As performers of classical Urdu maršiya poetry, Shī‘a women in India and Pakistan proclaim a set of social, religious and literary values, reinforcing and reshaping the status of the maršiya genre. The maršiya, a form that usually details the seventh-century C.E. martyrdom of the Prophet of Islam’s grandson, Imām Ḥusain, has a reputation for being more complex and more erudite than other genres of the Shī‘a Muslim mourning assembly, the majlis (pl. majālis). As authors of poetic texts, a small number of female maršiya writers engage unusually assertively with the tragedy of Karbala and with the legacy of the most famous maršiya poets. This paper briefly sketches the lives and work of three twentieth-century female maršiya poets who manifest a thoughtful and proud identification with a great classical tradition of Urdu poetry.

Today, poetic genres about Ḥusain’s tragedy—sāz, salām, maršiya and nauha—usually frame a religious sermon delivered by a žākira in women’s majalis. Although maršiya in India dates from the fifteenth century, the form is commonly said to have achieved its culmination in Lucknow, with the lengthy narrative works of the male poets Mir Babbar ‘Alī Anīs (d. 1874) and Salāmat ‘Alī Dabīr (d. 1879). Nineteenth-century maršiyas still enjoy popularity today and are performed in a range of styles: chanted, spoken and augmented with dramatic gestures, or rendered melodically. The same classical text may be recited in different ways by different reciters in different places.

The very small number of female maršiya poets who exist appear to emerge from literary Shī‘a families, and of necessity, from environments with long and passionate traditions of maršiya performance and apprecia-
tion by women. While the works of female poets have not earned widespread fame, they have certainly been valued in the circles of their families and friends, who usually share their quite high level of literary education. These female poets stress the pride of familial, classical poetic, and Shi’a Imāmate lineage in their poetry in ways that can augment our picture of the Urdu marjiya tradition as a whole.

In this brief piece, rather than attempt to dissect minute samplings from very lengthy marjiya poems, I will focus largely on the emergence of three female poets and the reception of their works. A summary of the Shi’a Muslim Muḥarram observances that provide the context for recitation of marjiyas, however, is a necessary prelude to any discussion of the poets Bēgam Mukhtar Fātima Zaidī, Bēgam Shuhrat, and Tāsīr Fātima.

The Shi’a hold gender-segregated mourning assemblies throughout the year to commemorate the deaths of the Imāms and the members of the Prophet’s immediate family, but the major majlis season starts with the beginning of the first Muslim month, Muḥarram, and continues for about sixty-eight days. The core event remembered through these ritual activities is the battle in which Imām Ḥusain and his male followers were slain by the forces of Yazid, the Umayyad Caliph, in Karbala (680 C.E.).

Certain dimensions of the Karbala narrative, its rituals, and beliefs about its origins lend women’s mourning assemblies a particular and powerful sense of continuity. After Ḥusain’s death, the Imām’s enemies cruelly unveiled his female relatives, led them on a forced march to Damascus, and imprisoned them, but these heroines of the marjiya kept alive the memory of Ḥusain’s sacrifice. Ḥaẓrat Zainab, Ḥusain’s sister, is credited with the very founding of the mourning assembly that evokes Karbala and its lessons of sacrifice. Many believers say Zainab and Muḥammad’s daughter Fātima are present in today’s mourning assemblies, acknowledging the virtuous grief and devotion of the pious. The various genres of majlis poetry, as well as the majlis sermon, feature sections on the masā’il, the torments of Imām Ḥusain and his family, which stimulate weeping, wailing, and sobbing on the parts of both listeners and performers.

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Of the three marjiya women poets discussed here, Bēgam Fāṭima Zaidi resided in the area closest to the Lucknow center of classical marjiya. Born in Panipat in 1900, she hailed from a respected family of Shi‘a ulema and literary figures. She was a great-granddaughter of Urdu critic and poet Maulānā [Alī Ḥusain] Ḥali; her aunt, Ḥali’s granddaughter, Shāli‘a ‘Abid Ḥusain, produced works of literary commentary and criticism, and played a prominent role in organizing Shi‘a women’s majāls in the Delhi enclave of Okhla. Although Fāṭima was never enrolled in school, she benefited from a cultivated atmosphere both in her natal family and after she married. Her admirers find her marjiyas especially remarkable because she lacked any sort of regular mentoring by a poetry teacher, an ustād.

