

STUDENT PAPER

Value and Vitality in a Literary Tradition:
Female Poets and the Urdu *Marsiya*

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As performers of classical Urdu *marṣiya* poetry, Shī'a women in India and Pakistan proclaim a set of social, religious and literary values, reinforcing and reshaping the status of the *marṣiya* genre. The *marṣiya*, 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 *marṣiya* writers engage unusually assertively with the tragedy of Karbala and with the legacy of the most famous *marṣiya* poets. This paper briefly sketches the lives and work of three twentieth-century female *marṣiya* poets who manifest a thoughtful and proud identification with a great classical tradition of Urdu poetry.

Today, poetic genres about Ḥusain's tragedy—*sōz*, *salām*, *marṣiya* and *nauḥa*—usually frame a religious sermon delivered by a *zākira* in women's *majālis*. Although *marṣiya* 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 Mīr Babbar 'Alī Anīs (d. 1874) and Salāmat 'Alī Dabīr (d. 1875). Nineteenth-century *marṣiyas* 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 *marṣiya* poets who exist appear to emerge from literary Shī'a families, and of necessity, from environments with long and passionate traditions of *marṣiya* 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 *marṣiya* tradition as a whole.

In this brief piece, rather than attempt to dissect minute samplings from very lengthy *marṣiya* 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 *marṣiyas*, however, is a necessary prelude to any discussion of the poets Bēgam Mukhtār Fāṭīma Zaidī, Bēgam Shuhrat, and Taṣvīr Fāṭīma.

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 Yazīd, 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 *marṣiya* kept alive the memory of Ḥusain's sacrifice. Ḥazrat 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 Fāṭīma are present in today's mourning assemblies, acknowledging the virtuous grief and devotion of the pious.¹ The various genres of *majlis* poetry, as well as the *majlis* sermon, feature sections on the *masā'ib*, the torments of Imām Ḥusain and his family, which stimulate weeping, wailing, and sobbing on the parts of both listeners and performers.

¹In addition to my consultants, Shi'as interviewed by Vernon Schubel and David Pinault also cited this belief. See Vernon Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam: Shi'i Devotional Rituals in South Asia* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), p. 50, and David Pinault, *The Shiites* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 19.

Of the three *marṣiya* women poets discussed here, Bēgam Fāṭima Zaidī resided in the area closest to the Lucknow center of classical *marṣiya*. 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 [Alṭāf Ḥusain] Ḥalī; her aunt, Ḥalī's granddaughter, Ṣāliḥa 'Abid Ḥusain, produced works of literary commentary and criticism, and played a prominent role in organizing Shi'a women's *majālis* in the Delhi enclave of Okhla. Although Fāṭima was never enrolled in school, she benefitted from a cultivated atmosphere both in her natal family and after she married. Her admirers find her *marṣiyas* especially remarkable because she lacked any sort of regular mentoring by a poetry teacher, an *ustād*.

Bēgam Zaidī 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, *Āmanistān-e 'Aqīdat*,² contains *na'is*, *manqabats*, *salāms* and *rubā'īs*, as well as *marṣiyas*. It was largely her popularity as a reciter of the *marṣiyas* of Mīr Anīs that led Bēgam Zaidī to start composing *marṣiyas* herself. She recited in the dramatic, declamatory *taḥtu 'l-lafẓ* 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 Zaidī's renderings.

In March 1999, I recorded Sājida Zaidī's recitation in *taḥtu 'l-lafẓ* of this two-verse sample from a 107-verse *marṣiya* by Fāṭima, along with a number of other verses from the poem's various sections. This *marṣiya* 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'ē, hā'ē, hā'ē*.
They've wounded his entire body, *hā'ē,*
hā'ē, hā'ē.
How can such regret and trouble be
borne? *hā'ē, hā'ē, hā'ē*.

²Lucknow: Aḥbāb Publishers, 1965.

