show his coquetry, trying and examining their faith and love, and thus even the most cruel manifestations of the battle in which the 'youthful heroes', as Shah Latif calls them, are enmeshed, are signs of divine love.

The earth trembles, shakes; the skies are in uproar;

This is not a war, this is the manifestation of Love.

The poet knows that affliction is a special gift for the friends of God, Those who are afflicted most are the prophets, then the saints, then the others in degrees', and so he continues:

The Friend kills the darlings, the lovers are slain,

For the elect friends He prepares difficulties.

God, the Eternal, without need what He wants, He does.

Shah 'Abdu'l-Latif devotes two chapters to the actual battle, and to Hurr's joining the fighters 'like a moth joins the candle', e.g., ready to immolate himself in the battle. But towards the end of the poem the mystical aspect becomes once more prominent; those who 'fight in the way of God' reach Paradise, and the houris bind rose chains for them, as befits true bridegrooms. But even more:

Paradise is their place, overpowering they have gone to Paradise,

They have become annihilated in God, with Him they have become He ...

The heroes, who have never thought of themselves, but only of love of God which makes them face all difficulties, have finally reached the goal: the *fana fi Allah*, annihilation in God and remaining in Him. Shah 'Abdu'l-Latif has transformed the life of the Imams, and of the Imam Husayn in particular, into a model for all those Sufis who strive, either in *the jihad al-asghar* or in the *jihad al-akbar*, to reach the final annihilation in God, the union which the Sufis so often express in the imagery of love and loving union.

And it is certainly no accident that our Sindhi poet has applied the tune *Husayni*, which was originally meant for the dirges for Husayn, to the story of his favourite heroine, Sassui, who annihilated herself in her constant, brave search for her beloved, and is finally transformed into him.

Shah'Abdu'l-Latif's interpretation of the fate of the Imam Husayn as a model of suffering love, and thus as a model of the mystical path, is a deeply impressive piece of literature. It was never surpassed, although in his succession a number of poets among the Shi'i of Sindh composed elegies on Karbala' .

The most famous of them is Thabit 'Ali Shah (1740-1810), whose specialty was the genre of *suwari*, the poem addressed to the rider Husayn, who once had ridden on the Prophet's back, and then was riding bravely into the battlefield. This genre, as well as the more common forms, persists in Sindhi throughout the whole of the 18th and 19th centuries, and even into our own times (Sachal Sarmast, Bedil Rohriwaro, Mir Hasan, Shah Naser, Mirza Baddhal Beg, Mirza Qalich Beg, to mention only a few, some of whom were Sunni Sufis).

The suwari theme was lovingly elaborated by Sangi, that is the Talpur prince 'Abdu'l-Husayn, to whom Sindhi owes some very fine and touching songs in honour of the prince of martyrs, and who strongly emphasizes the mystical aspects of the event of Karbala', Husayn is here put in relation with the Prophet.

The Prince has made his *miraj* on the ground of Karbala',

The Shah's horse has gained the rank of Buraq.

Death brings the Imam Husayn, who was riding his Dhu'l janah, into the divine presence as much as the winged Buraq brought the Prophet into the immediate divine presence during his night journey and ascent into heaven.

Sangi knows also, as ever so many Shi'i authors before him, that weeping for the sake of the Imam Husayn will be recompensed by laughing in the next world, and that the true meditation of the secret of sacrifice in love can lead the seeker to the divine presence, where, finally, as he says

Duality becomes distant, and then one reaches unity.

The theme of Husayn as the mystical model for all those who want to pursue the path of love looms large in the poetry of the Indus Valley and in the popular poetry of the Indian Muslims, whose thought was permeated by the teaching of the Suf'is, and for whom, as for the Turkish Suf'is and for 'Attar (and innumerable others), the suffering of the Imam Husayn, and that of Hasan b. Mansur, formed a paradigm of the mystic's life.

But there was also another way to understand the role of Husayn in the history of the Islamic people, and importantly, the way was shown by Muhammad Iqbal, who was certainly a Sunni poet and philosopher. We mentioned at the beginning that it was he who saw the history of the Ka'ba defined by the two sacrifices, that of Ismail at the beginning, and that of Husayn b. 'Ali in the end.[7]

But almost two decades before he wrote those lines, he had devoted a long chapter to Husayn in his *Rumuz al-bekhudi* (p. 126ff). Here, Husayn is praised, again in the mystical vocabulary, as the imam of the lovers, the son of the virgin, the cypress of freedom in the Prophet's garden. While his father, Hazrat 'Ali, was, in mystical interpretation, the *b* of the *bismi'llah*, the son became identified with the 'mighty slaughtering', a beautiful mixture of the mystical and Qur'anic interpretations.