Bēgam Zaidi only started producing poems in any number once she moved to Aligarh after the death of her husband. At this point, at about thirty-five years of age, she had five young daughters. Known for her unswerving piety under difficult circumstances, she began writing religious poems of various sorts, as well as commemorative poems for family events. A collection of her poetry, Čamanistān-e ‘Aqidat, contains na‘ts, manqabats, salāms and rubā‘īs, as well as marjiyas. It was largely her popularity as a reciter of the marjiyas of Mir Anis that led Bēgam Zaidi to start composing marjiyas herself. She recited in the dramatic, declamatory tahtu ‘l-lafz style that is now far more common among men than among women, a tradition that her daughters Zāhida and Sājida maintain to some extent. They say, however, that although their mother’s recitation style is their model, it is quite impossible to equal the piety that added indescribable intensity to Bēgam Zaidi’s renderings.

In March 1999, I recorded Sājida Zaidi’s recitation in tahtu ‘l-lafz of this two-verse sample from a 107-verse marjiya by Fāṭima, along with a number of other verses from the poem’s various sections. This marjiya depicts the horrific scene of battlefield slaughter and enemy jubilation that greeted Imām Ḥusain’s survivors immediately after his death.

The Saiyid’s corpse on the burning sand, hā’e, hā’e, hā’ē.
They’ve wounded his entire body, hā’e,
    hā’e, hā’ē.
How can such regret and trouble be borne? hā’e, hā’e, hā’ē.

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The arms of the Prophet’s family, and
bonds, ḥaṭṭ, ḥaṭṭ, ḥaṭṭ.
Sajjād’s neck heavily chained, alas!
A plaint higher than the heavens, alas!

The corpses of the martyrs were
shroudless in the wasteland:
Akbar’s flower-like body, wounded
with daggers
The silver-bodied ‘Aun and
Muḥammad, unburied
‘Abbās, and Qāsim, son of Ḥasan
The flowers of the Prophet’s garden,
scattered over the battlefield
All these, the comforts of Fāṭima’s soul,
ransomed.3

As it would require an hour or more to recite a full-length classical-style marṣiyya, reciters select particular verses from a complete marṣiyya depending on the particular martyr being honored, their own favorite segments, the tune they select if not reciting in taḥtu ’l-lafz, their audience’s attention span, and time pressures. Typically, women recite somewhere between eight and twenty-five verses of a marṣiyya in a majlis.

Bēgam Zaidī is remembered to have recited her own poetic works in a relatively soft-spoken, unornamented way, while she was best known for dramatically reciting Anīs’s poems, especially verses describing the morning of the battle, the departure for the battlefield, the praise of the sword, and the martyrdom of each hero. The woman poet’s descendants, however, stress the idea that the appeal of her own marṣiyyas emerges in recitation far more than on the printed page. They give the example of a male passerby who once heard Bēgam Zaidī reciting one of her marṣiyyas in a majlis, and mistook it for the work of Anīs. While not venturing to compare her work to that of Anīs in sophistication, her daughters noted that since he was the single marṣiyya poet she viewed as a worthy model, there is something of his stamp on her work.

Our second woman poet, Bēgam Shuhrat of Hyderabad Deccan, was roughly a generation younger than Fāṭima Zaidī. Today, Bēgam Shuhrat’s

3Ibid., pp. 58–9.
family maintains its own distinctive *majlis* customs in the Īrānī Gali and Purānī Ḥavēlī areas of the old city of Hyderabad. The family often invokes its links to a Ḥaidarābādī poetic tradition characterized by a singular “simplicity” and reverence for the message, rather than the form, of the *marṣiyya* text. Several of Shuhrat’s relatives contrast this quality of humility with what they typify as Lakñnāvi poetic flamboyance and a tendency of Lucknow reciters and writers to promote themselves rather than the loftiness of Ḥusain’s sacrifice. Still, *marṣiyyat* produced in Hyderabad since the mid-nineteenth century have almost invariably adopted conventions in poetic meter and verse form that the Lucknow poets Anīs and Dābir popularized.

