



## **BEAUTY AND THE BELOVED: SARAPA IN 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY HINDAVI SUFI ROMANCE MRIGAVATI**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Islam is generally understood to be opposed to figural depictions of sacred objects. Yet in medieval literature and paintings, we find examples where God's beauty is artfully depicted. This article firstly traces the rich debates within Islamic theology and underscores why anthropomorphism is juxtaposed with the principle of monotheism or Tauhid. The article then highlights how Sufi hermeneutics, and specifically Ibn al Arabi, brings forth an interpretation that allowed Sufi writers such as Qutban Suharvardy to write in nuanced ways about the beauty of God. Interestingly, these were deeply embedded in Quran and Ahadith, unlike what many Oriental scholars who view Sufism as a derivative of other religions, would anticipate. Then, it dwells upon the compelling ways in which Persian literature, Indian aesthetics, miniature painting, and Sufism interacted to bring forth the 16th century masterpiece known as Mrigavati.

**Key words:** Sufism, anthropomorphism, Sarapa, Sufi hermeneutics, Mrigavati

Islamic literature, painting, music and other art forms such as architecture are abundant with references to God's beauty. Sarapa, the description of the beloved's body, is a convention common to Persian and Indian romances. However, a tension still seems to exist with regards to figural depictions of God in art forms. One of the reasons theologians push back against it is to preserve the oneness of God (Tauhid), which is a central Islamic

principle. Islamic theology thus debated heavily on it. References to God's body were often viewed as restricting God to corporeal limits, and a challenge to the oneness of God (Tauhid) and His transcendent (tanzih) nature. This paper seeks to shed light on how the literary convention of sarapa, in 16th Century Hindavi Sufi romance Mrigavati, can be placed genealogically as drawing directly from Quran and Hadis, employing the Sufi hermeneutical approach to exegesis. It also seeks to shed light on how Qutban draws from Indian literary theories such as rasa, in addition to drawing from the tradition of Persian Sufi poetry.

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It is important to understand the Quranic and theological concepts that underlie the concept of Sarapa in Miragavati, as to a modern commentator they may appear like spontaneous inter-cultural borrowing. However, a closer inspection renders this limited understanding untenable. To understand this, it is important to first consider that the central theme that permeates throughout Islamic cosmology is oneness of God or Tauhid. Monotheism is a central tenet in Islam, and a principle that every Muslim is expected to believe in. While there is a rich debate amongst different theological and legal schools on many other aspects of Islam, the idea of one God and an 'iconoclastic rejection of idolatry' (Winter 2008, p. 5) is amongst the very few principles that all of them agree on. Depiction of God in figural form, then, posits a challenge to the transcendence of God, with the possible danger of polytheism, as these many 'forms' of God could be worshipped.

Interesting, however, while the Quran has many verses that uphold the absolute transcendence of God, there are others that emphasize his immanent nature. Ambiguity or multivalence is thus embedded in the very cosmos of the Quran. Verses such as "nothing is like Him" (Qur'an 42:11), and "(Deity) is not asked about what He does" (21:23) paint a God that has nothing in common with creation and is thus transcendent. However, verses such as "Wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God" (2:115) suggest that God is present everywhere. Thus the debate is regarding, "affirming difference (tanzih) or affirming resemblance (tashbih)" (Winter 2008, p. 6). While some theologians<sup>1</sup> posit an extremely transcendent God who is stripped of all attributes and remains beyond the possibility of knowing, the other end of the spectrum had Hanbalites who asserted that God, in the literal sense, possessed a 'hand', 'face' or 'dimensions' that put forth a God who was seen as corporeal and finite (Winter 2008, p. 8).

Thus, there are verses that appear to signify

God as having human attributes, such as the following:

*Indeed, those who pledge allegiance to you, [O Muhammad] - they are actually pledging allegiance to Allah. The hand of Allah is over their hands. So he who breaks his word only breaks it to the detriment of himself. And he who fulfills that which he has promised Allah - He will give him a great reward (Quran 48:10)*

*And the Jews say, "The hand of Allah is chained." Chained are their hands, and cursed are they for what they say. Rather, both His hands are extended; He spends however He wills. (5:64)*

*And to Allah belongs the east and the west. So wherever you [might] turn, there is the Face of Allah. Indeed, Allah is all-Encompassing and Knowing. (Quran 2:115)*

In order to protect the religion from straying from monotheism, theologians as a counter technique refer to many verses that posit a transcendent God. Few such examples are verses such as 42:11 and 112:1-4.

*Say, "He is Allah, [who is] One, Allah, the Eternal Refuge. He neither begets nor is born, Nor is there to Him any equivalent." (Quran 112-1-4)*

In addition to that, they relate verses such as;

*[He is] Creator of the heavens and the earth. He has made for you from yourselves, mates, and among the cattle, mates; He multiplies you thereby. There is nothing like unto Him, and He is the Hearing, the Seeing. (Quran 42:11)*

This clearly shows that precedence for both of God's attributes of being completely transcendent and immanent are present in the Quran, and various theologians and philosophers draw from such sources to posit one idea or the other. This has led to

rich debates within the Islamic tradition on the principles of Tashbih (transcendence), tanzih (immanence) and tajsim (anthropomorphism) among many others. Within the Sunni schools, various factions have upheld different positions and espoused elaborate theses on it.