The arms of the Prophet's family, and
 bonds, *hā'ē, hā'ē, hā'ē!*
 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 Qāsīm, 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 *marṣiya*, reciters select particular verses from a complete *marṣiya* depending on the particular martyr being honored, their own favorite segments, the tune they select if *not* reciting in *taḥtu 'l-laḥz*, their audience's attention span, and time pressures. Typically, women recite somewhere between eight and twenty-five verses of a *marṣiya* 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 *marṣiyas* emerges in recitation far more than on the printed page. They give the example of a male passersby who once heard Bēgam Zaidī reciting one of her *marṣiyas* 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 *marṣiya* 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

³*Ibid.*, pp. 58–9.

family maintains its own distinctive *majlis* customs in the Īrānī Galī 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 *marṣiya* text. Several of Shuhrat’s relatives contrast this quality of humility with what they typify as Lakḥnavī poetic flamboyance and a tendency of Lucknow reciters and writers to promote themselves rather than the loftiness of Ḥusain’s sacrifice.⁴ Still, *marṣiyas* 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 Dabīr popularized.

Shuhrat’s poems nonetheless emerged in an environment that stressed predominantly Persian lineage, regional links to the oldest Urdu *marṣiya* 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 *marṣiya* poets, in some notable respects. The most prominent literary figure among Bēgam Shuhrat’s ancestors was Ashar, a Ḥaidarābādī *marṣiya* poet; Shuhrat’s sister Riyāzāt also wrote *marṣiyas*, and Shuhrat’s daughter Riyāz Fāṭima 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 *marṣiyas*, like Fāṭima Zaidī’s, employ the form and traditional meters adopted in nineteenth-century Lucknow, but listeners can compare her *marṣiyas* 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 ‘Alī 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

⁴Saiyid Murtaẓā Mūsavī, personal communication, 3 June 1998; Riyāz Fāṭima, 24 May and 3 June 1998.

cherished three-day series of *majālis* from the nineteenth to the twenty-first of Muḥarram to commemorate Sakīna's death, and some of their favorite *marṣiyas* among the works of major male poets also center on Sakīna's sufferings. This *marṣiya*, *Allāh Kyā Mubīb Yatīmī kī 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 *marṣiya*, 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 *marṣiya*, but since Shuhrat's *marṣiyas* are much shorter than Bēgam Zaidī'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 *marṣiya*.

“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 Ḥusain appeared upon the
 prison wall
 He called to Sakīna, “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”⁵

⁵Bēgam Shuhrat, *Hasht Marāṣī-e Shuhrat* (Hyderabad: Bābu 'l-'Ilm Society, 1975), pp. 30–1. Translation: Amy Bard.

This most popular of Shuhrat's *marṣiyas* shares more than verse form and meter with nineteenth-century Lucknow *marṣiyas*. At least four or five well-known classical *marṣiyas* include this poem's key scene, in which Imām Ḥusain'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 *marṣiya* with a very similar scene in a *marṣiya* by Anīs,⁷ and get an indication of how standard the diction and phrasing of a stock incident are in the work of virtually any *marṣiya* poet. Poets and listeners have such familiarity with this tableau that the very similarity of *marṣiya* 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 Anīs and Dabīr so enormous, it's not surprising that virtually all poets who compose in the genre would have some verses that sound very similar.

The *marṣiyas* of Shuhrat and Bēgam Zaidī circulated for years orally and in manuscript form in family circles before being published. In both cases, these *marṣiya*-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 *marṣiyas* in simple books, and their own recitations. Their endeavors in the cause of family literary legacies differ little from those of some of Anīs'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 Fāṭīma, a generation younger than Shuhrat's daughters, and two generations younger than Fāṭīma Zaidī's, has taken a different route to poetic production than her predecessors, and has a distinctive attitude about writing and recitation.⁸ Taṣvīr Fāṭīma takes the view that her lonely state as a female *marṣiya* poet is due in part to the fact that, "*Marṣiya* is a difficult and lengthy form of expression, the

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

⁷For example, the *marṣiya Jab Qā'idōn kō Khāna-e Zindān mēn Shāb Hu'ī*, in Naiyar Mas'ūd, ed., *Bazm-e Anīs*, (Lahore: Packager, Ltd., 1990), p. 497.

⁸This paper has largely emerged from an ongoing and sporadic conversation between myself and Taṣvīr Fāṭīmah, carried on partly in person, but mostly through pieces we have written about women and the *marṣiya*.

burden of which the delicate constitution of the weaker sex cannot bear.”⁹ Although many Shi‘as of both sexes often expressed to me the belief that only an unusually accomplished woman could ever become a *marṣiya* poet, few actually attributed the scarcity of female poets to innate female delicacy or inadequacy.