Shuhrat’s poems nonetheless emerged in an environment that stressed predominantly Persian lineage, regional links to the oldest Urdu *marṣiyya* tradition in South Asia, and pride in a Ḥaidarābādī recitation style that renders the text more clearly than the melismatic Lucknow style. Her background, not surprisingly, resembles that of Bēgam Zaidī, and indeed that of most female *marṣiyya* poets, in some notable respects. The most prominent literary figure among Bēgam Shuhrat’s ancestors was Ashar, a Ḥaidarābādī *marṣiyya* poet; Shuhrat’s sister Riyāzat also wrote *marṣiyyas*, and Shuhrat’s daughter Riyāz Fājima is a literary scholar who specializes in *marṣiya*. Like Bēgam Zaidī, Shuhrat had a reputation for remarkable piety, and maintained a tradition of declamatory *taḥtu l-lafẓ* recitation that her daughters try to uphold.

Shuhrat’s *marṣiyyas*, like Fājima Zaidī’s, employ the form and traditional meters adopted in nineteenth-century Lucknow, but listeners can compare her *marṣiyyas* with a wider range of standards than Bēgam Zaidī’s readers would tend to use when evaluating her poems. This is because while Mīr Anīs is as much of a model poet in Hyderabad as in Lucknow, local poets such as Ashar and ʿAlī Ja’far also enjoy great favor in Hyderabad. Ḥaidarābādī *marṣiya* aficionados compare and contrast these local luminaries with Anīs as a matter of course.

Shuhrat’s *marṣiya* about the child Sakīna portrays the young girl’s interactions with her female relatives in prison before she dies, and above all elaborates the intense love between Sakīna and her father, Imām Ḥusain. In this case, *majlis* tradition at the most local level affected Shuhrat’s choice of *marṣiya* subject: Shuhrat’s family has long sponsored a

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4Saiyid Murtaḍā Mūsavī, personal communication, 3 June 1998; Riyāz Fājima, 24 May and 3 June 1998.
cherished three-day series of majlis from the nineteenth to the twenty-first of Muḥarram to commemorate Sakina’s death, and some of their favorite marājiya among the works of major male poets also center on Sakina’s sufferings. This marājiya, ʿAllah Kyā Muhīb Yatīmti ki Rāt Hai, enjoys sufficient popularity to be recited a number of times during the Muḥarram season, and reciters therefore use at least four different tunes to vary it. As with any marājiya, reciters also vary the number and type of verses they select from the poem from majlis to majlis. The selection below is only a fragment of the marājiya, but since Shuhrat’s marājiyas are much shorter than Bēgam Zaidi’s or those of most classical poets, the tone and mood of the extract are more representative of the entire poem than is the case when a short sample is extracted from a lengthier, more variegated marājiya.

“Father, the world is desolate without you
In my eyes, the whole universe is desolate
Settlements, desolate; the breadth of the desert, desolate
Death is better; the whole framework of life is desolate
Call to you the one who cries day and night, Father dear
Call to you the one who sleeps on your breast, Father dear”
When she said this, beating her own head and weeping loudly
The head of ʿUsain appeared upon the prison wall
He called to Sakina, “Oh, light of my eyes,
My heart is not at peace, even after death
I have neither comfort in the day, nor relief at night
Daughter, it’s for your sake that I’m so distressed”

This most popular of Shuhrat’s *marjiyas* shares more than verse form and meter with nineteenth-century Lucknow *marjiyas*. At least four or five well-known classical *marjiyas* include this poem’s key scene, in which Imām Husain’s decapitated head appears to his daughter Sakīna in prison when she is so miserable in her orphaned state.6 One can compare this episode in Shuhrat’s *marjiya* with a very similar scene in a *marjiya* by Anis,7 and get an indication of how standard the diction and phrasing of a stock incident are in the work of virtually any *marjiya* poet. Poets and listeners have such familiarity with this tableau that the very similarity of *marjiyas* poets’ descriptions seems to spur listeners to remember the hundreds of other times they have pictured the weeping girl in jail, and wept themselves. Where the cumulative impact of listeners’ intimacy with tragic episodes is so powerful, and the stylistic impact of Anis and Dabir so enormous, it’s not surprising that virtually all poets who compose in the genre would have some verses that sound very similar.

