

# The Aesthetic Contribution and Prospects of Bangla Marsiya Literature

Dr. Md. Muhasin Uddin\*

[Abstract: *Marsiya* literature began to take shape in Bangla as early as the sixteenth century. Apart from the *Charyapada* and *Shrikrishna Kirtan Kavya*, no other genre in Bangla literature predates it. Remarkably, *Marsiya* literature encompasses all three modes of literary expression—**verse**, **prose** and **lyric**—demonstrating its formal versatility. It possesses a profound emotional resonance, capable of evoking the full spectrum of *rasas* described by classical Sanskrit aestheticians. Yet, despite its literary depth and emotional power, *Marsiya* literature has remained a marginalized and underexplored domain within the broader study of Bangla literature and culture. This oversight underscores the urgent need for a more focused critical engagement with the genre. Responding to this call, the present article offers a modest attempt to evaluate both the aesthetic contributions that *Marsiya* literature has made and the potential it holds to enrich Bangla literature.]

## 1.

*Marsiya* originated as a poetic form in Arabic. Based on Arabic phonetics, the term is more accurately transliterated as *Marthiya* (مرثية) (Chatterji, 115). However, the common pronunciation in Bangla tends to soften the "th" sound to an "s" sound, leading Mr. Chatterji to adopt the spelling *Marsiya*, a convention we also follow here for consistency. Etymologically, *Marthiya* in Arabic signifies a lament or an expression of mourning over death. The deep-rooted poetic sensibility of the pre-Islamic Arab world, combined with their profound emotional attachments, gave rise to this genre as a way of articulating grief through verse. Among the most prominent poets of this elegiac tradition were **al-Khansā'** and **Mu'tammim ibn Nuwayrah**, whose works exemplify the depth and poignancy of pre-Islamic lamentation poetry (Saklayen, 4).

---

\* Professor, Department of English, Barishal University

Before the tragic martyrdom of Imam Hussain at Karbala, *marsiya* referred broadly to any elegiac poem written to mourn the death of an individual. However, earlier instances of *marsiya* composed for the deaths of prominent historical figures—such as the elegy by Ka’ab ibn Malik on the death of Caliph Uthman (Suyuti 109), and Abu al-Aswad al-Du’ali’s lament for Hazrat Ali (R) (Saklayen 5)— gradually shaped the genre toward a more selective focus. Over time, *marsiya* became increasingly associated with commemorating only the most profound and tragic losses, culminating in its near-exclusive dedication to the events of Karbala. Following the martyrdom of Hazrat Ali (R), the tragedy of Karbala stands as the most heartbreaking episode in Islamic history. Given the immense emotional weight of this event, one might have expected an immediate outpouring of *marsiya* poetry immediately after the tragic events of Karbala. However, fear of persecution under Yazid's brutal regime and the broader suppression imposed by the Umayyad rulers silenced many voices for years. It was not until the Safavid dynasty rose to power in Iran that poets were encouraged to express their grief over the events of Karbala. With royal patronage and the support of a regime sympathetic to the Ahl al-Bayt (the family of the Prophet), the long-suppressed sorrow of Imam Hussain’s followers finally found poetic expression. Thus began a flourishing tradition of *marsiya* dedicated to mourning the unparalleled tragedy of Karbala (Saklayen 7).

Muhtasham Kashi is recognized as the first poet to compose *marsiya* in the Persian language within this literary tradition. His renowned collection of elegies is titled *Haft Band*. A second collection, *Tarjiband*, while less frequently anthologized, holds undeniable significance in the history of *marsiya*. Muhtasham was followed in the sixteenth century by several other *marsiya* poets, including Talib Amuli, Ghazali, Kalim, and others (Saklayen 7).

A new style within this poetic form was later introduced by Muqbil. While retaining its earlier expression of sorrow and lamentation, this emerging style placed greater emphasis on detailed narratives of the events at Karbala. With this transformation, *marsiya* evolved from a mere expression of grief into a rich narrative form, gradually acquiring the features of epic poetry. The tradition of *marsiya* literature in the Indian subcontinent emerged in the wake of this later-developed epic style. Its origins are linked to a significant historical episode involving the Mughal emperor Humayun. In 1544, after being deposed by Sher Shah Suri, Humayun sought refuge at the court of the Safavid ruler Shah Tahmasp I (1514–1576), a renowned patron of *marsiya* literature in Iran. The friendship between Humayun and Tahmasp marked the beginning of a

profound literary and cultural exchange between Iran and India. The development of *marsiya* in India can thus be seen as a direct outcome of the deep-rooted connection between the Safavid and Mughal dynasties (Saklayen 9).

