

The Construction

The *marthiya* 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 *marthiyas* dealing with the death of a hero on the plains of Karbala¹, follows a more or less standardized pattern which resembles the ebb and flow of a tide. In *marthiyas* 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 *marthiya*. In this part the hero is introduced.

The second part is the rising action that 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 grievous 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 war craft. 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 it 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 *mussadas* 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 *marthiya* as the discovery of blank verse for the flourishing of Elizabethan drama.

The language is assiduously cultured 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 *marthiya* with ease and grace without undergoing any apparent change or looking like going out of date.

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