Amongst the early theological schools, one of the notable schools was the Mutazillites. While they could be termed as a continuation of Qadrities, another theological school which was a strict upholder of the doctrine of free will, they diverged in significant ways. The Mutazillites called themselves 'People of Unity and Justice'. According to Abu Hudhayl (c753-841), who coined the 'Five principles' (Al usool al khamsa), the Mutazillites could be understood as upholding the following five principles:

- (1) God's unity and uniqueness (tawhid);
- (2) His justice ('adl);
- (3) the eternity of Paradise for the righteous and hell for sinners
- (4) the intermediate state of the Muslim sinner, between belief and unbelief; and
- (5) the command to enjoin goodness and to forbid iniquity

(Blankinship 2008, p. 46)

The first two principles were of utmost importance to the Mutazillites. Their conception of God being unique was derived from Quranic teachings such as 42:11 and they asserted that nothing that compromised God's uniqueness could be permitted. They were antagonistic towards anthropomorphic explanations of God, which were favored by traditionists and early Shias (Blankinship 2008, p. 47). They viewed them as contradicting God's oneness and thus an insult to his transcendence. They argued that God could not be divided into parts.<sup>2</sup> In addition to that, they asserted that God could not be thought of as having an indivisible body, as by subjecting him to corporeality, his

transcendent nature would be compromised. Thus, they posited, that any anthropomorphic description of God must be inferred as purely allegorical or metaphorical (ibid).

In order to buttress this theory, they conceived a theory of language, which allowed the utterances to be compartmentalized into literal (Haqiqi) and figurative (Majazi). They used Quranic verse 3:7 for textual evidence and argued that many verbs and adjectives that God uses do not point to a separate existence of those things, they merely refer to His actions (Blankinship 2008, p. 48). Hence, God's hands (Quran 5:64), according to them, must not be read as God possessing real hands. Rather, they symbolically refer to His actions. This interpretation remained unproblematic with regards those verses where God appeared to be producing something new, such as fulfilling his role as a Creator and a Provider. This is because those attributes could be allegorically understood as referring to his actions as a Creator or Provider. However, it became problematic where His names were not directly associated with actions or with producing anything new, such as God as living Being (ibid).

The Hanbalis read the aforementioned Quranic verses as they were, without interpreting them, which meant God could have a face or a throne. This led the Ashari's to term them as 'anthropomorphists'.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the Mutazillite school, their ideas resonated better with the general populace as they postulated a more personal, more available God (ibid). This literal reading of Quranic verses extended to verses relating to the Day of Judgement and Heaven and Hell as well. Rather than sifting the verses through reason, they accepted them without asking why ('*bi-la-kayf*').

As the Sunni schools gradually reached a consensus, the Ashari and Maturdi doctrines were eventually absorbed in the developing Sunnism. The Maturdi theology relied on reason as well as revelation. According to

them, reason cannot be allowed to triumph over interpretation and the Quran must not be viewed as simple. For Quranic interpretation, their hermeneutical approach was that if a passage is clear, it should be accepted as it is. However, if it seems to clash with another verse, then at least one of the verses needs to be re-interpreted (Leaman and Rizvi 2008, p. 89). While this on the one hand could mean accepting one's inadequacy to fully understand Quran's message, on the other it offers a possibility to reconcile the two verses, so that a contradiction no longer remains. To only restrict to literal translations and clear meanings, according to them, was to view the Quran as simple, and does not allow interpretation through rational methods.<sup>4</sup> The Maturdis posit that due to the fact that reason is a faculty provided by God, He expects human beings to use it (ibid).

According to Maturdis, anthropomorphic Quranic verses cannot be taken literally. This is because it would accrue to a formulation of God having a body, which according to them, is not what God expects us to believe (Leaman and Rizvi 2008, 90). They arrived at the conclusion through applying reason to Qur'anic verses that sound anthropomorphic: they argued that there is conclusive rational proof that demonstrates that God cannot have a physical body. Hence, if a Qur'anic verse appears to suggest that God has a body, given the rational certainty that He cannot have a body, the verses in question need to be reinterpreted. Hence, exegetical tools need to be employed to interpret such passages, or otherwise they should be referred as *bi-la-kayf*, which means that their meaning is not clear or they cannot be interpreted. The Maturdis can thus be seen as closer to the Asharites than Mutazillites, as they posit themselves as the middle way, and not aligning with either extreme (ibid).

Through the discussion above, it can be summarized that the Mutazillites sought to interpret verses referring to the hand of God and face of God as metaphorical. The Asharites,

seek to uphold the transcendence of God, and thus they read the verses as symbolic as well. The Asharites push back against the literal interpretations, as they fear that it will confine God to human or temporal limits, the same limits that human beings are subjected to. Hence, in order to preserve God as unlike all other things, as distinct from human beings, and to preserve His transcendence, they view such seemingly anthropomorphic elements as symbolical or metaphorical, or referring to any other aspect of God, for example His actions. The same verses are interpreted by Wahhabis as metaphorical as well, as they sense a possibility of idol worship if they are taken literally, and hence reinterpret it. The Qadrites, however, are at the opposite end of the spectrum, as they read such verses literally.

