

Religion with a Human Face

Marthiya 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 reverence, 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 aggressiveness 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 Karbala' give him an insight into the mystery of human life, its beauty and its justification.

The characters on the side of the Imam Husayn are different shapes of human excellence, full of compassion and grace and the milk of human kindness, the very soul of loyalty 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 subtly individualized; `Abbas, the soul of chivalry, the hope and support of all, the protector of women's honour and children's smiles, power pledged to truth, like his father `Ali; `Ali 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; Qasim, mild and retiring and loveable; the two sons of Zaynab restless with the adolescent dreams and ambitions to rise to the stature of their forefathers 'Ali and Ja'far; `Ali Asghar representing humanity in its most tender and innocent condition; Hurr, 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 Husayn, the man, in whom all the qualities of power and beauty, of firmness and gentleness mixed in balanced perfection.

The enemies are all painted black with little differentiation, except that Yazid is a drunken tyrant; Ibn Ziyad, his relentless tool; `Umar Sa'd 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 *marthiya* may justly be called the poetry of the beauty and sanctity of human relationships.

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