Taṣvīr Fāṭīma 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 *majālis* wherein, she says, her listeners generally lack the poetic sensitivity or training to even really follow her verse. “A *marṣiya*’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,” Taṣvīr Fāṭīma cannot recite before male *majlis* listeners.¹⁰ Conveniently, she has a male *ustād*, Sibṭ-e Ḥasan Anjum, who first encouraged her to try her hand at *marṣiyas* and who reads her *marṣiyas* 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 *majlis* and of lending it the validation of a known poet.

Taṣvīr Fāṭīma’s published *marṣiyas* also have a glossier look than Shuhrat’s and Fāṭīma Zaidī’s volumes. Shuhrat’s *marṣiyas*, issued in pamphlet form from a minor Ḥaidarābādī press, are prefaced by a simple religious-minded introduction, while Bēgam Zaidī’s hardcover volume has a longer, more literary preface by Muṣṭafā Ḥusain Rizvī that lays considerable emphasis on how very unusual it is to come across a female *marṣiya* poet. Taṣvīr Fāṭīma’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,”¹¹ or even “Urdu’s first female *marṣiya* poet.”¹²

Besides the attention Taṣvīr Fāṭīma receives simply for being a woman

⁹Taṣvīr Fāṭīma, “Khatūn Marṣiya-Nigār kī Diqqa‘n,” *Riṣā‘i Adab*, no. 4 (1998), pp. 68–9.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Shāhid Naqvi, in Taṣvīr Fāṭīma, *Ridā‘-e Ṣabr: Pāñṣ Marāṣī* (Karachi: Ḥalqa-e Fikr-o-Nazar, 1996), p. 27.

¹²Tābīsh Dehlavī, in *ibid.*, p. 25.

who writes *marṣiyas*, the notable difference between her poetry's presentation and that of Shuhrat's and Bēgam Zaidī's works lies in the label "modern (*jadīd*) *marṣiya*." One reviewer comments that Taṣvīr Fāṭīma is a link in the chain of poets such as Jōsh and Jamīl Maẓharī, who reshaped the classical *marṣiya* by introducing to it "modern expression" and imbuing it with "philosophy" and a "universal character."¹³

Although it is difficult to determine what these approving catch-phrases actually signify, since the reviewer fails to provide examples of "modern expression," "philosophy," or "universal character," one notices that Taṣvīr Fāṭīma's *marṣiyas* 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. Taṣvīr Fāṭīma'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 *marṣiya* about Sajjād (Ḥusain's only surviving son and the fourth Shī'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 Ḥusain 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 *marṣiya* in women's *majālis*, but the bulk of Taṣvīr's seventy-five verse poem instead builds a portrait of leadership, in general and in the Shī'a tradition of the Imamāte, using Sajjād as an example. The *marṣiya*'s first line—the title by which a poem is recognized—is "*Rahbarī ṭauq-o-salāsīl mēn safar kartī hai*" ("leadership makes its journey in shackle and chains").

In addition to shifting the *marṣiya*'s thematic emphasis, Taṣvīr Fāṭīma makes slight cosmetic changes to the *musaddas* (six-line) verse form and rhyme scheme that Fāṭīma Zaidī and Shuhrat employ quite traditionally. Despite these alterations, and Taṣvīr Fāṭīma's unusual mode of entry to the *marṣiya* scene, the emphasis critics place on her family background has a familiar ring. Adīb Suhēl tells us that as the granddaughter of (*marṣiya* poet) Jamīl Maẓharī, "it was in an atmosphere full of poetry and *marṣiya* recitation that Taṣvīr first opened her eyes."¹⁴ Because of her family environment and traditions, then, Taṣvīr Fāṭīma possesses what are considered appropriate qualifications for appreciating good poetry and for writing

¹³Adīb Suhēl, in *ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁴In Taṣvīr Fāṭīma, *Baṣīrat* (Karachi: Ḥalqa-e Fikr-o-Nazar, 1989), p. 13.

marṣiyas. She, like Bēgam Zaidī, also experienced family tragedy at a young age. Ra‘nā Iqbāl comments that perhaps Taṣvīr Fāṭima’s loss of her parents colors her *marṣiya*, adding that “When something is written under the influence of sorrow, it’s definitely effective. Since Taṣvīr was cut off at a very early age from her father’s and mother’s love, she has a long-standing acquaintance with grief.”¹⁵