#### SUFI HERMENEUTICAL DISCOURSE

The significance of the Sufi or mystical interpretation of the Quran is that it seeks to retain both the metaphorical and literal meanings of the verses. This hermeneutical approach is important as it shows how Qutban, drawing from Ibn Al Arabi's ideas, can be situated within the rich spectrum of Sufi interpretation. Moreover, with regards to sarapa, it shows how the modern dichotomies of sacred (*Haqiqi*)-profane (*Majazi*) and literal-metaphorical are simplistic according to Ibn-al-Arabi's approach, as there is a rich overlap and a relationship between the two.

The hadith of Abd Allah b. Masud (d.652) is most often cited by the Sufis to establish the possibility of multiple interpretations of the same verse. The hadith is not only accepted by most scholars, but is vastly debated on, and reported and interpreted differently by different scholars. Commentators who were not Sufis, such as Tabari, quoted it as well. However, they understood it differently than their Sufi counterparts.<sup>5</sup>

The hadith of Masud by Abu Jafar al-Tabari (d.923) reads as follows:

*The Messenger of God said: The Quran was sent down in seven ahruf (singular:harf). Each harf has a back (zahr) and a belly (batn). Each harf has a border (hadd) and each border has a lookout point (muttala) (Sands 2006, p. 8).*

According to Tabari, the seven ahruf refer to the dialects of Arabs (*alsun*) and the aspects (*awjuh*) of revelation (Sands 2006, p. 8). Hence, Tabari understands it as each harf having a border (*hadd*) erected by God, which no one can bypass. Regarding the words batn and zahr, he comments that zahr is what becomes apparent, while batn is what is hidden. For Tabari, batn refers to the events in the future, specially events relating to the Day of Judgment, the knowledge of which remains only with God and is not given to human beings until the Day of Judgment. The word tawil, which has various meanings according to the Quran, is used by Tabari to mean the stretching out of events, and not in the sense of interpretation.

Sahl al Tustari (d. 896), who was a mystic, and could be roughly termed as a contemporary of Tabari, interpreted the same Hadith differently in two significant ways. Firstly, he rendered the knowledge of the external sense (*zahir*) as public (*amm*) and the knowledge of inner sense (*batin*) as private (*khass*). The second significant point of divergence was, unlike Tabari who understood *mutalla* as knowledge that can be garnered after the Day of Resurrection, Al-Tustari understood *mutalla* as a way of perceiving through the heart, and the important difference was that this knowledge could be gained within this lifetime. He does not explicitly mention, however, who the people who possess these different forms of knowledge are (Sands 2006, p. 10).

As Sands (2006) presents, Al-Ghazali (d.1111) also comments on the Hadith of Masud in his book *Ihya Ulum al-din*, while defending the Sufi exegetical approach towards the Quran. His approach was fiercely combative and was directed towards rebutting religious scholars

who assert that Quranic commentary should only be restricted to the traditions transmitted by the Companions and Followers of the Prophet (Sands 2006, p. 10-11). Ghazzali challenges them to explain Ibn Masud's hadith, if they keep the limits of exegesis so strict. He asserts that if one undertakes such an approach, they must be aware and accepting of the fact that it is their subjective, personal limitation that makes them bring the explanation to their own level (ibid).

It is interesting to note that Sufis up till Ghazali's period do not refer to themselves as esotericists (*batiniyya*), as it had negative connotations attached to it, having being applied to those who rejected the literal translations of the Quran. Sufis neither rejected the literal translations, nor dismissed the exoteric or external aspects of the religion. On the contrary, they believed them to be prerequisites towards proceeding to the inner aspects. Nasr (1985) employs the example of a circle to denote this. The outer circumference of the circle represents the outward form of religion, for example the injunctions that the religion enjoins such as the *salah* or *zakat*. The radius of the circle then represents the mystical path for the Sufis that allows them to reach the center. This path is often referred as the distance from *Shariah* to *Haqiqah* (p. 122).

For classical Sufi interpreters, a reading that was completely *zahiri* or strictly *batini* was usually not acceptable. In the context of anthropomorphism, it could be inferred then that the Sufis would like to retain the literal as well as the metaphorical meaning of the verses. Ahmad ibn Ajiba (Nasr et al 2015, p. 131) writes that while Ibn Al Arabi was classified by some of the commentators as one who gave up *zahiri* aspects to preserve the *batini* ones, a close study of his works reveal that such is not the case. Ibn al Arabi writes,

*Know that God addressed man in his totality, without giving precedence to his*

*exterior (zahir) over his interior (batin)” and “Perfect happiness belongs to those who join the (external meaning with the internal meaning (Chodkiewicz 1993, p. 38).*

He posits that keeping in view of the classical tradition, the hadith corpus, the legal meaning and the ishara (batin) all had to be taken into account in order to read Quranic verses. Thus, in the case of anthropomorphic verses, both the literal as well as the metaphorical interpretation of such verses need to be retained.