The *marjiyas* of Shuhrat and Bēgam Zaidī circulated for years orally and in manuscript form in family circles before being published. In both cases, these *marjiya*-writers’ daughters, now in their 40s or 60s, have played an important role in sustaining the poets’ works through manuscript collection and editing, the publication of *marjiyas* in simple books, and their own recitations. Their endeavors in the cause of family literary legacies differ little from those of some of Anis’s descendants still in Lucknow except for the limited encouragement and recognition they get, which situation probably holds true in the case of any minor Urdu poet.

The Karachi woman poet Taṣvīr Fāsimah, a generation younger than Shuhrat’s daughters, and two generations younger than Fāsimah Zaidī’s, has taken a different route to poetic production than her predecessors, and has a distinctive attitude about writing and recitation.8 Taṣvīr Fāsimah takes the view that her lonely state as a female *marjiya* poet is due in part to the fact that, “*Marjiya* is a difficult and lengthy form of expression, the

6One of these *marjiyas* is actually entitled *Jab Khāna-e Zindān mēn Shāh-e Dīn ka Sar Ājā* (when the head of the King of Faith came to the jail-house). I am unsure who authored it.

7For example, the *marjiya* *Jab Qā‘idon kō Khāna-e Zindān mēn Shāb Hu‘ī*, in Naiyār Maśūd, ed., *Bazm-e Anis* (Lahore: Packager, Ltd., 1990), p. 497.

8This paper has largely emerged from an ongoing and sporadic conversation between myself and Taṣvīr Fāsimah, carried on partly in person, but mostly through pieces we have written about women and the *marjiya*. 
burden of which the delicate constitution of the weaker sex cannot bear.”

Although many Shi’as of both sexes often expressed to me the belief that only an unusually accomplished woman could ever become a marja’iyya poet, few actually attributed the scarcity of female poets to innate female delicacy or inadequacy.

Tašvîr Fâţima finds herself in the predicament of being a writer who cannot recite her poems in the forum where she insists they might be properly appreciated, the men’s mourning assembly or majlis. As a woman, she can only read her poems in gender-segregated women’s majâlis wherein, she says, her listeners generally lack the poetic sensitivity or training to even really follow her verse. “A marja’iyya’s virtues and flaws,” she writes, “only appear to public notice when it is recited in a majlis,” but although women give speeches in political contexts or on TV, “in view of the seriousness and sanctity of a mourning assembly’s environment,” Tašvîr Fâţima cannot recite before male majlis listeners. Conveniently, she has a male utṣâd, Sibg-e Ḥasan Anjum, who first encouraged her to try her hand at marja’iyyas and who reads her marja’iyyas before male audiences. Given her continual assumption that the only cultured listeners are men, this arrangement has the double benefits of exhibiting her work beyond the women’s majâlis and of lending it the validation of a known poet.

Tašvîr Fâţima’s published marja’iyyas also have a glossier look than Shuhrat’s and Fâţima Zaidî’s volumes. Shuhrat’s marja’iyyas, issued in pamphlet form from a minor Ḥaidârabâdî press, are prefaced by a simple religious-minded introduction, while Bêgam Zaidî’s hardcover volume has a longer, more literary preface by Muṣṭafâ Ḥusain Rîzvî that lays considerable emphasis on how very unusual it is to come across a female marja’iyya poet. Tašvîr Fâţima’s books each include a rather long series of endorsements and encouragements to the young writer from well-known poets and literary figures. Some of these statements extol her as today’s “voice of womanhood,” or even “Urdu’s first female marja’iyya poet.”

Besides the attention Tašvîr Fâţima receives simply for being a woman

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10Ibid.
12Ṭâbîsh Dehlavî, in ibid., p. 25.
who writes marjiyas, the notable difference between her poetry’s presentation and that of Shuhrat’s and Bégam Zaidi’s works lies in the label “modern (jadid) marjiya.” One reviewer comments that Taṣvir Faṭima is a link in the chain of poets such as Jösh and Jamil Mažharı, who reshaped the classical marjiya by introducing to it “modern expression” and imbuing it with “philosophy” and a “universal character.”