Even these short sketches reveal a basic pattern of qualities that *majlis*-goers and other observers attribute to female *marṣiya* poets, to their poems, and finally, to female audiences.¹⁶ Traits of piety, endurance of hardship, and humility figure prominently in descriptions of female *marṣiya* poets. These qualities, also exemplified, of course, by the very heroes and heroines of the *marṣiya*, are not entirely absent in oral and written anecdotes about famous male *marṣiya*-writers, but they are hardly stressed as much. Tales of poetic competition, wondrously prolific production of *marṣiyas*, and dramatic costumes and performances flesh out traditions about the male poets in a way that has no counterpart among female *marṣiya*-writers.

Whether male or female, *marṣiya* poets are likely to emerge from religious family backgrounds and poetic lineages. *Marṣiya* 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 *marṣiyas* 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 *marṣiya* 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 Riḏvī pronounces Bēgam Fāṭima Zaidī’s poetic works to be of a “standard,” and firmly affiliated with the tradition of classical *marṣiyas*, he also especially praises the “flow,

¹⁵In Taṣvīr Fāṭima, *Ridā’-e Ṣabr*, p. 23.

¹⁶I can supplement these three sketches with similar ones concerning the few other female *marṣiya* poets I have been able to identify, and with extensive fieldwork in the *majlis* setting.

sweetness, and rectitude” of her *marṣiyas*.¹⁷ Similarly, Taṣvīr Fāṭīma, 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 *marṣiyas*.¹⁸ This is not to say that critics might not ever praise such qualities in the *marṣiyas* 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 *marṣiyas* popular in the women’s *majālis* are degraded versions of the great classical *marṣiya* tradition. In actuality, however, the women’s *majālis* defy the stereotype that *marṣiya* texts written or recited by Urdu-speaking women diverge from the classical tradition more than any other set of performed *marṣiyas*.

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 Mīr Anīs’s *marṣiyas* to about twenty-five verses, making the poems, in effect, the same length as those published by Bēgam 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 *marṣiyas*. That is, quite often reciters would excise in performance the stylized scenery, elaborate imagery, or complex metaphors that feature in Anīs’s *marṣiyas* and distinguish them so plainly from those of a poet such as Bēgam Shuhrat when presented in printed form.

Taṣvīr Fāṭīma might well dismiss this notion of female performers and audiences collaborating with a malleable *marṣiya* text to create a performance at once unique and consistent with classical models. Although the *marṣiyas* of Bēgams Shuhrat and Fāṭīma Zaidī have been kept alive within small family *majālis*, whatever their critical reception, Taṣvīr Fāṭīma insists

¹⁷In Bēgam Fāṭīma Zaidī, *Čamanistān-e ‘Aqīdat*, p. “kh.”

¹⁸Tābīsh Dehlavī, in Taṣvīr Fāṭīma, *Ridā’-e Šabr*, p. 26.

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 *marṣiya* 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.”¹⁹ Certainly, the popular idea of women as poetically unsophisticated, which she shares with many Shi’a men and women, has something to do with the limited number of women who even attempt to write *marṣiyas*.

Although there are just a handful of female *marṣiya* poets, their emergence is suggestive of the status of *marṣiya* 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 *marṣiya* by heart, but also relate stories about *marṣiya* poets and *marṣiya* competitions as though nineteenth-century *marṣiya* poets still lived in the locality. For many Urdu genres, this sort of supplementary oral culture, which probably helped Bēgams Zaidī 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.

Taṣvīr Fāṭima, representing the new generation, is a young poetess in a world where the *marṣiya*’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 *devanagari* 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, Taṣvīr Fāṭima, the “modern *marṣiya* 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 Taṣvīr be suited to this
eloquent form of expression?
After all, I’m proud to say, my
grandfather is Mazhārī

¹⁹See her “Khātūn Marṣiya-Nigār kī Diqqatēn,” pp. 68–9.

It's due to this lineage that I've acquired
the taste for *marṣiya*
His *marṣiyas* provided guidance at every
step
And it is my particular prayer to the
Almighty
That continuity not be broken with the
school of Anīs and Dabīr²⁰

□

²⁰ *Ridā'-e Şabr*, p. 35.