Some of the verses that Sufis use to call attention to God’s immanence (*tashbih*) in His created things are through mirror and sun analogies. The mirror analogy is used to show that while a person’s reflection could be called to be him in one sense, it is not really him either. Thus, similarly, God’s creation is His reflection in one sense, and some reflect more of His attributes than others, just as polished surfaces reflect a better image of the person. Similarly, the rays of the sun could in one sense be called the sun, as they stem from it, are one form of it, but in another sense, it would be wrong to characterize the two as same, as they are distinct in some other senses. Sufis also use ‘Laisa Ka mithli hi shayun’ which has been rendered many interpretations, amongst which one by Ibn Al Arabi is used to show the very principles of

### **Tanzih and Tashbih in Ibn Al Arabi’s metaphysics**

Sufis expound on the principle of *Tashbih*, which refers to God’s immanence or Him being present in everything. Sufis such as Rumi and Ibn al-Arabi often use the analogy of a mirror to allude to this point. They assert that everything in the world is a reflection of God, so it is in some sense Him, because it is His reflection, but it is not Him in the sense that the reflection is not equal to the being. Through the *tashbih* principle, everything in the world then becomes a sign, a symbol, a

reminder of God. Thus, though God is similar through His names, He is beyond in His essence.

Ibn al Arabi critiques the theologians who emphasize one of these aspects of God over another. Drawing from Quran and Hadis, he maintains that God is both transcendent and immanent at the same time. According to Ibn al Arabi, theologians employ rational analysis to decipher the nature of God using *aql* (reason). While *aql* allows them to grasp what God is not, it does not allow them to understand how God manifests Himself in the cosmos, which could be understood only by imagination. The rational thinkers insist upon interpreting scripture according to what reason alone allows them to understand, and thus limit God, as reason fails to grasp the signs of God that manifest in scripture, cosmos and human soul. Imagination (*khayal*) has the power to grasp God’s similarity (*tashbih*).

Ibn al Arabi maintains that cosmos is He/ not He at the same time. It is identical with *wujud* and different from *wujud* at the same time. As His Essence cannot be grasped, He remains transcendent and incomparable, which upholds His oneness. *Wujud* is one in Essence, but manifests itself as many through its self-disclosure. It is thus incomparable with the entities, but is also similar to every created being. Divine names allow God to manifest in a manner that creation can understand. Cosmos, man, art, poetry, all then represent some aspect of God in the sense that God had to limit Himself in each manifested thing, and the Essence of God is not disclosed through them. Yet, they are similar because through some names, they reflect attributes of God<sup>6</sup> (Chittick 1994, p. 29).

It is important to remember that in Ibn Al Arabi’s hierarchy, Divine names are below Essence. A perfect man (Insan-al-Kamil) is able to reflect all of God’s names.<sup>7</sup> Beauty (*jamal*), and Love (*Wudd*) are also names of God. And thus, when they are disclosed to human beings through a beloved (*sarapa*

of Mrigavati in this case), then it represents the beauty of Mrigavati, the doe, but is also rooted in God's beauty, as the cosmos is a manifestation of God. To draw a distinction between the two amounts to restricting God to a domain which would uphold his tanzih nature, but reject his tashbih nature. The love that Rajkunvar feels for Mrigavati, then, is also a reflection of love that God beholds for creation. The sacred-profane (haqiqi-majazi) distinction that modern commentators hold does not stand, as it is both the love between a man and woman, but as love itself comes from God, and represents a name of God, it is the love for God as well.<sup>8</sup>

In order to expound upon the tashbih principle of how God is similar to creation, Sufis use hadith such as;

*My servant never ceases drawing near to Me through supererogatory works until I love him. Then, when I love him, I am his hearing through which he hears, his sight through which he sees, his hand through which he grasps, and his foot through which he walks. (Chittick 2010, p. 325).*

This is one of the most contentious *ahadith* as it vociferously sheds light on the tashbih nature of God. God becomes the hearing, the sight, the hand, the foot. It is bothersome to theologians who want to elevate God so that He shares none of the human, material attributes, as any similarity between God and creation would jeopardize the Divine Status of God. Yet, here, in this *Hadis Qudsi*, God uses the very language, the very faculties of human beings to not only convey a message, but to show that for the spiritual seeker, once he attains gnosis, and Divine mysteries are unveiled to Him, then his heart (qalb) is so purified that he reflects God in the most perfect manner. He becomes the mirror that is so clear and empty of itself that it shows nothing of itself, but reflects only the image. The person is annihilated (*fanaa*) in such a manner, that he becomes empty of himself, his ego, that like a reed flute that is hollow,

it is only Divine Breath that produces sweet melodies through him. It is in this manner that then God becomes his hearing and seeing etc.

For Sufis, a central idea is that wherever the believer looks is indeed some form of manifestation of God: "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (2:115). This is further evinced by Hadis Qudsi, where the Prophet said: "I was the hidden treasure I wanted to be known. Hence, I created the world" (Chittick 2010, p. 5). The 'I' here refers to God and alludes to the idea of God's being as evident in the material and physical world around human beings; through the 'tashbih' principle. Quranic verses, prophetic traditions and Sufi cosmology as articulated by theologians such as Ibn Arabi, are central to understanding the usage of 'sarapa' in Miragavati because it can be interpreted as one of the complete and visual manifestations of the Divine. One of the key Quranic verses in this regards is: "We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth. But is it not sufficient concerning your Lord that He is, over all things, a Witness?" (Quran 41:53).

## HISTORY OF SARAPA

Although Qutban draws from earlier literary canons, he reshaped it in a distinctive manner. *Sarapa* literally means 'head to toe'.<sup>9,10</sup> In Persian and Indian romances, the description of the heroine's body follows the order of *sarapa*, the head to toe description of the heroine. Writers compose passages dwelling upon the physical features of the beloved: the heroine's curly tresses, the dark mole on her cheek, or how her fragrance ensnares the senses. Interestingly, Hindavi poets draw the imagery from Sanskrit, Middle Indic and new Indo-Aryan poetry's convention of *nakha-sikha varanana*, which is the head-to-toe description of human heroines (Behl and Doniger 2012, p. 23).