In the tradition of *marsiya*, Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah (1580–1611) of the Deccan stands out as one of the earliest and most significant poets. During that era, a seminal work recounting the events of Karbala—*Rawdat al-Shuhada*—was translated into Urdu under the new title *Dah Majlis* (ده مجلس). Although a translation, this text proved to be a pivotal influence on the evolution of *marsiya* literature in India. All these factors contributed to the development of *marsiya* literature within the epic tradition, rather than that of lyrical poetry.

Later other forms of *marsiya* literature gradually evolved in India. Those forms assumed lots of diversity within the scope of literature. The ceremonious, gathering-style recitation of *marsiya* poetry came to incorporate both storytelling and elements of theatrical performance. Mir Jamir, a classical Urdu poet, ushered in refined conventions and decorum into this literary tradition. The movement he initiated incorporated the innovative practice of reciting *marsiya* poetry from the pulpit of mosques, thereby imbuing the verse with a solemn and dignified religious aura. (Saklayen 14). He also contributed to the long narrative poetry within the scope of *marsiya* tradition. Mir Dabir and Mir Anis introduced the values of patriotism and love for justice in the poetic expression of the narrative. Such innovations in *marsiya* literature gradually transformed the genre into one of remarkable inclusivity and depth, so much so that by the 19th century, its scope had expanded to encompass virtually everything that literature, in its entirety, has to offer.

2.

In Bengali literature, the tradition of *marsiya*—lamentations commemorating the martyrdom of Husayn—originated through the emulation of *Maqatal Husayn*, a seminal Persian work initially authored by Lutfi of Herat. Over time, numerous Persian poets produced successive versions of this poignant narrative, each recounting the tragic events surrounding Husayn’s death under the same evocative title. By the sixteenth century, poets in Bengal began composing elegiac verses that echoed the stylistic and thematic conventions of these Persian *Maqatal Husayn* texts, portraying the sorrowful saga of Karbala. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, several

distinguished Bengali poets contributed to this literary form. Among them Doulat Wazir Bahram Khan, Faizullah, Muhammad Khan, Hayat Mahmud, Fakir Garibullah, Radhacharan Gop, and Hamid are remarkable ones. Notably, both Fakir Garibullah and Hamid explicitly acknowledged their indebtedness to the Persian narratives chronicling the events of Karbala (Saklayen 21).

The Bengali poets demonstrated notable creativity in the titles of their works, often deviating from the conventional Persian title *Maqatal Husayn*. Instead of uniformly adopting this traditional name, many chose to create distinctive titles for their compositions. Faizullah, for instance, named his work *Zaynaber Chautisha*, while Fakir Garibullah titled his text *Jangnama*—a title also adopted by Doulat Wazir Bahram Khan and Hayat Mahmud. Hamid chose the name *Sangram Husayn* for his work. In contrast, Muhammad Khan retained the essence of the original Persian title, modifying it slightly phonetically to *Moqatal Hossen*.

These works were all written in verse in the metrical arrangement called *Payar*. *Payar* refers to a type of metre in which every line would consist of 14 syllables and the line has two distinct parts in 8 + 6 or 6 + 8 syllabic structure. The verses of these works have lyrical grace and at the same time the verses offer theatrical entertainment for the listeners and the readers. These works have another striking innovation in the narration of the events of Karbala. The *marsiya* literature of Persian tradition had to maintain strict religious norms and values. So the Persian poets had little liberty to engage the verses to describe the beauty of the female characters or to create romantic diversions by elaborating on the marriage between Kasem and Sakhina, as such attempts might undermine the solemn and devout tone of the narrative. But the poets of Bangla *marsiya* broke free from the constraints of Persian tradition even in the formative stage of the genre in the seventeenth century. They freely infused their verses with vivid descriptions of female beauty, at times evoking a subtle sense of erotic pleasure for readers and listeners. Their verses, employed in the narration of the marriage between Kasem and Sakhina, skillfully blended eroticism with pathos, introducing a rare craftsmanship of beauty into Bangla literature of that time.

The aesthetic pleasure offered by the *marsiya* literature of these elegant poets was primarily intended for the educated elite and so-called gentlemen of the time. The intricate rhetoric and refined prosody of their poetry demanded a cultivated taste and critical sensibility to enjoy those texts. The rural, uneducated populace, however, lacked the literary sophistication necessary to savor such works. Yet, as devout Muslims, they were deeply familiar with the tragic history of

Karbala. Their awareness of these events stirred in them an intense yearning for aesthetic and emotional engagement with the tragedy. This longing gave rise to the need for a new form of *marsiya* literature that could resonate with the common people. Over time, *Jarigan* emerged as that accessible offshoot of *marsiya* literature, crafted to fulfill the artistic and emotional needs of the broader society.