Although it is difficult to determine what these approving catchphrases actually signify, since the reviewer fails to provide examples of “modern expression,” “philosophy,” or “universal character,” one notices that Taṣvir Faṭima’s marjiyas conspicuously dwell on ideal qualities such as “insight” or “leadership.” Classical poets of both great and middling literary stature frequently linger over heart-wrenching details of the Karbala tragedy to allude to moral lessons. Taṣvir Faṭima’s poems, though, tend to question and define what leadership or insight is, and then illustrate the concepts through events from the well-known Karbala cycle. In her marjiya about Sajjād (Huṣain’s only surviving son and the fourth Shi’a Imām), for example, she uses plot-driven scenes very sparingly. In these scenes, Sajjād receives miraculous blessings and guidance when the severed head of Huṣain speaks to him, mourns over his sister Sakīna’s grave in the Syrian prison, and then is finally released from captivity. Such “incidents” often dominate recited versions of marjiya in women’s majālis, but the bulk of Taṣvir’s seventy-five verse poem instead builds a portrait of leadership, in general and in the Shi’a tradition of the Imamāte, using Sajjād as an example. The marjiya’s first line—the title by which a poem is recognized—is “Rahbarµ τauq-o-salāsil mēn safar kartµ hai” (“leadership makes its journey in shackles and chains”).

In addition to shifting the marjiya’s thematic emphasis, Taṣvir Faṭima makes slight cosmetic changes to the musaddas (six-line) verse form and rhyme scheme that Faṭima Zaidi and Shuhrat employ quite traditionally. Despite these alterations, and Taṣvir Faṭima’s unusual mode of entry to the marjiya scene, the emphasis critics place on her family background has a familiar ring. Adib Suhīl tells us that as the granddaughter of (marjiya poet) Jamil Mažhari, “it was in an atmosphere full of poetry and marjiya recitation that Taṣvir first opened her eyes.”

Because of her family environment and traditions, then, Taṣvir Faṭima possesses what are considered appropriate qualifications for appreciating good poetry and for writing

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13Adib Suhīl, in ibid., p. 28.
maršiýas. She, like Bēgam Zaidī, also experienced family tragedy at a young age. Ra'īnā Iqbāl comments that perhaps Taşvīr Fāţīma’s loss of her parents colors her maršiýa, adding that “When something is written under the influence of sorrow, it’s definitely effective. Since Taşvīr was cut off at a very early age from her father’s and mother’s love, she has a long-standing acquaintance with grief.”

Even these short sketches reveal a basic pattern of qualities that majlis-goers and other observers attribute to female maršiýa poets, to their poems, and finally, to female audiences. Traits of piety, endurance of hardship, and humility figure prominently in descriptions of female maršiýa poets. These qualities, also exemplified, of course, by the very heroes and heroines of the maršiýa, are not entirely absent in oral and written anecdotes about famous male maršiýa-writers, but they are hardly stressed as much. Tales of poetic competition, wondrously prolific production of maršiýas, and dramatic costumes and performances flesh out traditions about the male poets in a way that has no counterpart among female maršiýa-writers.

Whether male or female, maršiýa poets are likely to emerge from religious family backgrounds and poetic lineages. Maršiýa aficionados tend to view family traditions of poetry preservation and the circulation of manuscripts as bequests, dowries, and gifts as advantages for any aspiring poet, but such customs seem especially useful for the informal training of female poets, who usually lack formal mentor relationships with senior poets.

What do literary commentators say about maršiýas written by women? Since there are so few female poets, opportunities to gauge the reception of their poetry are limited. Generally, those who have commented laud the fact that women compose religious poetry at all. Although women’s maršiýa poetry is often substantively very similar to that of male poets, these critics often ascribe certain “feminine” qualities to the poetry written by women. While Muṣṭafā Ḥusain Rizví pronounces Bēgam Fāţīma Zaidī’s poetic works to be of a “standard,” and firmly affiliated with the tradition of classical maršiýas, he also especially praises the “flow,

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15In Taşvīr Fāţīma, Rīdā’-e Šabr, p. 23.
16I can supplement these three sketches with similar ones concerning the few other female maršiýa poets I have been able to identify, and with extensive fieldwork in the majlis setting.
sweetness, and rectitude” of her marjiyas. Similarly, Taṣvīr Fāṭima, whom critics appreciate on some level for her “modern,” seemingly political, poetic bent, also earns praise for the “thematic appeal, the soft tone of dialogues and descriptions, the beauty of metaphors and similies,” in her marsiyas. This is not to say that critics might not ever praise such qualities in the marsiyas of male poets, but to point up how this trend in commentary compounds the marked absence of terms such as “epic scope,” “tragic sense,” or “revolutionary sensibility,” when female poets are under discussion. Those phrases are tediously common in assessments of even unremarkable male poets.