This classical notion survives till this day, and is so prevalent in literature that in modern

Urdu literary criticism it is classified as another genre called *sarapa* writing or *sarapa nigari* (ibid). The beloved whose physical beauty is described so meticulously can refer to a person the protagonist or the writer is in love with, or God, or both at the same time. However, usage of classical tropes, or language that is imbued with nuances that signify the multivalence, and its close comparison with the whole literary work can often help in deciphering whether it refers to only the human beloved, or God, or both. The paper seeks to find the undercurrents in *Mirigavati*, a Sufi romance, written in Hindavi by Qutban Suharvardi in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Interestingly, his primary language is Hindavi, which was one of the vernacular languages present in South Asia. In addition to that, he employs local tropes as well as symbols that are undoubtedly from Hinduism. This often perturbs modern scholars and they often label it as 'syncretism', which tacitly implies that the pure Islamic form is diluted from these borrowings from another culture and religion. Syncretism as a term is problematic due to the very fact that it assumes that there is no room in a religion to take on a local form and still remain true to a religion.

However, there is another way to look at 'syncretism', and that is through the conceptualization and practice within Islamic civilization with regards to arts. Islamic art and poetics are rooted in a science of inner principles. This is often referred to as 'hikmah' or wisdom, which encapsulates spirituality and intellectuality. According to this principle, the new cycles and phases in Islamic art, for example when there is more intercultural borrowing, do not signify a change in principles of Islamic spirituality. Rather, it demonstrates their capability and adaptability to be applied to changing circumstances and conditions of a living tradition (Nasr 1987, p. 5).

### Sarapa

The Indic genre *nak-sikh* has its corollary in Persian literature as *sarapa*. *Sarapa* means

head-to-toe description of the beloved. The concept is not only widespread in Persian and Indian language, but has also flowed into Urdu as well. While sometimes the word *sarapa* is used directly by the poet, often 'head to toe' descriptions are provided, as in the case of Mrigavati.

The following examples depict the usage of the word *sarapa*. It can be found in the poetry of Khusrau, Jami, Rumi, and Faiz, just to mention a few.

Amir Khusrau writes [:]

*Nami danam chi manzil bood shab jaay  
ki man boodam;*

*Baharsu raqs-e bismil bood shab jaay ki  
man boodam.*

*Pari paikar nigaar-e sarw qadde laala  
rukhsare;*

*Sarapa aafat-e dil bood shab jaay ki man  
boodam.*

*Khuda khud meer-e majlis bood andar  
laamakan Khusrau;*

*Muhammad shamm-e mehfil bood shab  
jaay ki man boodam.*

(English Translation)

I wonder what was the place where I was  
last night,  
All around me were half-slaughtered victims  
of love,  
tossing about in agony.  
There was a nymph-like beloved with cy-  
press-like form  
and tulip-like face,  
Ruthlessly playing havoc with the hearts of  
the lovers.  
God himself was the master of ceremonies  
in that heavenly court,  
oh Khusrau, where (the face of) the Prophet  
too was shedding light  
like a candle. (Sfetcu 2014)

Hafiz writes:

*dar sarapa-yi tu hairan manda-am  
dar na-mi-bayad ba-husnat zivari*



(I remain bewildered at the whole of you;  
no adornment is necessary with your beauty)  
(Arberry 1967, p. 353)

Both these examples are instances where Sarapa is used as the beloved's being, his presence, or the unique entity the beloved is. Here, the poets do not dwell upon the head-to-toe descriptions of the Beloved. However, such instances are also easily found in Persian and local Indian poetry. One such example is in *Mirigavati*, which is one of the few *prema-kahanis* (love stories) or Sufi romances written in Hindavi. Few others are Chandayana, Madhumalati and Padmavat and Duwal Rani Khizar Khan.

*Mirigavati* was written by Sheikh Qutban Suharvardi, an Indian Sufi master who was associated with the court of Sultan Hussain Shah Sharqi of Jaunpur (1458-1472). In addition to this, he was a remarkable poet and a storyteller. *Mirigavati* was composed in 1503 and its primary purpose was to provide tutelage to disciples who were on the mystical path (Behl and Doniger 2012). This Hindavi Sufi romance is not only a story full of adventures and exciting turns of events, but is also rich, multivalent and sophisticated. This literary classic, which could be viewed as a brilliant introduction to Sufism, is unique as it is also a tremendous repository and example of intercultural and interreligious sharing. It draws heavily from local Indian, Persian and European narratives and literary motifs, and also from Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic traditions. Aditya Behl translated this epic in free verse before his death, and wrote an introduction (completed by Wendy Doniger), which provides important insights in dealing and decoding the classic text.

The story unfolds as follows. Rajkunvar is a young prince, who goes out hunting in the forest with some nobles one day. There, in a lake, he sees a young, beautiful, seven colored doe, that possesses powers of shape shifting, flying, vanishing or changing her size. She is called *Mirigavati*, which literally means

doe-woman. This scene of the first encounter and the recognition of *Miragavati* is depicted in the painting below.