The popular and accessible form of Bangla *marsiya* literature known as *Jarigan* began to flourish in the nineteenth century. A poem by Joynarayan Ghoshal indicates that during this period, alongside various other forms of folk music, *Jarigan* was performed at cultural festivals and village gatherings to entertain the local people (Uddin 3). *Sangit Ratnakar*, a layman's work from the era of the East India Company, also mentions that festivals in Krishnanagar and other prominent locations featured *Jarigan* performances alongside *Panchali*, *Pirer Geeti*, *Chandigeeti*, and more (Saklayen 413).

The word *Jari* itself, derived from Persian, means "weeping," and traditionally referred to songs of mourning. However, over time, *Jarigan* expanded beyond its original scope, gradually assimilating many of the thematic and stylistic elements characteristic of classical *marsiya* poetry.

As noted earlier, the creative freedom enjoyed by Bengali poets allowed them to move *marsiya* beyond its strictly religious framework, enabling the expression of a wide range of emotions and the application of refined aesthetic techniques. In this evolving literary landscape, *Jarigan* too embraced these broader emotional and artistic dimensions. Eventually, all forms of *marsiya* literature, including *Jarigan*, came to skillfully embody the nine classical aesthetic emotions (*Navarasa*) through appropriate figures of speech, thus enriching the tradition of *marsiya* poetry in Bengal.

We know Bharat Muni first expounded the idea of *rasas* (aesthetic emotions) in his famous work titled *Natyasastra*. This was his original idea that *Rasa* arises from the combination of Determinants (*Vibhava*), Consequents (*Anubhava*), and Transitory States (*Vyabhicaribhava*) (Bharata, verse 31). In the complete exposition of the idea he mentioned eight types of *rasas*: Śṛṅgāra (Love), Hasya (Laughter), Karuṇa (Compassion), Raudra (Anger), Vīra (Heroism), Bhayānaka (Fear), Bībhatsa (Disgust) and Adbhuta (Wonder). Later scholars added the ninth *Rasa*: Śānta (Peace,

Tranquility). Surprisingly most of these *rasas* are cultivated in marsiya literature with due aesthetic beauty.

Mary Frances Dunham has explained some of those *rasas* in the context of jarigan in her famous book *Jarigan: Muslim Epic Songs in Bangladesh*. She has shown in her analysis how Karuna, Vira, Sringara and Hasya rasas have found poetic expression in Jarigan (Dunham 110). However, a close exploration of the eminent texts of Bangla marsiya literature reveals how those mighty poets have created all the *rasas* in their works.

Marsiya literature is fundamentally rooted in *Karuna* — the emotion of compassion evoked by the tragic events at Karbala — and thus, expressions of *Karuna rasa* are inherently present and require no deliberate search. The poetic exploration of how and why *marsiya* poets came to incorporate *Sringara rasa*—erotic expression—into episodes such as those of Qasim and Sakina or Yazid and Zainab has already been discussed. *Hasya rasa* (the expression of laughter) emerges subtly when characters like Omar Ali or Bahram mock or ridicule soldiers and commanders in Yazid’s army. *Raudra rasa* (anger) pervades the fiery speeches of Muhammad Hanifa across numerous *marsiya* texts, while *Vīra rasa* (heroism) is prominently embodied in the words and deeds of Husayn and other valiant figures such as Muhammad Hanifa, Omar Ali, Mashab Kakka, and others.

*Bhayānaka rasa* (terror) is evoked through vivid depictions of Yazid’s grim fate. *Bībhatsa rasa* (disgust) seeps through the graphic portrayals of Husayn’s beheading and the brutal treatment of the women of his family as they were taken to Damascus. *Adbhuta rasa* (wonder) initiates the narrative, as the audience is struck by the unnatural course of events surrounding Husayn’s family. Finally, *Śānta rasa* (tranquility) prevails at the conclusion, when the intensity of emotions finds resolution in a cathartic release, guiding the reader or listener to a state of spiritual calm and contemplative peace.

## Works Cited

Bharata. *Nāṭyasastra*. Chapter 6, Verse 31.

Chatterji, Suniti Kumar. "Banglay Marthiya Sahitya: A Review." *Islam and the Modern Age: A Quarterly Journal*. Vol. 4, No ii, May 1973, pp 115-122.

Dunham, Mary Frances. *Jarigan: Muslim Epic Songs of Bangladesh*. The University Press Limited, 1997.

Saklayen, Golam. *Banglay Marsiya Sahitya*. Rajshahi University Textbook Publishing Board. 1994.

Suyuti, Allama Jalaluddin. *Tarikh al-Khulafa*. Translated by Mawlana Ataur Rahman, Lahore, 1342 H.

Uddin, Muhammad Mansur. "Jari." *Mahe Naw*, vol. 11, no. 10, Magh 1366, p. 3. (in Bangla)