Literary critics, as well as male and female majlis-goers, frequently invoke the notion that the whole corpus of marjiyas popular in the women’s majlis are degraded versions of the great classical marjiya tradition. In actuality, however, the women’s majlis defy the stereotype that marjiya texts written or recited by Urdu-speaking women diverge from the classical tradition more than any other set of performed marsiyas.

To understand the extent to which this stereotype is erroneous, not only must we compare poets’ works with one another in performance as well as on the page, but we must fully appreciate how the same text undergoes one transformation when it moves from the page to the declamatory format of the solo reciter’s pulpit, and another when selections from it are chanted by a group. Many reciters today would, in performance, truncate Mr Anīs’s marjiyas to about twenty-five verses, making the poems, in effect, the same length as those published by Bēgām Shuhrat. Moreover, those selected verses of Anīs would likely be characterized by the sorts of action scenes, dialogues between characters, exhortations to listeners, and lament so dominant in Shuhrat’s marsiyas. That is, quite often reciters would excise in performance the stylized scenery, elaborate imagery, or complex metaphors that feature in Anīs’s marsiyas and distinguish them so plainly from those of a poet such as Bēgām Shuhrat when presented in printed form.

Taṣvīr Fāṭima might well dismiss this notion of female performers and audiences collaborating with a malleable marjiya text to create a performance at once unique and consistent with classical models. Although the marsiyas of Bēgāms Shuhrat and Fāṭima Zaidī have been kept alive within small family majlis, whatever their critical reception, Taṣvīr Fāṭima insists

17In Bēgām Fāṭima Zaidī, Čamanistān-e ʿAqidat, p. “kh.”
that the gender segregation of the majlis, although culturally appropriate, actually distances women from quality literary interaction. Most women, are, in her words, “completely deficient in understanding how the marjiya should be performed on the pulpit, in adhering to the norms of listening, and in appreciating vocal inflections and modulations.” “There’s a whole crowd present,” she adds, “but one completely unacquainted with poetic taste.”

Certainly, the popular idea of women as poetically unsophisticated, which she shares with many Shµ’a men and women, has something to do with the limited number of women who even attempt to write marjiyas.

Although there are just a handful of female marjiya poets, their emergence is suggestive of the status of marjiya in contemporary Shi’a cultural life. Today, there are still neighborhoods in Lucknow and Hyderabad where many people not only know marvelously long selections of classical marjiya by heart, but also relate stories about marjiya poets and marjiya competitions as though nineteenth-century marjiya poets still lived in the locality. For many Urdu genres, this sort of supplementary oral culture, which probably helped Bégams Zaidµ and Shuhrat become poets without any structured ustād-shāgird relationship, has disappeared. One wonders what kind of precedent these women poets set for a world in which virtually no young Urdu poet has an ustād in the traditional sense.

TaΩvµr Fâṭima, representing the new generation, is a young poetess in a world where the marjiya’s role in the majlis is less and less central, where the youngest generation of reciters in Lucknow read out their majlis poems from books in devanagarµ or romanized transliteration because they don’t know the Urdu script, and where she feels she must circumvent gender barriers to get her poetry to a broad audience. Even so, TaΩvµr Fâṭima, the “modern marjiya poet,” pointedly invokes family and classical poetic lineage in her verse. The following invocatory sample from her most recent collection serves as a final illustration of the enduring authority of the classical tradition.

Why shouldn’t TaΩvµr be suited to this
eloquent form of expression?
After all, I’m proud to say, my
grandfather is Mażhari

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It’s due to this lineage that I’ve acquired
the taste for marjiya
His marjis provided guidance at every
step
And it is my particular prayer to the
Almighty
That continuity not be broken with the
school of Anis and Dabir20

20 Ῥᾶḏāʾ-े Șabr, p. 35.