(Behl's *Mirigavati* Book Cover)

Another pictorial depiction of the first encounter with 'sarapa' of *Miragavati* is shown in the following picture, which is made in the *chaurapanchastika* style of painting, as shown by features such as the jutting pavilion, horizontal registers, and the specific use of the colors orange and blue which are traditionally used in that style.

Rajkunvar sees her bathing in a pond with her friends and follows her. The elusive doe triggers a desire in the prince that consumes his mind and soul. Behl suggests that it refers to the prince's internal spiritual journey, where the doe signifies divinity that manifests in a mysterious form, and awakens a longing, but remains yet to be earned and achieved through struggle (Behl and Doniger 2012). The arousal and deferral of desire represents the idea of love in Sufism, where each love is a preparation, a step towards



(Mirigavati/Indian Miniature "The first Glance" 1525)

something higher, finally leading up to God. According to Rumi, it is akin to fighting with a wooden sword in order to become ready for divine love.<sup>11</sup> Rajkunvar becomes deeply mesmerized by Mirigavati's beauty and cannot imagine being separated from her. However, the doe lures him, but vanishes into the lake. Rajkunvar jumps in and frantically searches for her, but she is nowhere to be found. Rajkunvar is devastated and weeps continually, replaying in his mind the magical encounter again and again. The prince decides he cannot return to the court, although the whole town persuades him to. He asks his father to let him build a seven-storied red and gold palace around the shimmering lake where Mirigavati had first appeared.

One year after the first encounter, the doe finally appears with her friends. However, the prince cannot endure her beauty and falls unconscious. He later describes to the nurse the inimitable beauty of Mirigavati, her head-to-toe description or Sarapa. The nurse advises the prince to steal Mirigavati's sari the next time she comes to bathe, so that she cannot return. This is a theme already present in Indian literature, as Krishna (one of Vishnu's avatar) mischievously steals the clothes of gopis while they bathe in a river (Srimad Bhagavatam n.d.). In addition to that,

this motif was present in Kashmiri and Assam hills narratives as well.

The prince then brings her back to the palace, and is maddened by joy and her beauty. However, Mirigavati does not let him touch her, and the prince cannot consummate the desire. When he tries to touch her, Mirigavati's response is extremely interesting as it signals towards the underlying theme of the story. Mirigavati says,

*Force does not count, only through rasa  
can you enjoy the savor of love.*

*Count that as true love, in both the  
worlds.*

*Rasa cannot be enjoyed through vio-  
lence*

*It is a savor that only comes through  
rasa.*

*If you talk of enjoying rasa, I have told  
you gently what rasa means.*

*Only those who are colored with rasa  
can savor it now or hereafter (Behl and  
Doniger 2012, p. 86)*

Rasa can be understood in various ways. Literally, it is the Sanskrit notion of juice or savor, or sap in plants or living things, but also refers to the aesthetic experience associated with it. There are various kinds of rasa, and in this story, the *prema-rasa*, the savor of love is used. In Indian aesthetic theory, rasas are accompanied by bhavas, and only people who are qualified are able to fully enjoy a particular *rasa*. It could be understood as being a journey from a universal idea (for example love), to a particular (a human being who encounters the work of art that espouses the idea), and from there it goes back to the universal, as through his particular subjectivity, he savors the universal idea invoked (Patankar 1980).

The spiritual meaning of the passage, however, is that Mirigavati cautions the prince that although he has been mesmerized by her beauty, and has experienced *hal*, he must strive hard to reach *maqam*. Hal is classically understood as a spiritual gift given

by God, which could be obtained without any real effort. However, *maqam* refers to a spiritual station that is not as transitory as *hal*, and is achieved after tests, tribulations and consistent effort (Behl and Doniger 2012). Thus, Mirigavati is signaling the prince to first master his own self, before trying to master her. She is thus indirectly urging him to cleanse his own ego, and rather than being captured by her beauty and trying to attain her immediately, to inculcate a love for her that is beyond egotistical wishes for which he must be ready to fight as well. The prince then had to undergo many trials and tribulations before finally achieving a union with Mirigavati (ibid). One union could be seen as the consummation of their desire, while the ultimate one is their death in the end which signals ultimate annihilation or *Fanaa*.

It is interesting to note that Rajkunvar takes on the garb of a yogi when he begins the spiritual journey. Ernst (n.d.) shows how intercultural sharing was prevalent between different religions. Muslims translated yogic books and some Sufi orders took breath practices and remodeled them within an Islamic framework (Ernst p. 2-5). It is interesting to note that despite the localisation and naturalisation of Islamic artistic expressions, some homogeneity can still be found. While local variations in terms of expression, technique or structure can be found, the artistic universe still seems to be founded on some firm wholes that evade temporal, cultural or geographic distinctions (Nasr 1987, p. 3). The spiritual universe of Islamic art, like any other sacred art, is not simply what materials were used, but how they were fashioned and molded into a particular form, with the artistic spirit of a particular religious collectivity.