But Iqbal, like his predecessors, would also allude to the fact that Husayn, the prince of the best nation, used the back of the last prophet as his riding camel, and most beautiful is Iqbal's description of the jealous love that became honoured through his blood, which, through its imagery, again goes back to the account of the martyrdom of Husayn b. Mansur al-Hallaj, who rubbed the bleeding stumps of his hands over his blackened face in order to remain *surkh ru*, red-faced and honoured, in spite of his suffering.

For Iqbal, the position of Husayn in the Muslim community is as central as the position of the *surat al-ikhlas* in the Holy Book.

Then he turns to his favourite topic, the constant tension between the positive and negative forces, between the prophet and saint on the one hand, and the oppressor and unbeliever on the other. Husayn and Yazid stand in the same line as Moses and Pharaoh.

Iqbal then goes on to show how the *khilafat* was separated from the Qur'anic injunctions and became a worldly kingdom with the appearance of the Umayyads, and it was here that Husayn appeared like a raincloud, again the image of the blessing rain which always contrasts so impressively with the thirst and dryness of the actual scene of Karbala'. It was Husayn's blood that rained upon the desert of Karbala' and left the red tulips there.

The connection between the tulips in their red garments and the bloodstained garments of the martyrs has been a favourite image of Persian poetry since at least the 15th century, and when one thinks of the central place which the tulip occupies in Iqbal's thought and poetry as the flower of the manifestation of the divine fire, as the symbol of the Burning Bush on Mount Sinai, and as the flower that symbolizes the

independent growth of man's *khudi* (=self) under the most difficult circumstances, when one takes all these aspects of the tulip together, one understands why the poet has the Imam Husayn 'plant tulips in the desert of Karbala".

Perhaps the similarity of the sound of *la ilah* and *lala* (=tulip), as well as the fact that *lala* has the same numerical value as the word *Allah*, e.g., 66, may have enhanced Iqbal's use of the image in connection with the Imam Husayn, whose blood 'created the meadow', and who constructed a building of 'there is no deity but God.'

But whereas earlier mystical poets used to emphasize the person of Husayn as model for the mystic who through self-sacrifice, finally reaches union with God, Iqbal, understandably, stresses another point: 'To lift the sword is the work of those who fight for the glory of religion, and to preserve the God-given order.' 'Husayn blood, as it were, wrote the commentary on these words, and thus awakened a sleeping nation.'

Again, the parallel with Husayn b. Mansur is evident (at least with Husayn b. Mansur in the way Iqbal interprets him: he too claims, in the *Falak al-mushtari* in the *Javidnama*, that he had come to bring resurrection to the spiritually dead, and had therefore to suffer).

But when Husayn b. 'Ali drew the sword, the sword of Allah, he shed the blood of those who are occupied with, and interested in, things other than God; graphically, the word *la*, the beginning of the *shahada*, resembles the form of a sword (preferably a two-edged sword, like Dhu'l-fiqar), and this sword does away with everything that is an object of worship besides God.

It is the prophetic 'No' to anything that might be seen beside the Lord. By using the sword of 'No', Husayn, by his martyrdom, wrote the letters 'but God' (*illa Allah*) in the desert, and thus wrote the title of the script by which the Muslims find salvation.

It is from Husayn, says Iqbal, that we have learned the mysteries of the Qur'an, and when the glory of Syria and Baghdad and the marvels of Granada may be forgotten, yet, the strings of the instrument of the Muslims still resound with Husayn's melody, and faith remains fresh thanks to his call to prayer.

Husayn thus incorporates all the ideals which a true Muslim should possess, as Iqbal draws his picture: bravery and manliness, and, more than anything else, the dedication to the acknowledgement of God's absolute Unity; not in the sense of becoming united with Him in *fana* as the Sufi poets had sung, but, rather, as the herald who by his *shahada*, by his martyrdom, is not only a *shahid*, a martyr, but at the same time a witness, a shahid, for the unity of God, and thus the model for all generations of Muslims.

It is true, as Iqbal states, that the strings of the Muslims' instruments still resound with his name, and we may close with the last verse of the chapter devoted to him in the *Rumuz al-bekhudi*:

O zephir, O messenger of those who are far away

Bring our tears to his pure dust.

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1. Divan, p. 655.
2. Divan 485.
3. nr. 376.
4. Yunus Emre Divani, p. 569.
5. Divan, p. 569.
6. Ergun, Bektasi sairleri, p. 95.
7. Bal al-Jibril, p. 92.

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