Suharvardy starts the first chapter by saying 'Singular sound' which could refer to *kunn* in Arabic, when God decreed creation or Om, and invokes the transcendent attributes of God. These include references such as 'unseen', 'untainted', 'does not take any form' and invokes God's unity (dualism never yields

peace). It is interesting to note that the same story that begins with the principle of Tauhid, by paying tribute to Muhammad (by saying that the light of Muhammad was created as the first thing in the universe), comfortably borrowed local customs, religious idioms and language. A few lines later, he writes how for Muhammad's sake God manifested Himself and created Shiva and Shakti in two bodies. While such a move could be perhaps to make it more relevant to the audiences, it could be understood in other ways as well.

Ibn AlArabi's thesis on religious diversity could give some clues in order to unpack this mystery that makes modern commentators term it as 'syncretism' and mindless intermingling of two religions, with no clear or distinct boundaries between them. The example of a mountain is often used to understand such inter-religious and intercultural borrowing. As various paths on a mountain can lead to the top, each tradition represents one path to the top. However, on the way to the top, travelers could borrow from each other, to the extent that it makes the journey easier, while keeping them on the same path. From the bottom the traditions may seem extremely distinct. However, once a person reaches the top, he realizes that those differences were intended by the Creator, but they lead to the same reality or *Haqiqah* (Chittick 1994).

Similarly, the example of four triangles (a prism) with a square base is also used to illustrate the same principle. From whichever side a person views, he can conclude that he sees a triangle and he will be correct, according to what is available to him. However, if seen from a top, one can see it more clearly that it not just one triangle, but many that come together to lead to the same top, and they share the same base.

The relation between microcosm and macrocosm can also be seen from the Quranic perspective. The principles that govern the cosmos also determine the human microcosm, and just as the Will of God molds

the destiny of human collectivity, it also shapes the life of each individual. The Quran says “We shall show them Our signs upon horizons and within themselves till it becomes clear to them that it is the truth” (41:53). Mirigavati’s beauty or *Sarapa* therefore could be understood as God’s manifestation.

It is interesting to note that while the prince gives a head-to-toe description of Mirigavati, he does not only dwell upon the feminine beauty principle, but also mentions the fierceness that it brings about. This can be understood using the *Jalal-Jamal* principle in Islamic cosmology. They are both names of God, and some commentators posit that all of God’s attributes can be summarized under them. *Jamal* or beauty refers to delicate feminine grace and is often understood through attributes of Love and Compassion. However, *Jalal* refers to God’s wrath and refers to his fierceness or destructive capacity (Chittick 2010, p. 29).

Suharvardy maintains an intricate balance between the two; as Rajkunwar elaborates how Mirigavati’s beauty has enamored her heart, he also refers to how it has left him weak and almost dead. For example, while her eyes are shown to emit light that sets everything alight, her dark tresses are shown as snakes and serpents (a corollary with Kali can also be seen). Similarly, while her eyes are shown as bees sitting on a lotus petal, her eyebrows are shown to be poisonous arrows that killed him. Similarly, while the same lovely lips that drew him like an ant drawn to the sweet rasa of nectar, through the same lips she drank his blood, leaving him almost dead. Her teeth that shine like diamonds in a mine also flash like lightening on a dark night. Her neck, which is as lovely as a dancing peacock, also has hidden nooses to capture him. Her back which is like a minaret to reach the heavens, is also a poisonous snake. Here it becomes pertinent to recall the theory of ‘*rasa*’ which is a particular sensibility that considers art from the lens of emotional states.

### Theory of Rasa:

In Indian aesthetic theory, *rasa*, a Sanskrit word, refers to sap, juice, flavor, essence or taste. It has flowed to all spheres of artistic expression, whether the medium was visual, literary or aesthetic art. Modern critics often juggle with the concept. Often due to ignorance of artistic expressions and literary thought of pre-British India, they feel no need to learn or incorporate it in their literary or academic journeys. This leaves an extremely rich and important concept of Indian aesthetics in a dark closet of an abandoned room, while theorists seek to make sense of the house. The other approach by the Sanskrit critics is often to regard it as sacred, and they wish to not offer it to modern theorists to cut it into fine pieces for purposes of scrutiny. The fate of *rasa*, through both responses, remains the same (Patankar 1980, p. 293).

To understand the impact of *rasa* on interpreting and understanding art, it is imperative to understand its history. The history of *rasa* can be traced to Bharata, a sage and a priest who is believed to have lived sometime between first to third centuries. The theory of *rasa*, however, was developed by Abhinavagupta, a Shaivite thinker, who lived between 10th and 11th C in Kashmir. While Bharata discussed this in terms of responses (such as delight, laughter, sorrow, anger) (Patankar 1980, p. 294), Abhinavagupta remodeled them into a contemplative form, and named them as erotic, comic, pathetic and various other forms of *rasa*. In short, *rasa* can be understood as the aesthetic experience that a person undergoes while encountering the work of art. It is widely believed that only those who have experienced a similar feeling in real life qualify to feel *rasas*. However, another theory that springs forth from the view of rebirth is that the ability to taste *rasa* is a reward for being virtuous in one’s previous life (ibid).

Natyasastra is a popular work of dramatic theory, in which Bharata Muni has laid out eight forms of *rasa*. The work is believed to

be written sometime during 200 BC and 200 AD. According to Natyasastra, each rasa has not only a specific color but can be attributed to a certain deity who presides over it. Hence, there are four pairs of rasas which are as follows:

Śṛṅgāram (Love, Attractiveness). Presiding deity: Vishnu. Colour: green  
 Hāsya (Laughter, Mirth, Comedy). Presiding deity: Ganesha. Colour: white  
 Raudram (Fury). Presiding deity: Rudra. Colour: red  
 Kāruṇyam (Compassion, Tragedy). Presiding deity: Yama. Colour: dove coloured  
 Bībhatsam (Disgust, Aversion). Presiding deity: Shiva. Colour: blue  
 Bhayānakam (Horror, Terror). Presiding deity: Kala. Colour: black  
 Vīram (Heroic mood). Presiding deity: Indra. Colour: wheatish brown  
 Adbhutam (Wonder, Amazement). Presiding deity: Brahma. Colour: yellow

Similarly, Natyasastra delineates eight moods that accompany these. They are as follows:

*Rati* (Love), *Hasya* (Mirth), *Soka* (Sorrow), *Krodha* (Anger), *Utsaha* (Energy), *Bhaya* (Terror)

*Jugupsa* (Disgust), *Vismaya* (Astonishment) (Patankar 1980, p. 295).

The later denotations of rasa evolved into further categorizations, and according to Behl (2012), Mirigavati could be understood to be premised on *prema-rasa*, the rasa of love, as love seems to be the guiding and the pervasive factor throughout the story. *Sarapa* is significant as beauty serves as the beginning of untamed desire which was later developed into a mature love. Although love is shown as a progression, and its various forms are delineated, it is interesting to note that it still remains the lynchpin and the glue that holds the story together.

In Sanskrit tales of love, there is a technique of deferring the satisfaction of desire, called bhava, which allows the author to weave his poetic or literary exegesis, which may be

predictable, but serves the author's purpose of keeping the reader captivated. In Mirigavati this usage of emotion is also to channel his Sufi agenda, of designing the poem and the quest in a specific way (Behl and Doniger 2012, p. 34).

Another literary tool, called bhava, which could be read as 'being', 'meaning' or 'emotion' (here used in reference to the palace gate), is employed to signify the feeling or emotion that underlies rasa. It is important to understand its significance in literary criticism, as well as its usage here both conceptually and historically. The precedence of sufi usage of bhava and rasa can be seen through texts such as Bhagavata Mahatamaya, and also through bhakti texts born in the South. Conceptually also it was undertaken to convey the rich feeling of devotion which was developed earlier by Vaisanava groups (Behl and Doniger 2012, p. 36).

From a political lens, the Sufis in South India can be understood to be operating in a world where their encounter with such Sanskrit terminology and literary techniques was inevitable. This sublimation of desire into divine love was employed by Sufis to express their own cosmology and the ideology of Islamic monotheism, as expounded earlier in the essay (Behl and Doniger 2012, p. 36-37).

## CONCLUSION

Mirigavati is a remarkable example of inter-cultural and inter-religious borrowings in literature. However, it is interesting to note that the modern rendering of such texts as gratuitous copying, or a result of dilution of all religious boundaries, is often mistaken. Through remaining true to Quranic ideals, prophetic traditions and Sufi cosmology, the linkages of such texts to their traditions' roots can be traced. Moreover, metaphysically, such moves of inter-cultural borrowings, while remaining true to Islamic principles, can be mapped through thinkers such as Ibn al Arabi, whom authors such as Qutban seem to be drawing from. *Sarapa*, then, can

be understood as a divine manifestation in human form, which does not negate the presence of either. The story could be read as a prince following a doe, on its own terms, and linking it with spiritual nuances and roots does not negate such a reading. However, the language used in the story, the unfolding of the quest, and it being strewn with ideas of Sufism, suggests that Sarapa can then be understood as a manifestation of the Divine, and it remains entrenched in Sufi cosmology, that is in fact based on Islamic principles, and buttressed with the Quran, Ahadith, Islamic theology and Sufi metaphysics.

## NOTES

1. One such example is Jahm ibn Safwan (Winter 2008, p. 5).
2. Drawing from Quranic verses 114:1-4.
3. One example is that of Abu'l Shaykh alls bahani (887-979), who collected a large compilation of anthropomorphic ahadith and titled them as 'The book of Majesty' (Kitab al-Azama) (Blankinship 2008, p. 50).
4. Except where it is logically necessary, for example to resolve two conflicting verses.
5. It is important to remember, however, that these categories overlap considerably: there are a great many Sufis who would also call themselves Ash'aris or Maturidis or Hanafis or Imamis, while there are other Sufis who would distinguish themselves from any of these schools.
6. There is a hierarchy within names as well, as some names such as knowledge are more encompassing than others.
7. There is a debate on the number of names of God. Generally, they are accepted as 99 in number.
8. In Ibn al Arabi's cosmos, the distinction between lover and the Beloved is also not strict. God is both the lover and the Beloved.
9. The farther a human being is on the spiritual hierarchy, the more names s/he represents. Yet, due to the distinct shape of each soul, one particular soul could manifest one name of God with more intensity. As Insan-al-Kamil represents all names, he maintains a balance and would represent both Jalal and Jamal.
10. Sarapa literally means 'head-to-toe' and exists in Urdu and Persian poetry. (Haq 2013).
11. Let go of metaphorical love, the goal of love is for the Real.
12. The warrior gives a wooden sword to his son
13. So that he may become a champion in battle
14. Love for human being is that wooden sword
15. When the trial comes to its end, you will love the All-Merciful (Chittick and Nasr 2013).

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